

## FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER FROM YOUR HEART

Matthew 18:15-35

Key Verse: 18:35

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

In our last study of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus taught that our Father God saves all of his little children without missing one. He is like a good shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep in the open country to go and find the lost one. We tried to practice this love of Jesus by inviting people to the summer Bible conference. Then God sent 79 newcomers from our chapter. In today’s passage we learn how to make a good spiritual environment for God’s children to grow in. It is quite simple, actually. We must know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must confront the sin problem decisively. Most of all, we must forgive our brothers from our hearts. May the Spirit help us apply today’s teaching.

First, help your brother until he repents (15-17).

As we study this passage, we must keep in mind God’s shepherd’s heart. Verses 15-17 are not a prescription to drive out people from the church. Rather, they teach us how to win over a brother who has become a stumbling block to others. In the end, they teach us how to maintain the spiritual purity of the body of Christ. Look at verse 15. “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.” When someone sins against us, it can hurt us deeply, evoking anger or depression. What should we do? We must go and show our brother his fault, just between the two of us. We should not carry out a smear campaign against our brother, or brood over it silently. Instead we must confront him personally and show him his fault. We must give a factual account and a sound Biblical explanation. This should not be done in anger, but prayerfully and calmly. It is better to do this in person rather than by e-mail or text messaging. The purpose is to win him back to God. This is good for him and for us as well.

Sometimes, the offender will not react well to a personal visit. We should not give up easily, but visit several times. If that fails, then what? Look at verse 16. “But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’” These “others” should be mature men or women of God who can bring objectivity and wisdom to bear on the matter. Still, they may not be successful. Then what? Look at verse 17. “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” The church leaders must make a great effort to win over the offender, remembering the heart of Christ. However, if he still remains unrepentant, they must treat him as a pagan or a tax collector. This does not mean to hate him, but to regard him as an unbeliever. He should be publicly rebuked and cast out of the church, pending his repentance. This should not be done hastily, but after much prayer. In 1 and 2 Corinthians we can find an example. A man was committing incest. His blatant sin offended God and badly influenced the church. Many church leaders knew about this, but no one confronted him with it. Finally, Paul ordered that he be cast out. It was painful. But it brought about the sincere repentance of the offender and a new spirit of purity in the church.

This world is like a spiritual desert that is dry and hard under the influence of the devil. The church is the dwelling place of the living God. The church is a spiritual oasis where we taste heaven itself. To participate in church fellowship is a great privilege. To bear this privilege, we must love God and love one another. We must repent and encourage repentance. Then the body of Christ will be pure and alive.

Second, if two or three pray together, Jesus answers (18-20).

Look at verse 18. “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” The church is the visible presence of God on earth. The actions of the church must reflect the mind and heart of God. The decisions of the church are binding both on earth and in heaven. One who has been properly disciplined by a Spirit-filled church should not think that he was treated unfairly. He should not expect a better verdict from God himself. The church’s action is tantamount to God’s action.

However, we must distinguish between spiritual authority and political authority. Look at verse 19. “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”

The church's authority comes from heaven through prayer. It is spiritual authority. It is given to the collective body of leaders who pray for God's guidance. In the final analysis, our heavenly Father carries out discipline through the church.

In Acts 5, there is the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They tried to deceive the Holy Spirit and the body of Christ by exaggerating their generosity to gain human recognition. Peter rebuked their sin. As he did so, they fell down dead, one after the other. Obviously, the Lord himself exercised judgment against them, confirming the rebuke by Peter. This is spiritual authority. It was present in the Jerusalem Church when the leaders studied the Bible diligently and prayed persistently.

However, if church leaders do not pray, their actions can become political and even anti-Christian. In John chapter 9, Jesus healed a man born blind. It was a miracle that validated Jesus' identity as the Christ. The Pharisees rejected the man's testimony and cast him out of the synagogue. What happened to the man? Jesus visited him personally and blessed him. Jesus revealed his true identity as the Christ and gave him eternal life and the kingdom of heaven. The good purpose of our Lord Jesus Christ cannot be thwarted by church politicians. Jesus is the head of his church and he rules with his grace and truth.

What is the church really? These days we see so many kinds and styles of churches, from house churches to mega-churches, from traditional churches to contemporary churches. But the defining characteristic of a church is best explained by Jesus himself. Look at verse 20. "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." The church is Jesus' dwelling place. Where Jesus is, there is the church. If there is no Jesus, there is no church. The number of members is not important. The motive and purpose of gathering is important. When just two or three worship Jesus and pray, Jesus is present.

When Jesus is present, a few people can be used to change a nation, even the world. Christian faith began to spread through house churches: Mary and Martha's house church near Jerusalem, Lydia's house church in Philippi, Priscilla and Aquila's house church in Rome, and so on. Christians worshiped Jesus in their homes. Several gathered to study the Bible, pray and celebrate the Lord's Supper. Then Jesus blessed them with his presence. Jesus healed their sick and gave them life and joy and peace. Through their good influence, the presence of Jesus spread. Within 300 years, the Roman Empire became Christendom. We pray for North America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We don't need an army of millions to accomplish this. It can be done through a few people who love Jesus and pray. Dr. Jim and Jennifer Rabchuk worship Jesus and pray together in one accord. God has blessed their house church with many fruits, beginning at UIC and spreading to WIU, Northwestern, UNO, New Jersey, Harper, and U. Missouri-Columbia. Jesus can conquer the USA through praying house churches. But for those who do not pray, nothing happens.

