

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 64, Chapter 18 Conclusion

We began to study Matthew 18:15 - 20 last week and shortly we'll re-read that section. Before we do that we need to set the context. This is necessarily going to involve some amount of sermonizing to go along with the teaching.

The opening of verse 15 says (in most English Bibles) "Moreover, if your brother commits a sin against you". The term "your brother" as used here has to be taken to mean a person who shares your faith. Nearly all Bible commentaries on this matter say that this means something that happens between "Christian brothers". This is, I think, a bit of reading something into the passage that is too narrow. No doubt this has to include Jews in general, but it also involves some element of trusting in Christ; that is, this instruction is general on the one hand but on the other is also more targeted at one that is among His flock of followers. But at this point in the Book of Matthew (or in any of the Gospels for that matter) we learn that up to now Yeshua has revealed that He is the Messiah **ONLY** to His 12 and that they are **NOT** to tell anyone outside that closed inner circle. Remember that the overall context of this section of Matthew is that at the moment Christ is speaking only to that inner circle. Since these men represent the leadership of the Jesus movement, then it seems that what we are getting from Yeshua is what we can rightly call community rules that will be needed when the anticipated community of Believers starts to mature and expand beyond only the 12. So it is improbable that these rules apply **only** to the 12, however it **is** likely that Yeshua is stating something that, ideally, all Jews ought to already be doing because they have the Law of Moses to refer to. Even so, this instruction applies doubly to those that claim allegiance to Him.

The use of the word "sin" here can be a bit off-putting (if you commit a sin against

your brother). Typically modern Western Believers think of sin as something that is committed against God and not another person; so to speak of one person sinning against another person doesn't feel quite right to us. The Greek is **hamartano** and it is a broadly used word that can define the commission of an offense both from the secular sense and the religious sense. It can mean breaking a legal law but also severely upsetting another. So we have to be careful not to spiritualize the matter in this regard. Even more complicating is that only some of the ancient Greek New Testament manuscripts include the words "against you" in that opening sentence fragment. That is, some of the manuscripts say only "Moreover if your brother commits a sin" and leaves out "against you". So in the one case it is an issue between two people; someone has offended someone else. In the second case it is that someone within the Believing community has committed a sin (presumably against God) and so the question is: what does the community do about such a sinner? I strongly favor the first case because of the context of how the matter is handled. But I can't dismiss the possibility that it is the second case.

Since I am rather confident that this is about an issue between 2 people, then we must also approach this matter as the offense not rising to the level of a crime as we think of it. That is, it is not something that has occurred that under normal circumstances would be taken before a criminal court system such that a level of judicial punishment might be involved. It may not even have been a situation where a Law of Moses was broken such that a Temple sacrifice was required. I want to emphasize this. Verses 15 - 20 are mostly about someone doing something that substantially upset another or has caused them shame. This passage has sometimes been misconstrued to say that Christians should not involve the local criminal legal system when someone has committed a crime within the Christian community, but rather it should be treated as an internal matter. Let me give you a real life example of what I mean.

I am aware of a Church that had hundreds of thousands of dollars embezzled over a several years period by that Church's financial officer. Once discovered, the Pastor and some others did not want to report the matter to the police, but rather they thought that Christ taught that instead the Christian community should handle it themselves and avoid the local legal system. Thus perhaps using what is outlined here in Matthew 18 the notion was that the man would be confronted whereby he would confess, repent, and they could make a deal with him to pay the money back and thereby not involve the police. Apparently the Church's board decided to contact law enforcement despite the Pastor's appeals not to.

Who was right? The Pastor or the board? I tell you that the board was right. And this is because what Christ taught about community discipline in this passage generally speaking did not involve criminality.

A way to think about it is that what is being dealt with is more akin to our civil code of justice that doesn't deal with matters of guilt or innocence. Rather it deals with compensation, satisfaction, and restoration for someone wronging another. Very often in our time it has to do with the performance of a contract. Or maybe your neighbor cut down a tree and it fell and damaged your fence. Or someone borrowed a tool and returned it broken, feeling no responsibility to fix or replace it. So it was these sorts of offenses (plus the element of shame) that is more what is being contemplated. It isn't outright theft or murder or some such thing.

