

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 or sister from your heart."

In last Sunday's passage Jesus taught about life in the Christian community. We learned that causing little ones to stumble is a very serious matter. In today's passage Jesus continues to teach about life in the Christian community. Just as causing little ones to stumble is serious, so also sinning against brothers and sisters is very serious. Wherever people gather together, conflicts will arise and people hurt each other. The same is true in the Christian fellowship. It is because our mindset and lifestyle are still influenced by the power of sin. Even though we become Christians, we don't become perfect immediately. John Calvin compared the sin in believers to a many headed hydra, whose heads need to be cut off one by one. We have to fight against the sin within us persistently. Otherwise sin damages us and others through us. Sin breaks relationships between fellow believers. However, these days many do not recognize sin as sin. They try to understand everything in terms of psychology, sociology or culture. Their view of people lacks a very important element: that people are sinners. In many cases, their attempts to solve problems are little more than escapism and irresponsibility. In actuality, sin has power to destroy relationships, people's character, families and the society. This is why, in spite of all the advances in technology, medicine and social policy, we have not found a way to establish healthy communities. Some of the most advanced nations have the most dysfunctional families. What is the solution to this? In today's passage Jesus shows us how to solve this problem. First Jesus teaches us that sin between people in a Christian community is very serious and must be dealt with appropriately. But this must be done in a spirit of forgiveness. Jesus emphasizes this through the parable of God's mercy and an unmerciful servant. Forgiveness is the only way to solve the sin problem between people and to establish a healthy Christian community. Let's learn to forgive brothers and sisters from our hearts.

I. Dealing with sin in the Christian community (15-20)

In verse 15a the phrase, "If your brother or sister sins...", could include the words "against you," according to the footnote. In fact, most major versions of the Bible include the phrase, "against you." So this verse does not mean that we should all be

watchdogs over the sins of the community. Rather, it instructs us how to deal with one who sins against us personally. Why is this such a serious matter? Suppose someone offends another person by speaking carelessly. While the offended party may be greatly hurt, the one who spoke carelessly may be totally unaware that there is a problem. The offended party may hold a grudge which breaks the relationship between them. This affects not only the two of them, but also the people around them. Grudges lead to gossip that sickens the Christian community like a tumor growing in the body. With this kind of atmosphere, a church cannot be healthy. So this problem should be dealt with appropriately for the sake of those involved, and for the health of the Christian community.

In verses 15-17 Jesus gives us a method for solving this kind of sin problem between fellow Christians. First of all, we must go to the person on a one-to-one basis. Look at verse 15b. "...go and point out their fault, just between the two of you." However, it is natural to hold a grudge against one who offends us. This damages our spiritual, mental and physical life. It hinders our prayers and leads to depression and bitterness, and may also cause stomach ulcers and hypertension. Instead of suffering like this, it is better to go to the offending person. We should not go to others first, but to the offending person. Jesus teaches us to take the initiative when we have been offended. In order to do that, we need a forgiving spirit, heavenly wisdom, compassion, courage, and a lot of prayer. It is not easy, but it is worth the effort. Jesus said, "If they listen to you, you have won them over." The purpose of pointing out another's fault is to forgive them and restore a love relationship with them. Then both persons become healthy and grow.

However, it is not easy for the offending party to accept their fault. In most cases, people become very upset when their sins are pointed out by another. Only those who are humble can receive this kind of rebuke and profit from it. When people do not listen, then what should we do? Verse 16 tells us to take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Why did Jesus tell us to obtain two or three witnesses? Dealing with the sin problem is a very delicate matter. It should not be done on the basis of emotion, prejudice or a judgmental spirit. It should be done with compassion, objectivity and a spirit of forgiveness. The presence of witnesses can help accomplish this. They can create a prayerful atmosphere of objectivity than subjective emotional exchanges. Their involvement brings to bear a seriousness that may lead the offending party to seek reconciliation, rather than dismissing the matter as a personal issue. They may also help uncover behavior in the offended party that

contributed to the problem. The witnesses must be spiritually mature. Galatians 6:1 says, "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted." The process of involving witnesses takes time, so patience is required. After they had made a great effort, if the offending party still refuses to listen, then what should be done?

Look at verse 17. "If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector." What does it mean to "tell it to the church"? It means to expose the matter publicly, so that the congregation may pray about it. This also protects church members from misunderstandings and bad influence, because "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (1 Cor 5:6). The purpose of the church should not be to cut off offending members, but to redeem them. 1 Timothy 1:5 says, "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." If the person ignores even the entire church's labor of love, what can we do? Jesus said to treat them like a pagan or a tax collector, who are deliberately rebellious against God. This implies that they be put out of the fellowship. This is done in the hope that they will repent and return to the Christian community. The church should be ready to accept those who repent, remembering God's heart for one lost sheep.

