

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL FORGIVENESS (Matthew 18:15-35)

1.30.22

INTRODUCTION

This is part of a continuation of a conversation that Jesus had with His disciples that began with the question of “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” The idea Christ presented was that the virtue of humility made for the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And He continued by pointing out that, as His followers, we needed to look at each other from the context of humility, of being willing to serve others, to see everyone around us as more important than ourselves.

Last week we mentioned why it was important for Jesus to have this conversation. He is founding His church, which is going to continue in ministry long after He has returned to heaven. His church will accomplish nothing for His kingdom if all its members are concerned about its prestige, position, and power. His kingdom is about gentleness, meekness, humility, and love. All His disciples — including us — need to both understand that intellectually and then practice that as well; in other words, being that kind of disciple has to look like something.

Now we need to remember the context of the times. Jesus is trying to explain a kingdom that is completely different than anything His disciples had ever seen or even considered before. The world’s kingdoms were built on power and ambition. Even as Jesus spoke, their nation was occupied by the power and ambition of the Roman Empire. The disciples were sure that the kingdom of heaven must operate that way too; that’s what was behind their initial question about greatness in the first place. And Jesus is explaining how His kingdom is set up, to the point that, if they want to be a part of His kingdom, they will have to change. Their hearts will have to be different; their worldview will have to be different; their goals will have to be different, their definition of “greatness” will have to be different. And only Jesus, their Radical Rabbi, will be able to make them different. So, as we continue this look at what it takes to be a member of His kingdom, **let’s go to the Master of that kingdom in prayer.**

TEXT (Matthew 18:15-35)

While obviously the most important relationship in the church is between its members and Jesus Christ — our vertical relationship with God through Him — He gives incredible importance to our relationships with each other — our horizontal relationships intended to reflect Him. If you have any doubt about this, let me ask you: Have you all ever heard a sentiment expressed something like this: “Love God, hate the church!” I actually heard that from a pastor once. But I’ve also heard it from many other people who have experienced hurt or disappointment or conflict within the church. Christ knew that stuff was coming so He decided to lay out a plan for how to address those moments, and He starts with the most basic: the relationship between two individuals, and this and all other situations with people is going to be about three R’s: Repent, Reconcile, and Restore — so let’s begin:

“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:15.

There are a couple of realities we need to bear in mind. First, somebody may have offended us without having the slightest clue they did that. But even if the wrong was intentional, the attitude that Jesus has already expressed about being submissive to one another and gentle with one another will go a long way in helping the other person realize what has happened and apologize.

We're not trying to win some kind of argument or battle here; we are trying to reconcile and restore a relationship, for the honor and glory of Christ and His kingdom.

We see a beautiful picture of what this can look like, where sin has occurred between two people, from Paul's letter to the Galatian church: ***Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently — Paul, Galatians 6:1a.*** A couple of Greek words really highlight what this means:

- 1) The Greek word *katartizo* is actually a medical term that means “to set a broken bone.” The idea is to restore, to make perfect, to mend, to perfectly join together. That word fits so well with —
- 2) The Greek word *praotes*, which means to do something with gentleness and humility. Think of the gentleness and tenderness with which we would approach somebody with a broken arm. We would do everything we could to make sure that nothing happened that damaged that arm further, that absolutely nothing bumped it or jostled it. We would be as gentle as possible.

These words together tell us that confronting somebody who may have sinned against us is not about conquest, about achieving a victory of some sort, nor is it about venting our “righteous indignation” all over them. It is about having the love and humility to sincerely desire the healing of repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. And it also tells us the state of heart we must have if the sin turns out to be ours, and we need to reach out and ask for forgiveness. Bottom line: It's about passionately desiring the best for the other person's relationship with Christ, and that we will do all in our power to come alongside that brother or sister to help ensure that that happens.

“But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:16 (quoting Deuteronomy 19:15).

This is one of the blessings of being a part of a church family. In the case of a disagreement or misunderstanding or misdeed that somebody feels was done, and they've tried the one-on-one approach and things didn't seem to resolve, the next step Christ outlines is to bring one or two others into the situation. One possibility: They may tell you that you are the one in the wrong — which affirms that you need to reach out to repent and reconcile with the other person in order to restore the relationship. If, however, the other person is genuinely in the wrong, “one or two others” allows both the support of prayer for the situation as well as the wisdom and perspective that can come from having others involved, assuming that their only interests are for repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. It also provides for the witnessing of the conversation — the words and the tone — as the person is confronted with their sin.

