

Bible Study Guide: Week of 9-6-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 18:21-35

21 Then Peter came and said to [Jesus], "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

21 Then Peter came and said to [Jesus], "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23

Our gospel lesson this week comes on the heels of last week's lesson in which Jesus taught his disciples about conflict resolution within the church. As we saw last week, such resolution involves careful listening to one another and a commitment to reconciliation and fellowship. As Jesus ended his teaching last week, it is as the church gathers in Jesus' name and finds agreement and accord with one another that this life of discipleship is lived out in the church. Obviously, such a way of living involves forgiveness. Here, Peter asks Jesus to clarify the limits of such forgiveness.

Once again, the NRSV does us no favors by translating *adelphos* as "another member of the church"—Peter's literal question is "If my brother or sister sins against me..." Not just "a brother or sister," but *my* brother or sister. The combination of *my* along with the intimate term for a fellow church member—a sibling—makes doubly clear the closeness that Jesus has in mind for members of the church.

Peter's proposal of forgiving a fellow sister or brother up to seven times seems narrow only in light of what Jesus says next. Taken on its own, it seems like an unreasonable standard—how many of us, after all, are willing to give a sister or brother in Christ upwards of seven chances when she or he acts in a hurtful way without repentance? Often,

our fallen human tendency is to say, “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.” We often speak of second chances. How often do we speak of seventh chances? Further, Peter’s proposal has theological overtones—seven is the number of completion or perfection. Surely, he may think, forgiving a perfect seven times is enough! Also, the mention of seven brings to mind the sevenfold curse placed on anyone who harmed Cain in Genesis 4:15. Surely such forgiveness is sufficient for a follower of Jesus, right?

Yet Jesus makes a shocking statement in reply: Not seven times, but seventy-seven times. This phrase can be alternately understood as seventy-seven times or as seventy x seven, or 490 times. Either number makes clear that there is practically no limit to be placed on forgiveness among siblings in Christ. The coming parable, as we will see, colorfully illustrates the extravagant forgiveness Jesus envisions. These two verses here (21-22) serve to illustrate the spirit required by any church that plans to live out Matthew 18:15-17. Only as we offer one another overly generous grace and mercy can we have any hope of living together as people of God.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

Jesus begins this somewhat disturbing parable by saying, “For this reason” or “because of this”—something about this parable will point us toward a larger point about showing extravagant mercy toward fellow sisters and brothers in Christ. The Greek term *doulon* used here can mean either “slaves” or “servants” depending on the context. Often, bible translations use “servants” to soften the language; in English “servants” has a more positive connotation than “slaves.” I don’t want to get bogged down in a long excursus about the similarities and differences between slavery in the ancient near east and the African slave trade in the antebellum American South, but suffice it to say our ideas about slavery are not always similar to what existed as slavery in Jesus’ day. Here, the translation “servants” is probably better than “slaves” because in this parable Jesus seems to be talking not about household slaves, but rather about subordinate business partners or lesser rulers who would have had the means and opportunity to squander a large amount of money.

24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

Just as “77” or “490” instances of forgiveness are extravagant, owing ten thousand talents would also be extravagant. Indeed, ten thousand talents would be an unfathomable amount of money. A single talent was equal to 6,000 denarii. A single denarius was a day’s wages for an average laborer. The subordinate servant owed the king 60,000,000 days’ wages! Laboring 365 days a year at a laborer’s average wages, it would take over 160,000 years to pay back the debt. Indeed, this is an unfathomable amount of money! Even selling off the servant and family and possessions, the king could never hope to recover such an amount.

26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

Given what we know of the debt in question, the servant’s words ring hollow—we know he could never repay such a crippling debt. It is only pity—perhaps better rendered compassion—that caused the lord to forgive the debt. We would well imagine that being shown such compassion would change the life and actions of the servant. Jesus’ words from Luke 7 may come to mind for us here—the one who is forgiven little loves little; the one who is forgiven much loves much. We expect a trickle-down effect for the mercy shown.

28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe.'

The amount owed to the forgiven servant is insignificant—a pittance—compared to his forgiven debt. A hundred day’s wages, in contrast to 160,000 years’ wages—would be easily payable in a short period of time. The servant’s harshness is evident in his action of seizing another by the throat and demanding payment.

29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

We saw in v. 26 that the first servant's words begging for mercy were fruitless—nobody could hope to pay back what he owed. Here, however, the amount in question could probably be paid back in short order. Rather than show mercy or have pity or compassion, the first servant refuses to forgive or even negotiate and responds ruthlessly to the one who owed him a very little amount.

31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

Of course, as we might expect, the king gets word of this injustice and responds in righteous indignation and the formerly forgiven servant finds himself tortured until he could pay his entire debt. We saw earlier that this would have been impossible to begin with, much less while being tortured. As I said at the start, this is a disturbing parable, featuring dishonest use of money, violence, the wielding of personal power and control, the planned sale of persons into servitude, and torture.

35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

To make this parable that much more disturbing, Jesus turns back to the disciples and tells them, in essence, "God will have you handed over to be tortured and force you to pay what you owe if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Jesus is obviously using hyperbolic language to make the point that God's radical forgiveness of us is far more mercy than we have any right to expect. We can never pay back such a tremendous debt, yet we are often quick to deny forgiveness to others over relatively trivial matters. God's hope is that we forgive as liberally as we have been forgiven.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. How many times do you tend to forgive another person for sinning against you? How does this compare with Jesus' teaching here?**
- 2. Can you think of a time when someone forgave you something you felt you could never repay on your own? How did/does this impact your actions and attitudes toward others?**
- 3. In Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer (6:12) Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." This is in contrast to Luke's version of the prayer, with which we are more familiar: "Forgive us our sins/trespasses..." Likewise, here, Jesus compares forgiveness of sins with the forgiveness of monetary debt in this parable. Why do you think Jesus urges us to link forgiving one another's sins with the idea of monetary forgiveness? What difference does this make in how you think about forgiveness?**