SIN AND FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:15–35

Key Verses: 18:19,20

“Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”

We live in a lonely world. Even though people are around others all the time and can connect on social media, loneliness is increasing. To address this problem, the UK even appointed a Minister of Loneliness. God knows that it’s not good for us to be alone. But how can we really be together with other people? One of the biggest obstacles is when we do something wrong, or even when we’ve got the wrong attitude. Since everyone is going to do something wrong or have the wrong attitude at one time or another, we can see why being together can be so hard. Jesus calls his followers out of the world to form a new community. His grace, his truth and his presence make it a place where genuine unity is possible. Today Jesus gives instructions on how to deal with sin in his community, and, how to forgive. We need to practice both his teachings if we’re truly going to gather in his name and form the kind of community he wants. We especially want to think about the importance of agreeing and gathering in his name. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Our Lord Jesus has already been teaching about the kind of community he calls us to. In his community, everyone is important, especially the “little ones,” those with many weaknesses and needs, those that people in the world would ignore or despise. Everyone is important in his community because we all gather out of our faith in Jesus. He taught us to be careful not to cause one another to stumble in faith because we’re being thoughtless or selfish. To be a good spiritual influence on one another, he taught us to be most serious about struggling against our own sins. He also taught us how even one brother or sister that wanders off is so precious that we should go after him or her at any cost. Everyone is important. Everyone is mindful of their influence on one another. Every single one is worth saving. Only humble people can live like this. But what a beautiful community it is!

Next, our Lord Jesus teaches us about relationships within his community. In the world, profit, return on investment, results are important. But in Jesus’ community, relationships are important, even though they’re hard and costly. Because relationships are so important, he wants us to be thinking seriously about what breaks relationships with our Christian brothers and sisters, and what restores them. He wants us to be working on these relationships as our priority. And he wants us to know why these relationships are so important. In the first part of today’s passage our Lord Jesus teaches us to follow three steps, and the first step is probably the hardest.

Read verse 15. In Jesus’ community, sin is a serious matter. It’s a place where he calls us to hold one another accountable for our attitudes and our behavior. Why? It’s because his community represents Jesus himself in the world. If believers who gather together don’t take sin seriously, it turns their fellowship into just a human gathering, people getting together for their own mutual benefit. Then we can’t really represent our Lord Jesus to the world. He first taught us to struggle against our own sins, and now, to also watch over one another and care for each other enough to speak up. It’s hard to do. We don’t want to offend people. In fact, we don’t want to get too involved. Apostle Paul also taught us the same thing in Ephesians, that we should be speaking the truth in love, and that when we do, we become a spiritually mature community (Eph4:15).

Read verse 15 again. What we also notice here is that our Lord Jesus tells us to do this privately. We might think only special people are qualified to give spiritual discipline or encouragement in the Christian community. But to Jesus, every believer has spiritual discernment. Every believer in Jesus is responsible to help every other believer. Philippians 2:4 says, “…not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” Whether a brother or sister sins against us, or is just sinning in some way that we happen to notice, it’s our responsibility not to ignore it, but to go and help. This is how we practice real, unselfish love. But it doesn’t mean we all should be meddlers. In fact, the Bible warns us again and again not to be meddlers (2Th3:11; 1Ti5:13; 1Pe4:15).

So, what’s the difference between pointing out someone else’s fault and meddling? Meddling means getting involved other people’s lives for selfish reasons, because we’re being too nosy, or too controlling, or like to gossip. On the other hand, pointing out someone’s fault privately is done in genuine Christian love, because we don’t want that person to wander away from Jesus. We may have many opinions on how others should be living, but often we can’t say anything. We especially need to be quiet when the other person is not yet a committed Christian. And even when they are, we need to be wise about what we’re trying to change in their lives. What’s truly worth speaking up about to a Christian brother or sister? In verse 15 our Lord Jesus uses the word “sins.” It seems like such a broad term that it could include almost anything. But it has a specific meaning. To sin means to wander from God and from his teachings in the Bible. All the Bible’s teachings can be summed up with two: love God and love your neighbor. When we see a brother or sister doing something that reveals they’re not really loving God or not really loving their neighbor, we should not be quiet; we should speak up. So often, what we tend to do when we see someone else’s fault is to just criticize them in our hearts and complain, or talk about it to other people, not to them. Jesus teaches us in verse 15 to actually go to the person in private and talk directly to him or her. It can be so awkward and uncomfortable. But if we truly care about him or her, we’ll do it. And we need to remember that Jesus is talking about a Christian brother or sister. If they’ve repented of their sins and accepted the grace of Jesus, hopefully they’ll be different than other people, who live based on their pride. Psalm 141:5a describes the godly reaction to a personal rebuke: “Let a righteous man strike me—that is a kindness; let him rebuke me—that is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it…”

However, three times Jesus mentions the possibility that the person will refuse to listen. Jesus is sober about human nature. Read verses 16,17. Why would someone refuse to listen to both private counsel and the feedback of other genuine believers? The Bible warns us not to be “hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb3:13). When we stop encouraging one another daily, tragically this can happen. We may start growing in Christian life at first, but we’re too weak to take a deep root on our own; we need the loving community of brothers and sisters in Christ if we’re going to thrive and grow. If we choose to isolate ourselves before becoming mature, we can be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. It only takes a little bit of sinful influence to get the hardening process started. And each time we reject truthful counseling, we become harder and harder. But our Lord Jesus teaches us here not to give up, to keep taking more and more people. It’s not a power struggle to win an argument. It’s not a paranoid obsession with some extreme notion of purity. It’s simply a genuine effort of love to turn a person back to Jesus.

