

The Twelve | Enrolled in the School of Jesus (C)

Relational Hygiene in the Church

Matthew 18.15-35

February 28, 2021

"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶ "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. ¹⁷ "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. ¹⁸ "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. ²⁰ "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."

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

²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ "When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ "But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. ²⁶ "So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' ²⁷ "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ "But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' ²⁹ "So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' ³⁰ "But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. ³¹ "So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. ³² "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. ³⁵ "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Today is the final sermon in a series on why and how Jesus Christ trained the Twelve disciples. We've looked at it between Christmas and Easter (2019, 2020, 2021).

Next week, Phil is slated to talk about discipleship from St Paul's perspective (my girlfriend and I plan to be away to celebrate 35 years of marriage!) and then we hope to look at the Passion of Jesus Christ from John's Gospel, CHs 18-19 (if you'd like to read ahead).

Today, we find the Teacher instructing His students about the nature of His new society, His movement and how it would look in all the different places and cultures where it would spring up throughout the world in these little/big groupings called churches.

HIS community – will be holy. He died to make us holy AND it will be a community of mercy and forgiveness. The question is: HOW to have both?

In bars there's a lot of forgiveness/acceptance but maybe not too much holiness or moral excellence. And in religions a big stress on moral excellence and commitment to holiness/standards and accountability but maybe not so much acceptance/forgiveness.

In bars, if someone rubs you the wrong way or puts demands on you – you just move your seat or find a new bar. In religious communities, when you don't meet the demands, you hide/deny your flaws. "Beware the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy." (Luke 12.1)

Is it possible that we can have both: a community where there's both holiness (pursuit of moral good) AND acceptance, forgiveness and mercy?

- Let's look at: 1) NEW Family Values**
2) Community Re-Imagined
3) A NEW Way of Doing Community

This chapter begins with "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'" (18.1) They're clinging to old, typical, religious competition (it's all they've ever known).

Then Jesus calls a little child and says, "Become little like this child (lowly)... AND don't make one of these weak/needy types stumble. Be tender with the weak."

Then Jesus gives that little parable about the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep in order to find the one that strayed and is in danger. AND THEN immediately He says, "If your brother sins go and show him his fault in private..."

The Lord of the Church is telling us that the church is NOT basically a religion or a bar or a resort or a club or a hospital or a sports team/army – it's a family.

"If your brother sins...": not if your "fellow customer or client or even teammate or buddy"... "Brother."

And while people in our own time and place call for a return to "family values" by which, I guess they mean Honesty, Responsibility, Respect, Chastity, Hard Work, Community Involvement,

Tradition (all of which are great) but THE family value Jesus has in mind (tracing the flow of the whole discussion) is mercy.

If he stumbles...if he's weak/needy like a child...if he's immature or straying like a sheep... if he's really offended you: remember, he's your brother and he needs MERCY. So, before you file a report or go to the HR department or tell other people or post some sort of veiled reference on social media – “go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.” And that's at least ONE goal: win or regain or recover your family member.

It's not to WIN over those who might join you in being incensed and offended and who will reinforce YOUR rights – the goal is to win the family member and to regain relationship.

And IF and WHEN you go to your family member in a private, winsome way (going to WIN her) AND with the express desire of restoring that kind of warm, close, open, honest, comfortable familiarity that you once had BUT IF YOU CAN'T WIN HIM/HER – THEN (only after you go in private as a brother or sister) THEN get some help: “if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. (Mat 18.16; Deut 19.15).

The other witnesses – also, coming to WIN the brother – may find that YOU are the problem or may be able to mediate or communicate like Nathan did with King David... OR... this tear in the familial fabric may be worse than we knew... Maybe, the offender doesn't see how believing the gospel isn't consistent with her pattern of sin and she refuses to listen.

In that case, don't throw her away – but continue the effort at winning her/him: call the leaders of the local church to reason with this brother – it's like using the defibrillator (it's shocking and kind of extreme) but if he still resolutely refuses to listen... then there should be some acknowledgment that “sister so-and-so” doesn't see herself as a part of this family... So, treat her like you would an outsider and that means “continue your attempts to win her/him” because that's what we do with the unchurched – we try to serve them and win them to the gospel.

And Jesus is telling the Apostles, wherever two or three of you supervise this process OR wherever future church leaders follow you in this process, God will sanction the proceedings. I, the Head of the Church, Jesus, the Messiah am IN THE PROCESS of seeking the weak, the lost, the straying and sinful. But I'm NOT going to be IN IT if we just write people off and “live and let live.” That may be tolerance but it's not love – in fact it's often just apathy.

Then Peter, always looking to quantify the exact demands so he can DO IT (just DO it!), Peter asks, “How often should we forgive? ‘Seven times like the rabbis say?’ Jesus answers, “no limits” (“70 x 7”).

Then the Teacher illustrates with a parable: a man owes a king 10,000 talents. Scholars say that's somewhere between a million and a trillion. The more exact amount is what we call, "a ZILLION". (One trillion seconds is 31,000 years – just for some perspective!)

And the debtor can't repay so he has to go into "debtors' prison" along with his wife/kids. Everything is liquidated. But the man pleads with the king, falls on the ground and begs for more time and the king "FELT COMPASSION" and released the big debtor and forgave him.

