

Whose Property Is Always to Have Mercy

Ezekiel 33:7-11 | Psalm 119:33-40 | Romans 13:8-14 | Matthew 18:15-20

MATTHEW 18:15-20

¹⁵ *If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.* ¹⁶ *But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.* ¹⁷ *If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.* ¹⁸ *Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.* ¹⁹ *Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.* ²⁰ *For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

INTRODUCTION

A Sunday School teacher had just finished teaching the children about repentance. Trying to confirm that she had gotten her point across, she asked the children: ‘Can anyone tell me what you must do before you can obtain forgiveness of sin?’ There was a short pause and then, from the back of the room, a little boy spoke up. ‘Sin.’ I like that joke. I like it, in part, because it focuses the mind on a simple, and yet sometimes difficult transaction—that of sin and forgiveness—the subject of our Gospel reading this morning. And here is what I think Jesus teaches: It is imperative that we assume a posture of forgiveness. It is imperative that we assume a posture of forgiveness. I think we will see this in two ways, both in the need to confront sin—so that forgiveness may be given, and then the particular posture of forgiving sin. Let’s take a closer look.

THE NEED FOR CONFRONTING SIN (V.15)

The passage opens with a simple exhortation. But the translation is a bit difficult: *“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.”*¹ Our translation has made an interpretive decision to talk about church members, when more literally, it reads: *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.”*² This is important for us because it immediately establishes a familial context, that of a family of fellow Christians who are intimately tied together.³ Other passages will address how we, as Christians, are to confront the evils of the world. This is an internal matter.

Why? What is the task of one who is a sibling in the faith? Well, in this passage, it is to call his brother or sister to account for his sin against him. The word here is something of a loaded

¹ Matt 18:15a (NRSV).

² Matt 18:15a (ESV).

³ Building from at least 18:1, possibly going back to 17:24, this larger discussion first concerns “little ones,” children, those who Jesus describes as *believing in him*, and who become the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven through the humility of becoming *a little one*. This has been a theme in Matthew’s Gospel, of course, reaching a climax of sort at the end of chapter 12, in which Jesus redefines who his mother and brothers are as those who do the will of God. This familial language, importantly, continues after our passage, where Peter immediately asks about forgiving his *brother*. This entire discussion is about how we treat each other, in the church community, as family.

word, typically translated as *rebuke* or *prove wrong* in the other Gospels.⁴ And it is directed at a person for a particular reason: sin. In Christian contexts, *sin* generally means any unrighteous, evil, or rebellious act or thought, against God or others. But in this case, the focus is on those sins against others. The grammar makes it clear that the sin is *against you*.⁵ There is a wronged party with a specific and significant grievance. And what is their responsibility?

To confront the sin. Now, let's sit with that a moment. Is that your instinct? Is that what you do? This is not an easy thing. Most of us probably fall into one extreme or the other. On the one hand, we might be the sort of person who looks for the sins of our brothers and sisters for the purpose of calling them out. Is this our default position? To critique or criticize in a petty or mean-spirited way? To take someone down a peg? Bring a little righteous humility? And the motivations of our hearts that cause us to do this are just as dark as the act itself. We feel better about ourselves in comparison—*schadenfreude*, the Germans call it. But it is a self-justifying kind of legalism. Or maybe it's a self-aggrandizing effort to play the victim? Either way, it very rarely comes from a genuine concern for the brother in question.

But, frustrating as this extreme is, I suspect most of us are on the other end of the spectrum, precisely where our culture pushes us to be. It is seen as impolite at best, more likely as simply offensive, to tell someone that they have sinned. We may tell our spouses that someone sinned. We may tell our friends. We may tell our neighbours. We may tell our neighbours' third-cousin's friend's acquaintance from work. Gossip will never go out of fashion. But for most of us, confronting the person who wronged us is something to be avoided—especially if you're married to them. And so, we never learn how to have healthy Christian confrontation. We'd much rather ignore it, until the hurt of the sin gets unburied, ripping you apart—and ultimately ripping the relationship apart. And it gets couched in all sorts of ways. 'We need unconditional acceptance. God is love and would never judge, so why should we? God made them this way, so who am I to confront? Right?' This approach, by the way, is the easiest way to institutionalize sin in a church. But this passage has a different message. What if it is, in fact, calling us to maturely, calmly, with great reflection and mercy, confront our brothers and sisters who have sinned against us. "*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.*"⁶ Why? Because if they listen, "*you have regained that one.*"⁷

THE POSTURE OF FORGIVING SIN (V.16-20)

And this brings us to the second point: a posture of forgiving sin.⁸ The context of our passage is quite important in seeing this. It is preceded by a parable about a lost sheep—especially the shepherd who goes out of his way to find the lost sheep and rejoices over it.⁹ The message is

⁴ Perhaps even more compellingly in the cultural context, it is the famous word used by Plato and Xenophon for what Socrates does with his conversation partners—cross-examining or confronting to the point of frustration.

⁵ Now of course, debates in text criticism suggest the possibility that this is sin in general by noting that some manuscripts leave out the "against you" phrase, making it not a brother's sin against you, but *sin in general*—however the people who decide what gets printed in the New Testament ultimately decided to retain it, and the context supports it. It's like the judicial context of 1 Corinthians 6.

⁶ Matt 18:15a (ESV).

⁷ Matt 18:15b.

⁸ Sometimes, that posture may be forgiving without confronting, when the grievance is small. But a lot of the time, it is something we need to address. And for that, we need posture, a bias toward forgiveness.