I tell you this because both as a community of Believers and as individual Believers we must be careful not to misapply what is being spoken by Yeshua. And, what is being spoken is about members of the local community at large; you, me, everybody. But the key word is local. Leaders are certainly included, but they are held to an even higher standard and can bear larger consequences than laymen for their wrongs. However the issue of leadership and leaders is not the real focus of the subject. With that, let's re-read the passage.

RE-READ MATTHEW 18:15 - 20

Front the long view, the entire scenario that is being envisioned is something that we could call dispute resolution that in the West could involve an arbitrator and not a judge. There is a multi-step process established by Jesus to deal with a dispute between two individual followers; one seeing himself as the offended party. By definition the other party sees no responsibility in the matter, or it could be that the person isn't even aware he has caused an offense. If we look behind the words it is rather easily seen that there is great benefit meant for the offender, so that he is not publicly humiliated or put in a position of never being able to be restored. And of course the outcome hoped for is that the offended party feels satisfied. Thus privately the offended party is to confront the other party to see if matters can be worked out. If not, then 1 or 2 other members of the Believers' community are to be taken as witnesses (this is assuming they have some insight as to what occurred). Why? Because as the end of verse 16 says:

^{CJB} **Matthew 18:16** *...so that every accusation can be supported by the testimony of two or three witnesses.*

This phrase is a paraphrase of the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy.

^{CJB} **Deuteronomy 19:15** *"One witness alone will not be sufficient to convict a person of any offense or sin of any kind; the matter will be established only if there are two or three witnesses testifying against him."*

So how does taking 1 or 2 witnesses along add up to obeying the Law of Moses that requires 2 or 3? Because obviously the offended person is, in this case, counted as a witness. But also because we are once again dealing with lesser matters; personal offenses and shaming... not criminality.

Verse 17 says that if steps 1 and 2 fail, then step 3 must be invoked. The offense is to be announced to the local Believing community. Or, better, the offense now moves from the private sphere to the public. And if the person refuses to even acknowledge his offense after it is revealed to the community, then he is to be treated as a pagan or a tax collector. The Greek word being translated as pagan is **ethnikos** and it is referring to a person of another nationality. In other words, a gentile... a non-Jew. I find it ironic that 1 of the 12 disciples was a hated tax collector. The point is not that Christ is somehow saying that tax collectors are inherently wicked. He is merely using 2 examples from among those folks considered by Jews in general as unwanted outsiders to the Jewish community. A Jewish tax collector was deemed an outsider because he was seen as a traitor and so was shunned. Bottom line: the final step of the discipline process is to exclude the unrepentant offender from the Believers' community. Some commentators say this amounts to excommunication. Excommunication is actually an action that was originally prescribed by the Catholic Church; it meant that the person could not engage in any of the Church sacraments (such as communion) nor could they attend confession. So essentially they were declared no longer part of the Church; their salvation was in jeopardy if not revoked. Therefore I cannot agree that excommunication is what is being called for by Yeshua. That is, that this unrepentant offender is somehow declared as having had his faith declared null and void. Rather being cast out is the most severe community discipline contemplated. He can't be in the group.

It goes without saying that the hope is that at some point this person who is now experiencing the loss of fellowship as a discipline will realize his offense and wrong, confess, repent, and be restored to the community. Then in verse 18 we get what isn't really a repeat of something Yeshua said in an earlier chapter; it is more or less saying that this is the principle that He had already stated that is

being brought to action. And the principle is that whatever you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in Heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in Heaven. Thus Jesus is saying that if one follows this discipline procedure then the decision of the community to forgive the offender his offense (to loose or permit) or to cast out the unrepentant offender (to bind or prohibit) is to be accepted as the correct and righteous thing to do on every level... physically and spiritually. God backs it. So there is no need to worry, and no need to wonder if there is proper authority. Yeshua goes so far as to say that such a decision is to be taken as if they had received it directly from the Father in Heaven. Pretty strong. But now in verse 20 we get a well known phrase that, again, must be taken in its context for proper understanding.