In verses 18-20 Jesus talks about the authority of the church. The church's authority does not originate from man, but from God. Look at verse 18. "Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." We should not take this verse out of context and claim authority from God to do whatever we want. Rather, we need to understand that verses 18-20 are given in the context of dealing with sin and forgiveness. Jesus gave his apostles authority to preach the gospel to all nations (Mt 28:18). The gospel is the only way of salvation God has given to mankind (Gal 1:8-9). As the gospel is preached, those who repent and believe receive forgiveness of sins from God. Those who do not accept the gospel do not receive forgiveness. As forgiven sinners, we live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The word of Christ, which is the word of God, is the standard for our faith and practice. As we listen to his word, the Bible, by the help of the Holy Spirit, he guides his community. Jesus is the head of the church and we are members of his body. Jesus is leading his church, loves his church, and takes care of his church (Eph 5:23,25;

Col 1:18). The church must submit to Christ (Eph 5:24a). In this relationship the church expresses Christ's authority on earth.

Verse 19 tells us that this authority can be practiced through united prayer. It says, "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." Here agreement is not just human agreement. It is agreement in the will of God. We must seek to understand God's holy and pleasing will (Ro 12:2). We should have the confidence that when we pray according to God's will, the mighty power of God will be exerted in answer to prayer. Here we learn the power of united prayer. When we see UBF ministry today, it has spread all over the world and includes so many members. There is a great diversity and the accompanying cultural conflicts. Perhaps no one could imagine that this ministry would develop so extensively. The beginning was like a mustard seed. Dr. Samuel Lee and Mother Sarah Barry overcame barriers of gender, culture, and philosophy and united in prayer to save young people on college campuses, raise them as Jesus' disciples, and send them out as missionaries. With this clear prayer topic, they died to themselves and dedicated their whole lives, coworking together for 40 years. God has blessed their united prayers and is reaching the campuses of the world with the gospel. In the same way, if just two or three people among us gather together in the name of Jesus with a God-given prayer topic, God is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine (Eph 3:20).

In verse 20 Jesus promised, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." Jesus is with his people who gather in his name. The church is not a building, but the place where Jesus dwells with his people. The church is not an organization, but an organism with Jesus' life flowing through it. Where Jesus is, anything is possible. Two or three people gathering together may seem small. When we see some of our scattered house churches, they look isolated, lonely and ineffective. But Jesus is there. Jesus' presence brings life, joy, peace, healing, and power. Many servants of God have been raised through such house churches. The key to experiencing this work of God is being united in Jesus' name. This principle can be applied to every kind of Christian gathering: a husband and wife, a small group, a campus meeting, or a large congregation. When even two people die to their own pride and selfishness and unite in Jesus, God can work mightily. Genuine unity in Christ among believers is a power source for doing great things. This is why it is so important to work for a healthy unity with love and peace. Jesus' teachings in this part should not be taken legalistically, but as his prescriptive wisdom to make his church healthy. They should be practiced with the spirit of forgiveness.

II. God's mercy and an unmerciful servant (21-35)

After hearing Jesus' teaching, Peter understood the meaning and realized that he needed to practice forgiveness toward his fellow believers. He wanted to be cooperative and get on board with Jesus' program so he generously offered, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" (21) In Judaism, forgiving three times was enough to show a forgiving spirit. But Peter suggested seven times. Most likely, he expected that Jesus would praise him. But unexpectedly, Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Peter may have thought, "Seventy-seven times?! What?! Maybe Jesus is joking." But Jesus was serious. Actually, seventy-seven times is a metaphorical way of expressing unlimited forgiveness. Why should we do this? How can we do this? Jesus explained by telling a parable.

Jesus began in verse 23, "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants." Here the king represents God, and his "settling accounts" refers to rendering judgment according to what each servant has done. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. According to the footnote, a bag of gold refers to a talent, which was worth about 20 years of a day laborer's wages. So, ten thousand talents would be about 200,000 years of a day laborer's wages. A person's working life may be about 50 years. It would take 4,000 lifetimes of work to pay this debt. It means that this debt was impossible to repay. 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. It was unbearable. The man faced separation from all of his family members, the loss of all his property, and the suffering of a slave for the rest of his existence. Due to his debt, he lost everything and fell into a deep pit of despair. He could not get out of it, no matter how much effort he exerted. So he fell on his knees before his master and begged, "Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything." The man did not ask for cancelation, but only patience and was determined to pay it back. But the master did far more than he asked. The master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. The servant was free and his family would stay together. He experienced a flood of relief and great joy. How was it possible? It was by the one-sided mercy and grace of his master.

