



Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom? (Part 4)

Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom

Matthew 18:21-35

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Pastor Nick Shaffer

Introduction and Recap

The more I read the words of Matthew 18, the more I am struck by how much Jesus Christ loves His church, how much He loves His bride for which He died and how far we all have to go in loving His church in the same way. Here in Matthew 18 we hear the heart of Christ for the life of His church -- what life in the church should be like, how we should think about one another and act towards one another, how we should care for one another, how we should live together in community in a manner that displays and confirms the power of the gospel to save sinners and to transform the human heart. He is earnest and serious that we should together “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:1–3, ESV) That we would together “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (Colossians 1:10, ESV) This is Christ’s desire for His church on this earth and it all stems from, it all finds its root in the Father’s and the Son’s love for the church. Jesus wants us to love His church – not the institution – but the people in the same way that He does. In Matthew 18, Jesus paints a picture of what the church is to look like, a beautiful picture of a beautiful bride.

He tells us that His church is to be made up of humble, caring and gracious people. The church has no room for the prideful and arrogant, for the self-promoting, for those who scabble and scramble to have pre-eminence over others. No, His church is to be made up of those with a servant heart, who do not make much of themselves but make much of Christ and who count others more significant than themselves. The church is not composed of individuals who are self-contained (just me and Jesus), but instead is composed of people who really care for one another, whose lives are folded into one another, those who receive fellow brothers and sisters

with joy, who really care for one another knowing that how we receive one another is how we receive Christ. His church is to be composed of people who are watchful and vigilant, never to lead another brother or sister into sin, never to entice a fellow child of God, one of His little ones into sin and away from Christ because they know how much God loves each of His little ones and what a grave sin it is to cause their love for God to cool by leading one of his little ones into wrongdoing and transgression. Instead, the church is to be made up of people who are continually exhorting and encouraging and promoting greater faithfulness and love to Christ in each other. His church is to be made of faithful ones who fight and forsake sin out of love for God the Father and for Christ, but also out of love for His brothers and sisters in Christ, not wanting the consequences of his own personal sin to affect the corporate body but who instead wants to protect the purity of Christ's bride. Then as we saw last week, Jesus desires that his bride be composed of those who will be their brother's keeper, that His people would shepherd each other with love and mercy. He expects that His people, will in love, grace, humility and compassion, overlook lesser transgressions, but will, when necessary, confront another brother and sister who is in sin, with the desire not to get their pound of flesh or to make an example of them, but to turn them back to the way of life and love towards Christ, to rescue the straying brother. And Jesus expects that in the church, those who are His, when they are confronted with sin will respond in humility and in repentance and be restored to the flock because those who do not respond show that they never were Christ's at all.

Today, in this text, we are coming to the end of Christ's teaching in this chapter regarding life in His church. And the question that Peter asks comes as a natural response to Christ's instruction to pursue the sinner and bring him back to the fold and back in step with Christ and His church. Peter asks – "How many times do we do this?" What's the limit? How many times do we overlook lesser transgressions trusting Christ to deal with our brother or sister as He sanctifies them. How many times does someone sin against us or sin against the body – really against Christ's love ultimately – how many times do we keep pursuing someone, confronting them with the Word, they repent and we take them back as brother or sister in Christ?" That is the context here, okay? Keep this in context. The question is not about unbelievers who sin against us or about those who are unrepentant and show no fruit of repentance. He is talking about our brothers and sisters in the local church. In response to Peter's question, Jesus gives us a glimpse of divine arithmetic.

The Divine Arithmetic of Forgiveness (v. 21-22) Look at verses 21-22: "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?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."

(Matthew 18:21–22, ESV) As I said a minute ago, this is a perfectly logical question to ask. Peter’s offer of forgiveness up to seven times would have seemed very gracious to the other disciples. The rabbis, taking verses out of context from the book of Amos, taught that it was only necessary to forgive someone up to three times because that’s how God did it. So Peter doubles the rabbis’ requirements and adds one for good measure. Now, because it is Peter, we want to pile on right away, don’t we? But before we do that, ask yourself this question, when was the last time you consciously and completely forgave someone seven times? Peter asks this question in sincerity, really thinking that this is over and above. Jesus’ response must have thrown him for a loop.