The verse is:

^{CJB} **Matthew 18:20** *For wherever two or three are assembled in my name, I am there with them."*

The context of Christ's statement is the decision of the community to forgive or to expel a wrong doer. Notice that 2 or 3 witnesses were to be called against the offender before the more drastic action of going public and then expelling him was taken. And in this context Jesus is saying: I am there with you in this decision when, as Believers, you follow this process. So we can't just willy-nilly lift this statement about "2 or 3 being assembled in My name" from Matthew, isolating it, and then making it into to an overly broad proverb.

Folks, I'm sorry to pop some large Christian bubbles, but this is the ONLY place and the ONLY context that we find this particular statement of Yeshua or of any writer in the New Testament. And the issue is that this is not the establishment of a Christian *minyan*. In Judaism a *minyan* of 10 men is needed for prayer. So Yeshua isn't somehow reducing that number to 2 or 3 for His followers. This has nothing to do with prayer in general; this has to do with the specific matter of the minimum number of men to determine and then apply community discipline, and it includes His assurance that they are acting in His authority ("I am there") when they do that.

I think it is instructional to see how Paul looked at this teaching of Yeshua and then taught it. In 1Corinthians we read this:

^{CJB} **1 Corinthians 6:1** *How dare one of you with a complaint against another*

go to court before pagan judges and not before God's people? ² Don't you know that God's people are going to judge the universe? If you are going to judge the universe, are you incompetent to judge these minor matters? ³ Don't you know that we will judge angels, not to mention affairs of everyday life? ⁴ So if you require judgments about matters of everyday life, why do you put them in front of men who have no standing in the Messianic Community? ⁵ I say, shame on you! Can it be that there isn't one person among you wise enough to be able to settle a dispute between brothers? ⁶ Instead, a brother brings a lawsuit against another brother, and that before unbelievers!

Notice the key words "minor matters", and "affairs of everyday life". This is a lovely and accurate way of characterizing Yeshua's instructions from Matthew 18:15 - 20. These are NOT large or criminal matters. These are disputes... disagreements. And just like today, there were in Christ's era lower courts to settle these everyday matters if need be. Think of it like small claims court. No one is going to jail over it, and the size of the matter is relatively small. But Yeshua and Paul are saying that there ought to be enough good will and wisdom in a community of Believers to settle such small disputes among ourselves instead of having to go to a public court of small claims. Thus a dispute that must go outside the community and to a court over small everyday matters means that either the offended or the offender is not being reasonable or obedient, and thus in a way it is a defeat for the entire community.

Let's move on to the final section of Matthew 18, which is essentially about mercy towards the offender. Before we read it, I want to preface it with this. Mercy does NOT mean declaring a person not-guilty. It also doesn't necessarily pardon a person from consequences for their wrong actions. Especially when it comes to a community, mercy doesn't only involve love it also involves wisdom. It is easy to just follow a series of precisely defined laws to the letter. But even in Western style secular justice systems a judge must determine not only guilt or innocence but also what is just and reasonable. Decisions can have farther reaching effects than only upon the perpetrator or even the victim, and that too has to be considered. There is no perfect answer; so we must do the best we can with the tools we are given in this imperfect world. Yeshua is giving His Believers tools for running a community that include adding the elements of wisdom and mercy to our determinations for the discipline that is to be applied to an offender within that local Believing community.

RE-READ MATTHEW 18:21 - end

Here is another statement of Jesus that we have all heard many times, but again it's context that is crucial for understanding and application. Begin by disregarding the paragraph change because it tends to signal to our minds that there has been a subject shift. There has not. Rather the issue is still community rules and discipline, and what to do about everyday offenses and disputes that arise...NOT criminal matters. And the proof of this is in the Parable that Yeshua uses to make His point.

