

Week 22: Matthew 18:15–35

Hook



Main Point: In the Upside-Down Kingdom, we forgive from the heart.

Bruce Goodrich was being initiated into the cadet corps at Texas A&M University. One night, Bruce was forced to run until he dropped – but he never got up. Bruce Goodrich died before he even entered college.

A short time after the tragedy, Bruce’s father wrote this letter to the administration, faculty, student body and the corps of cadets: “I would like to take this opportunity to express the appreciation of my family for the great outpouring of concern and sympathy from Texas A&M University and the college community over the loss of our son Bruce. We were deeply touched by the tribute paid to him in the battalion. We were particularly pleased to note that his Christian witness did not go unnoticed during his brief time on campus.”

Mr. Goodrich went on: “I hope it will be some comfort to know that we harbor no ill will in the matter. We know our God makes no mistakes. Bruce had an appointment with his Lord and is now secure in his celestial home. When the question is asked, ‘Why did this happen?’ perhaps one answer will be, ‘So that many will consider where they will spend eternity.’”ⁱ

Q: How might you have responded to such a tragedy?

Q: How might you have responded to such a letter in response?

Q: How can a change of perspective aid you in handling tragedy?

Week 22: Matthew 18:15–35

Book

Main Point: In the Upside-Down Kingdom, we forgive from the heart.

Matthew 18:15–20 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Christians are to take sin and stumbling blocks seriously.

Q: Why does Jesus give them a three-part process for confronting each other about sin?

The context of this passage is important. In the verses just before this, Jesus told His disciples that God is like a shepherd who would leave His flock of 99 to pursue the one that has gone astray, implying they should do the same. Remembering that the goal is not condemnation but trying to bring back the sheep who has gone astray into the fold makes a world of difference in how we view this process of confronting sin in our churches. The goal is not excommunication; it is only a last resort, if the person absolutely refuses to repent after every attempt to lovingly confront has failed. We must pursue straying sheep to bring them back into the fold (vv. 10–14), but in very severe circumstances, we have to “purge the evil person from among you” to keep them from infecting the whole community (1 Corinthians 5:13). This all fits this context, just after Jesus pronounced woe to those who are a stumbling block to others (18:6–7; 15).ⁱⁱ Even in cases when the Church excommunicates someone, the ultimate long-term goal of the process is that after having been away for a while, that person would repent and come back (1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 2:5–11; 1 Timothy 1:20).ⁱⁱⁱ Because God’s desire is for *all people* to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), for *none* of His little ones to perish (Matthew 18:14).

Excommunication is a relatively simple process, very similar to the Jewish tradition at the time.^{iv} This is one of those straightforward passages, giving us clear instructions about what to do when a fellow believer has sinned against you. It doesn’t use metaphor, poetry or parables. It’s simple, practical advice for conflict resolution between two people in a believing community, with a focus on mutual love and respect even when there is conflict or sin. The Bible is clear that we are not to judge outsiders, but we have a *responsibility* to judge and confront those *inside* the church who are sinning (1 Corinthians 5:12). The Bible is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16) and “the Lord disciplines the one He loves” (Hebrews 12:6). As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are responsible to hold each other accountable, to “stir up one another to love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24). But this cannot be with a holier-than-thou attitude or slanderous motives or out of vengeance or anger. It has to be “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). Because it’s all about bringing the sinning person back into the flock.^v

To that end, the first step is to confront the sinning person in private (v. 15). Slandering someone or gossiping about them was considered a grave sin.^{vi} Some rabbis of Jesus' day said that publicly shaming others was so severe it warranted exclusion from heaven.^{vii} At the same time, just letting sin go without confronting it isn't okay either. It isn't healthy for the relationship between the two people or for the community as a whole. Conflict cannot be avoided; it has to be confronted directly, but in a healthy, loving way.^{viii} You must first confront the person one-on-one, clearly sharing how that person has hurt you and what needs to change. In a healthy, loving, Christian community where everyone is loved, valued and respected as fellow members of the body of Christ, and everyone is living in humility with others, all conflicts would be resolved with this step. There would never have to be a step 2 or 3. Ideally, a good fellow believer who loved you would apologize and work hard to change his or her behavior.

This is why Jesus commanded them to talk to the person in private first. If you go straight to confronting them in public or gossip about them instead, you cause brokenness in your relationship and their reputation. If you never confront them, your friendship and your church community will still have brokenness in it. By confronting them in a loving way, you have the opportunity to fix the relationship and to both grow and change. Or they may explain their side to you, and you may find it was all a misunderstanding. Healthy confrontation (working through this process) with another Christian who is committed to living like Jesus and loving others only strengthens the friendship and whole church community. Unfortunately, in too many churches, people either avoid conflict, which causes the situation to fester and get worse, or they gossip about the situation rather than confronting the person directly, which results in slander and brokenness for everyone.