“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” Some translate that as “seventy seven times”. It can be translated in either way, but an actual number is not the point. Jesus is not improving on Peter’s proposition; His point is that Peter is thinking in the wrong category. He is speaking from a perspective of law not grace, of justice not mercy, from legalistic obligation and gritted teeth and certainly not from love, which keeps no record of wrongs.

And it is spoken, quite honestly, out of ignorance of the greatness of the forgiveness which Christ will and now has extended to His disciples – to us, a forgiveness, not only for sins prior to salvation, but a forgiveness that Christ extends without measure every day of our lives as we still continue to sin being, as we are, not yet glorified. What Jesus wants Peter and all of the disciples – us too – to see is that mercy must be the motivating principle for all who have received mercy from God. Forgiveness springs forth from mercy – mercy received from God and mercy extended to the people of God. We are a people that have been constituted because of the mercy and forgiveness of God. Mercy is why we exist as a church. For that reason, mercy is to be the motivating principle of our lives. Mercy is not a commodity that can be weighed, measured, and counted as if it can be parceled out little by little up to a defined limit – like forgiving someone 7 times, for instance. It is wrong thinking and that is why Jesus says what He does. The spirit of genuine forgiveness knows no boundaries; it is a state of heart, not a matter of calculation. Mercy is not something we extend; merciful is what we are. It’s part of our spiritual DNA.

Paul speaks of this in very clear terms in Ephesians 4:32, saying: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32, ESV) The forgiveness that we extend to our brothers and sisters in Christ is to be rooted in the forgiveness that we have received from God in Christ.

In what manner did God forgive us?

He forgave us by taking upon Himself the destructive and painful consequences of our sin against him. To forgive us cost God deeply – it cost Him the sacrifice of His Son in our place and the pain of separation as He poured on Him the wrath which we deserved, His judgment poured out in full fury upon His son as He bled and died. He bore the pain of our sin in order to forgive us. Forgiveness is costly.

God forgave us in Christ by canceling the debt we owed him. We are no longer held liable for our sins or in any way made to pay for them. In the sacrifice of Christ, our sins and the debt that we owed God for them was fully cancelled. “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13–14, ESV)

God forgave us in Christ, graciously forgoing revenge and instead determining to do us good in Christ. God did not demand payment for our sin from us, but instead because of His great grace, He poured and continues to pour the riches of His grace upon us. Isn't that the heart of Ephesians 1, where we are called to worship and bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, because He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places: choosing us for salvation, adopting us as His children, making us holy and blameless, giving us an inheritance in heaven and sealing us – and all of this because of the redemption that we have received through Christ's blood, the forgiveness of sins.

God forgave us in Christ by reconciling us to himself, by restoring the relationship our sin had severed. True forgiveness pursues reconciliation. Romans 5 describes that: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” (Romans 5:8–11, ESV) We have been forgiven and reconciled to God the Father by the blood of Jesus' cross.

Reconciled – our enmity destroyed and the invitation extended to come into His presence and enjoy intimacy with Him .

God forgives us fully. 1 John 1:9 says: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9, ESV)

God remembers our sins against us no more. “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,” then he adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”” (Hebrews 10:14–17, ESV)

This is the kind of forgiveness that we have received as the children of God – mercy and forgiveness that should define our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. An unforgiving person demonstrates a thorough ignorance of the greatness of the forgiveness that the children of God enjoy from God through Christ.

So, in light of all of this, what does real forgiveness in the body of Christ look like? Well, true forgiveness is a forgiveness that is costly, that requires us to bear with one another and suffer some loss. It is forgiveness that sees the offending brother just as he was before he sinned, that sees him as forgiven the way that God sees him. It comes from a heart that refuses to dwell upon an offense or to regard the repentant brother or sister in light of the offense. True forgiveness cancels the debt of one who has sinned against us is by promising not to bring it up to the offender, to others, or to ourselves, to not hold a grudge, to not harbor bitterness and resentment. Real forgiveness resolves by the Spirit of Christ, never to throw the sin back into the face of the one who committed it, holding it over his or her head, using it to manipulate and shame him. Real forgiveness refuses to bring that offense up to others in an effort to chip away at someone’s reputation or to make ourselves look good. Real forgiveness determines never to bring it up to ourselves as justification for self-pity or to excuse resentment of the one who hurt us. Real forgiveness seeks restoration of intimacy and the renewal of trust and it deals a deathblow to bitterness and unrighteous anger. Forgiveness rejoices with God and seeks reconciliation, seeks unity and closeness again. It says to your brother “I love you and desire your spiritual good.” It is a matter of humility and love. Those who have been forgiven much,

loves much. Those who have received mercy are merciful and the merciful heart delights to forgive. Genuine forgiveness is supernatural and it is a work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart. It is the product of mercy received from God. It must define us as the people of God – we are to be a merciful forgiving people.