THEN the BIG debtor is so relieved and so carefree and so overjoyed and ecstatic and jubilant that when he runs into a fellow slave who owes him a few thousand bucks, he tells the guy, "Hey! Don't look away when I'm coming down the sidewalk – I've been forgiven AN IMMENSE DEBT and now it's easy for me to forgive this little debt – you're free! Let's go get lunch – it's on me!"

Nope. He felt sorry for himself and blamed his gross mismanagement on people who owed him money (even though a few thousand dollars was NOT the problem – totally illogical!) SO, he chokes this fellow servant and threatens him. He's deaf to his pleas for patience and UNWILLING to listen and he has the fellow servant thrown into debtor's prison.

But he was caught on a security camera and when the king looks at the recording he has the Big Debtor thrown in prison – handed over to the torturers.

And Jesus closes this absurd parable (which would never really happen in real life!) with the words: "So will My heavenly Father do to everyone who does not forgive his brother FROM THE HEART."

Our friend Tim Keller always talks about how forgiveness is never free. Someone always pays.

You see the repetition of the words, (vv. 24-30) "Repay, repayment, owed, debt". See, if you forgive someone and then that person's name comes up in conversation – you'll feel a burning desire to let it be known that he once hurt you (even if you just roll your eyes or make an expression). But if you resist the eye-roll or resist that torturous desire to "out" the person – that sense of self-denial is YOU paying for that person's offense.

And IN this parable – when the King forgives the ONE ZILLION dollar debt – it doesn't just go away – the King absorbs it. The King pays. That's what the gospel IS: the Story of the King paying the enormous debt of sin that debtors have incurred. The books have to be balanced and someone has to pay – and Jesus Christ lived under the Law and obeyed IN MY PLACE and DIED UNDER THE SENTENCE I DESERVED; He was handed over to the torturers for ME.

And when I see that and when it's vivid to me BY FAITH – when I feel the relief of knowing that a debt I could NEVER REPAY – a debt that causes me to be weighed down and always preoccupied

and regretful and afraid – when that inestimable burden is lifted – I can only feel such relief, liberation, comfort, rest and JOY that IT HAS TO OVERFLOW INTO MY RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS.

That's one of the main benefits of believing the Gospel – I see God as a merciful, King and Father who at His own expense (someone always pays!) He sacrifices His Beloved Son to make ME (a wasteful irresponsible, squandering debtor) into a child, a son. I see God as merciful (Mercy is His darling attribute!)

I see myself as a bigger sinner than I thought I was: “My debt is WHAT? I mean, I never thought I was perfect - I mean who's perfect? I know I sinned a few times but... did You say ‘A Zillion’ – how's THAT possible?”

But the Gospel shows me how great is my debt by giving me a vision of what it cost to repay it!

And I see others in a new way too! I always thought YOU were a lot worse than I am – you're a BIG, BIG SINNER and I'm a little sinner. But NOW I see that I'M the BIG SINNER – “I am”, said St. Paul, “the biggest sinner I know!”: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.” (1Ti 1.15)

Whatever terrible things people have done to me (and I don't want to discount or minimize what you've been through – some people have suffered profoundly at the hands of others!) but even the worst offences against people don't compare to our failings to do God's good will.

The community Jesus Christ is building is one where holiness and love coexist BECAUSE the members of the community see God, others and themselves in a new way.

We know overwhelming relief and freedom and forgiveness so we can hate sin (in others AND MAINLY in ourselves because sin ruins life) and we can offer fellow weaklings (needy like children) we can want to win people and extend them the same mercy that's been extended to us AND TRULY HOPE that our family will help one another to live in the freedom Christ has purchased for us.

It's community reimagined: more accepting/open and honest than the BAR and more holy, committed and loving than the MONASTERY.

I'll close with a few ideas (7) on how that dynamic might actually play out:

- 1) Spend more time thinking about God's debt-relief program toward YOU. Think about the Gospel. Sing about it. Pray about it. Repent and believe it as much and as often as possible. ONLY THE GOSPEL CAN GIVE YOU THIS NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT GOD, others and yourself.

2) See the Church as God's new alternative community in the world. Paul said of the Church, "it's the mystery, which for ages has been hidden in God...but is now revealed in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places." (Eph 3.9-10)

The Church is God's answer for the world. So join a church. If you're not a member of a church, you're an un-churched person... This crucially important peace-making process can't take place in your life. I know that sounds blunt in our individualistic world but it's God's gift to us and we should not refuse it.

3) If you stay aloof from people – like we do from distant relatives, church life will be nice, safe and mostly ineffective as a tool for your growth. If you really get involved as family members – the church will sometimes be a struggle and immensely beneficial.

4) If people offend you, go to them in private. If someone tells you how she/he was offended by so-and-so, then say, as tactfully and firmly as possible, "I think you should go to him in private."

5) Give people the benefit of the doubt. Avoid being self-pitying and hypersensitivity. We're all prone to it and it's a community-killer (read the article in bulletin!)

6) Forgiving doesn't always mean forgetting. If someone has been abusive to you and you forgive them (as you must) it doesn't mean you need to let them abuse you again and again. (I can tell you more about that and suggest some good reading.)

7) The bottom line, last words, "if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." This goes beyond a behavioral checklist approach (do these 3 steps or forgive 490x) – it involves the heart, feelings, emotions, motives, desires and only the Holy Spirit can get into our hearts. So look to what Jesus has done for you (enjoy your forgiveness!) and trust the Spirit to give you the desire/motives to forgive from the heart.