If the offender won't listen to you in private, you should try again with two or three witnesses (v. 16). Judaism was strict about the need for witnesses; to speak evil of another person without supporting witnesses warranted a public beating.^{ix} These witnesses should be strong believers who love both of you and are committed to reconciliation. They should not make the other person feel ganged up on, but instead function as mediators between the two of you. Their goal should be to listen and help you work things out, not cause more trouble.

If the person still won't listen *and the witnesses agree* that the person needs to repent (v. 16), the next step is to bring the conflict before the whole church body. If the witnesses don't agree, you need to reconsider your grievance. If the person still won't listen, he is to be "to you as a Gentile and tax collector" (v. 17), meaning unclean and to be avoided – excommunicated from the community. As Paul wrote, do not even associate with someone who claims to be a Christian but lives in habitual, unrepentant sin. He makes it clear that he is not talking about

unbelievers, “since then you would need to go out of the world,” but those who call themselves Christians (1 Corinthians 5:10–11).^x

Jesus ended His description of this process by repeating what He said in chapter 16, that whatever they bind or loose on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven (v. 18). Bible commentators W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr. write that this means that “the halakic decisions of the community have the authority of heaven itself.”^{xi} Binding and loosing refer to the judicial authority of Christians gathered in Jesus’ name to decide cases based on God’s law.^{xii} In Jewish law, there had to be a minimum of 10 males to form an assembly for a synagogue, but God’s presence was promised when only two or three gathered to study His Law, so Jesus is equating Himself with the presence of God (v. 20).^{xiii} If Jesus is there with them, and all parties follow this process in His humility and love, it will keep the Church pure from sin that destroys communities, both the sin that needed confronting and the gossip, slander or brokenness that could come from handling it wrongly.

Q: What should you do if someone in your church gossips to you about a situation or slanders someone else in the church instead of confronting them directly?

Q: How would our churches be different if we followed this process with humility and love every time there was a conflict or sin?

Matthew 18:21–30 [Read]

Talking Point 2: The debt we have to forgive others is nothing compared to the debt God has forgiven us.

Q: Does “70 times seven” mean we have to forgive someone 490 times, but then we can stop forgiving them? If not, what does it mean? (Note: The ESV translates “seventy-seven times,” but the original Greek is “seventy times seven.”)

Q: How does this relate to the process Jesus described above, when He describes grounds for excommunicating people from our churches?

In Scripture, seven is the number of completion or wholeness as well as blessing and rest. The people are commanded to rest on the seventh day and to give the land a rest in the seventh year. There are 49 days (7x7) between Passover and Pentecost, and 49 years between the years of Jubilee. When he asked Jesus, “As many as seven times?” Peter would have thought this number was very generous, being more than double the “requirement.” Rabbis at the time taught that forgiving someone more than *three* times was unnecessary, citing Amos 1:3–13, where God forgave Israel’s enemies three times, but then punished them.^{xiv}

But Jesus upped that number times 10 – their estimation number for “a great number” – and then times another seven. Because these are such symbolic numbers, it isn’t meant to be taken literally, as if you should forgive someone 490 times and then you could stop. It is a play-on-words, kind of a way to say we must forgive *forever*. Bible scholar Craig S. Keener wrote, “A disciple’s forgiveness should be unlimited.”^{xv} No matter how many times a person has hurt you in the past. As 1 Corinthians 13 says, love “does not take into account a wrong suffered” (NASB). Love doesn’t count the wrongs till you get to any particular number, no matter how high. Love doesn’t count at all.

To illustrate this point, Jesus told a powerful parable. Because we’ve heard this story so many times, and we have so much cultural distance from it, we can lose a lot of the force of the parable. The setting of the court of a Gentile king was unusual for Jesus. He usually used examples from the Galilean countryside. But the Gentile court provides suspense for the story – such unbelievable grace, then such harsh punishment. Given the ruthlessness of typical ancient Near Eastern kings, it would have been inconceivable for the king to forgive this man’s debt, especially with the enormity of it. The hearers of the parable would have been shocked, which set up their reaction to the slave refusing to forgive the debt of another slave – even more shocked, because his debt was comparatively so small.

