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# Kingdom Relationships

Matthew 18:15-34

*Russ Kennedy*

God's people are going to sin against one another. This is simply a fact. We live in a fallen world with sin remaining in us and fleshly thinking still affecting our hearts. Sin will sometimes break relationships. This happens in church, in ministry and more often, happens in homes. The Bible recognizes that sinning against one another will need some guide as to how to deal with sin and be reconciled.

The driving idea in kingdom relationships is forgiveness and reconciliation as forgiven people. The Bible calls for and commands that broken relationships among God's people be dealt with. Jesus is going to set this agenda and its process and authorities in these paragraphs.

This is not going to be a sermon about church discipline. This text provides a general framework which we use to establish how we confront people who are sinning. That is present in the text. It is not the point of the text. It is not what the text is about. Do you understand the difference? There are things in many texts that can be observed. But they are not necessarily what the text is about. This text has a required process for dealing with relationship-breaking sin – but it is about something else. This text is about forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration.

## Dealing with Relational Sins (v.15-20)

Christians are supposed to deal with relational sins.

<sup>15</sup> "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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

### *Its Purpose (v.15)*

This is to "gain" your brother. It is in the hope that the brother or sister will listen. It is aimed at restoring a relationship broken by sin. Reconciliation and restoration are the stated and intended aims.

This is how we are to deal with sin between believers. Sin between or against believers is not to be ignored, swept under the rug, passed over. It is to be dealt with. Broken relationships in the church, between Christians are to be addressed.

### ***Its Limitation (v.15)***

At least in this text, there is a limited engagement. This contributes to the Bible literature on this process. It is not comprehensive. Notice the scope:

This is to take place between believers. While it may work in the world, it is an “in the church, between believers” sphere and scope.

This involves sin, not wisdom issues. Disagreement over wisdom issues may lead to sin. This often happens when someone will not accept decisions by people in authority (husbands, elders, ministry leaders). It may lead to relational sin that needs to be addressed. What is in view here is when we sin against one another.

This is not just any sin. This is relational sin. It is what one does against another. In this text, it is not that we see another Christian sin. It is that the Christian has committed a sin against us. This narrows the scope quite a lot.

Further, this sin has broken the relationship. This is not a sin we can overlook, commit to the Lord or allow the Lord to settle. This is a sin that has caused a breach, a break in the relationship. The Christians are no longer speaking to one another, avoiding one another, or working against each other. Affection for one another and attention to one another’s needs and interest has been snuffed out by the sin against one another.

This is not being on a sin hunt. This is not people prying into one another’s lives seeking to find sin. Sometimes Christians think they are responsible to keep other people right with God. Too often this is not loving concern; it is simply being a busybody.

It is not disagreements over wisdom issues. It is wrong to break relationships over issues of liberty. There is to be a poise to accept, to accommodate others on wisdom issues. We have this so wrong so often! May I say it clearly and plainly? Do not break a relationship with another believer over liberty and wisdom issues. Period.

### ***Its Engagement (v.15-17)***

There is a step-by-step process by which we are to work to restore broken relationships. The Bible does not specify how long for each step, how many times you repeat the first two steps. Yet each step is commanded. If a Christian sins against you in way that breaks your relationship, *this is what you must do*. It is not an *option* that is open to you. Restoring broken relationships in the church is so important that the Lord through Matthew commands this of each one of us.

Each step in this engagement:

Is intended to gain the other believer, hoping that they will listen. This simply means that believers are to be poised to listen and respond with humble acknowledgment. Obedience means that we deal with broken relationships.

Goes to the next step when the person will not listen in a way that brings repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Brings more and more helpers into the situation, involving more and more people.

Brings more and more pressure on the person who will not listen and will not repent. That is what it is supposed to do.

Is moving ultimately to a determination as to whether the sinning person is a recipient or not of the grace of repentance and therefore is a true believer. All of the discipline texts assume that it is God who grants repentance and so when God withholds that grace, He is doing so to expose the unbeliever.

What are the steps in this engagement?

<sup>15</sup> "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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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.

### **Private confrontation**

Go to the person who sinned against you and talk through the issue. This discussion may take place over time and may require more than one effort. The aim is prayerfully, humbly seek to be restored. What a blessing when this step results in the relationship being restored and the believer gained.

### **Assisted confrontation**

If the person will not listen with a poise to respond, then you are to get two trustworthy, mature believers who will come with you. They are primarily to function as witnesses. They will affirm that the charge is accurate, has been clearly conveyed, appeal to the person to listen and then be witnesses of whatever the person does.

