

Matthew 18:21-35 | David Vinyard

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Date: 15 December 2024

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[0:00] Good morning. Glad you guys are here. Glad we made it. Oh, I can't believe it's already mid-December, honestly. It feels like this year is flying by a bit.

But it's going to be a Christmas season. Even though we've had some rain, had some gray, I'll take it. Another year passed, you know. Jeff noted last week, he started his message by saying something to the effect of, you don't get to often choose your topic of the sermon.

It just sort of falls that way, depending on how it gets dealt out. And I like that admission, because, you know, sometimes you don't. Sometimes you do. Sometimes you don't. And I felt that way about today, just because it's a topic that I don't do great with.

Something that you could say doesn't come naturally to me. And so that always makes for a fun preparation. You know, it's a great couple weeks leading up to that. You're like, oh, another thing I'm bad at. Here we go.

So, today we're going to be talking about the topic of forgiveness in Matthew 18. We're going to pick it up in verse 21. There's a common saying. I usually like to look for, like, popular phrases, little jokes, little things like that.

[1:11] There's not a lot out there as far as comedy around forgiveness. It's like, it's, no one wants to make light of it. So, the most popular one is it's easier to forgive, or it's easy to ask forgiveness than permission.

You know, we've all heard that one. But, and that is kind of my style at work. It's my style elsewhere. I'll just bull nose into the subject. And, eh, somebody got bothered by it. It's okay. We'll get through it.

But it's harder to come by, you know, when it's me that's taking the hit. It's just the way that it is. And so, I was going to start by just admitting that. And even asking yourself, you know, thinking about how you feel about times when you've been offended or wronged.

And where would you rate yourself? You know, somewhere between over here where I'm at poor to average to good to great. You know, just be thinking about that. I asked KJ to pull up this photo because this is one that I do relate to.

And I'm not saying this is correct. But sometimes the first step towards forgiveness is really the other person was born an idiot, you know. If I were to write scripture, it might sound something like that.

[2:15] But that's because I'm much better at finding fault than I am, you know, working through the subject today. I'm an impatient person. I'm a skeptic. I excel in the problem-solving area of life.

But that is not necessarily the best when it comes to forgiveness. So, it's ironic. It's a bit painful. But God chose to use me as the mouthpiece today. So, here we go. So, before we dive in, just thinking about that, I'm thankful we're not studying my life or any of your life.

But we get to actually, we have the privilege of looking at the words of Jesus on such a subject. And after studying this, I'm convinced, actually.

I'm confident in saying this, that forgiveness is a subject of great magnitude and of great benefit. It's absolutely essential to the modern believer living in a difficult age.

And I heard this quote, I think it was a couple weeks back. It's not necessarily related to this message, but I did like it. The quote is, it's the job of the preacher to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

[3:20] Have you heard that before? Yeah. And so, whichever camp you're in today, whether you feel like this, hey, this is just going to be review for me because I'm great at this, or I don't really want to think about forgiveness, I pray that the Lord uses it for you as he has for me.

So, anyway, let's dig in. Matthew 18 is where we're going to pick this up. And starting around verse 21, if you want to turn there. I did not put a presentation together. I just figured we could go through it together.

But a bit of context in case it's been a couple weeks, this is a time of year where perfect attendance at church is not always easy. There's a lot going on. So here's what you may have missed.

Matthew 18, here towards the end of this text, it's culminating a broad discussion between Jesus and his followers. He's covered things like how to get along with government, how to deal with taxes, how to prioritize humility.

He's put an emphasis of unity on his followers. He's talked about how to deal with difficult people. I like that one. Some of you know what I do for a living.

[4:23] I work for a company that develops training and corporate learning. And without fail, you'll find this interesting. Every year, one of the top courses that our customers use from us is the course on how to deal with difficult people.

Isn't that interesting? In any corporate environment, I mean, we serve manufacturing, technology, healthcare, it doesn't matter. The one staple in every organization is difficult people, myself included. I may have driven some colleagues to take that course, you know.

But by Matthew 18 and verse 21, he culminates with this subject of forgiveness. And I thought it was appropriate because you can almost, when you look at this as a whole, not just week to week, but when you look at the conversation as it comes together, it's almost as if he's preparing them to live in a challenging world without him, which he is, right?

So it really, I just, I like the way that it makes sense as it flows through. Okay. I'm going to read this and then we'll get through it. Let's look at Matthew 18, verse 21 to 35.

It says, And then the master of the servant was moved with compassion.

[6:07] He released him and he forgave all the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. And he laid hands on him and took him by the throat saying, pay me what you owe.

So his fellow servant fell down on his feet and begged him saying, have patience with me and I will pay you. But instead he went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. Now when his fellow servants saw that what had been done, they were very grieved and they came and told their master all that had happened.

Then after he called him in, the master said to him, you wicked servant, I forgave all your debt because you begged me. Should you not also have compassion on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you? And his master was angry and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due him.

So my heavenly father will also do to each of you if you do not forgive your brother. Now at first glance, this topic I mentioned is not a, forgiveness is not a unfamiliar topic, right?

There are songs written about this. There are notable verses on forgiveness. I think of Colossians 3.13. It says, bear with each other and forgive one another. If any of you has a grievance against someone, forgive as the Lord forgave you.

[7:17] That verse in Colossians is just a great summary of Jesus' words to his disciples. But forgiveness, I guess the first point to make, forgiveness isn't necessarily uniquely Christian. Maybe you would disagree with that.

Maybe you understand what I'm saying. But other secular religions talk about forgiveness. Most countries and nations and their laws have measures of forgiveness. Think about parole. Think about first-time offender clauses.

It's not this foreign concept that we struggle to relate to. Most of us know what it's like to be wronged. We know what it's like to wrong someone else. We know how good forgiveness feels when you receive it.

And we know how tough it is when you're on the other side of that. But I think there's something more to what Jesus is articulating in his answer to Peter in Matthew 18.

Something specific about the why. Something about how we might aspire to forgive. And why Peter? If we have time for this, I put it as a possible, depending on how fast this goes. Is there any reason he would have used Peter to ask this question, to lead this subject with the others?

[8:23] So I hope this will challenge you as it's been a challenge to me. Let's first look at the obvious. How does Jesus answer the direct question? I always like to get the easy stuff out of the way.

Whether it's work-related, projects at home. Let's get one under our belt, right? So how does he start? Peter essentially asks Jesus, hey, how much forgiveness is enough?

And I know some of you in the room are math-minded. You like numbers. You like quantification like I do. So we get our fix right off the bat. You know? He throws a number out. He suggests seven. And a quick aside, I had to look into this.

Like, where did that come from? Why seven? What's going on here? I found two things. The first was that in Jewish custom, three times was considered appropriate.

I don't know if you've heard that before. Rabbis at the time often cited Amos in the first chapter, where God was willing to forgive Israel's enemies up to three times.

[9:20] So there's sort of this Jewish cultural practice that said, if three was okay for God and his enemies, then we'll just go with that. I also found a reference, and this is like maybe just two threads that ran through their culture, but a reference to Genesis 50, where Joseph, dealing with his brothers after he was Pharaoh's second in command, his brothers asked for forgiveness three times, and Joseph granted it.

So there was this assumption that like three seems like the right number based on some legacy practice. And so it's as if Peter was saying, surely seven ought to be enough, right? Like if three is what we're all used to, and we're thinking seven, I'm thinking Peter was probably thinking, I'll get a little affirmation on this.

I'll get an attaboy. I'll get a, you know, hey, some support here. Good job, Peter. So you can imagine his face, or maybe his reaction, when Jesus says, no, not seven, but 70 times seven.

It's like not even in the ballpark. It doesn't even make sense, right? In a way, it does. It's a play on words and everything. But this word, I was kind of digging in a little bit.

It's pronounced aphame, I think. It's used about 100 times, but it means to let go, or to give up, or to keep it no longer. And so Jesus first addresses Peter's question about a number with a number, right?

[10:45] He took his imperfect question, dealt with the frequency. But if you notice, in the rest of what's covered, he actually gives him a more perfect answer. As he typically does, Jesus takes the traditions of men and turns it on its head, which I always appreciate, too.

Anybody that's willing to stand up against the popular opinion and said it right, that's our Lord. But he says, Peter, it's not just the frequency. It's also the magnitude of forgiveness.

It's the reason behind it. Look what else he tells Peter in his answer. Just kind of looking back at the text there, if you're reading. You might recall there were two debtors, right? This is a semi-familiar account.

The first, in verse 24, owed 10,000 talents. And just for reference, that was equal to a massive fortune. More than probably anyone had. The second debt between the two servants, or the neighbors, if you want to call it that, was equal to a couple months' salary.

So it wasn't nothing, but it was a modest sum, right? The difference between a modest sum and an almost innumerable fortune is a great magnitude.

[11:58] It's a huge amount. So I think there's a principle at play for us to learn from this example that Jesus is sharing. For we who have trusted in the work of Jesus on the cross, Jesus the Christ, who saw this great magnitude of our offense, of my offense, and chose to forgive, chose to lay down his life, after being tortured, to be a payment for sin, for we who believe the picture Jesus is painting is this.

In light of that great offense, David, in seeing the absurd measure of favor that you have been shown, as a sinner with no hope of repaying an unmeasurable debt, to a perfect God, a perfect master, as a broken person who's been offered forgiveness a thousand times over, it's through that faith, it's through that understanding in the gospel that we can carry that forward and try to forgive our fellow man.

Now that's much easier said than done. I'll be the first to admit that. But just the logical example of what he's sharing there. To acknowledge, I had to really distill this just for my own benefit, but to acknowledge that any and all wrongs against us pale in comparison, and to just admit the futility of our own pride and grudges.

No matter how frequent or severe. It's hard to think that way. You know, when you've had someone that has wronged you, or when you've been in a situation where you're on the receiving end of that, everything seems like a big deal.

At minimum, an annoyance. At maximum, you know, you feel personally attacked. But I do love this. If you can write this down, you can turn there if you want to take a look at it, but this same encounter is recorded in Luke's gospel.

[13:45] The same scenario, but you get one added detail. And you get the response of the disciples to what Jesus shares. You ready for this?

So it says in Luke 17, around verse 5 or so, it says, After hearing this, they replied, Increase our faith. They don't get much right. The disciples don't nail it every time.

But man, I think they nailed this one. In light of such a high standard, in light of such a testimony to the gospel, Lord, increase my faith. Increase our faith.

Help us remember the great magnitude and frequency of forgiveness that we as believers have received. And I think it's through that.

In fact, I think it's only through that that we can maintain a faith that far exceeds our circumstance. A faith that overshadows the offense. A faith that solves for my own pride and my own loss.

[14:46] Lord, increase our faith. That's sort of the simple prayer from today's message. So we could pause there. We could probably wrap it up there.

I was chatting with Jeff last night about just the beauty of a short message. And I was tempted. I was like, should we do it? Almost got me to do it. We have plenty of time left.

That's a lot to chew on. You know, there's a lot you could take. And I mentioned this is not an area that I excel at. You know, thinking about a time when someone would have wronged you. A time when someone cost you something.

A time when it was something important. When it was something you've talked about before. You know, I've been there. I'm sure you have too. It's a struggle. Sometimes you think about it at the weird times in the night. Sometimes you, for no reason at all, it comes back to mind.

You're like, oh, it still bothers me. There are actions that people take. There are choices that people make that can't be undone. And whether it's someone at work, someone you care about, someone, you know, whatever the scenario is, how can we ever aspire to get to this forgiveness that Jesus is describing?

[15:57] It's unnatural. It's illogical. From a human sense. Right? If someone continues to wrong you, eventually, logically, I'm done dealing with that person.