It is interesting to think of sin in terms of a financial debt. “Debts” is used in Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer because ancient Judaism often viewed sin as debt before God.^{xvi} But “sins” is used in Luke to make it more intelligible to a Greek audience. This concept comes from the way redemption worked in ancient Israel. If you became so poor that you couldn’t pay your debts, you sold yourself into “slavery” (what we think of as indentured servanthood) to pay off your debts. However, if a close family member had the means, they could redeem you – pay your debt for you to buy you out of slavery. This would have been a large amount of money, so it was a major sacrifice and generosity on the part of the kinsman-redeemer. Scripture likens our sin to this kind of debt that God redeemed us through Christ’s death on the cross. “You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from you forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:18–19). The danger of thinking of our sin as debt is thinking that it is something we *can* pay, and therefore that our good works are payments toward our debt. As if our sins are like a bank statement, with credits and debits, that one day will balance out if we just work hard enough. But this parable makes it abundantly clear that the debt owed to the king was so astronomically large it could not be repaid. It had to be forgiven.

We may not get the “gut-punch” moment of this parable the way Jesus’ original audience would have because we don’t understand the value of their debts: 10,000 talents vs. 100 *denarii*. A *denarius* was one day’s wage for a day laborer, so the small amount the slave owed to the other slave was about four months’ wages. A large amount of money, but not impossible to repay over time. But 10,000 talents would have taken a day laborer *150,000 years* to earn.

Obviously, there is no way he could ever repay that amount. Even if he sold himself into slavery, he would only be worth about 1/5 of *one* talent, which would still leave him 9,999+ talents in debt. This was hyperbole in the extreme; it was more money than existed in circulation in the whole country at the time. But it was a symbolic number: 10,000 was simply the largest single number Greek could express, the largest amount imaginable. Jesus was intentionally using astronomical numbers to make a point. The debt we owe God is more than we could ever imagine, and therefore, His grace is greater than we could ever imagine. But the parable is not just about God's grace; it's also about our forgiveness. The point being made is that the magnitude of God's saving grace is the only proper model for our forgiveness of each other.^{xvii}

The debt of the first slave to the king was almost *half a million* times the debt of the other slave to him. The theological point? No matter what another person has done to you, it is *nowhere near* what God has forgiven you. Whatever they have done to you, it pales in comparison to God's grace toward us. Remember, this parable was in response to Peter's question about how much we have to forgive. Jesus' answer? As much as God has forgiven you. This makes our forgiveness of others not an obligation, but a joy. An opportunity to pay God's grace forward to someone else (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Not just "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," but as has been done unto you, by God! Forgive as you have been forgiven. Love as you have been loved (1 John 4:19). Children tend to reflect the love and actions of their parents. If they have been yelled at a lot, they tend to yell at other people. If they have been hugged a lot, they tend to be affectionate. If they have been treated with impatience and anger, they tend to lash out. Kids often treat other people the way they have been treated by their parents. Then why don't we treat others the way we have been treated by God?

The parable says that the king was "moved with compassion" (KJV) for his slave. This is the same word used in the story of the prodigal son and when Jesus had compassion on the multitudes and the sick and hurting. It comes from the word for entrails – the vital inner organs. It is not just a feeling, but a physical pain that hits you in the gut. When you feel so upset about something that you feel sick. From its use in the Bible, we can see that this is an emotion that produces action. When Jesus felt compassion for the people, He did something about it. He didn't just feel sorry for them and move on. It is *only* used of God or Jesus' having compassion on people. This is a divine reaction to sin and brokenness – not self-righteous anger, but compassion.^{xviii} This is the heart we need to have when we confront others who have sinned against us in the church community. Instead of going to them in anger and self-righteousness, we need to approach them with humility and love. When people sin against us, we would do well to remember that we are all sinners in need of God's grace. Our goal should never be to get revenge or to make the other person pay but to heal the brokenness in our relationships and our communities.

Q: Why is it so hard to forgive people?

Q: How could remembering how much you have been forgiven by God change your heart?

Important Clarification: Forgiving someone an unlimited number of times does not mean continuing to let that person abuse you. In the same way that an unrepentant sinner should be excommunicated from the Church if they refuse to listen after the process of confrontation, so it should be in personal relationships. If you confront someone and he or she refuses to change or even admit wrong, you need to end the relationship. You should still work to forgive that person in your heart for your own sake, but do not continue to allow him/her to hurt you.

Matthew 18:31–35 [Read]

Talking Point 3: If we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us.

Q: How did the king’s attitude change toward the unforgiving slave? Why?

Q: What does this tell us about how God will treat us if we are unforgiving of others?