And then Christ continues: ***“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” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:17.***

So, if there is still a failure to resolve the issue, then the situation, and the sin involved, must be presented to the entire church. If there is still no repentance, then reconciliation and restoration is impossible. While that person is never to be hated, they have forfeited the close fellowship that right relationships within the church possess, leaving church discipline as the only option. The sinner is now an outsider who has chosen himself over the required spiritual steps that begin with repentance. That person is still, however, to be the object of prayer, evangelism, and of a love that continues to seek to minister to the person and seek the best for the person.

“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. 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. For where two or three gather in My name, there am I with them” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:18-20.

Now it’s not enough that somebody unrepentant toward sin is on the receiving end of church discipline. In such serious circumstances, Christ is telling His disciples that it is most important that the church be at its spiritual best. In other words, how can a church exercise church discipline if the body of believers is undisciplined itself? The context for how the church conducts itself on earth — “whatever you bind” — must be in accord with God, and whatever the church permits — “whatever you loose on earth” — must first be permitted by God. Church discipline does not mean members of the church throwing their weight around. It is not their authority that is at stake here, but God’s authority — with the desired outcome of repentance, reconciliation, and restoration of one of His kids who has fallen into sin.

In addition to the authority of God’s word in how the church conducts an affair as serious as church discipline, there must also be prayer. When Jesus talks of “two of you on earth” agreeing about anything they ask for, the Greek word being used for “agree” is *sumphoneo*, from which we get our word “symphony.” The word itself means to be in harmony with one another, to agree together, to be in one accord. That agreement comes from a joint exercise of God’s word and prayer. The church needs to have the affirmation of conducting their affairs, particularly in the context of church discipline, totally within the context of God’s expressed will — and that is only found through His word and through prayer.

And finally, there must be found in that church a fellowship that worships God in spirit and in truth, recognizing the presence of God Almighty in their very midst. This is the basis for the honesty that would need to be present in any approach of church discipline. And that honesty must first be formed from absolute love from the church family for the sinner; it must be a congregation that makes a practice of, as Paul said, ***speaking the truth in love — Paul, Ephesians 4:15a.*** As pastor and teacher Warren Wiersbe has said so well: *“If we practice love without truth, it is hypocrisy. But if we try to have truth without love, it may be brutality.”* This was always Christ’s pattern: truth with love, even if the truth hurt. But as the book of Proverbs tells us: ***Wounds from a friend (literally, “a loved one”) can be trusted — Proverbs 27:6a.***

But in all matters and situations that may arise within the body of believers, meekness, gentleness, and humility — those character traits which Christ has been trying to get the disciples to understand and embrace — must come before honesty. What is the condition of our own hearts as we confront the sin in somebody else’s? We could just as easily fall into sin as our brother or sister. And we can never forget what the desired outcome of such confrontations are: repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. The church is not a human organization. It is God’s family, and its members are His kids.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times — Matthew 18:21-22.

Peter, bless his heart, gets a couple of things wrong, one of which comes from a heart that struggled to find that humility that Jesus was talking about. Certainly, a great example of missing some humility was at the Last Supper, when Jesus predicted that the disciples would shortly desert Him. Peter disagreed; ***“Even if all fall away on account of You, I never will. . . . Even if***

I have to die with You, I will never disown You — ***Peter, Matthew 26:33, 35a***. There was a whole lot of pride being spoken there — pride spelled “I” — and that same lack of humility is heard here: “How many time shall I forgive?” Someone is going to sin against him; of that he is certain. But never does he consider that he might be the sinner.

The other mistake Peter makes is by putting limits or some kind of measure on forgiveness. Actually, in his defense, there was precedent; the rabbis had usually taught that forgiving somebody three times was enough. So, to forgive seven times? Wow, what a guy — or so he thought. Again, where’s the humility? But he forgot Who he was talking to, and the kingdom “Who he was talking to” represented.

Now while the NIV (and the ESV as well) translate Christ’s response as “seventy-seven times,” other translations (NASB, NKJV, NLT) give Christ’s reply as “seventy times seven.” Either answer must have shocked Peter; I mean, think about the poor guy: “Seventy times seven? Rats, let me see: zero, seven times seven, nine, carry the four — 490! You want me to forgive somebody 490 times? Who’s going to keep count of that?” Even if the answer was seventy-seven times, the number was unheard of. But that was exactly the point, which Paul wrote in such a plain, direct way, telling us that love ***keeps no record of wrongs*** — ***Paul, I Corinthians 13:5b***. Forgiveness should be a habit that becomes a lifestyle. Now there is still the process of confronting sin that Jesus so clearly laid out but, especially in view of repentance, forgiveness should be immediate and unconditional — and with no calculators attached. After all, that is how God forgives us. Remember what the psalmist wrote: ***If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you*** — ***Psalms 130:3-4***. And then, to illustrate His point as only He could, Jesus told one of His most vivid parables.