It's through the faith in our understanding of the gospel and the working of the spirit. I think that's the main emphasis, is that we have to understand and seek that if we want to aspire to that.

Taking a quick aside, since we have a few minutes still, if you looked at the last verse of that text, there's a bit of a problem, not problem text, I don't think there's any such thing as a problem passage, but there's one that presents itself a little funny.

If you go back and read it, read about the servants, read about how between the two of them, there's this lack of forgiveness, promotes disunity, promotes division, right?

There's that sort of obvious, as one hamstring the other and says, no, you have to pay me, right? But then it says, in verse 35, so also my heavenly father will do to each of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart, kind of presents itself in an odd way, right?

[17:04] Thinking about that? Without going into full detail, because there's just one other thing I want to touch on. I do want to say this, I thought it was appropriate to at least nail down this response to a verse

like that in our text.

We who live in the age of grace, who trust in the good news of Christ's sacrifice for sin, we have a complete and a secure forgiveness.

Romans 5 says that since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into the grace which we now stand.

So I guess that the emphasis I want to respond to that with is there is no condition, there's no behavioral clause attached to the sin debt we've been forgiven as believers. Does that make sense?

Follow, okay. Colossians 2 says, while you were dead in your trespasses, he made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt against us, which was hostile towards us, he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

[18:15] And I think that's important. I think it's important to understand and look at that in light of other scripture and think about the most important feature of a verse like that that's in the text.

I do think there's a use for it. I do think Jesus may have had a intention for his followers. I think there were many occasions where something that was instructed to the 12 may not have immediate or literal reference to us.

and just choosing not to completely unpack that today. I just, our forgiveness before the Father as believers is complete in Christ. I just wanted to nail that down before going past it or glossing over it. Is that fair? There's always a tendency to like, do I dig in deep? Do I cover everything? Do I lean into some things? And I just felt like that was worth declaring is that our forgiveness, our faith and hope in the gospel and the work that Jesus did is complete.

Which begs the question, so what are the implications for us? As those living now, in the words that Jesus said to Peter, if Christ who saved us and secures us wants us to forgive, how do we bring that together practically in our life today?

[19:29] You really get a sense of like a family. Not lording over each other in moments of weakness, but building towards unity. I actually, I put a little note in here about my own family.

I was thinking about how does forgiveness play out being that I'm bad at it. And, you know, my son Benjamin is actually, he's quite the human being in many ways. There's a lot to say about that. But despite all of his fire and passion, he has a very forgiving heart. It's surprising. It's like hard to believe, in fact, unless you see it in action. Because the apple fell far from the tree, you know, in that regard.

And, you know, as a parent, I think specifically as a dad, a lot comes at you at the week, especially at the end of a long work day. And, you know, our five to seven o'clock hours are just beautiful, you know, full of school stress and anger and shouting and all those things.

And so when tempers and stress are high and maybe things blow up between me and the boys or whatever else it is, you know, my son Benjamin is the first to come and tell me he's sorry.

[20:35] Or if it's me, and I'm like, man, I messed that one up and I go to him, he's immediately, Dad, it's okay. I forgive you. And this is the part that is harder to believe, is that even when it's with his brother, right?

Mom and Dad, the dynamic there, it's easier to accept. But even when it's with his brother, he's the first to lay it down to say, dude, you know, come here, Isaac. I, you know, I want to be reconciled to you.

And I love that because it's just such a simple distillation of a family when there's division, when there's disruption, what it looks like during and what it looks like after someone forgives.

It's so simple, right? The Bible teaches that we men, we all are imperfect sinners, are we not? So logically, if all of us is broken in some capacity and that's our basis for engaging with one another, we have no choice.

It's truly impossible to have unity between flawed people without this commitment to forgiveness, right? It's not a matter of if someone will offend you, it's a matter of when.

[21:46] And so I think Jesus is recognizing that, thinking about the 12, thinking about all the conflict they're going to go through, right? Did the apostles in the early church, were they living in a time void of conflict?