And Jesus drives this point home, like a hammer does a nail, through the story He tells next. It brings home, in vivid form, Christ's point and it serves as a perfect climax to this chapter regarding our relationships in the body of Christ. Look with me at

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (v. 23-35) Start in verse 23: "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." (Matthew 18:23–24, ESV) It is pretty easy to see that the king in this parable represents God. And this king, who represents God, is seeking to settle his accounts with his servants when one of his servants is brought to him who owes him 10,000 talents. Although the 10,000 talents in the parable is difficult to translate into today's currency, the talent was the largest monetary unit in the Roman Empire, and "ten thousand" was the largest number for which the Greek language had a specific word (*murioi*, *myriads*). By combining the largest denomination of currency with the largest number, Christ is hyperbolically indicating an astronomical sum that was completely beyond the servant's ability to repay. That is the whole point. It is an inestimable amount. This man had been given a loan and squandered it all.

Can you see yourself here? We are the servant who owed the insurmountable debt. Our rebellion, our selfish acts, our willful choices, our pride, our lovelessness toward others, our godlessness – living as if God does not exist, the hurt we have caused others deliberately, our anger, our lust, our bitterness, our lies, every sin that we have committed against God's glory, against God's holiness, against God's righteousness and love – it all adds up to a staggering debt to God that we have no power, no resources to pay. What could we offer to God – all of our righteousness is as filthy rags. There is only one currency that will suffice and we do not have it. This servant is us and he is called to make restitution to the king and he cannot. And verse 25 says:

“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.” (Matthew 18:25, ESV) That’s the demand of justice. That is the demand of the law apart from mercy. There is no way that the man and his family could ever pay back the debt, but this is the fate, the judgment, and the punishment that he deserved. It is the punishment we deserve – eternal hell and even given all of eternity we could not pay the debt of our sin.

“So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ” (Matthew 18:26, ESV) In desperation, the debtor makes a promise he cannot keep- just give me more time and I will pay the debt. This promise is pitifully untrue isn’t it, as threadbare as any promise or offer of repayment that we could make to God. The debt is astronomical. In this parable it is 1000 times the annual revenue of Galilee, Judea, Samaria, and Idumea combined. Totally beyond imagining. Still he begs for the opportunity and what happens is astonishing.

“And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.” (Matthew 18:27, ESV) The king does not agree to give him time to pull himself up by his bootstraps, does not give him a payment plan. The king completely and fully forgives this servant of the entire debt. All of it. The debt is cancelled. The only motivation for such an incredible act is mercy...true mercy. It is an astonishing act of mercy. This is a costly mercy. The king forgives the debt but it costs him to do so. Do you see? It is not that the debt just magically disappears. Someone has to take responsibility for the debt, someone has to bear the cost for the king to forgive and that someone is king himself.

The parallel is obvious. Moved by compassion, acting in great mercy, the holy God has drawn near to us and though our spiritual debt of sin left us with an eternal punishment of divine wrath – the wages of sin is death – God did not merely ignore our debt and strike it from the books. He sent His own Son to pay the debt in full – the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23, ESV). It is absolutely fitting that Christ would cry from the cross “Tetelestai” -- “It is finished, paid in full.” Because that is exactly what He did. Christ mercifully paid our insurmountable debt in full with His own blood --- the only sufficient payment, the only sufficient currency to pay our debt, not out of obligation but out of mercy. It’s astonishing grace.

In this parable, against all expectation, the king forgives him freely and grants him mercy. And now comes the mind-boggling part of the story, verses 28-30 – “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.” (Matthew 18:28–30, ESV) You feel it, don’t you beloved? You instinctively get it, don’t you? How in the world could this man do such a thing, this man who had been the recipient of such mercy, this man who had received his life back from the brink of destruction, this man who owed a debt that 600,000 times greater than this man’s debt to him, a debt that by comparison was a mere pittance – how could he act in such an unmerciful manner? The man who owed him money, he uses the exact same words that he, himself had used with the king --‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ” But the connection and implication were completely overlooked. He threw this man into prison until he could pay all he owed. The king’s mercy did not create mercy in him. He is merciless. It makes you sick, it makes you angry and it is supposed to. That’s the point. You would think that one so forgiven, one who has been shown such great mercy and kindness would be filled with such gratitude and awe that the most natural thing for him to do would be to be merciful and forgive others. The unimaginable size of the original debt that was forgiven – the ten thousand talents – makes unthinkable that the smaller debt should not be willingly, promptly and cheerfully forgiven. A man shown so much mercy should be the first to extend mercy to others.

