

## **FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER 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.”**

Recently I heard from some public school teachers in our ministry that they are not allowed to refer to students in their classrooms as “boys” or “girls,” but must call all of them “friends.” They are also encouraged to help children question their gender: “Am I really a boy? Am I really a girl?” This confusion runs contrary to the clear Biblical teaching that God created male and female. As our society abandons God and his word, people have become more and more degenerate. In many ways, we have lost the standard of truth about right and wrong. People instinctively follow their sinful nature in the name of freedom and human rights. People do not recognize sin as sin. Just as it was in the time of Noah, and Sodom and Gomorrah, God’s judgment is inevitable. In this kind of environment, the church must stand as the pillar and foundation of the truth (1Ti 3:15). If the church fails to stand on the side of the truth, it will become useless, like salt that has lost its saltiness. Yet, as we stand on the truth, there is a danger that we can become legalistic and self-righteous. We need to remember God’s grace of forgiveness and practice this grace toward others.

In today’s passage Jesus teaches us how the church should deal with sin in an uncompromising manner, so that we may become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. At the same time, Jesus teaches us how to maintain a spirit of forgiving grace as we deal with sin. This reveals the heart of God. Forgiveness is a serious matter in the church. Unless we forgive others from our hearts, there is no genuine fellowship, we cannot grow in God’s heart, and we cannot escape God’s judgment. Let’s learn how to deal with sin and practice God’s forgiveness in the church.

**First, restore healthy relationships in the church (15-20).** In the previous passage Jesus taught us how important it is to know God’s heart for the little ones, that is, young believers. We should be very careful not to cause little ones to stumble in sin. As God loves each little one unconditionally, so should we. However, when we do so, there may be a danger of condoning their sin. Sin cannot be condoned in any case. Because God is holy, we are to be holy. In this part, Jesus teaches how to deal with sin. Verse 15 begins, **“If your brother or sister sins....”** Other versions, such as ESV or KJV, include the

## **FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER FROM YOUR HEART**

words “**against you.**” This is not a general teaching about sin, but specifically about sins that occur in our relationships with others. All of us are sinners. We say and do things that hurt others, even though it may be unintentional. Sometimes it happens through a casual, thoughtless word, or through an attempt to be humorous that is insensitive. When someone is offended, they close their hearts and break their relationship with the other person. They don’t say, “Hello,” or shake hands, and just try to avoid the other person. The offending party may not even be aware of this. These kinds of broken relationships are like tumors that grow under the surface until they become fatal. Ultimately, they can destroy the church. So they should be dealt with immediately and seriously to restore healthy relationships in the church. In verses 15-17, Jesus tells us how to do this.

**First of all, the offended person should go and point out the fault, just between the two of them.** Most people tend to avoid this kind of confrontation. Rather, they hold a grudge and gossip about the person who hurt them. This makes things much worse. Instead of gossiping, we need to go directly to the offending party and point out their fault. To do this, we need courage, wisdom and genuine love for the other person. This is why we must pray. If they listen, we have won them over. The problem is solved, the relationship is restored, and we can experience God’s love and truth in practice. If the offending party does not listen, then what? It is easy to become even more upset and get into a tussle. But Jesus says, “...take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (16). Instead of becoming upset, we should be objective and patient and recruit proper witnesses. These witnesses can help focus on the issue, clarify the facts, and promote a serious effort at reconciliation. In Galatians 6:1, Paul said, “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.” Being gentle is important, since the offending party is outnumbered. Through the spiritual effort of a few people, a genuine love relationship can be restored.

Though such an effort is made, if the offending party still does not listen, what should we do? Shall we curse and condemn them? No. Jesus said, “**If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church....**” (17a). This means to make a public announcement so that the church as a whole can be aware of, pray about and deal with the issue. This may be rather embarrassing, but it is necessary to help the offending party to take the sin seriously, and to avoid strife and division within the church. As the church deals with the issue, it

## **FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER FROM YOUR HEART**

should be done in love (1Ti 1:5). If the offending party refuses to listen, even to the church, Jesus says, **“treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector”** (17b). This means to regard them as unbelievers, excluding them from church fellowship. Yet we continue preaching the gospel to them, giving them a chance to repent. This church discipline is a very delicate matter. Practical implementation requires wisdom, and it should always be done with the goal of restoration and in the spirit of love. If the church abuses its authority, the devil can use it to destroy people. So we should be very careful and prayerful.

