

**The Unforgiving Servant:
Some Surprises on Forgiveness
Matthew 18:21-35**

Our opening study introduced us to several problematic parables in Matthew. We focused in general on the famous parable chapter in Matthew 13. In particular, we looked at the parable of the *Wheat and the Tares* and its interpretation. Anyone who looks at this parable will immediately perceive that it is deeply embedded in Matthew's eschatology. This makes it problematic for some. (We will have reason to pursue that matter in more detail later in that presentation.) Along with its twin, the parable of the Net, it finishes the third great Parable Discourse of Jesus in Matthew. As with the other four main discourses, it constitutes a strong warning to those in the kingdom. At the last day, at the coming of the Son of Man, those who have pursued righteous lives, we are told, "will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father" (Matt 13:43).

But there are others in the Kingdom. This is where the emphasis rests in Matthew 13. In an ancient harvest the entire crop is cut and put in sheaves. The good wheat is gathered into bundles for threshing. The weeds are gathered separately and burned. In very carefully stated language, likewise, Matthew opines, "The Son of Man will gather out of his Kingdom all who cause sin and evildoers." Notice again that Matthew is not talking about the world. It goes its way to its inevitable end. Rather he is talking about the Kingdom of God. Some within the circumference of this kingdom are going to have a difficult time. As I pointed out in the earlier lecture, I cannot see any way around the conclusion that this is a slap at soteriological security - no matter how well people may seem to bolster it with their theological theorems. In Australia there is a popular saying, "It's all right mate!" Of course, this is not always the case. In terms of preaching, I believe we should point this out. This may get the attention of even the most complacent of our folks who show up at the assembly on Sunday morning.

Nevertheless, I am contending that we do see grace in this passage and others like it. Matthew surely reminds us that the mere fact that we are on a church roll somewhere, even having taken the time and effort to become part of a sectarian community that stands against the debased culture, in itself, is not enough. What is needed as we prepare for the Judgment is assurance of a life suffused by the imitation of Christ. And here is where the grace factor emerges. At its core, that imitation involves showing care, concern, and nurturing of our fellow believers in the community. We are to be good shepherds. We are not tasked to act as harsh arbitrators as to who is in and who is out; but as Matt 13:30 says, using the famous *aphiēmi* of Acts 2:38 we are "to permit, allow, forgive or leave the unproductive brethren together with the productive until the Lord himself will deal with the situation at the end." Grace comes in our encouragement. Grace is giving the needy brother or sister a cup of cold water, speaking that word of hope when it is sorely needed. Grace is like that good shepherd of Matt 18 who, even after many falls, picks up that brother and takes him back to the AA meeting. In other words, at the very center of all of this is our topic for today: Forgiveness.

Analysis of Matt 18:21-35

In keeping with our focus on the parables this is the quintessential parable on forgiveness in Matthew. We note that verses 21-22 are included in this unit even though the parable does not directly answer Peter's question as to how often shall I forgive a brother who sins against me? Instead of dealing with the quantifying question, the parable moves off in the direction of the need for unlimited compassion. Matt 18:22, echoing Lamech's song in Gen 4:23-24, also stresses this theme of no limitation. The Genesis passage, of course, speaks about vengeance without limitations. Jesus articulates the same point substituting forgiveness for vengeance. Thematically, however, the concept of forgiveness is central both in the dialogue with Peter and the parable. Also, the exaggerated number of times one forgives stands out as a central feature in both units. We have already noted this in the Peter incident. It also emerges in the parable on forgiveness. The ten thousand talents that the king forgave is an incredible amount. Thus verses 21-22 and the parable should be linked.

As many commentators have noted the parable itself is framed by the introductory v. 23 and the closing v. 35 which serves as a kind of application. We will have cause to look at v. 34-35 more closely for other reasons. For now, just as the parables of the *Wheat and the Tares/Net* ended the third great discourse of Chapter 13, verses 34-35 end the fourth great discourse on *Rules for the Community*. This is evident because Matt 19:1 uses the standard phraseology that ends all of Matthew's five great discourses.