This king who was moved with compassion was now moved with anger. He not only threw the slave in jail, but handed him over to the *torturers* until he could repay his debt, which we know would be never. Scholars believe this represents the eternal punishment of hell.^{xix} Jewish law would not have allowed torture, but the king in the parable was a Gentile.^{xx} Jesus tells us here, and when He teaches His disciples the Lord’s Prayer, that if we don’t forgive others, He won’t forgive us. Not because He doesn’t love us, but because when we don’t show grace to others, we are “playing the game” of law, not grace. If we judge someone else by the law instead of by grace, God will judge us that way, too (Matthew 7:1–3). We cannot condemn others without condemning ourselves (Romans 2:1). We have no right to judge, no room to talk. As we treat others, so we will be treated. If we demand debt repayment from those who have sinned against us, God will demand debt repayment from us. But if we want to be shown grace by God, we must show grace to others. We are all to forgive one another, no matter what others have done to us. There is no sin that is beyond forgiveness, no debt too big. And it can’t just be lip service, it has to be from the heart, being moved with compassion and love, as God forgave us (v. 35).

But this isn’t about God’s creating some sort of conditional contract for our forgiveness. It’s about God transforming our hearts, taking that murderous anger out of our hearts and replacing it with love and forgiveness. When we hold on to anger, it eats at us from the inside with bitterness and hate and anger. When we don’t forgive someone, it doesn’t hurt the other person; it hurts us. It’s been compared to drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. But when we forgive, we let go of all that anger, bitterness and hate. We are free to love.

Forgiveness is about reconciliation – bringing ourselves back into right relationship with God and with each other. The reason we can’t bring our offerings to God while we have an issue with our brother is not some arbitrary rule God made up to keep us on our toes (Matthew 5:23–24). Our love for God is by nature tied up with our love for our brothers and sisters (1 John 4:20). Our God is all about relationship. We do not love and worship Him in a vacuum, on our own. We love and worship Him in community. As the body of Christ, we are bound

together. If one member of the body will not forgive another, it is like the body cutting off its own hand. You cannot love and worship God when there is conflict between you and a Christian brother or sister, not because it's a rule God made, but because you *cannot* do it. You must fix the cut-off arm before you can serve as the body.

Q: Have you ever experienced a time when unforgiveness and anger hurt you from within? How did you heal from the anger and hurt?

Q: Why is it so unhealthy to hold onto anger and unforgiveness in your own life? In the Church?

Q: Why is it important for the body of Christ to treat one another with the grace and forgiveness of God? How does it affect our church communities?

Week 22: *Matthew 18:15–35*

Took

Main Point: In the Upside-Down Kingdom, we forgive from the heart.

Mr. Goodrich performed a rather inconceivable act by forgiving those responsible for the death of his son. He had every reason to respond in anger and potential lawsuits, yet he chose forgiveness. It is evident that the Lord was working through Mr. Goodrich. In the Upside-Down Kingdom, we forgive from the heart. The debt we have to forgive others is nothing compared to the debt God has forgiven us. Even in the midst of terrible pain and suffering, when we focus our perspective on God, we can grasp the depth and power of the Gospel.

CHALLENGES:

THINK: Are there people in your life whom you need to forgive? Any person or situation for which you are holding unforgiveness or anger in your heart? How can you work to forgive that person and heal the relationship? What if that person doesn't want to reconcile? How can you work to forgive that person in your own heart even if the person doesn't repent?

PRAY: Pray for those who have hurt you in the past or even those who are hurting you now. Pray for the wisdom and strength to know how to confront them in love and humility. Pray for their hearts to be softened to hear you and for your heart to be softened to forgive.

ACT: Contact that person and ask to reconcile your relationship. If the person refuses to reconcile, take steps toward healing and forgiveness in your own heart, for your own personal emotional and spiritual health.

Hook, Took & Editing by Luke Humphrey

- ⁱ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/f/forgiveness.htm>
- ⁱⁱ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).
- ⁱⁱⁱ V. C. Pfitzner, "Purified Community–Purified Sinner, Expulsion from the Community According to Matthew 18:15–18 and 1 Corinthians 5:1–5" *Australian Biblical Review* 30 (1982), 34–55.
- ^{iv} T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).
- ^v T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).
- ^{vi} Samuel Belkin, "Philo and the Oral Law: The Philonic Interpretation of Biblical Law in Relation to the Palestinian Halakah," *Harvard Semitic Series 11* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940).
- ^{vii} M. Beer, "On Solidarity Among the Sages" *Zion* 53 (1988), 149–66
- ^{viii} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).
- ^{ix} Samuel Belkin, "Philo and the Oral Law: The Philonic Interpretation of Biblical Law in Relation to the Palestinian Halakah," *Harvard Semitic Series 11* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940).
- ^x T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).
- ^{xi} W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew, International Critical Commentary, Vol 1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991).
- ^{xii} W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew, International Critical Commentary, Vol 1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991).
- ^{xiii} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).
- ^{xiv} John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Word Bibles, 1997), 1426.
- ^{xv} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).
- ^{xvi} Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).
- ^{xvii} Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).
- ^{xviii} *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*
- ^{xix} T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).
- ^{xx} Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).