In verses 18-20, Jesus talks about the authority of the church. The authority of the church does not originate from humans, but from God. God recognizes in heaven what his church does on earth. Jesus said, **“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”** (18). Here, “bind” and “loose” does not refer to arbitrary authority of church leaders, but to the authority to proclaim the gospel. As the gospel is proclaimed, those who accept it receive the forgiveness of sins, and are set loose. The church is not a human organization; it is a divine institution. We should humbly acknowledge God’s authority working through the church. This authority is exclusively in the church, not in any other human institution. So, we should be serious about solving the sin problem in the church. When someone is challenged to repent of their sins, they may think of themselves as victims. They may try to find another church to avoid repentance. However, the sin problem can never be solved simply by changing churches. It can only be solved before God as he works through his church.

Verses 19-20 are frequently quoted out of context and misapplied. We need to understand these verses in context. Jesus said, **“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.”** These verses do not imply that the prayer of two or three persons is more effective than the prayer of one person. James tells us that God hears the prayer of one righteous person and will answer it (Ja 5:16-18). Nor is this verse an invitation to demand benefits from God that are random, frivolous or contrary to his will. As with all prayers, this one also is subject to the will of God (1Jn 5:13-14). These verses are Jesus’ promises given in a specific context: restoring a straying believer through church discipline. They assure us that his wisdom, power and presence will accompany the church as the members sincerely seek to practice church discipline. These days discipline is unpopular in our society. It is easy for

## FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER FROM YOUR HEART

churches to go with the social consensus instead of taking a stand on the truth. Then the church becomes just like the culture. For example, a couple of years ago, a prominent megachurch in Nashville embraced a kind of inclusiveness that ignores Biblical standards. It was a surrender to the trend of political correctness in America. By the way, since then they declined in membership from 2,200 members to 240 members.<sup>1</sup> Instead of following the trend of the culture, the church must influence society based on gospel truth. When we do so, God is with us. Some people think, “Well, of course God is with us. God is always with us no matter what we do.” But that it not true. President Abraham Lincoln once said, “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.”<sup>2</sup> God is with those who stand on his side. When God is with us, we can stand and be blessed. A small house church of two or three members can stand and be blessed when God is with us. If God is with us, no one can stand against us; we are more than conquerors (Ro 8:37).

**Second, practice God’s mercy (21-35).** Peter understood Jesus’ teaching and was ready to cooperate. He came to Jesus and asked, “**Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?**” (21) Peter thought he was being very generous and proactive. He might have expected a compliment from Jesus. But surprisingly, Jesus answered, “**I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times**” (22). The NIV footnote, as well as most other versions, suggest that Jesus meant seventy times seven, or 490 times. This could be once a day for more than a year. Peter might have thought Jesus was joking. This is beyond imagination and it seems to be impossible. Peter wanted to set a limit to forgiveness, which he thought was generous. But Jesus implied that we should forgive without limit. This is one of the key characteristics of the kingdom of heaven.

To explain why and how we should practice unlimited forgiveness, Jesus told a parable of a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants (23). As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him (24). This is an extraordinarily high amount of debt; in modern terms it would be more than 7 trillion dollars, about 1/3 of the U.S. national debt. It was absolutely impossible to ever pay this debt back. Here, debt represents sin. Those with home mortgages or school loans can understand this. Debt makes us anxious and burdened. It deprives us of the

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wnd.com/2017/08/the-sad-story-of-carrie-underwoods-megachurch/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/abrahamlin388944.html>

## **FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER FROM YOUR HEART**

joy of life and makes us feel like prisoners. This is just a shadow of the burden we feel due to our sins. Sin robs us of peace and joy, and torments our souls with condemnation, guilt and shame.