So verse 15 began: "Moreover if your bother sins against you..", and now in verse 21 we read "Rabbi... how often can my brother sin against me and I have to forgive him?" The two verses are clearly connected in the subject that is being addressed. So the issue is not if this offending brother admits to his offense; it's what happens if he is a serial offender... even if he's one who is quick to admit his wrong. Let's face it; most of us have known people who regularly do wrong but easily admit it when confronted. Even so, they'll race to do it again. Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

I confess to you that this is perhaps one of the most challenging instructions of Yeshua that I struggle with. Just how many times must I put up with someone... family member, neighbor, co-worker, acquaintance, employee... that clearly has become an expert at doing wrong but confessing and pushing all the right buttons to garner some mercy and thus get out of some consequences, even though you know that sincerity is lacking. Peter asks if he is to forgive a brother as many as 7 times; Yeshua responds: "70 times 7". A little quick math says that is 490 times! Of course tabulating someone's offenses against you so that you must forgive until it is the 491st offense is not the intent. The idea is that you always forgive someone's offenses against you. I know I've said it a few times today, but I'll say it again: this is not about criminality. I'm not saying that you don't forgive someone that has done something serious and criminal against you; I'm saying that this is not what is being addressed here in Matthew 18.

And why must we be willing to forgive so much? Because it is in imitation of the Father who has forgiven us so many times. In the Sermon on the Mount, Yeshua told His audience to "pray like this", and then what follows is what we call The Lord's Prayer. Part of that prayer is:

^{CJB} **Matthew 6:12** ¹² *Forgive us what we have done wrong, as we too have*

forgiven those who have wronged us.

Then immediately after giving His audience this prayer model, Christ expands on the issue of forgiveness.

CJB **Matthew 6:14-15** ¹⁴ ***For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;*** ¹⁵ ***but if you do not forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will not forgive yours.***

So although we are 12 chapters along after this statement, nonetheless the principle is embedded in what Yeshua is teaching in Matthew 18. Forgiving others for their offenses against them has no limit to the number times the offenses are committed. That said, keep in mind that the context for what we are currently studying remains what Paul called "everyday" offenses... even though these everyday offenses have the potential to be somewhat serious in their effect.

Nearly every commentary or journal article I've read on this section of Matthew speaks of how this verse and what follows stands in tension with what Yeshua has just said about dealing with an unrepentant offender, even to the point of expulsion. The conclusion is that because of the tension either the narrative in verses 15-20 is in error, or verses 21 -35 are in error. Or that one or the other has been added by some Christian editor at a later date, which rather made a mess of things. I've mentioned before that academics in most fields... also in the field of Bible... don't like fuzzy or gray areas. Typically there can be only black/white, either/or interpretations. But nothing is further from the Hebrew mindset of ancient times. A tension between multiple biblical principles indeed exists; it is legitimate and a given because they are being carried out in the background of a much fallen world.

Yeshua was anything but an idealist; He was a pragmatist. He didn't address hypothetical problems; He addressed real and present problems in the Jewish faith and society. And one of those societal problems stemmed partly from the remnants of the fallout of a shame and honor culture (a system that God had been trying to eradicate from Israel since Mt. Sinai), as well as from erratic behaviors that result from our corrupted human nature. In application it was that people could be petty. People could also be inconsiderate and selfish. People could say cruel, insulting or totally improper things to one another. It happened every day... probably hundreds if not thousands of times a day in every society...

Jewish included. Retribution and revenge is the un-Godly norm that so many humans almost instinctively respond with when we feel offended or shamed. Sometimes we're so sensitive to being rejected or disagreed with that we anticipate it'll happen and we look at all of life through that lens. In the 1st century it often led to homicide, fights, injuries and then blood feuds among families that could last for generations. But Jesus envisioned a community of humans based upon the Kingdom of Heaven; its community rules would be entirely contrary to what seemed all too normal and customary to the current Jewish society. In truth it was what Israel was always supposed to have looked like.

