

Together in His Name
Matthew 18:14-35

I am told that the modern military method of training goes something like this: “Tell them what you’re going to tell them. Then tell them. Then tell them what you just told them.” Classroom teachers use the same three-part technique, although we use different jargon: “advance organizers,” “methodologies,” and “reinforcement.” Yes, it’s always a good idea to start any sort of lesson by giving a brief overview and to end it with some sort of summary or review.

This is what Jesus does in the story of the king and the two servants, isn’t it? For both at the beginning and the end of His story, He drives home its main point: we must forgive one another. And we must forgive them in sincerity, from the depths of our hearts. And we must do this over and over and over again.

And the story Jesus tells between these two summaries gives us the most compelling reason for such mutual forgiveness, doesn’t it? For think about the debt that the first servant owed to his king. In those days, the amount of money called a talent was equivalent to 6000 denarii, and one denarius was the payment a laborer received for an entire day’s work. So, given the current Federal minimum wage, and given only an eight hour workday, one talent would be worth a minimum of \$348,000. So, 10,000 talents would amount to three billion, four hundred eighty million dollars. It is a staggering amount of debt, unimaginable for anyone – except, apparently, the United States Congress. And it is incredible that anyone would simply forgive such a tremendous debt, as the king does in verse 27.

But the sad fact is that all of us owe so much more, and not just the \$86,000 that is each American’s share of our Federal debt. No, because we have all valued the creation more than the Creator, because we have all set our hearts on what pleases us rather than on what glorifies God, we are all guilty of the worst sort of disloyalty to Christ our King. Moreover, whenever we put our wants ahead of the needs of others, whenever we give in to the self-centeredness that is natural to every human being since the Fall of Adam, we are breaking God’s perfect law of love. And all such turncoats, all such traitors, all such outlaws deserve the greatest penalty of all – because we have defied God’s Divine Majesty, we all deserve nothing less than death. We thus owe God our very lives – a price none of us can pay, at least not if we want to go on living.

But if our debt is much greater than the \$3.5 billion the first servant owed, it has also cost God much more to forgive us that debt. For, as Jesus tried to explain to His disciples in the previous chapter, in order for those who trust in Him to be forgiven, He would have to be delivered into the hands of His enemies and killed. It was only His death that could pay the penalty that we all owe, just as it is only His resurrection on the third day that has finally destroyed the power that death holds over all of Adam’s helpless descendants. Yes, that’s the glorious good news: for all who trust in Christ, God has forgiven us an incalculable debt at an unimaginable price.

But, as Jesus’ story goes on to illustrate, doesn’t that make our own stubborn refusal to forgive one another, well, more than a little bit stingy? For what did the first servant do, right after he had been forgiven that debt of \$3.5 billion? He went to yet another of the king’s servants and demanded payment of a debt of 100 denarii – and according to our previous calculation, that would only come to \$5,800 in today’s money.

Now, that’s still a sizable sum – certainly nothing for any of us to sneeze at. And the fact is that we all have people who owe us debts of comparable size. Sure, some may owe us money, but many others owe us apologies for thoughtless or cutting remarks they have made, or restitution for promises

they broke, or for physical or emotional harm they've done to us or our loved ones. And of course some wounds are so deep that nothing can really be said or done to cover them or make them whole, right?

No, the sad fact is that many of us have really good reasons to hold on to our grudges. And as a result, we've been nursing some of them for years. Yes, many of us find it easy to sympathize with the man who threw that deadbeat into prison because he wouldn't pay him that \$5,800. We know very well what it's like not to forgive those who owe us, what it's like to live in the second part of this story.

But as we cling to our resentments, haven't we forgotten the first part of this story? Yes, we might have been seriously harmed by others, but do any of them deserve the death penalty for what they've done to us? And sure, writing off what others owe us may cost us some of our money, or more likely some of our pride. But have we forgotten the much higher price, the lifeblood of Christ Himself, that God paid to ransom us from the power of death? So, how can we refuse to forgive others so little when Christ has forgiven us so much at so great a cost?

Oh, this need to forgive others may be a hard lesson to hear, but there can be no doubt that this is exactly what Jesus is trying to tell us. For He doesn't just summarize this teaching before and after His story. No, the whole lesson is actually a repetition of something He already told us way back in chapter 6, when He taught us the Lord's Prayer. For doesn't that prayer include a pledge to God that we will "forgive our debtors" – those who have sinned against us in any way? And after teaching us that prayer, doesn't Jesus make the same point He makes in the story of the king and the two servants? "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matthew 6:14-15). No, there can be no doubt that honest, sincere, heart-felt, genuine, continual forgiveness of others is a critical component of the Christian life, a necessary response to God's forgiveness of us.

But if all of that is true, then what are we to make of the verses that come right before Jesus' story? How do we explain this rather elaborate three-part method of confronting those who have sinned against us? For if we are called to forgive others completely and sincerely, why would we need to go through such a complicated and doubtless distressing and humiliating process?

Well, given what we've already learned, we shouldn't – that is, not if our only objective is to elicit some kind of confession or apology, or to gain some kind of vindication for ourselves. Indeed, Jesus makes it clear that we should never want to embarrass anyone about the sins they may have committed against us – that's why a private, personal conversation is prescribed as the first step towards reconciliation.

And yet Jesus makes it clear in verses 15-17 that we should, in fact, have such difficult conversations. So why go through such a process if we aren't trying to gain some kind of revenge from those who have hurt us?