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 pay the debt (25). This is the king's justice, which reflects God's justice. Why did Jesus use an extremely massive amount of debt to illustrate this point? Is it just hyperbole? I think not. Rather, it reflects the debt we owe to God due to our sins. It is more than we can imagine. Romans 3:23 says, **"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** God made man in his own image to bear his likeness. We can see this image perfectly in Jesus. We should be like Jesus. But instead we are like cockroaches due to our sins, who sneak around in the darkness and nibble on dirty things. Then when the light comes on they flee away quickly. No one likes cockroaches. But to the holy God, we are harder to look at than cockroaches. We like to compare ourselves favorably with others in terms of our morals, social status, education, family background, ethnicity, wealth, and so on. But before God's justice, we are all terrible sinners. Dr. John Perkins is an African American Christian minister and civil rights activist. He was born in Mississippi about the same time as Mother Barry. After accepting Christ as a young man, he began to work for social justice, especially in race relations. Once he was falsely imprisoned and beaten almost to death by some southern white sheriffs. One of them shoved a fork up his nose. At that moment, Perkins found something arise in himself that was purely evil. Hated so overpowered him that he wanted to destroy everyone with an atomic bomb. He discovered the devil within himself. Through this he realized that the evil things he was fighting against in others were also in himself. He also realized that God's justice is more serious and important than social justice. We should all come to understand that our own sin against God is more serious than we imagine.

Let's come back to the parable. When the servant confronted the king's justice he was helpless. He fell on his knees before him and begged, **"Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything"** (26). The master knew that he would never be able to pay it back, no matter how long and hard he worked. If the master exercised justice, there was no hope for the servant. But there is another aspect to the master's character: mercy. James 2:13b says, **"Mercy triumphs over judgment."** So, the master took pity on his servant, canceled the debt and let him go (27). There was no string attached, not even a probation period; he was totally free. Just as the debt was beyond

## **FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER FROM YOUR HEART**

imagination, so the mercy of the master was so great that we cannot fathom it. Throughout his lifetime, the servant should remember how his master had mercy on him and practice this mercy toward others. But instead, what did he do? He went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a hundred silver coins. It was a fraction of what he owed his master, far less than 1%. But he grabbed his fellow servant and began to choke him, demanding, **“Pay back what you owe me!”** (28) His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, **“Be patient with me, and I will pay it back”** (29). It was the same plea that he had made before his master. It was the opportunity to practice mercy toward his fellow servant. But he refused. Instead he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt (30). The other servants were outraged and told the master what had happened (31). The master called the servant in and said, **“You wicked servant. I cancelled 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?”** (32-33). In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed (34). Then Jesus came to the point. Let’s read verse 35. **“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart”** (35).

In this parable, Jesus warns us about the consequences of failing to forgive others. Every Christian has a duty to be forgiving toward others just as the Father has been forgiving toward us. The problem is that it is not easy for us to forgive others. When we are hurt, even by a small thing someone does, we easily hold a grudge and become bitter toward that person. Their wrongdoing seems to us like a debt of 10,000 bags of gold, while our own sins seem to be like 100 silver coins. But we need to examine ourselves before God. How does God see us? When we truly see ourselves from God’s point of view, we can realize that our wrongdoing is unimaginably huge while others’ wrongdoing against us is quite small. So our first response to others’ wrongdoing should be to come to God. We should seek to find our own sin before God and remember his great mercy on us. Then we are able to practice God’s mercy toward others. As each of us struggle to do this, we can grow in the image of God and experience his kingdom. Our church can be filled with the spirit of mercy and forgiveness, as well as justice and truth.

When we consider Jesus’ teachings in this passage, they are indeed challenging. But it is the way for us to live as a healthy church in which many godly men and women can be raised, and through which many godly families can be established. Ultimately it is the way to influence our society as the salt

## **FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER FROM YOUR HEART**

of the earth and the light of the world. Let's remember that God is with those who stand on the side of truth.