

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 09/17/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, September 17th

Matthew 18:21-35

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

God's mercy is beyond our understanding

Directly following last week's text on church discipline, this week's Gospel lection emphasizes the importance of forgiveness among the people who God took the initiative to call together in Christ's name. Peter asks a question about how many times he must forgive a brother who sins against him. In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus demonstrates the extravagance of God's mercy. Yet despite the mercy that has been lavished upon us, we tend to behave as the unforgiving servant in the parable and limit the mercy we show others. Perhaps even worse, we sometimes act as though God limits His mercy, even presuming to know to whom such mercy is limited by establishing barriers that exclude some people from our churches.

Matthew 18:21-35 Commentary

This text is part of the fourth discourse of Jesus in Matthew which is known as the Discourse on the Church. The Gospel lection is a continuation of the instructions Jesus gave to His disciples about responding to a fellow disciple who sins: "If your brother sins against you..." (18:15-20). In this week's lection, Peter brings up the question of how many times must such a brother be forgiven.

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Peter answers his own question. He suggests as many as seven times. Peter here is quite forgiving. In Judaism, forgiving someone three times was sufficient to demonstrate a forgiving spirit (based on Job 33:29, 30 and Amos 1:3; 2:6). Jesus responds with a number that suggests one should not keep count at all: seventy-seven times. Some argue this may be an allusion to Lamech's boast of vengeance in Genesis 4:24.

²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

Jesus then immediately launches into a parable about the Kingdom to demonstrate the behaviors expected under God's rule, the so-called Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. The servant's debt to the king is an unimaginable amount. A single talent was a monetary unit that equates to 20 years wages for a laborer. If a laborer is paid \$15 an hour, a talent would be worth approx. \$600,000. A debt of ten thousand talents would be \$6 billion!

²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

Faced with a debt that he could never pay and the consequences looming, the servant throws himself at the mercy of his master. Out of pity the master forgives the servant his debt.

²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

This unbelievable level of generosity and mercy shown to the servant by the king did not seem to change the servant's behavior. He goes to find one of his fellow servants who owed him a debt. A denarius was the daily wage of a laborer. In the same calculation above, the debt owed in this case was \$12,000. A man who had just been forgiven \$6 billion refuses to forgive someone a debt of \$12,000!

³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.

Word of the unforgiving servant reaches his master. He had shown the unforgiving servant forgiveness, why did he not do the same? The master, in his anger, delivers the unforgiving servant to jailers presumably for the rest of his life as punishment.

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

In case of any confusion, Jesus explains the punchline of the parable to His disciples. Transactional forgiveness is not sufficient. Forgiveness must be from the heart.

Reflection & Application

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is straightforward to interpret. Perhaps this is because Jesus is addressing only His disciples. Regardless, in case there is any lack of clarity, Jesus drives home the punchline of the parable in v.35. There are several themes emerging from this text that are worth mentioning.

First, we are to forgive indefinitely. The number seventy-seven essentially tells us we are not to keep count. It is difficult to imagine a situation where a brother or sister pulls out a list, checks the count, and then tells the offender, "I have forgiven you seventy-six times already. This is the absolute last time!"

Second, the enormous debt the king in the parable forgives (six billion dollars) helps us to understand in some small way the value of God's grace. The unforgiving servant was forgiven a debt that he could never have repaid; such it is with us. Sometimes when things are "free" we tend to discount the value. While such grace comes at no cost to us, Jesus paid an extreme price.

Third, how can the unforgiving servant be so, well, unforgiving? He has just been forgiven a debt that would take him 200,000 years to pay off! If he had forgiven his debtor in the same way, he would still have been ahead by \$5,999,988,000! Not a bad position! Yet this is exactly the way we behave when as Christians, forgiven the penalty

of our past, present and future sins, and we refuse to forgive our brothers and sisters who transgress against us. Jesus indicates in v.35 the enormous consequences this will have. Perhaps even worse is when Christians presume to act on behalf of God and limit His mercy by introducing human barriers designed to exclude certain people from church.

Finally, forgiveness is more of a state of heart than a state of mind. It is one thing to declare someone to be forgiven but it is another thing entirely to act as though this person is forgiven. The former involves only a state of mind. The latter causes us to act in a way as though the person never transgressed us. Such reconciliation comes at the risk of exposing our hearts to be hurt again but we are not in this alone. The relationship that exists between Christians involves a special kind of spiritual fellowship, *koinonia*, possible only through the working of the Holy Spirit.

The text opens with Peter asking his question about how many times he must forgive. Peter would continue to make mistakes in his journey with Jesus. Perhaps the most famous is denying Jesus three times in succession after Jesus was arrested (26:69-75) – just as Jesus predicted. One wonders as Peter sat weeping bitterly, realizing he had denied his master three times if he remembered this conversation about forgiveness. Jesus went on to forgive Peter and the rest is history.

