Matthew 18:15-35: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Matthew chapter 18 verses 15 to 35. If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.

If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.
If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.
Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.
For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. Then Peter came up and said to him, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him?
[1:02] As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but seventy seven times. Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 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.
So the servant fell on his knees imploring him, Have patience with me and I will pay you everything. And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.
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.
So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, Have patience with me and I will pay you. He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 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.
[2:16] Then his master summoned him and said to him, You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?

And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.
The second half of Matthew chapter 18 is a passage dealing with the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness. Sins against us within the body of Christ need to be considered in the light of brotherhood.
And we have to deal with our brothers. When your brother wrongs you, you can't just let it fester. You have to interact with your brother day by day, and you have little choice but to relate to your brother.
And our relationships in the body of Christ should be the same. There is an imperative to uphold and establish peace between us, and to heal any wounds that might exist.
[3:17] We confront each other in order to sort things out swiftly. And Jesus gives here a procedure that is designed to avoid any sort of premature escalation of situations to conflict.

Many people seem to approach this as if the earlier stages are unfortunate prerequisites for really dealing with the problem. Finally being done with people that have wronged us, and bringing them to the point of being cast out.
Yet Jesus' teaching here is very clearly designed with the end that we might win over our brother. That's the optimal outcome. We care about our brothers and sisters, so we very much wish to win

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them back, if at all possible.
The point of this is that we are not the ones that want to see things escalate. Every form of escalation is a result of the resistance of the other party, of their opposition, not something that we seek to bring about ourselves.
This begins in private. And it's an important thing to give people a chance to climb down. It's very hard to climb down from something that we've said that is wrong or hurtful in public.
[4:26] We very often feel that desire to stick to our guns, to stick to what we have said, to save face. And dealing with things in private gives people an optimal context in which to repent for what they've done, to set right wrongs, to take back perhaps some of the words that they have said.

And it is also a way of avoiding gossip and rumours and seeds of bitterness. We are going to deal with this directly, and we're going to deal with it quickly.
We take the step of approaching people, rather than letting anything fester. And we approach them in a personal way. This is us going to them.
We're not sending someone else on our behalf. We're dealing with this personally, and in a way that gives them the ideal situation in which they could repent and set things right.
A healthy society needs a minimum of law, but litigiousness is a sign of people who cannot adequately resolve their own disputes. And so we do have to take these things to other people at certain points, but we draw out that process.
[5:34] We don't go straight to the most extreme authority. This may be a particular problem for us, where we can always appeal to the crowd, we can always appeal to some other parties to intervene and to come into our situation and cast their judgement upon it, particularly as we have access to the internet.

Resisting the power that that gives us, and dealing with things closer to home, dealing with things in a way that gives people the opportunity to stand down, to repent, and to set things right, without putting them to a public shame, or putting their feet to the fire so that they have no choice but to back down.
That's not what we're trying to do. Rather, we seek to establish peace where at all possible. We bring witnesses along on that second occasion to test the words of all.
Now, no testimony is being given yet, but the witnesses introduced that implicit warning of it, that this may come to something more, and at this point we want people to establish the words.
We don't want false rumours. We don't want a sort of he said, she said situation. We want the words to be established and true. We want to know exactly what was said, who stands where, and how things can be resolved, if they are possible to be resolved.
[6:51] Finally, we bring things to the church, and if they refuse to listen to the church, we don't associate with them as brothers anymore. The point of all of this is that we are peacemakers.

We are people who seek reconciliation. We are people who deal with things quickly, and always in a way that seeks to avoid unnecessary escalation. And here we should note the importance of being in a situation where we are relating to each other deeply, and in a sustained fashion.
It's very easy to be a person that never needs to forgive, if you're not relating to people as brothers and sisters. It's very easy to avoid forgiveness, if whenever you fall out with someone, you just go to the next church in town.
We need to relate to people in a sustained way, and it will form in us the virtue of forgiveness. This is something that doesn't come easily. It's very easy to cut off connections with people.
It's very easy to avoid the sort of connections that might really impinge upon our will, that really might make us vulnerable to being wronged by others. But yet we're called to put ourselves in that position, and that's in part how we will learn what it means to forgive.
[8:02] We should remember that Jesus' teachings don't operate in isolation from each other. His earlier teaching about not wanting to be a stumbling block, and about the importance of humility, is still in play here.

What is our concern when someone sins against us? Is it primarily the assertion of our rights? Or are we concerned for the spiritual health of our brother, and the church of which we are both members?
Are we trying to restore peace and establish harmony between people? Or are we more concerned about ourselves and our own rights and entitlement from our brother?

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Are we concerned about restoring the lost sheep? Or, in this case, restoring the lost brother? And this is the concern that should be animating our practice at this point.
Jesus talks again about binding and loosing here, once again in reference to the church and the authority that's given to it. He declared a similar statement with Peter a few chapters earlier.
[9:01] God uses the words and actions of his people to affect his work in the world. This isn't an absolute power, a sort of blank check, that allows the church to act in whatever way it wants, with the assurance of complete divine backing.

