

Matthew 18:21–35 — Until Seventy Times Seven

Forgiveness and Repentance, the Ten Thousand Talents, Governmental Forgiveness, and the Dispensational Bearing

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:21–35

“Then came Peter to him and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

“Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest.

“So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.”

Then: What Peter’s Question Flows From

The first word of verse 21 is then — a large and significant word. Peter’s question about forgiveness flows directly from what preceded: the Lord’s teaching about a brother who sins, the process of bringing it before the assembly, the binding and loosing, and the promise of the Lord’s presence in the midst. Peter hears all of this and immediately asks about forgiveness. That is not a non-sequitur. It is a spiritually sensitive response: where the Lord is in the midst, where his authority operates, where discipline may be exercised — that is precisely the place where forgiveness belongs too.

The parallel from 1 Chronicles 21 illuminates this. When David sinned in numbering Israel and the angel was destroying Jerusalem, the Lord commanded the angel and he put up his sword. And then David said: This is the house of the LORD God; this is the altar of burnt offering for Israel (1 Chronicles 22:1). The place where the sword was sheathed — the place of governmental intervention, of divine presence and authority — was the place of the altar: the place of acceptance and peace. So it is here. The place where authority is exercised (Matthew 18:15–19) is immediately followed by the question of forgiveness (verse 21). They naturally go together.

Seven Times, Then Seventy Times Seven

The rabbis held that a man could be forgiven three times. Peter, going beyond the rabbis, proposed seven times — a complete and generous number. The Lord staggered even that: not until seven times, but until seventy times seven. For all practical purposes, that is without limit. No arithmetic is intended; the force is that there is no ceiling on forgiveness. As God deals with us, so we are to deal with our brethren.

The context established in verses 15–16 must be kept in mind. This forgiveness is not unilateral and unconditional in its administration. The parallel passage in Luke 17:3–4 is clear: if thy brother repent, forgive him. Forgiveness here supposes that the brother has come and repented, as one learns the brother was gained in verse 15. That is the basis on which forgiveness is administered. This does not mean that before repentance comes one may harbour bitterness, revenge, or hatred in the heart. One holds the offender as an object of love and prayer, and cultivates a right inner attitude, while the actual word of forgiveness awaits the repentance.

Governmental vs. Judicial Forgiveness

The parable turns on the distinction between two kinds of forgiveness. Judicial forgiveness — the forgiveness of sins before God, secured by the blood of Christ — is never taken back. God does not re-present the sins against which the blood of the Son has been shed. That forgiveness is not what this parable is about. What the parable describes is governmental forgiveness — the mercy and forbearance that God extends in his administration of things, which can be withheld or withdrawn when there is hardness of heart and contempt for his grace.

The king in the parable forgives the enormous debt out of compassion when the servant fell down and worshipped. But that servant went out and throttled a fellow servant who owed him a hundred pence. The fellow servant used the identical words the first servant had used: have patience with me. It was refused. The first servant had been brought near the heart of the king; he had not entered into it at all. The Lord was moved with compassion — and that compassion found no echo. When the king heard, he was wroth and delivered the servant to the tormentors until he should pay all.

The debt that the man owed was approximately 700,000 times larger than his fellow servant's debt: ten thousand talents versus a hundred denarii. For a day labourer to repay ten thousand talents at daily wages would require roughly 70 million days of labour. It was, for all practical purposes, an infinite debt — impossible to settle. His saying to the king, Lord have patience with me and I will pay thee all, reveals that he had not understood his own position before his master at all. He still thought he could pay. He had not learned himself.

The Dispensational Bearing: Israel and the Gentiles

The parable also carries a larger dispensational application. The immense debt of the first servant speaks of Israel's position — a people that had been in a uniquely favoured place, receiving the highest privileges, and accumulating the greatest debt of unfaithfulness. After the cross, a renewed opportunity of mercy

was extended: the gospel was preached to Israel in Acts, with the offer of repentance and restoration. The Lord treated them like the manslayer who could flee to the city of refuge — and the Lord Jesus was that great city of refuge. They refused. Stephen's testimony brought it to a crisis. They gnashed their teeth, stopped their ears, and stoned him.

The smaller debt of the fellow servant answers to the Gentiles, who were far away and had comparatively less light. The unforgiving servant's treatment of his fellow servant points to Israel's treatment of the Gentiles — the refusal to allow mercy to those who were in need of it, the throttling of those who appealed for patience. And the consequence was the delivering to the tormentors: the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the judgment of God upon the nation, and the long centuries of the diaspora and persecution that followed. The tormentors are still at work, and the worst time for Israel — the time of Jacob's trouble — is still ahead.

This is no warrant for any Christian to participate in the persecution of the Jewish people. The Lord has appointed no Christian to be a rod of his government upon others. We recognize what God has said, we sorrow for the nation, and we rejoice when sovereign grace takes out an elect remnant. In God's purposes, the torment will end when the great tribulation is past and the Lord himself restores his people. The immense debt will be settled not by their paying it but by his sovereign grace on behalf of the election.

From Your Hearts: The Character of True Forgiveness

The last verse is sobering: so likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses. The words from your hearts go to the root of the matter. This is not the outward form of forgiveness — saying the words while harbouring resentment within. It is the real thing, from the heart, corresponding to repentance that has genuinely come.

The common appeal to simply forgive, to wipe our hands of a matter and move on without dealing with the offence, is not forgiveness in the scriptural sense. It sounds gracious; it often appeals to the desire to be thought well of; it avoids the discomfort of confrontation. But at its bottom it is the flesh — making provision for ease rather than submitting to the order of God's word. True care for the offender, true love for a brother, requires that the matter be brought before him as the Lord taught in verses 15–16, that repentance may be given the opportunity to come in, and that genuine forgiveness may then follow from the heart. Anything short of that, however pleasant it may look on the surface, is not what the Lord here requires.

I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven.