Instruction about Restoration and Forgiveness

The last part of Matthew 18 continues to develop the theme of a believer’s childlike nature. Those who are in God’s kingdom have a humble heart like a child and they are valuable as God’s “little ones.” Two further evidences of childlike believers are a willingness to reconcile with an offended brother and a heart to forgive any brother who has wronged them.

1. Restoration of a sinning brother (vs. 15-19)

In this section Jesus gives the required steps to restore fellowship when someone has offended or sinned against a Christian brother. This is sometimes referred to as church discipline. The purpose of such discipline is never punitive, but restorative and purifying.

   A. Confront the sinning brother **personally and privately**

   The purpose of such confrontation is restoration. If he is unwilling to listen proceed with the next step in the process.

   B. Confront the sinning brother with one or two other believers

   This fulfills the principle of Deuteronomy 19:15. If he is still unwilling to listen proceed with the third step in the process.

   C. Report the matter **to the whole church**

   This is not to embarrass or shame the person, but so that all the church family can pray for and pursue the brother’s reconciliation.

   D. Handle the unrepentant sinner as an unbeliever

   He must be regarded as an unsaved person who needs to be converted rather than a brother who needs to be restored. His unwillingness to repent and reconcile proves that he is not a Christian. The purpose is not to shun or punish him, but to see him as a detrimental influence in the church family and as a person to be prayed for and evangelized.

   E. This church action is **authorized and confirmed by Christ**

   Such a serious action is not to be taken lightly. The church body is Christ’s agent acting in accord with His will and authority. Verse 20 is often quoted in context with church worship, but it is actually in the context of church discipline when it becomes necessary to protect healthy fellowship in the body.

2. Forgiveness of a sinning brother (vs. 21-35)

No one can doubt the importance of forgiveness in the Christian life. God forgives us and He expects us to forgive others. The Bible is clear on this subject.
• God commands us to forgive others

_Ephesians 4:32_ And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you. _Colossians 3:13_ Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.

• Forgiveness reflects the character of God

As God’s children we are to demonstrate His character (Eph. 5:1). In regeneration believers receive a new nature that bears a spiritual likeness to God our Father. One of the birthmarks of a genuine child of God is a forgiving heart. A lack of forgiveness on our part is sinful and ungodly. God despises an unforgiving spirit.

• Forgiveness is foundational in Christ’s teaching

His prayers, sermons, and parables were all filled with lessons about God’s forgiveness and our forgiveness of others. In the model prayer Jesus taught us to forgive others, _Matthew 6:12_ And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. He then followed up with this reminder about forgiveness, _Matthew 6:14-15_ 14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: 15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The disciples clearly understood Christ’s focus on forgiveness, but they wondered how far they must go in forgiving others. As usual, Peter spoke up for the group.

A. Peter’s question and big-hearted suggestion (vs. 21)

The rabbis (citing Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, and 13) taught that it was unnecessary to forgive anyone more than three times. Peter must have thought his suggestion of seven times was more than adequate.

B. Christ’s answer and powerful illustration (vs. 22-35)

Jesus’ answer came in two parts. First He made a statement, and then He told a story to teach the measure and the manner of forgiveness. There is no limit to the times you forgive someone. Seventy times seven is another way of saying an unlimited number of times. Jesus then told a parable to highlight the motive of forgiveness. This story illustrates the principle of unlimited forgiveness. The story is about a king settling accounts with his servants who had great responsibility over large areas or provinces within the kingdom.

• The servant’s problem

One of the servants owed the king 10,000 talents, a vast sum of money. The talent was the largest denomination of currency and the number 10,000 would be like our expression billions and billions. This was far more than he could ever pay, and it became obvious that the only option was for him and his family to be sold into slavery as a payment for the debt.

• The servant’s plea
He could not pay what he owed, so he pleaded for mercy, “Just give me some more time and I will pay you everything I owe.”

- The servant’s pardon

The king did more than the servant ever thought possible. He freed him and cancelled all his debt. In part two of the story the forgiven servant approached a fellow servant who owed him just 100 denarii, equal to about three months salary. This was a very small amount compared to what he had owed the king. The servant became very aggressive and abusive, laying hands on him and threatening him. When the fellow servant couldn’t pay the debt, even though it was much smaller, he asked for mercy and patience, using the very same words of the forgiven servant (vs. 26, 29, “have patience with me, and I will pay thee all”).

But the servant’s plea was denied and the man was thrown into debtor’s prison to pay for the debt. The fellow servants heard about it and they were grieved. Then they told the master and he was disgusted and called for the unforgiving servant to have a face to face meeting. It wasn’t pretty. The master rebuked him for not having compassion on his fellow servant, especially since he had received compassion and forgiveness himself for something far worse. Then the master turned him over to the tormenters to pay the entire debt he owed. Whoever is unwilling to forgive others burns the bridge over which he must travel. God’s children must forgive others fully as they have been forgiven (Eph. 4:32). An unforgiving spirit is the proof of an unconverted heart.

While some commentators see the punishment of the unforgiving servant as describing God’s chastisement of an unforgiving believer, other commentators understand this as God’s eternal punishment of an unbeliever. The servant’s unforgiving spirit is evidence of an unconverted heart. This seems to be in keeping with the context of Matthew 18, the childlike nature of a true believer. J. C. Ryle comments: “There will be no forgiveness in that day (of judgment) for unforgiving people. Such people would be unfit for heaven. Would we give proof that we are at peace with God, washed in Christ’s blood, born of the Spirit, and made God’s children by adoption and grace? Let us remember this passage. Like our Father in heaven, let us be forgiving” (Expository Thoughts on the Gospels, 1:230-231). Spurgeon adds: “We incur greater wrath by refusing to forgive than by all the rest of our indebtedness. We cannot escape from condemnation if we refuse to pardon others. If we forgive in words only, but not from our hearts, we remain under the same condemnation. Continued anger against our brother shuts heaven’s gate in our own faces” (The Gospel of the Kingdom, 157).
Gospel of Matthew
Matthew 18:15-35

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C. Report the matter________________________________________________________

D. Handle the unrepentant sinner_____________________________________________

E. This church action is_____________________________________________________

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- Forgiveness___________________________________________________________

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