Read verse 17 once more. This is the same Jesus who taught us not to judge (7:1–5). But in this case, he’s telling us to accept the spiritual discernment of the community of fellow believers and to no longer have fellowship with the person who refuses to listen to God’s truth (cf. 2Th3:14,15). Apostle Paul taught this same thing to the believers in Corinth. There was someone in the fellowship guilty of sexual immorality who refused to listen. Paul taught the Corinthians to put that person out of their fellowship (1Co5:1–5). It was a practical case of church discipline. Another person who’d been in their fellowship had to be put out due to some sin. Later Paul taught them: “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him (2Co2:6–8). It tells us that there’s hope for someone who seems hardened now. We need to be clear about sin, but hopeful that God, who’s rich in kindness, tolerance and patience, can work even in a hardened person’s heart to lead him or her to repentance (Ro2:4; 2Pe3:9). We definitely shouldn’t be gloating over those who spiritually fall, considering ourselves superior. Instead, we should be trembling that the same thing could happen to us if we don’t stand by faith. In brief, in helping one another we should be meditating on both the kindness and the sternness of God (Ro11:18–22).

Read verse 18. This is the same thing Jesus taught Peter when he confessed his faith in him as the Messiah. He said, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (16:19). What does it mean? It means God gives believers the keys to Christian fellowship, to let people in or put people out. Because our faith in Jesus unites us with the Father, we can discern his will and carry it out on earth. We should take this seriously.

Read verses 19,20. This tells us why Christian fellowship is so important. When we are spiritually united, God answers our prayers, and Jesus is present with us. Paul wrote the Corinthians, “So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present…” (1Co5:4). When we take sin seriously and hold each other accountable, we truly gather in Jesus’ name. Even if there’s only two or three of us, if we gather in Jesus’ name, he’s present and listening to us. Worldly people may despise the small number, but Jesus doesn’t. Matthew strongly emphasizes the importance of gathering with Jesus as our Spiritual King (3:12; 12:30; 13:30; 22:10; 23:37; 24:31; 25:32).

Read verse 21. Why did Peter ask Jesus about this? No doubt it’s related to the disciples’ recent argument about which of them was the greatest (18:1; cf. Mk9:34; Lk9:46). Peter must have been so hurt when he felt that the others wanted to push him out. The rabbis taught that people should forgive up to three times, but after that, no forgiveness should be given. Peter thought he was being super generous to offer to forgive up to seven times. Read verse 22. Jesus wasn’t undoing what he’d just taught about dealing with sin in the fellowship. But he was teaching us to balance our clarity about sin with an awareness of God’s forgiveness. God’s forgiveness for us is way greater than we realize.

To help Peter and us appreciate this, Jesus taught the parable of the unmerciful servant. In this parable, how much did the first servant owe? Verse 24 says “ten thousand bags of gold.” In today’s terms, that’s about six billion US dollars. In other words, something completely impossible for anyone to pay off in one lifetime. What happened? Verse 25 says that since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. Put all together, it would barely make a dent in the balance due, and it threw them all for life into slavery in debtors’ prison. How did the servant respond? Read verse 26. Of course, he couldn’t really do that, but he’s basically begging for mercy. How did his master respond? Read verse 27. It was shocking. How could he cancel a multi-billion-dollar debt, with no balance due at all? It’s a testament to his great mercy. It’s a reflection of the mercy of God. We owe God way more than we could ever repay, but when we come to him humbly asking for his mercy, he freely gives it to us. He cancels all the debt of our sins (Ps103:10–12).

Then the story in the parable takes a turn for the worse. What did this forgiven servant go out and do? He found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins (28). In today’s money, it was worth about $12,000. It was a significant amount, but nowhere near the $6 billion. It says he was “choking” his fellow servant. What happened? Read verse 29. It was exactly the same thing the first servant had done to his master. But how did he respond? Read verse 30. It was really ugly. It describes those who’ve been forgiven by God but refuse to forgive someone else. Read verse 31. The other servants held him accountable. It symbolizes their prayer. The master called the servant in and said, “You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” (32,33) And Jesus’ parable doesn’t stop there. Read verses 34,35. Jesus is using hyperbole to make a point. Our Father God wants us to forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts—not superficially, deeply, wholeheartedly. It means we shouldn’t be holding any kind of grudge, no matter how someone may have hurt us. How can we forgive like this? We need to remember how much God has forgiven us. The more we appreciate God’s grace and mercy in our personal lives, the more we can be gracious and merciful to others like God is. This forgiveness is vital to building up relationships within Jesus’ community. With Jesus as our master, with his personal forgiveness in our hearts, we can be one with one another, and a powerful spiritual force in this fallen world.

Let’s read verses 19,20 again. May God help us to build up genuine spiritual unity among us, even though we may be just few in number. May we hold one another spiritually accountable, and at the same time, learn how to practice God’s grace and mercy toward one another. May our Lord Jesus dwell among us, and may we have beautiful relationships and deep fellowship in him. May he use us as his community to draw those who are lonely and broken in sin to come into his gracious fellowship and be truly blessed.