Look at verse 20 again. "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." This verse inspired two by two prayer. We recently experienced the power of two by two prayer. To prepare the summer conference, we met together frequently in July and studied Romans. At the end of each meeting, we prayed two by two and in fellowship groups. Then Jesus visited our conference. He poured out his Spirit upon all the messengers and moved our hearts with the word of God. It was nothing but the answer to prayer. When two or three pray together in Jesus' name, Jesus lives with them and works through them.

Third, forgive your brother endlessly (21-35).

As Peter listened to Jesus' teaching, he grasped the point. Jesus wanted him to love his brothers and pray together in one accord. But his brothers were so nasty. For example, James and John often plotted to push him aside and take over as top disciples of Jesus. To pray together with them in one accord required that he forgive their sins—not once, but multiple times. That seemed to be really hard. Anyway, Peter wanted to please Jesus. So he said, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Most likely, Peter thought he was being generous. Many Jewish rabbis taught to forgive three times, but not the fourth time. Peter seems willing to forgive seven times. Wow! Was Jesus impressed? Look at verse 22. "Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'" Jesus taught that we must forgive our brothers endlessly.

Why? Why should we forgive others endlessly? First, it is because we have been forgiven endlessly by God. Jesus explained through a most interesting parable. Look at verses 23-27. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king

who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go." In this parable God is the king and master, and we are the debtors who owe ten thousand talents. Ten thousand talents was a huge amount of debt. By modern standards it was multi-billions of dollars. It was impossible to repay. Likewise, our debt of sin is so heavy it is impossible to repay. But Jesus paid the debt for us. Jesus is the one and only Son of God. His life is so precious and valuable, beyond measure. Jesus died on a cross for our sins. It was sufficient to atone for all the sins of all who believe in Jesus down through the generations. Jesus paid it all. When we fall on our knees and ask mercy from Jesus, he forgives our sins and gives us a new life. This is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Since we have been forgiven by Jesus' grace, we must also forgive others.

We can find a good example in King David. Once he committed the terrible sin of adultery. To cover it up, he had his most loyal and faithful general murdered. It was a serious and deadly sin. But David repented before God with tears from the depths of his heart and soul. God sent the prophet Nathan and forgave his sin. David's relationship with God was restored. After that, David practiced the forgiving love of God toward others. Once, his son Absalom rebelled against him, badly influencing most of the kingdom. It was a terrible betrayal of David's love and a sin against God. However, David forgave Absalom. When civil war broke out, David really wanted Absalom to be spared. But in God's divine justice, Absalom was caught and killed by General Joab. When David heard about it, he wept uncontrollably. Those who have received the grace of Jesus must forgive others in this way.

There is another reason why we must forgive others. It is because God alone is the judge. Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." It is God's job to carry out justice. When we forgive, we leave room for God's wrath. We are not the sovereign Lord. If we try to carry out justice in our own way, we will end up as terrorists. There is a movie called "Munich" based on a true story. A special force of Israeli soldiers is sent to assassinate Arabs who kidnaped and killed their Olympic team members. At first, these special forces are sure that they are right. But as they murder their enemies one by one, their hearts harden. Soon they become just as wicked as their adversaries. They become like the terrorists. We must entrust justice and vengeance to God. Our job is to forgive.

How did the man in the parable do? Look at verses 28-30. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt." This part reveals the wickedness of fallen man. A hundred denarii was about ten thousand dollars. The man whose multi-billion dollar debt was canceled should have canceled this debt, practicing the same mercy that he had received. Instead, he treated his fellow servant very harshly. This is fallen man. Though he receives mercy without measure from Jesus, he cannot forgive the small mistake of his brother. Rather, he wants to put his brother in prison for life.

What happened to the man? Look at verses 31-34. "When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed." When the servant treated his fellow servant without mercy, the master treated him without mercy. This will happen to all merciless people. Look at verse 35. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." What Jesus really wants from us is to forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts. Then we can be one in the love of Jesus. Jesus will come and dwell among us. Jesus will work mightily through us.

But how can we forgive others? Since Jesus tells us to do so, we try. Yet sometimes it seems impossible to forgive from our hearts. We can make plastic smiles and coexist, but forgive from our hearts? Anger, hatred and bitterness are hard to overcome. What can we do? We must look up at the cross of Jesus. On the cross, Jesus suffered great pain and shame. Jesus was utterly humiliated and about to die. But Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus prayed for us. Jesus' cross has power to change our hearts and plant forgiving grace. Still, it is hard for us to forgive. So we must pray. When we pray, Jesus helps us to forgive.

We will soon begin a new fall semester on our Chicago area campuses. We all want our Lord Jesus to work mightily among us. The best way we can prepare is to forgive our coworkers, to forgive our family members, and to forgive young ones who do not know what they are doing. Then we can pray in one accord for the students on our campuses. Jesus promises to dwell with us. Jesus will make us fruitful, campus by campus, house church by house church.