What is wrong with this guy? Clearly he is oblivious to his own debt. He does not feel the weight of his own debt, his own sin. He is oblivious to the debt that was assumed by the king in order to forgive him. He clearly has no real sense of gratitude for the mercy of the king. He did not realize how little he deserved the king’s kindness, how much he deserved destruction. He is a fool. It is troubling and it is meant to be. We know instinctively that someone who has been shown such mercy should himself show mercy – it is obvious in this story. We act like this man, this foolish man, when we refuse to forgive debtors, fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, their sins against us. Mercy must change us. We know this kind of a response is wicked and so do the fellows servants of this master.

“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. 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.” (Matthew 18:31–34, ESV)

I want you to see something here. This master did not call him a wicked servant when he owed him the ten thousand talents, but he does call him a wicked servant for such harsh and cruel treatment toward his fellow servant. It is a profoundly wicked thing for us to have received God’s merciful and gracious forgiveness of our sins and then to withhold forgiveness from those who sin against us. The king expected him to show mercy! And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you – he asks. That means literally “was this not your lasting obligation?” It was this man’s duty not only to be filled with unceasing gratitude, but also to let his master’s mercy of which he had been the recipient be the pattern of his own conduct toward others. That’s the point. The one who has received mercy and knows it freely gives mercy. You can understand the king’s fury, his anger and his punishment of this man. He cast him in jail forever – there was never any way that he could pay this debt.

This is how vile unforgiveness is to God. Think about it. Jesus surrendered His life in order to pay for your sins and to grant you forgiveness before the infinitely holy God and you cannot forgive a fellow sinner for his or her sin against a wretch like you. That is the height of arrogance, wickedness and pride. It is such ignorance of your own sinfulness and the mercy that God has given to you. Unforgiveness in the church, in the bride of Christ, in His people, in us is a deadly thing and it exists all too often. It has severe spiritual consequences. It strangles our fellowship with God, cuts us off from other people, creates division and turmoil, it tarnishes the church’s testimony, makes our souls a wasteland and deafens us to the Word of God and, quite frankly, God hates it.

Oh beloved, get the point that Jesus wants us to get here – We are a company, a family of forgiven sinners, made brothers and sisters by the blood of Christ. It is not too much for God to command, for God to expect – indeed it makes complete sense to us – that we who have been forgiven would forgive in return. What we owed God, our offenses before Him are infinitely more than what any man or woman could owe us for the sins that they have committed against us. In comparison to our sins against a holy God, they are trivial. If I know the greatness of what I have been forgiven, the greatness of the mercy that I have been given – I must forgive my brothers and sisters in Christ. Christians should be marked as forgiving people because we have been forgiven like no one else on the face of the earth. Forgiveness is essential to the church and to unity with other believers. In fact, it is the key to love and to all meaningful relationships. Only forgiveness can destroy the barriers that sin erects between people.

Look, relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ can be messy. We see each other at our best and worst. The more we are together, the more life we share, the more love and laughter we enjoy. But it also means more opportunity for offense and hurt feelings. We sin against each other –we do. But we must forgive. It is right in the light of the mercy that we have received. The mercy that we have received is what makes it possible for us to forgive other people when it is painful and hard to do so. It is the realization of just how much God has forgiven us that makes us able to act in mercy and grant costly forgiveness to our brothers and sisters in Christ who themselves have been forgiven by God.