To answer that question, we have to go back to the first verse in today's passage, the verse which summarizes what we learned last week: "It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish." And how did Jesus illustrate that truth in the preceding verses? With yet another story – that of a shepherd who goes searching for one lost sheep, and who rejoices more over it than over his 99 others who never did go astray.

So, why do we go to all the trouble and effort to confront our brothers and sisters who have sinned against us? Not in order to get back at them, but to help get them back into the fold – not simply to repair their relationship with us, but to help them repair their relationship with God. In short, as we help others see the sin in their lives, we are participating in God's great missionary work, God's determination to save every one of His lost sheep.

For let's face it: didn't we all need the reminder we find in the story of the king and the two servants? Don't we all need to forgive one another more completely and sincerely? Indeed, don't we all need to have God's Word confront us about other sinful areas of our lives? So, why should we be surprised that sometimes we need each other's help to see how we are failing to live up to God's perfect law of love? And since none of us are mind-readers, how can we expect anyone to understand that he has hurt us unless we point it out to him?

Okay, so what might happen if we take Jesus' advice seriously, if we were to be honest with someone who has sinned against us? He might not be willing to admit that he has made a mistake, much less to confess that he has said or done something hurtful. But such a refusal may in fact be our own fault. We ourselves might be the ones who have misunderstood what he said or did. Sometimes we ourselves are the ones who need to be set straight, because sometimes we hold grudges for no good reason.

So, when such a private conversation doesn't clear the air, it's sometimes necessary to bring in others who can be trusted to be tactful and caring, who have knowledge of the situation, and preferably who also have a good understanding of the Scriptures as well. In our Presbyterian system of government, we elect ruling elders to perform this role, to help all of us straighten out our differences, to hold all of us accountable to our profession of faith and to help all of us live more consistently in a Christlike way.

Okay, but what if someone really is in the wrong? What if he really has hurt us but refuses to listen to us? What if he also refuses to heed the wise counsel of the elders and thus continues to live in opposition to the whole church? Well, what then? Jesus says we should treat him as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer, in other words, as a self-acknowledged, publicly unrepentant sinner.

Okay, but how does that help anything? I thought the whole point of this kind of intervention was to bring people back to God. What good does it do to confront them if the process only serves to drive sinners farther away from Him?

Well, let's think for a minute about what would happen if we never had these kinds of conversations. What if we just kept on forgiving those who kept on hurting us without trying to set them straight? What if we thus enabled them to continue in their thoughtlessness and sin? They'd just go on wandering further and further away from God, wouldn't they? But at the same time, they'd never realize that they had any spiritual problems at all.

And so if we Southerners do what comes naturally to us, if we try to avoid conflict by refusing to have honest, difficult conversations, we might be allowing such sinners to go on imagining that they are faithful followers of Christ when nothing could be further from the truth. And their spiritual self-deception, their spiritual blindness could have consequences for them that are far more serious than even a \$3.5 billion fine. Like the unforgiving servant in verse 34, such unrepentant sinners could end up being excluded from the presence of God forever.

But what if we were to have the courage to point out our neighbors' sins – discretely, tactfully and lovingly? And if they keep on refusing to listen to us or to the elders, what if we considered them to be, no longer our brothers and sisters in Christ but those who need to hear the gospel? And what if we then treated them the way God treats all such lost sheep – as those who need to be persistently pursued, as those who need to repent and receive the good news of God's grace? If we refuse to accept their sin but at the same time if we refuse to give up on them, might God use our persistent, loving witness to replace their blindness with sight, and thus to restore them not only to Himself, but to our fellowship as well?

But why is such reconciliation so important? Because of what this passage goes on to tell us about the nature of the Church. For when verse 18 summarizes the process of discipline that Jesus has already described, it makes clear that the power of the Church to hold its members accountable is not to be exercised by any individual. That's why Jesus uses the plural pronoun "ye," referring to the whole session or the whole congregation: it's whatever "y'all" bind on earth that will be bound in heaven, and whatever "y'all" loose on earth that shall be loosed in heaven.

And it takes groups of Christians to hold each other accountable because of what the Church is. As Paul told us in our responsive reading, the Church is made up of all those who trust in Christ throughout space and time. All that acknowledge Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord make up His body, no matter how different we may be from one another.

And since we are all united to Him as well as to one another, Paul makes it clear that we need each others' distinct gifts, experiences and perspectives in order to discern the will of God accurately, not only in cases of church discipline, but in every aspect of our lives. Because we are as tightly and intimately connected to each other as are the separate parts of our bodies, it is imperative that "there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another" (I Corinthians 12:26).

So, why should we forgive one another? Why should we seek reconciliation with those who have hurt us? So that there will be no division in the body. And why do we go to the trouble of holding one another accountable to our profession of faith? So that no one will wander off, again creating division in the body. It turns out that the best way for us to stick together is to love one another enough not only to forgive one another, but also to be honest with each about our sins.

And what will be the result of this sort of unity with God and with one another? That's the best news of all. For in verse 19, Jesus promises that God will hear and answer the prayers with which we all agree. And in verse 20, Jesus promises that God Himself will live in the midst of those who have gathered in His name, those who are joined together in His love. What more could we possibly ask for?

So, let's not allow our hard hearts to go on tolerating the difficulties and divisions between us Christians. Let's not allow others to wander off, oblivious to their own sins. Instead, let us pursue the peace, the unity and the purity of the Church, forgiving and never giving up on each other. For then we will truly be the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Lord, the place where God dwells on earth.