### **To the church**

At the Chapel, we have chosen to divide this next step into two sub steps. This is merely what we do as a wisdom application of the command. Others do it differently. That is fine.

#### **Get the Elders involved...**

We encourage you to get your flock elders involved. They will listen to the issue, talk with the witnesses and then go with you to try to help resolve

the issue. They will provide Biblical guidance and possibly an authoritative call to respond.

### **Get the church involved...**

If the person still will not listen, then the church is informed and instructed, as they are able, to talk to the person. By this step, there should be no question as to the person's sin and their unwillingness to listen, repent and be reconciled.

The aim of this is hopefully that the Lord will grant repentance through the ministry of the body. This step also reminds the church about the importance of dealing with sin and with broken relationships.

### **Removal to be treated as an unbeliever**

If the person will not listen to the church, then the person is to be treated as being outside the faith. Now we want to be careful here. Jesus is using terms familiar to the Jewish men He is talking to. Matthew uses them to help the church think about what it is doing.

- The person is to be treated as an unbeliever. The church is not declaring them to be an unbeliever. They are to be treated as outside the faith.
- The underlying assumption is that God will grant repentance to a believer. Since the person is unrepentant, then they are to be treated as outside the faith.
- Since we believe that only believers should be members of the church, they are removed from membership because they are being treated as an unbeliever.

What Jesus and Matthew are outlining here assumes:

That we value not allowing sin to break relationships.

That we are committed to do what the Bible says. All of these verbs are *commands*.

That we are committed to confessing our sins.

*There is a Biblical process to deal with relational sins that aims at reconciliation but may end in removal from membership.*

### ***Its Authority (v.18-20)***

<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

Notice that these verses are in the context of responding to unresolved conflict rooted in unrepented sin. The response of the elders and the church is one that is authorized by the Lord. He has given the authority to make binding decisions on earth that has

the authority of heaven. This makes what is done a very serious matter. It is not to be pursued lightly.

Now, verses 19-20 are often misused and abused. This has nothing to do with either getting people to agree with you in prayer so as to bind God. This is not about prayer in and of itself. These verses are about the presence of God in His gathered church where the church is making a decision that is binding on all. It is in this context that the prayer, the request to God is that God will be pleased to grant repentance and if not, that we will accept what this indicates.

How do I know that verses 19-20 are talking about verse 18? The sentence begins with "Again". In other words, what Jesus has just said in verse 18 is going to be said again, just expanded and explained. It functions as, "I told you about binding on earth and heaven. I am going to say it again, but in a more practical visible way. Here is what I mean by that..." That is what I think Jesus is doing here.

Then the church meets to deal with an unrepentant person, its decisions are binding because Jesus has authorized those decisions and is present in those kinds of gatherings. The two or three here are likely the witnesses with the person who was sinned against. They have agreed that the person has sinned and is unwilling to listen.

*We must so value our Christian relationships that we will deal with relationship breaking sins.*

## **Responding to Repeated Sins (v.21-22)**

Ok, now comes the question that we get asked all the time.

<sup>21</sup> 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?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

### ***Its Fleshly Response (v.21)***

How do we evaluate Peter's question? In the light of how Jesus responds to it, this seems to be what is going on in Peter's heart. Now, frankly, it goes on in the heart of most people.

### **Concerned**

Peter, in all that was just said, is concerned about how often a repenting person is to be forgiven. He is not poised to rejoice that the person repented. He has a mental golf counter in his head and is counting strokes. Peter is wanting to be the repentance police. At what point does the person commit the sin and repent over and over again and now we don't have to forgive because the repentance is fake.

I am sorry to have to tell you this. But that is wrong thinking and is not Biblical. Please don't quote John the Baptist to me: he was dealing with fake professions of faith by legalistic religious leaders. He was not dealing with believers who struggle with sinning but are granted the grace of repentance. So, all of you who are repentance police, you can turn in your badges at the end of the gathering.

## **Carnal**

This is not spiritual thinking. This is carnal, fleshly, of the world attitudes. It locates the issue, the question with what I am required to do. Do I *have to keep forgiving*? A spiritual, Christ-like attitude is poised, leaning into people, ready, eager to keep on forgiving.

## **Calculating**

This attitude assumes there is a standard, a threshold beyond which forgiveness is not needed. At what point is a person no longer required to forgive *even if the person is repenting*.

## **Counting**

This attitude is counting the **sins** not counting the **repentances**. It is clearly counting the wrong thing. To make it worse, it is very low number. What is being counted? Look at it. It is not a single sin, often repeated. It is just counting the number of times that the person sins against me and it could be in number of different ways.