How foolish to refuse to forgive someone whom Christ has forgiven. How foolish to demand payment for a sin that Christ has already paid for. How can someone receive God's mercy for all of his sin, an unpayable debt, and then not forgive someone else. It is arrogant and foolish because it sets you up as God, sets you up as the authority. Unforgiveness toward a brother or sister in Christ says, "I do not believe the price that Christ paid was enough to cover your transgression against me. I demand more. My glory is greater than the Father's. My glory is greater than the Son's. I demand a greater payment than blood" – for a transgression that is primarily against God – not you, God. What exactly would that be? That kind of thought is to set yourself up as God. Jesus cannot conceive of that. There's only room for one God in the Kingdom of Heaven. That's why He says in verse 35: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.'" (Matthew 18:35, ESV)

What does that mean? Does that mean that God will revoke our salvation if we fail to forgive? Is that what Jesus is saying? We know the full counsel of God. We know that is not what Jesus is saying – we don't earn salvation by our works and we do not lose our salvation because of sins that we commit – salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. What Jesus is getting at is this. We must forgive one another from the heart, from a heart of mercy, no counting up and no measuring involved. If you refuse to forgive another brother or sister in Christ, God will discipline you and strongly – you can count on it – until you repent and extend forgiveness. But even more than that, if you can remain in an unforgiving state, if unforgiveness marks you, if you can continue with a hardened heart toward a child of God and refuse to forgive, it can only be because you have not yourself received the grace of God and remain unforgiven. You are lost! Just like the proud and the unrepentant, the grudge holders -- those who will not forgive, those who keep a record of wrongs, those who harbor bitterness, those who refuse to forgive from the heart -- have no part in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Robert Rayburn offers this insight that I think is so right on the money. He says: It is easy to believe that you believe in the forgiveness of sins. But there is a way to test your belief, to tell whether you really grasp the concept, the reality, the power, the glory of divine forgiveness. There is a way to know whether your belief in forgiveness is merely intellectual or is the very substance of your faith. And that way, Jesus said, is to look to the way in which you forgive others. Is your forgiveness willing, cheerful, ready, heart-felt, ungrudging, and even grateful. That is, are you even glad that you have the opportunity to forgive a wrong, because to forgive another is the very best way to love God for his forgiving you and to prove that you understand, really understand what he has done for you in canceling your enormous debt.

Forgiveness is so important. It is the central to the heart of God and must be central to His people as well. God desires us to be a forgiven and a forgiving people, a family united to Him by cords of eternal, steadfast love and by great mercies and united to one another by cords of eternal, steadfast love and great mercies. These last words, from Jesus in Matthew 18 just fit.

What Matthew 18 Means For Us

Oh beloved, what a church this would be if we followed Matthew 18. Now, don't get me wrong. I love you. I love this church more than I have ever loved any church my whole life. This is a good church. We love the Word of God. We delight in the gospel. We love Christ and desire to be obedient to God. We long for God's glory to be revealed in us. We worship from the heart, in spirit and in truth. We know the depths of sin from which we have been plucked. We are not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is a real church. We aren't perfect. We have a lot of areas to grow. And that's why I am saying to you these words this morning. What a church this would be if in every way, the instructions of Matthew 18 defined our fellowship and shaped the love that we have for one another. What a church this would be if we were not concerned to make much of ourselves but instead were humbled by our sinfulness and in humility loved Christ supremely, with a love flowing from the a heart that knows the depth of His grace and mercy to us. What a church we would be if, in love, we did not seek to exalt ourselves above one another or seek to make much of ourselves but instead we counted others more significant than ourselves and we truly received one another, knowing that we are all sinners saved by grace. What if we truly received one another and invested our live in one another and folded our lives into one another and loved one another – not envying or boasting,

not arrogant or rude, not irritable, not resentful, not rejoicing in sin, but in patience and kindness we rejoiced in the truth, trusted one another, hoped and endured together until we see Jesus face to face. What if, out of love, we were so careful not to lead one of our brothers and sisters in Christ into sin but even more than that were intent on pointing them to Jesus and seeing them grow in the Lord. What if, out of love for Christ and for His people and for the sake of the church, we fought sin with every means of grace that God has given and sought to put sin to death. What if, we lovingly and graciously confronted sin in each other's lives – not to get our pound of flesh, not to prove our point but because we wanted to win our brother and protect one another from straying. What if, in humility, we were open to correction and embraced it as an act of love and care? What if, out of love, we really did forgive one another from the heart, giving to each other grace in the same measure that we have been given, delighting to show mercy to one another and living with one another in true peace? It would be like the Kingdom of Heaven breaking forth on this earth wouldn't it? A little slice of heaven here on earth. It is what the church is supposed to be. And that is why I pray, "Christ let your kingdom come – here. Right here!"

I am pleading with you to join me in that prayer.

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