No, the point is that Christ works authoritatively through his church, and that where his church is faithfully active, its words and actions can have the force of the proclamation of the words of Christ by his Spirit.
Peter's question to Christ that follows is perhaps one that reveals the hearts of many of us. How many times should I forgive my brother if he sins against me?
This is something that many of us have dealt with, people who have again and again sinned against us. And should it be up to seven times? Seven strikes and you're out?
Is there some sort of limit to this? And yet, Jesus says, up to 70 times seven. That's a strange number to give. Why that particular number? If we look back in the very early parts of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 4, there is a reference to 70 times seven.
[10:11] Lamech said to his wives, Ada and Zillah, hear my voice, you wives of Lamech. Listen to what I say. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.

If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is 77fold. So if Cain was seven times, then Lamech is 77fold.
This is the line of Cain. This is the line of the brother killer. And what Christ is calling Peter to be is the exact inverse of the line of the brother killer.
Rather, he is the one that seeks to win over his brother. If Cain is going to be avenged seven times and Lamech 77 times, then Peter is one who's going to be forgiving his brother, not just seven times, but 77 times.
He's going to express the inverse of vengeance in extreme forgiveness. But there's more going on here because in Daniel chapter 9, verse 24 following, God establishes his own pattern of forgiveness.
[11:21] Seventy weeks or 77s are decreed about your people and your holy city to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet and to anoint a most holy place.

God is going to forgive the sins of his people. He's going to restore them and he's going to do it after 77s. This is the time of restoration. It's the restoration from exile.
It's the year of the Lord's favour. Seventy times seven, 490. It's connected. It's a mega jubilee. Ten times that jubilee number, 77s.
God is restoring and forgiving and establishing his people after all that they have done, after all the ways that they have rejected and despised and mistreated him, in all the ways that they have turned their backs and gone to serve other gods, in all the ways that they have committed spiritual adultery, in the ways that they have mistreated their neighbours and despised the image of God in their brothers.
In all these ways that they have wronged him, God is going to restore them in 70 times seven and bring them to life in his presence. Now what Christ is teaching Peter, among other things, is that that must provide the paradigm for his exercise of forgiveness.
[12:47] Not the behaviour of Lamech, the descendant of the brother killer, who replaced the seven times of Cain's vengeance with 77 times of his own.

It's the inverse of that. And indeed it's the pattern that God himself has given. Seventy times seven. Peter then must extend the pattern of God's own forgiveness of his people to others.
And once we've appreciated this, Jesus' parable that he proceeds to give makes so much sense. Because God is the great king that has forgiven the incalculable debt that his people owe to him. He has given them that relief 70 times seven. And yet, there are so many of them who want to hold their rights against their neighbour, to insist upon getting their pound of flesh.
And God says that they're not to do that. Rather, they're to extend the forgiveness that he has given them to their neighbour. We are a people who are called to have a life founded upon and driven by forgiveness.

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[13:56] We don't seek our own rights, but seek to set things right. We seek to restore broken relationships, to win back the lost brother, rather than to assert our rights over him.

God makes us active participants in his giving and his forgiving. God, for instance, has given us the Holy Spirit. He gives the church the gift of the Holy Spirit.
But he gives each one of us, as members of the church, gifts of the Holy Spirit. The point is, that as we exercise our gifts, we're representing that one gift of the Holy Spirit.
And as I exercise my gifts and you exercise yours, we are giving to each other that one gift that Christ has given to his church. We are representing that thing that belongs to all of us.
God makes us active participants then, in his giving, and likewise in his forgiving. And those who resist this, cut themselves off from the grace that he's given us.
[14:59] As he gives us his Spirit, as he gives us his forgiveness, what he is doing is giving us the capacity to extend the same to others. To take the grace that has been given to us and show that grace to people who need it every bit as much as we do.

We are in a cycle of grace that has been opened up by the bountiful, liberal gift of God. A gift beyond all measure. A gift beyond all value or compare.
And we are called and privileged with the possibility of extending this, of being people who give to others what has been given to us. We are being given freely and bountifully.
And this blessing is so that we can give it to others. That we can share in that. That's the gift that we are being given. God does not just leave us as paupers who have been given some bounty that we can enjoy.
Rather, he has entrusted us with his gifts. That we might be those who extend gifts of forgiveness to others. We can proclaim God's forgiveness to others. It's one of the things that the Reformers recognized along with the church beyond the Reformers.
[16:11] The recognition that we can declare Christ's forgiveness to our neighbor. Christ has forgiven us and he calls us to be those who declare with the authority of Christ the forgiveness of all who truly repent.

That we might be sources of security and assurance for those people who have troubled consciences. That they come to God's throne and we can declare as people who act in Christ's name that they too are forgiven.
That he holds none of their sins against them. And this teaching concerning the unforgiving servant is the absolute inverse of what should characterize the church.
A question to consider. How does this teaching develop the earlier teaching concerning forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount?

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