

Community Life

Why does the church fall short of keeping the commands that seem so clear in Matthew 18:15-20? One reason is due to a fear of partiality, of being involved in selective discipline of selective sins. Another reason is that the church has been neglecting it so long that when you actually start doing it, it is shocking. If the church wants to take holiness seriously, however, it must take it seriously from the beginning and remember that this business of taking two or three witnesses can be overblown. The main thing is that we are all constantly striving together for holiness. In thinking about church discipline, it is helpful to think about a cognate word: disciple. A disciple is one who is under discipline. If we are really disciples, we are under a form of discipline every day and are taking sin seriously every day. It is an ongoing process. If we are faithful to discipline, teaching, and holiness day by day, this will not be such a difficult thing to do in the church. In other words, we need to start *before* the steps given in Matthew 18. We must start with a life together in which holiness is always a significant concern and the goal is always to win our brother.

In the conclusion of this passage, Peter has heard clearly what to do if someone sins and you rebuke him but he does not listen—you put him out of the church. But Peter has another question. He asks about a scenario in which discipline does not work and therefore how many times he must actually forgive his brother and act as if the offense never happened. His offer is up to seven times, which perhaps seemed pretty generous since the rabbis and the Pharisees said three times. But whether it is three or seven times, they are probably attainable. In real life, you might be able to count the three times you have forgiven someone for the same offense, or even up to seven times, and then you can be done with him. But Jesus' answer is 77 times—you cannot keep track of 77 times. You either give up or you blow up long before you get to 77. Forgiving your brother is either a way of life, or it is not. And that is Jesus' point; He is saying it must be a way of life.

There is no denying that living a life of forgiveness is a difficult thing. If forgiving someone three times is difficult, imagine how much more so is 77 times. So Jesus tells a parable. In this parable there is a servant with a debt to his master that is more than can be repaid in a lifetime, or even many lifetimes. When the master wanted to collect the debt, the servant begged to be given more time to pay it back, and remarkably, the master took pity on him and let him go. When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller debt than he owed, though it was still quite significant. He grabbed the other servant and began to choke him and demanded that he pay what he owed. The fellow servant made the same exact request, but the first servant refused to have pity and had the man thrown in prison. When the master's other servants saw what had happened, they told their master about it. The master then called the servant to him and said in Matthew 18:32-33, "You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" And Jesus concludes His parable saying, "In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

In thinking about the details of the parable, the servant owed his master 10,000 talents, which is roughly the value of 600,000 years' wages. That represents the debt we owe to God, our Heavenly Father. The debt the fellow servant owed to the first was 100 denarii, which is about the value of 100 days' wages. In the parable, this represents the offenses of our brothers against us. It must be acknowledged that this is still a great debt. Without allegorizing too much, Jesus is saying that the debts we owe to each other are substantial. But by comparison, they are far surpassed by what we owe to God. People do things to us that make us want to hold a grudge and even choke them and get our pound of flesh. Before we have that attitude, however, we must remember, however much we may be owed and however much we may

have to forgive, there is a much greater debt that we have been forgiven by God. This is our motivation to forgive our brother three times and 77 times—to forgive as God has forgiven us so much more.

Sometimes people wonder about the state of the servant at the end of the parable. They wonder if this person is really a brother, someone who is really in the community of God's kingdom. But the parable is not focused on that issue, so it does not speak directly about it. The parable is actually talking about appearances. This person seems to be a brother, so he must be treated as a brother. It is about community relations and how we treat those in the community. We do not really know the eternal condition of somebody's soul. We know their profession of faith and we deal with them according to their profession of faith until they prove themselves otherwise. In this section of Matthew 18, they prove themselves otherwise if they never repent or if they refuse to be forgiving, which indicate that they have not tasted of the grace of God. Thus the parable ends: this is how the Father will treat you; He will not forgive you if you are unforgiving. It does not mean that in order to be forgiven by God you have to be a tender and forgiving person. What it means is if you really understood how much you have been forgiven, you would forgive.

While this parable is primarily about forgiving a brother who has repented, there are two kinds of forgiving somebody. There is forgiving somebody in your heart, and there is forgiving somebody legally for the sake of the cause of Christ and the church. So you should always forgive, whether they have repented or not, because you are supposed to forgive and you are not supposed to hate anybody. That inner forgiveness—no longer being vindictive or hateful—is one thing we always owe everybody. But then if someone has not asked for it, even though we have inwardly forgiven them, for the sake of their good and the honor of Christ and the purity of the church, we are called to pursue them in reconciliation. This is where we may still need to deal with it with the church and the elders and so forth.