Before we move on I want to continue with this Scriptural problem of tension between and among some God principles with forgiveness not the least of these. Much too often a Bible verse (or even just a portion of one) is lifted out of its setting and made to stand alone; it can become an all encompassing proverb or even a Church doctrine. Then another verse about the same matter is subjected to the same treatment, but it may offer something different about that subject and now you have 2 doctrines that disagree. Things like love, mercy, discipline, and forgiveness are dealt with in many places in the Bible, often bringing different aspects of these attributes to bear, thus causing this tension. But in reality it falls to us to discern and know when and how to apply the various attributes of things like forgiveness.

For instance: we like to say that God forgives all. Not true. He doesn't forgive something called blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. And He also doesn't forgive everyone for everything or we wouldn't have any issue at all with anyone living their eternity outside of His presence. And according to the New Testament the ONLY people in line for any kind of divine forgiveness are those who accept God's Son Yeshua and confess it publicly. So with God as our example to mimic, it cannot be that there exists nothing that can be done to us by another human that arrives at a place where we are not obligated to forgive. Are we to be held to a higher standard than He holds Himself? And even if you don't agree with that statement, we also learn in both testaments that a perpetrator is to seek forgiveness. What if they don't? Well, we see in the previous verses of a perpetrator who didn't confess, or repent and therefore would not have sought forgiveness, and thus doesn't seem to have been given any. And even though the issues Christ is addressing in this narrative are of the smaller everyday variety, where is the line that the offense crosses over into serious matters? So the attributes of love, mercy, discipline and forgiveness involve shades of gray and are complex. This means we can't read a couple of verses about any of

these things (or others) and just mechanically go by that in our decision making. We need to study God's Word thoroughly and see these matters in several different contexts in order to learn how He deals with them and therefore what He asks of us.

This is the reason that the remainder of chapter 18 is a Parable. It is to help the 12 disciples understand how to apply what Yeshua has just taught them. Let's take just a moment to review what a Parable is. A Parable is a fictional story that is concocted to make a point. The characters in the story are also fictional. In addition every Parable has but one moral to it; it is not an allegory that we can remake to suit a number of circumstances. And finally, we must be careful not to try to dissect a Parable. The details are generally unimportant. They are only there to make the Parable meaningful, enjoyable, colorful and thus memorable. Therefore in this Parable of the king and the wicked servant, this is not meant to mimic any particular king or servant in any real situation or to imply that all kings and servants are like this.

So the point this Parable is trying to teach concerns the nature of divine forgiveness within the context of human to human relationships (love your neighbor). I've mentioned before that Yeshua is not a revolutionary; He is a reformer. So His teachings are also NOT revolutionary; rather they are trying to reform the Jewish faith by reinstituting to it a true understanding of God's Word (the Tanach) that has been undermined by centuries of manmade Tradition. So much of what we see Yeshua teach had already been long ago taught. As an example: in the Babylonian Talmud, section Shabbat 151b, we read of Rabbi Gamaliel Berribi saying something that had been a bulwark of Hebrew society for centuries: "He who is merciful to others, will have mercy shown to him from Heaven. He who is not merciful to others will not have mercy shown to him by Heaven". Of course we have heard this nearly word for word from Jesus because Jesus didn't invent the concept. Jesus was trying to restore an understanding of the operation of forgiveness and mercy from the divine viewpoint, and so how it is intended to play out in human relationships. Yeshua of, course, was more directly concerned with this divine concept of mercy and forgiveness playing out properly within the newly arrived Kingdom of Heaven and the community that participated in it.

So in the Parable we find that a servant of this anonymous king is in debt to the king for the insanely huge amount of 10,000 talents. We must understand that just like the instruction to forgive 70 times 7 is not a number meant for the

purposes of tabulation, but rather is just a number that represents a limitless amount, so is the 10,000 talents meant to represent a limitless amount of debt that is owed. Trying to comprehend that number for the average Jew in the 1st century is like us trying to comprehend the ever growing national debt. Who can imagine a trillion of anything? Let alone several? So the number wasn't meant to present us with a precise amount but rather to make the point of its enormity that had no chance of ever being paid back. And since common Jews (probably rich ones as well) of course understood that, then the servant asking the king to have some more patience to give him more time to pay it back is an absurdity. That king could have given the servant 1000 years and there is no way he could have accumulated such an astronomical sum.