## **Consequential**

It has a very difficult consequence. Is Peter saying that after a person sins against me 7 times, that I no longer have to forgive the person even if they are repentant? What does that mean? How would that work in long-term Christian marriages, ministries, or relationships? Isn't this just the opposite of the reason that we do confront one another? Isn't the whole point of this text about **forgiveness**?

## ***Its Spiritual Poise (v.22)***

Jesus' response is a sharp rebuke of Peter's attitude. "I do not say..." sounds as if what Peter said was an affront. Jesus' first responds with an ironic command. We are to forgive as often as we are sinned against. You see if you are counting, even to 490 (70 times 7), then you have it all wrong.

*We are to forgive as often as a person sins against us and repents.*

## **Understanding our Forgiven Status (v.23-34)**

Why should we do that? Why should we forgive someone every time they sin against us and repent of that sin?

<sup>23</sup> "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

What a galvanizing illustration. Notice two things that help us see what Jesus is doing:

Jesus makes a *connection* - "Therefore... " Jesus' story is directly connected to Peter's concern about how often we are to forgive. It is shaming us for our attitude.

Jesus is drawing *comparison* - This is the way the kingdom works. Kingdom people need to know and appreciate something very, very important that will radically affect their relationships.

### ***A Forgiving Master (v.23-27)***

A master has decided to collect on debts owed him and settle accounts. He calls in his servants who owe him. What this servant owes is simply impossible to repay. It is a ridiculous amount of money that makes you wonder how he got into this trouble to begin with. No amount of patience on the part of the master is going to help this man.

In response to the servant's appeal, the master simply forgives the debt. It is out of pity for the man. The master well knows that the man owes what he cannot possibly pay. His heart is moved. The man seems to be in earnest. He wants to repay. But the resolution is in an unmerited, unearned, and even, undeserved forgiveness.

It is sheer generosity, grace, mercy on the part of the master. The servant leaves, his burden lifted, his debt paid. He is free.

### ***An Unforgiving Servant (v.28-30)***

<sup>28</sup> 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.' <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

In an astonishing turn the forgiven servant goes out and finds someone, another servant like himself, who owes him about 1/3 of a year's wages. It is a lot of money, but a fraction of what he owed. He demands repayment, even resorting to physical force. Ignoring the pleas of the debtor, he threw him into prison until the debt should be paid.

It is a real cringe worthy response. We are all wanting to shout at him. Peter and the disciples are surely shuffling their feet, looking anywhere but at Jesus. It is a shocking response. It is almost beyond comprehension. How can he possibly do this given what the master has done for him?

Exactly. And this is Jesus' point. How could we, who have been forgiven so much by God, then not be poised to forgive those who send against us? We owed a debt to God we could not possibly pay. God, in Christ, has forgiven us, not only our past sins, but all the sins we will ever commit. Jerry Bridges talks about the great weight of our sins against God against the light weight of other's sins against us.

Here is where we need to think carefully, even in how we approach and execute church discipline. We are not ever punishing. That is God's role. We are responding

to the person being treated as an unbeliever. But we need a deep grief at that point and grace to understand the great weight of our own sins against God and the relatively light weight of the other persons sins against us.

### ***A Just Consequence (v.31-33)***

<sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.

Notice that even in Jesus' illustration, there is a corporate aspect. The other servants get involved and report the misdeed to the master. The unjust servant is brought in for an accounting. He is a wicked servant. He is not merely unwise. He is not merely hardhearted. He is unjust and wicked.

The master speaks for the Lord. "Having been shown great mercy, why would you not show mercy to others?" This is the pointed, powerful, convicting word to us.

*Forgiving others is the overflow of God's mercy to us showing mercy to others.*

But there are consequences. The unforgiving person may be an unforgiven person. Jesus' warning here is very pointed. This is simply another way of what Jesus taught them in the Lord's prayer. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Not showing the mercy of forgiving repeated sins and repenting people will bring great chastening from the Lord.

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## **Reflect and Respond**

What have we learned from this about our Christian relationships?

There is a Biblical process to deal with relational sins that aims at reconciliation but may end in removal from membership.

We must so value our Christian relationships that we will deal with relationship breaking sins.

We are to forgive as often as a person sins against us and repents.

Forgiving others is the overflow of God's mercy to us showing mercy to others.

To refuse to forgive a repenting person is unjust and wicked.

How do you know what forgiveness means? Briefly, this is Biblical forgiveness:

You will not hold the charge against them.

You will not continue to reflect on, think about, mull over (pick your verbs) about their sin.

You will not talk about their sin to others.

You will take the initiative to seek to be reconciled and to restore your relationship.

May God grant us, His forgiven people, the grace to forgive others.