“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 bags of gold was brought to him” — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:23-24***.

How this guy got into such astronomical debt we are not told, but he was in serious trouble. In the Greek, we are told that his debt came to 10,000 talents. The talent was the largest unit of currency in the Greco-Roman world. Just one talent was equivalent to 20 years of wages for the typical day worker — and he owes 10,000 of those things! In the economy of the time, this guy was having to look up just to see bottom. His situation was hopeless.

“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. At this 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 (the master took the debt upon himself) and let him go” — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:25-27***.

Now just the simple math tells you that there is no way that this guy can pay off this ginormous amount of debt. But fortunately for him, this particular king had an equally ginormous amount of compassion and mercy, so much so that he cancelled the debt and, because there was no longer any debt to the king, let him go, also meaning that this guy’s family was spared the humiliation of the consequences of his debt as well. But then the debtor becomes a creditor:

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. 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 it back.’ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:28-30.

This fellow servant owed our main character the equivalent of approximately 100 days’ worth of wages — a fair amount, but nothing like the first guy’s debt. Nevertheless, even in the face of hearing precisely the same words imploring him to be merciful, he refused to do so. Instead, because the fellow servant couldn’t pay, he had him thrown into prison until the debt could be satisfied. But what this guy didn’t realize was that his actions had an audience.

“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. This is how My heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 18:31-35.

When the king heard of the unforgiving spirit of the first man, the man he had so graciously forgiven, he decided there was only one way to be fair: show to that man the same amount of mercy — none — that he had been so casually willing to show his fellow servant. But now that this man had shown his true heart, there would be neither mercy or forgiveness. The original debt, along with the impossibility of repayment, was back on the books.

APPLICATION

Forgiveness is one of the most critical capabilities of a church. When Christ shared the Lord’s Prayer as part of the Sermon on the Mount, for all the petitions that were mentioned, it was the section on forgiveness that was the only one that warranted additional comment: “[I]f you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 6:14-15. And both those verses and this parable point to answering the same question: How far are you willing to go to please your Master?

One reason forgiveness is so important is that *forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you* — Paul, Ephesians 4:32, acknowledges that God’s forgiving us is a complete act of grace and mercy, totally undeserved yet totally accomplished by means of the cross of Christ. I am seen as perfect by God’s all-seeing eyes only because God’s forgiveness is so complete. He, in the person of His Son, is the model, the example, of what forgiveness is supposed to look like.

A second reason forgiveness is so important is that forgiveness is the greatest reflection of God we can exhibit to the world around us. We don’t see a lot of forgiveness at play in the world today. When the church shows forgiveness, it declares the glory as well as the very presence of God in an unmistakably unique way. It declares who is leading the church — not human emotions, not human power, not human wisdom, not human justice, but God, and God alone. The world needs to see God at work; practicing forgiveness is an incredible way to display Him.

A third reason forgiveness is so important is that forgiveness translates as obedience to God as few things do. Did you ever wonder why forgiveness is often so difficult and feels so awkward? One reason, and his name is Satan. Satan is the inventor of all things difficult and awkward. When forgiveness becomes necessary — either doing it or asking for it — I promise you Satan is going to be there first to make the whole exercise so clumsy and so distasteful that it becomes the last thing we want to do. Unfortunately, if we choose that route, we are doing so because we are

focused on ourselves instead of on our Master. Exercising forgiveness makes a clear statement that, no matter what, I will obey what my Father wants — unconditionally, without limits.

CONCLUSION

As we close this conversation about forgiveness, I need to be clear about something. I've been here going on three and a half years and, in that time, there is no way that I haven't said something wrong or done something wrong or somehow just blown it regarding your rightful expectations and my performance.

Yesterday I met with the elders and, along with pointing out some things I am doing well, they also graciously pointed out some things that I absolutely need to improve. I gotta confess: I am not great in hearing about my wrongs; my body language and/or my tone makes that obvious. But you know what? I was wrong, no ifs, ands or buts — including my body language and/or my tone. I am working to do things better, taking some tangible steps to follow their wisdom and advice. I continue to have great leadership to help get me to do things better, but I am still going to faceplant on occasion. When I do that — not if but when — I need to know that that has happened, that I have failed you, so I can both repent of my wrong and correct it. No crew that I have ever been associated with has meant more to me than you guys. I desire to be the best for each and every one of you that I can be, and I will not be satisfied just being OK. OK is not good enough if something better is available. So help me. Please pray for me; I need that so incredibly much. Please talk with me. Let's all of us desire and work to bring out the best in each other — for the glory of Christ's name. Let's pray!