⁹ The relevant context starts even before the parable. Starting back up in verse 7: We have Jesus commenting on the temptation to sin. In particular, he pronounces woe on those who cause others to sin. But in general, it is clear that

clearly one of welcoming back the one who sins: forgiveness and rejoicing in forgiveness. And of course, after our passage, we have Peter's question along the same theme. "*Lord, if another member of the church [again, this should be translated as brother] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? ... Seventy-seven times.*" Peter is wondering about the extent of the forgiveness and Jesus responds to Peter with an exhortation to overwhelming forgiveness.¹⁰ This context demonstrates a distinct focus on forgiveness. And so, the nature of the confrontation, as it is further explained, must be seen in this light. Listen again:

If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.¹¹

In other words, if your brother sins against you, go confront him. May he listen so that you can forgive him and gain your brother. If not, go with one or two others, so that two or three have borne witness to the offense.¹² The expectation is, of course, that he may repent and make it right, so that you have gained your brother. But if he doesn't, only then bring it before the church. But notice something very important here. The church does *not* do anything, at least not explicitly. The command there is to the individual—the one who was wronged initially. It's a singular *you*. It never leaves the context of the individual. We are still dealing with the conflict between two people and the need for confronting and forgiving.¹³

And to what end? If your brother doesn't repent of his sin, you—the wronged party—should treat him as a Gentile and a tax collector. Now of course, we have to ask what does it mean to treat someone as a Gentile and a tax collector in Matthew's Gospel? If we take Jesus as a model—the answer is decidedly not judgment. Rather, sinners are to be compelled to repentance so that they may be forgiven and welcomed as brothers and sisters, not held or judged by the Law. Jesus says elsewhere; "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.*"¹⁴ Now to be clear, I do not want to undermine or soften the consequences of continued unrepentance here. It is clear that without repentance, the person who offended is *not* to be treated as a brother. He is a Gentile or a tax collector—an outsider. And the intimacy of a shared faith is impaired. The unrepentant need the gospel, not fellowship. They need the gospel, not passivity or unconditional acceptance. But to the repentant brother, ours should be a posture of forgiveness. The whole point of the confrontation, the whole point of the process, the whole point is to extend forgiveness so that the relationship may be repaired.

sin is to be rejected at great cost. Then in verse 10, we have something of a counterpoint—a parable answering the natural question that arises from Jesus's strong words in 7-9: What about those who give in to temptation and sin?

¹⁰ Then we get another parable about the consequences, the judgment from God, for not forgiving in Matt 18:23-35.

¹¹ Matt 18:15b-17.

¹² This is, of course, right out of the legal context of Deuteronomy 19. Deut 19:15: "*A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained.*"

¹³ Of course, we can talk about whether the role of the church is larger here if we look at the next few verses, but the only prescribed reaction to the brother is that of the wronged individual.

¹⁴ Mark 2:17.

This, friends, is the gospel. May we be strong enough to extend forgiveness to those who have sinned against us. Why? Because we have been forgiven for our sins by God himself through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself ties these ideas together, of course, in the Lord's Prayer. *"Forgive us our trespasses [heavenly Father], as we forgive those who trespass against us."*¹⁵ Switching the order a bit: 'May we forgive our brothers and sisters who sin against us, just as God forgives us.' The forgiven are to forgive. But, it's not easy. It's costly. And that's the point, Jesus knows better than anyone what it costs to forgive someone who has sinned against you. He enacts this very connection later in Matthew. The night before he gives his life on the cross, he takes the cup of wine and says: *"Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for..."* what? It is for *"the forgiveness of sins."*¹⁶ It is the shedding of his blood that brings about the remission of sin. Whatever the cost to our pride to forgive our brothers and sisters their sins against us, it does not compare.

And at no point has this posture been more important, more abundantly in need, than in our day. While every age is distinct, our current era has introduced a fundamental shift in the nature of human relationships. We are more connected than ever. We can constantly communicate via smart phones. I frequently travel, thousands of miles away from my wife, and I talk to her more times during the day than my parents ever did during their workdays seven miles apart from each other. We, as humans, are in constant contact. And yet, as many have noted, we are more distant from each other.¹⁷ The personal connection, the intimacy, the ability to communicate in a healthy way has somehow decreased. And so, it is all the more important that we assume a posture of forgiveness, a mature understanding of and a desire to forgive and repair relationships and gain back our brothers or sisters.

CONCLUSION

As I conclude, I hope you have seen that it is imperative that we assume a posture of forgiveness, not ignoring those who have wronged us, but gently, lovingly approaching them so that forgiveness may occur and relationships may be restored. What this looks like may surprise us. I suspect you may already know where you need to shift your mind or your heart, what relationships need a little attention along these lines. I will leave you with a reminder of from whence this posture starts. In its profound poetic beauty, the *Book of Common Prayer* shows us the source of forgiveness: *"We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy."*¹⁸ God's nature—his property—is always to have mercy, to pardon the sins of those who approach him with humility and faith in repentance. And this passage, more than anything else, tells us to do the same, to have a property of forgiveness, to have such a posture that we may forgive, and so gain our brothers or sisters.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, help us to forgive those who trespass against us, as you have forgiven us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹⁵ Matt 6:12.

¹⁶ Matt 26:27-28.

¹⁷ E.g., Jasmin Tahmaseb-McConatha, "Technology Use, Loneliness, and Isolation," *Psychology Today*, October 19, 2022. See [psychologytoday.com/us/blog/live-long-and-prosper/202210/technology-use-loneliness-and-isolation](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/live-long-and-prosper/202210/technology-use-loneliness-and-isolation).

¹⁸ 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 313.