Moving to the parable itself, it falls into three parts. The first section comprises verses 24-27. It involves directly the king and the servant. Immediately the narrative gains our interest. We have this immense sum of ten thousand talents that is owed. Also there seems to be a major discrepancy between this extraordinary amount that cannot be repaid and the servant's request in v. 26 for patience; there is no time span that would allow him to repay that sum. Even allowing for Middle-Eastern Bravado and exaggeration this amount of debt seems to be impossible. Some have suggested that since the master is a king, the debtor, although described as a servant, may be a kind of client tax-assessor who had access to larger amounts of revenue. That is possible but unprovable. We probably should not make too much out of this background. The bottom line is that the servant owed the king an amount that was well-nigh impossible to repay – yet his debt was forgiven. Clearly this is meant to impart a lesson for believers or people of the Kingdom. They have received unbelievable mercy from the hand of the Father above. Verse 27 is well worth noting: “out of pity for him...the lord...released that servant and forgave the debt.”

The second section is 18:28-30. It deals with the servant and a fellow servant. It is here where the central weight of the parable seems to fall. Once again we are drawn to make this observation because something extraordinarily unusual takes place. The first servant, having been let off the hook after owing such a tremendous sum, acts in a totally unprincipled and almost inexplicable way. The one who had received mercy refuses to show mercy. Formally the circumstances which the first servant faced were exactly the same as the second. Yet, when he was in the reverse position, the first servant was totally unaffected by what had happened in his situation before the king. This incredible behavior on the part of the servant is the clue that leads

me to think there is something here close to the point of the parable. God's gracious offer of forgiveness places a moral imperative upon us to offer forgiveness to others. In 18:26 the first servant begs for patience with respect to his obligation to repay the debt. In 18:29-30 he refuses the same request from another. The first servant missed the fundamental point that, in the end, forgiveness is a pure expression of mercy.

This brings us to the complicated third section of the parable in 18:31-34. The entire parable is set in an ABA construction. In keeping with this simple construction we return to the main characters of the first scene. Now the king (here referred to as lord) settles scores with the unmerciful servant. It is at this point that we begin to move beyond thinking the parable is not much more than a mere set of moralisms. Forgiveness is not just some fortunate occurrence that may have come our way – like winning the lottery. Rather it is anchored in the very being of the God of the Bible. It is so close to the heart of the Father it is offered in the life of his son. But it demands a concrete response in the context of the imitation of the son's life (Jesus) in the kingdom of heaven (18:23). As part of our imitation of Christ, Matthew calls for it to be embedded in his community and our community today. Otherwise, as in the parable of the *Wheat and the Tares*, there will be consequences when the Lord returns. In case we have forgotten, the wording of Matthew 18:34-35 is a strong warning that should be kept clearly in mind.

The Parable in a Wider Context

The importance of practicing forgiveness as a central guiding point in the life of the church is unquestionably central to Matthew. Commentators regularly draw attention to the closeness of the theme of our parable and Matt 6:12 where Jesus in his model prayer teaches us, "And forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors." Here he leaves us in no doubt that we are not to consider approaching the Father above until we have forgiven others. God's mercy and forgiveness is not totally free and unconditional. It does not come cheap. Forgiveness is not easy. It wasn't easy for the Son of God at the cross. (I wonder if there is any significance that it is Luke that has Jesus speak these words, not Matthew?); and it is not easy for a morally sensitive person today. Yet our forgiveness of others is the necessary prerequisite before our prayers are acted upon by the Father.

We have noted that an additional interpretation of selected parables by Matthew (such as the Sower and the Tares) is an important clue with respect to what he holds as important in his narrative. With the Lord's Prayer an interpretive comment is also attached:

For if you forgive men their trespasses your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (7:14-15).