No. Did they offend each other? Did they have disagreements? Did they have things they had to iron out at councils and different, they had to separate ways sometimes, right? Jesus knew that was coming.

He was aware of that. I think of Ephesians 4 where Paul writes to his dear friends and he's urging them. I love the book of Ephesians, but Paul says, for the Lord then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. And I think that's what forgiveness actually looks like in practice.

So, I'm kind of belaboring this point. I'll wrap it up with this section. I got one more thing, but I think it comes down to this. If we think, if we walk out today with the assumption that our God wants us to be anything but humble and forgiving for the sake of unity and the gospel testimony, then we're mistaken.

[23:01] Later in Ephesians, Paul writes to the church, he says, let all bitterness and anger and slander be put away from you. Along with malice, be kind to one another, tenderhearted and forgiving as Christ, as God in Christ forgave you.

It's just simple. It's distilled. This was another point where I thought about cutting the message. Do we need to keep going?

It's a simple concept. It's very hard to deliver. And I don't necessarily believe in finding something new all the time. I don't necessarily think it's the job of the speaker to uncover some brand new aspect of scripture.

The Bible's been along for a long time and I am a modest 37 years old, right? But I came across something I found was interesting. I don't really believe in biblical coincidence.

So I'll share this last bit and you can take from it what you will. That sound alright? Sound good? It has to do with Peter. I might have been talking to Brad about this a couple weeks back. But it has to do with Peter. And I was just, I was thinking about Peter.

[24:05] I was thinking about the context of this question. I was thinking about how I know a lot of people like Peter. I have some Peter-ish qualities myself. But you know, the person that's quick to stand up and say what everyone's thinking, sometimes that's me, sometimes it's not me.

But I was thinking about this topic. I was thinking about Peter. I was thinking about his life. And I came up with a little bit of an observation that I think is worth sharing.

I think forgiveness was more important in Peter's life than he ever thought it would be. That's the observation.

If you want to look at Mark 14, here's why I say that. So Peter asks the question. Peter receives the answer. They all talk about it. And Luke, it says, just God, increase our faith.

Right? That's the response that we looked at today. By Mark 14, verse 66, Peter has become the repeat offender.

[25:08] He may be the premier example of the repeat offender. After shouting loudly about how he'll defend Jesus to his death, after Jesus healed his family, paid his taxes, I love that one, blessed his fishing efforts, Jesus brought him into his inner circle.

Jesus showed Peter things that nobody has hardly seen, before, during, and after. And just as Jesus was being attacked, Peter did something he couldn't undo. Mark 14, verse 66, as Peter was in the courtyard, one of the servants of the high priest came, and seeing Peter, she looked at him and said, you are with Jesus.

And he denied it, saying, neither I, I neither know nor understand what you mean. And it says he left. Verse 69, another saw him and began to say, this man is one of them.

But again, he denied it. And a little while later, the bystander again said to Peter, certainly you're one of them, for you're a Galilean. I don't know if they just wore certain clothes or if they smelled like

fish.

I don't know what the deal was, but they knew. Verse 71, but Peter began to invoke a curse on himself and swore, I do not know this man. Immediately, the rooster crowed, and it says Peter broke down and wept.

[26:24] I know we know that story, but think about it in the context of this discussion earlier. And the Luke 22, the account in Luke, it adds that one detail, and man, while he was still speaking, the Lord turned and looked at Peter.

That's the one. That gets it for me. It's like, whew, how do you be Peter in that circumstance? Right? The point with Peter is pretty straightforward.

Our offense yields abandonment. Our wrongdoings create division. Our crimes against one another, they alienate. They inspire ruin.

You know what else I thought about? Sorry, I've been so dry lately. I don't, I'm going to put this at a 95% confidence on this next one because I'm not exactly sure if there was another instance that precedes what I'm about to say.

I don't know if Peter and Jesus ever saw each other after that moment before Jesus came back to life.

[27:30] Does that make sense? In other words, that was probably the last moment they shared together. Peter and Jesus. So imagine the next couple days for Peter, right?