As the servant went out, dancing in celebration, he saw a fellow servant who owed him one hundred silver coins. A silver coin was equivalent to a day's wages. Compared to ten thousand talents, one hundred silver coins was nothing. However, the servant grabbed his fellow servant 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 it back." But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged 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 handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. Jesus concluded, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Jesus makes it clear that we can bear God's grace of forgiveness only when we practice forgiveness toward others.

In this parable, debt represents sin. Sin against God is like a man owing the king ten thousand bags of gold. Sin against one's fellow man is like one hundred silver coins. Our sin against God is so great that we can never pay the debt. Due to our sin we should be sold into bondage and lose everything. We should experience the lifelong misery of slavery like the Israelites in Egypt. In 18th century America, many African Americans had to watch helplessly as family members were sold separately, one by one, to different owners. Isolated and alone, they had to live their entire lives in bondage and misery, shedding blood and tears. Our situation was like that and even worse. Because of our sins we suffered a lot. We experienced sorrow and despair, depression, regret, fear and fatalism without any hope. No matter how hard we tried, we could not escape this bondage and debt. Finally we would be thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur, to suffer endlessly. But God had mercy on us and canceled all our debt. To do so, he punished Jesus as a ransom sacrifice in our places. God forgave all our sins unconditionally. Furthermore, he made us his beloved children and heirs of his glorious kingdom. Since we have received such wonderful grace, we must forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts. That's what God wants us to do.

But actually, forgiving others is not easy. It is like moving a mountain (Mk 11:22-25). In order to forgive others we need great inner strength. Where can we find this strength? It comes when we remember Jesus' grace of forgiveness moment by

moment. When we practice forgiveness in our relationships with others, we can experience heavenly joy and peace and grow in his grace. But when we do not practice forgiveness, we become judgmental, demanding and merciless, like the man in the parable. We cannot but wound many people, break relationships, and damage our community. There is a man who experienced the painful departure of his beloved disciple. Whenever he prayed, he called down curses from God's mighty hand upon the one who left him. He was suffering a lot. Then one day, as he prayed in the early morning, he remembered this parable. God had had mercy on him and canceled all his debt of sins. But he was like the forgiven servant who was choking his fellow servant. Then he heard God's voice, "You are the man!" So he deeply repented his unforgiving heart. Then the grace of God flooded his soul. It was deeper than the ocean and higher than the mountains. It dawned on him that conflicts between believers are nothing compared to the debt God has forgiven us. Since then he became a peacemaker.

There is a book called, "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...and it's all small stuff" by Dr. Richard Carlson. In the introduction, he explains how the book got its name. When his request for an endorsement by Dr. Wayne Dyer was ignored, Dr. Carlson's publisher decided to use a previous endorsement from Dr. Dyer without permission. Upon finding this out, Dr. Carlson withdrew the books from bookstores and wrote a very sincere apology to Dr. Dyer. A few weeks later, he received the reply. It went as follows: "Richard. There are two rules for living in harmony. #1) Don't sweat the small stuff and #2) It's all small stuff. Let the quote stand. Love, Wayne." Compared to the debt God has forgiven us, all the wrongs others have committed against us are small stuff.

When we have a right perspective in this matter and learn to forgive others from our hearts, we can experience a transformation in our community. There is great power in forgiveness. General Wellington of England had to deal with a soldier who was an incorrigible sinner. As a result, the soldier was facing execution. At that moment, Wellington said to him: "I tried to teach you in many ways, but you did not receive my instruction. So I tried to correct you through discipline, but you never changed. I tried to reform you by putting you in prison. But it did not help. I did my best. Now there is only one thing to do: you must be executed." At this critical moment, a friend of the soldier stepped forward and said, "With all due respect, General Wellington, there is one thing you did not try. You did not forgive him." Wellington was cut to the heart. So he canceled the execution and said to the soldier, "I forgive you without any condition." Surprisingly, this soldier totally

changed into a new man. Forgiveness has power to transform people. That is why God forgives us without limit and unconditionally. God wants us also to practice unlimited, unconditional forgiveness. This is the secret to establishing a beautiful Christian community.