Not only in this unit (part of the Sermon on the Mount) is this emphasis on forgiveness underscored; but, in my judgment, it is at the heart of the *Community Discourse*, the wider unit in which Matthew 18 appears. The latter functions in Matthew as essentially Jesus' instructions to

the church. In an important book by the late W. G. Thompson (*Matthew's Advice to a Divided Community*) he isolates the entire *Community Discourse* as 17:22-18:35. But I would trace its beginnings back as early as the transitional passage in 16:13-20. What is highlighted in this linking unit which moves from Jesus' contest with the leaders of Israel to the focus on his instructions to the pillars, the restored Israel, is the authorization of Peter in 16:17-19. Peter is given "the keys of the kingdom." What immediately is striking for the reader is that this presages a set of references to Peter and other leaders that end with the Petrine dialogue in 18:21-22. Of course, in turn, the latter immediately precedes the parable on forgiveness. I contend that this is not accidental. The groundwork for the parables of forgiveness is the authorization of Peter in 16:17-19. Indeed, wherever we mark the beginning of the *Community Discourse*, the whole of Matt 16:13-20:34 is a unit dealing primarily with issues of church and discipleship. Matthew has set it up as Jesus' instructions for life in the community of God. And at the heart of these instructions is a call to pursue the way of forgiveness.

I need to say more about Matt 16:17-19. But before doing so, it is important to see that this unit is not the only reference to Peter. Matt 16:21-28 makes it abundantly clear that Peter is the spokesperson for the disciples. This continues on in the Transfiguration narrative in 17:1-13 and the strange unit on paying the half-shekel tax in 17:24-27. So, all over the place Peter is a key figure.

This brings me back to say a little more about the importance of the Peter passage in 16:17-19. In many ways Peter is a quixotic figure in Matthew. On the one hand he is capable of great leaps of faith; but he is also subject to astonishing displays of weakness. Look at the incident of Jesus walking on the water in 14:28-32! Nevertheless, Peter is the first to be given the power to bind and forgive in Jesus' new community of the last days. As we have seen, it is certainly not because Peter is a superior exemplar of faith and stability. Later he will deny Jesus! But he is not only the first one in the community that is called to bind Jesus' interpretations of the law on later followers, but also to model Jesus' way of maintaining the allegiance of sisters and brothers in the community by always being prepared to extend the hand of forgiveness. Matthew 18:18 extends this power to the fellowship of his disciples. In 18:35 it is described as forgiving your brother from the heart. Matt 18:19-20 also ties in here.

Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them.

In short, when the church adopts the policy of forgiveness we are assured that the vital presence of Jesus lives and abides in his community. That was very important for Matthew's church. The Gospel highlights the conviction that Jesus is alive, is with them (Matt 28:20), and will soon visibly return to oversee his kingdom.

Process wise, this abiding presence of Jesus is seen in the concern for "the little ones," Matthew's term for fellow believers. It is seen by reaching out, even when one is wronged, to convince the sister and brother of her or his sin. Forgiveness and reconciliation between sister

and brother takes place not only on earth but is ratified in heaven. That is the message and purpose of the keys. Peter was the first to receive them. His importance rests in his being first. But the duty to forgive and reconcile is passed on to the pillars and then to the living community down until today. To be a church in the Petrine tradition is to pursue this model. The total *Community Discourse* clearly underscores the significance of forgiveness for the life of the communities that follow in the legacy of Jesus.

Deeper Issues on Forgiveness

Yet despite all this, for some time now the issue of forgiveness has haunted me – especially from the perspective of our maintaining the memory of past hurts. How can I be sure that I have truly forgiven? In our pastoral ministries almost daily we encounter people who have been deeply shamed and incredibly wronged. We see people sexually abused as children. The list goes on. And that is just in the sphere of the Kingdom. Things happen that are difficult to forget. Sometimes we do awful things that we cannot forgive ourselves. The presence of memory is very strong. Look at your own life. Many in this gathering today have been wronged by leaders in churches who have treated them shamefully. Let us be honest about it! You say you forgive but you wonder about it. Luke’s account of Jesus’ word of forgiveness at the cross is before us. But it only reminds us how hard it really is to forgive.