Now that Yeshua's audience is hooked on this story, the totally unexpected solution is presented. Rather than the king giving his servant more time (knowing that time wasn't the issue, the debt simply was not repayable), he shows mercy and cancels all that was owed. In Yeshua's day a servant... along with his entire family... that didn't pay his debt was liable to become property of the debt holder until it was paid. Now the plot takes an interesting twist. The now debt-free servant immediately confronts a man (a peer, more or less) who owes him but a trivial amount of money. And this other servant asks for a little more time. The servant that has just had his incalculably high debt canceled by the king as an act of mercy, then threatens the servant who owed him only a tiny amount and said he'd have him imprisoned if he didn't repay it immediately.

Other servants overheard this, were greatly upset, and reported it to the king. The king calls this servant before him, deems him wicked because he didn't show mercy to this other servant... on just the smallest level. It is inherent to the story that the wicked servant should have mimicked what his king just did for him. Thus the king reversed his edict, took back the forgiveness of the debt that the servant had been given, and threw this greedy and unrepentant person into prison until every last shekel was repaid. Of course it was impossible that the debt ever could be repaid so this man was destined to remain imprisoned forever. In verse 35 Christ gives us the moral of the story (just 1 moral) so His disciples didn't have to figure it out for themselves.

CJB Matthew 18:35 ³⁵ *This is how my heavenly Father will treat you, unless you each forgive your brother from your hearts.*

Mercy and forgiveness are not simple matters; they are complex with several

nuances. But a general underlying principle is that mercy and forgiveness is a reciprocal arrangement and it must happen from the heart; it can't be only an outward behavior. If we show mercy and forgiveness to our fellow man, the Father will show it to us. We don't, He won't. Of course the impossibly perfect and complete forgiveness that the Father will give to us cannot be precisely carried out by any human. But this is the bull's eye of the target that especially as Believers we are to strive to hit.

Now let's return to the beginning of the Parable. The first words are:

CJB **Matthew 18:23** ²³ ***Because of this, the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared...***

So the important background of this Parable is that it is about how to understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Mercy and forgiveness are not natural for humans but they are for the Kingdom of Heaven. So what is depicted in this Parable is nothing like what everyone on earth... Jews included... have ever witnessed. It operates like nothing on earth because at the moment earth is Satan's dominion. However as much as is possible Christ's followers are to choose, decide, obey, and behave as though the Kingdom of Heaven was already in it's fullness and Satan had already been banished.

I find it interesting that in Jesus's Parable there is no mention of the wicked servant asking for mercy and forgiveness a second time. I confess that I don't know that we ought to draw anything that Yeshua intended to communicate from the absence of such a pleading, yet again, for forgiveness. But from an allegorical standpoint, I think an application can rightfully be made. The servant knows that this time his offense is so great, and that it has crossed over some line in the sand, that once the king's wrath came down upon him and once that begins there is no turning back. The servant stands condemned due to his hard heart and wrong attitude, and forgiveness for him is no longer an option. In fact, the punishment... the king's wrath... for him is even worse than it would have been had he not been forgiven the first time.

The CJB does a poor job in translating verse 34 because there we read that the king turned the wicked servant over to jailers for punishment. This implies that jail IS the punishment (like it is in the Western world today). However the Greek word is **basanistes** and it means a person who tortures. Think of being burned slowly at the stake; being sawed in two; having your skin flayed from your body. The

king has turned this wicked servant over to the torturer to suffer unspeakable and interminable pain. And trust me, the 12 disciples who heard this Parable understood the gravity of the intent.

We'll begin chapter 19 next time.