Did he think back on the conversation that he and Jesus had in Matthew 18? Our humanity is selfish. We're prideful.

We do things that detract and take from one another. We make decisions we can't undo. We hurt in a short phrase. So, I don't want to end on a down note.

I will say if you came here this morning needing encouragement or if you feel downcast or struggling with sin or if you feel inadequate or unworthy, whatever, whatever the weight is, maybe feeling like Peter in Mark 14, I have good news to end with.

The good news is this. Not only did Jesus teach us to forgive, not only did he give us a helpful guiding standard standard and a way to understand it. He didn't just define forgiveness and walk out the door.

[28:38] He personified it. He carried that burden, not just spiritually, but physically. He knew what it felt like. I think in John 21, I'm going to, just for the sake of time, I'm going to paraphrase some of this.

I think John 21 might be the very next time Jesus and Peter saw each other. Again, confidence factor, 95%, but I think I could be open to other instances. Here's what it says.

After what just happened, after what Jesus went through, consider this narrative and how it goes. It says, John 21, after Jesus rose from the grave, he revealed himself to the disciples by the sea.

Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, and two others. Peter said to them, I'm going fishing. So they went out and got into a boat, but they caught nothing all night.

Just as the day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore, but they did not know it was him. And he said to them, Children, do you have any fish? They answered, No. So he said, Cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.

[29:43] A little bit of a tip, you know, have we heard that before? Did it work? Maybe. Maybe. So they cast it and they were not able to haul it in. You know, the typical story, Jesus doesn't usually give in 20% factors, right?

He's filling that net every time. And the disciple who Jesus loved said to Peter in John 21, It is the Lord. And when Peter heard it, all the other guys stayed in the boat.

When Peter heard that, he throws back on his clothes and he dives into the sea to rush to shore.

And it says, When they arrived, they saw a charcoal fire in place, fish laid out, bread, and they knew at that point it was the Lord.

Now that's a cool story. I know there's a little bit of a famous passage, you know, Jesus asked Peter three times, Peter, do you love me? He uses different words for love and Peter says, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you and Jesus says, Feed my lambs and there's that whole dialogue that we're familiar with.

But he asked Peter that three times and I don't think it's completely unrelated to the three times that Jesus was denied by Peter publicly.

[30:54] And it says Peter was grieved and maybe it's because of a lot of things going on with Peter at the moment but I really think it has to do a lot with his own failure and his own offense and just embracing that.

But do you notice how Jesus shows a forgiveness towards Peter? First, he filled their nets. He blessed them. Second, he prepared breakfast. He served them. And lastly, he spoke kindness and affirmation.

He restored Peter. I think that's significant. I think that this could have been the most defining moment in Peter's life as a man, as an offensive man, as a man in need of forgiveness.

And I love how Jesus approaches that. He follows the three denials with these three restoration comments of get back to work. There's things to do.

Get to unity with the brethren and move on. As the musicians come up, I just, I know that's a lot. I probably jumped all over the place. I felt the struggle of this message to bring it in one lane.

[32:05] But I hope it challenges you. It is hard to forgive. It is hard to let go, as the word means. But when we understand the gift of salvation, when we think about Jesus has known fully what it means to be offended, he understands what it means to be wronged, to be hated or accused, not just spiritually, physically, all of the above, and yet still becoming forgiveness for us, it's in that faith that we aspire to forgive.

It's really our only mechanism by which to even get to an understanding of that capacity. So I pray that the Lord increases our faith today. I pray that we see that.

I pray that he helps us keep top of mind the frequency and the magnitude of the forgiveness that we have been shown. So God, I lift that up to you. I pray that for this group in the room. And as we turn now and sing, I just pray that you would be encouraged by that challenge, to live as those redeemed in unity practicing forgiveness.

And the challenge is to think of somebody. Think of somebody you may need to forgive. Think of something that you haven't quite let go of or think of something that bears a new perspective.

Let's sing.