While reflecting on these matters several years ago I came across an essay by Miroslav Volf, “God’s Forgiveness and Ours,” that, shall we say, spoke to what was troubling me. At the time I shared this with the small *Text-to-Sermon* group here at the Sermon Seminar. And I want to thank the group for interesting follow up and internet response. I want to revisit some of this today because I think a sermon could easily emerge out of this area.

In his article Volf tells of a situation that occurred in 1984. A native of Croatia (he knows our own Mladen Jovanovic), Volf was forced to do a year of compulsory military service in the Yugoslav army. It was one of those situations where they chose you, you did not choose them. You were on their time table. Indeed, he arrived at camp almost having finished his dissertation in Theology at Tübingen and only recently married to an American lady. To make matters worse the Balkans were in turmoil. They were still under Tito’s socialist nominally atheistic government. But things were coming apart. In such a situation Volf was presumed to be somewhat suspect.

Still, that was only half of it. Not knowing it at the time, his whole company of 40 were assigned to spy on him. Their goal was to collect evidence of any hint of sedition and report it to the authorities. Moreover, some were trained to have conversations that might bring out a slip of the tongue. Magazines were offered for the same reason. He was given a job in a particular room that later, he learned, turned out to be bugged.

One day he stumbled into a heartbreaking situation. A security officer had intercepted a letter from Volf’s wife and was translating it to another officer. Shortly after, Volf was summoned to a conversation with the military authorities under the leadership of a distasteful interrogator whom Volf calls “Captain G.” Thereafter, almost every day he was brought before

the interrogators. A file half-a-foot thick emerged. It was filled with information supplied from the activities of the rest of his company. If he didn't tell what they wanted to hear they threatened him with eight more years more of military service. He came to fear and loathe these daily briefings and the interrogations: always under the leadership of the repulsive Captain G.

And then, as suddenly as it started, one day it stopped. Shortly after, his time of compulsory service was over. They let him go. Volf never heard any more about it. But now he was left with another problem. The situation with Captain G was unresolved. How could Volf get him out of his memory? He could not find him to deal face to face with the situation. How could he forgive him when this wrongdoing and abuse was repeating itself constantly in his memory? In the words handed on to the church by the Matthean Jesus how could he "love his enemy?" Could he separate the doer from the deed and truly forgive him? More often than we like to think these are the real issues we struggle with in respect to forgiveness.

Volf tried to think about the image of the final banquet at the end of the age. "Could I picture myself sitting at the table with Captain G feasting with laughter and camaraderie?" An impossible thought? I don't know. After all Christ died for the ungodly. And Paul says in one place that Christ died for all and (in some sense) all died! Could Captain G be there? Volf thought so. "Perhaps I had better remember the wrong done to me rightly!" But what is the right way?

What happened to Volf is only the tip of the iceberg. Sometimes these things are not even concretized in one person. Think of those who are victimized by the reality of war; or someone who is the victim of the barbarity of radical Islam. Do we hold accountable all who live by this faith? And what about those who live in the underside of things who are totally convinced that they will never get a fair shake in this life. How then can they move to the place where they can receive grace? And remember, we are called not only to seek justice for our enemy, but to go beyond it?

It is not easy. Our story of the cross gives us hope that it can be done. Volf suggests that we condemn most poignantly by separating the doer from the deed and forgiving or reconciling with him or her. Certainly, we must always remember that we too stand in the company of wrongdoers. To remember the one who has aggrieved us is always to stand in the company of the self-confessed wrongdoers. Only by God's grace and power can we be enabled to truly forgive and be reconciled. If we can draw this out with some hints of resolution, there is a sermon here.