Chapter 19 of Matthew deals further with the nature of kingdom life and relations between disciples. The next focus is upon what service one owes to a spouse. Matthew 19:3 begins to tell of an interaction Jesus had regarding this issue: "Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?'" The last phrase could be translated, "For any reason whatsoever." This was a technical question asked by Jews in that day. The question was not whether a man could get a divorce. The answer to that—everybody agreed, right or wrong—was 'yes.' Could a woman get a divorce? The answer to that, everybody agreed, was 'no.' A man could divorce his wife; a woman could not divorce her husband. They are asking what the grounds may be for divorce. May one divorce his wife for any reason whatsoever? Some Jewish teachers said one could get a divorce for any reason whatsoever, while others said there had to be a cause.

The crucial text that they debated was Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

"If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled."

What they debated was what it meant when Moses said, "If she becomes displeasing because he finds something indecent." There were three answers given to that question. The strictest answer was that a man could only divorce his wife if he found some unchastity in her. The next answer was far more lax which said that if a wife spoils her husband's meal twice, then that was grounds for divorce. The

thinking was that for a woman to serve bad food to her husband was indecent. The third answer, however, was the most lenient and basically said that a man could divorce his wife for any reason at all.

The question about divorce might have been rephrased as: What is the least I can give? Or, how can I get out of the commitment as easily as possible? Jesus replies to the questions, however, very differently by accusing His questioners of not being able to apply the Scripture. He says that since God made male and female in order that they be united and become one flesh, that is the principle that should be applied. That means that they should not be asking questions about how one can get out of a marriage, but rather should be asking how one can stay faithful in marriage. At that time the rabbis had pages and pages of description about how to serve a bill of divorce, but they had almost nothing about how to have a good marriage and really nothing at all that was practical to marriage. But Jesus says that the focus should be upon God's original good plan.

The Pharisees responded to Jesus saying, "Why then did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" But Jesus said they had it wrong; Moses did not command divorce; he permitted it because of their hardness of heart. When the discussion ended, the disciples complain that Jesus' teaching might make marriage seem too hard and so it might be better not to marry. With that objection, they probably thought they had Jesus beat. In that day, almost everyone eventually got married, but if by requiring a lifelong commitment marriage seemed more like a burden, then maybe people would not marry. But then Jesus shocked everybody by saying that indeed some people might not be able to marry if they cannot handle the commitment. Thus the question to ask is not, How little can I give? The better question is, Am I willing to take seriously the marriage vow? If one is not able to take it seriously, one should not do it.

A scene that follows is in much the same line of thinking about the costs of the kingdom and what it means to be a disciple. Someone asks Jesus the question in Matthew 19:16, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Another way to ask his question would be: What can I accomplish so that when I am done with it God will owe me eternal life? Jesus answers the man very simply, by saying that he needs to keep the commandments. In reply the man says he has done that. What he really wants to know is, once he has been perfectly obedient, what else can he do so that God owes him something, just in case he missed something, or committed an accidental sin, or if he would mess up at the end of his life. He wants to know what he can do in order to have some merit in the presence of God.

His line of questioning is really the same as the one before. The Pharisees were trying to work the angles to see how little they could give. Now this man is working the angles to see how he can manipulate God and find out how much he can get for what he gives. But Jesus responds in an interesting way. If I had been there, I would have asked, "Do you mean to tell me that you have kept all those commandments perfectly all your life? Do you mean to tell me that when you were 14 you never once spoke disrespectfully to your parents? Give me a break." But Jesus does not say that. Jesus seems to take the man's assertion that he has been perfect at face value. Then He goes on saying, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Of course, the man was rich and so unable to do it. He went away grieving, and we understand that the one little thing that Jesus asked him to do is not a little thing at all. What Jesus is really saying is that the man has not kept the first commandment. Did you notice his list of commands were all from what we call the second table of the law, the commands that regard human-to-human relationships? He did not mention loving God or keeping the Sabbath or not having idols or not taking God's name in vain. So the one issue Jesus picks up on is the most important of all—does he really love God? The main reason he could not follow Jesus' instruction was not because he was rich but because he did not really love God. He loved himself and he loved his own hope for reward, and so he left.

As he left, Jesus taught about how difficult it is for rich men to enter the kingdom because they have so much to give up. The disciples were astonished at this because riches at the time were thought to be a sign of God's blessing and favor. If it is difficult for a rich man, who seems to have the blessing of God, to enter the kingdom, the disciples wondered who then could be saved. Jesus answered, "With God all things are possible." But Peter is only kind of listening to what Jesus is saying. After watching the rich man walk away, Peter reminds Jesus that although that man would not give up everything, Peter and the other disciples had. Peter says in Matthew 19:27, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" To summarize Jesus' answer, He said that they will indeed be rewarded, but they should watch out that they are not too focused upon the reward.