A Theological Question: The Issue of Violence in Jesus' Parables

If the deep metaphysic of forgiveness itself is not enough, there is another puzzling point in the Matthean parables that we have "zipped by" several times. It has to do with the issue of violence that often comes at the day of reckoning in Matthew's picture of the end time. In itself this is troubling. These are the days when we recoil so easily from such imagery. But it is also a problem because Matthew holds up so clearly the model of non-retaliation as God's strategy for restoring wellbeing.

For example, Matt 5:38-48 is full of teaching designed to break the cycle of violence that often emerges when one person takes advantage of the vast and unequal powers that he may have and uses it to abuse another. In the context of the ancient world, the attempt to shame and humiliate shown by a master when slapping his servant on the cheek can be countered by turning the other cheek. Jesus advocates this strategy as a creative response by a disciple to an aggressor. With the cycle of aggression temporarily interrupted the way may be open to healing and reconciliation. Matthew 5 chronicles a number of other examples along these lines given by Jesus. He crowns them with the injunction to love our enemies. A very careful account of how Matthew arranges his account of the conduct of Jesus in the Passion account during his last days, shows that he embodies the essence of this teaching. Even among his own, at the Last Supper, when he speaks of the future betrayal of his own followers Jesus is still prepared to offer himself in forgiveness and total commitment to them. As some commentators have noted this is especially prominent in Matthew with respect to Judas. Despite the terrible things Judas is planning nowhere in that grim set of episodes is there any hint that Judas' plan of betrayal is reciprocated. Indeed Matthew records that Judas was aggrieved (*metamelomai*) RSV (repented) and said, "I have sinned betraying innocent blood." Jesus' conduct is the perfect expression of the counsel of Matthew 5.

Thus it comes as a surprise when we arrive at the end of the parable on forgiveness in Matt 18. There the unforgiving servant is rebuked by the lord. That is appropriate. Then he is told that he will be delivered to the torturers. Now some of the translations play this down. But it is not, as we have noted, an oddity for Matthew's description of the kind of things that take place at the eschaton. In the parable of the *Wheat and the Tares* the evildoers will be tossed into a burning furnace on the last day. Something similar for the analogue to the useless fish in the twin parable of the net! And in Matt 25 the king, when he returns, will consign those who did not minister faithfully to eternal punishment. Even parables that have parallels in other gospels, in Matthew's account, are deepened with more graphic details of eschatological punishment. As you can see this suggests a rather awkward theological paradox when there is such an emphasis on forgiveness.

As Matthew narrates it, Jesus in his own personal conduct and his teaching of the disciples was a model for the way of non-violence as the means to reconciliation and forgiveness. But, at the last day, it apparently is entirely a different matter. The Son of Man will reappear and there will be severe retribution for some who did not measure up. What is it to be? How are we ultimately to conceive of the divine nature? Is God, on Matthean terms, some kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Is the Judgment that Jesus will bring inconsistent with the ethic he taught and lived?

Of course, I am far from the first to raise this question. I am not especially convinced by banal comments such as God's wrath is the other side of his love. Or, we need a stern judgment to make plausible an ethic of non-violence. Apply that to a parent. That is not a particularly welcoming image. Perhaps the best we can do for now is to say that passages like Philippians 2:6-11 and other units give us a picture of a God who loves us so much that he is prepared to win us by suffering with us; and this clearer picture of the depth of divine love trumps other images

that are designed to bring out the theme of divine vengeance for failure to pursue the way of the Kingdom.

So, we come to the bottom line. What will it be for us? Will we meet the God of Philippians 2 or the One that emerges out of Matt 18:34-35? I do think, at the very least, Matthew reminds us that life in the kingdom is very serious business. The accountability of the Judgment is not a matter to be taken lightly. And I think we can agree Matthew takes a very good slap at those who have trained themselves to live in their own little worlds of soteriological security. Perhaps that is enough.

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