

Living for heaven on earth 3: Love Mercy

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to Matthew chapter 18. Matthew chapter 18, it's page 823 in the Church Bibles.

Love, mercy. One of the most striking things in the teaching of the Lord Jesus, and for that matter, in the whole of the New Testament, is that Jesus will not separate relationship with him from the relationship we share with the rest of his family.

In the passage that leads into Jesus' teaching here in chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, he talks in chapter 17, verse 25 and 26, he talks about his followers as being sons of the King.

And you can't all share the same father without sharing the same brothers. You see, you can't think like an only child, and act like an only child, and be part of Jesus' family.

Jesus is very clear. We've seen it. The evidence of your relationship with the father is seen in the quality of your relationships with his other children.

[1 : 30] In other words, relationships in the church matter. They really do matter. And that's what this whole chapter is all about. We've seen it. Jesus is teaching us how to live as the family of heaven on earth.

So the question in verse 1 begins at, what is true greatness in the kingdom? What are the marks of true stature in this family? Well, first we saw it means, verses 3 and 4, walking humbly, knowing that entrance to the kingdom comes only by the sheer mercy of God.

And the evidence of that, well, it's that we value every other little one that the father has called his own. Verse 5, we receive them as we too have been received.

Verses 6 to 9, we do nothing to make them stumble, to risk them. Rather, we reflect the heart of the father. We are to be restorers. As verses 10 to 14 tell us, he wants none of these little ones to wander away.

He wants none of them to perish. And so we are to feel just the same about our brothers, our Christian brothers and sisters. That's why we too are to be restorers from sin.

[2 : 49] We are to do justly. That is, we are to be a family with heaven's redeeming righteousness. Heaven's restoring righteousness rules, as we saw last time in verses 15 to 20.

We have a responsibility to restore others when they sin. To bear the real cost of restoration, to invest time and energy and devotion.

We saw that we are to do it, verse 16, persistently. Not giving up the first hurdle, but doing everything it takes. We are to do it protectively, doing all that we can to protect our brother's reputation, to protect ourselves from getting involved in sin.

We are to do it prayerfully, involving others, and involving God himself, most of all, in the whole process. Because when we act this way, Jesus tells us, when we act as true brothers, then we can be assured of the presence and the power of our Father in the midst, verse 19 and 20.

It will be done, says Jesus, by my Father in heaven, for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst. But of course, for us to be like this, for the church to be, actually, a family where heaven's restoring righteousness is at work in power in people's lives, we must also, inevitably, then, be a people in whom forgiveness reigns supreme, in whom forgiveness is a way of life.

[4 : 24] We must be a people of indefatigable forgiveness. We must not only walk humbly and do justly, but we must also love mercy.

And that's the point of Jesus' conversation with Peter here in verses 21 and 22, isn't it? And in the parable that follows, so let's look at these verses carefully.

First, verses 21 and 22. Here's a plain statement that Jesus makes about the extent, the extent of true forgiveness. You see, Peter recognizes something very profound in response to what Jesus

has said about the real and persistent commitment to restoring one another when there's been sin. He recognizes that not only is it hard and costly for the sinner to repent and be restored, he also recognizes that it's very, very hard for the ones who are doing the restoring work. He recognizes that such restoration absolutely depends upon having yourself a forgiving spirit. you can't effect true restoration of fellowship and reconciliation in relationship without the exercise of true forgiveness.

[5 : 45] You simply can't do it. Without a spirit of deep forgiveness, without a true extension of mercy, all such attempts to remedy a situation will not lead to restoration at all.

No, because the real goal, unless we have a truly forgiving spirit, won't be reconciliation. It will be retribution. Our real goal, unless we have a deeply forgiving spirit, will not be restorative, merciful justice.

No, it will be only punitive justice, setting things to right in a legal sense. You see, where wrong is done, where sin is committed and relationships are damaged and broken as a result.

Someone must bear the cost. But true forgiveness means that you, as the wronged party, you pay the price for somebody else's sin.

You resolve your perfectly righteous anger. And as a result, you liberate the guilty party from their predicament, from the estrangement that they've brought about because of their sin.

[6 : 59] you set them free so that that relationship can be restored. You see, true restoration is a deeply, deeply costly thing.

Reconciliation has a price. And its price is a spirit of forgiveness and mercy that overcomes even righteous anger and righteous hurt and profound disappointment in somebody else.

and therefore it is able to restore and to redeem. And good for Peter. He recognized that. And he grasped just how terribly hard it is.

And that's why he says in verse 21, how often are we expected to go on with that? Can we possibly manage even seven times? You see, the rabbis taught that, well, you should forgive somebody once and then a second time and then perhaps a third time.

But after that, you've cooked your goose. You don't waste any further time. Now that sounds pretty reasonable, doesn't it? Give somebody one chance and then another and then maybe a third, but after that you're wasting your time.

[8 : 10] And compared with that, seven times truly is magnificent. It's double that, plus one. But poor old Peter. Once again, Jesus totally wrong-foots even his good intention, doesn't he?

Not seven times, but seventy times seven. You're out by a whole order of magnitude, Peter. That's what Jesus is saying. Apparently, the text here in the Greek isn't absolutely clear.

You'll see in the footnote it could be seventy-seven times rather than seventy times seven, but quite clearly to get taken up with the exact numbers is the very opposite of what Jesus is wanting us to understand here.

What he means is that your forgiveness is not to be counted at all. It's not to be tallied up. Rather, it's to be so extensive that even keeping any count is just out of the question.

It's to be limitless. There's actually an allusion here to a text in the Old Testament, Genesis chapter four, verse 24, where Lamech is talked about.

[9 : 13] Lamech, the great avenger, he said this, if Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold. So you see, Jesus is taking the natural desire of a man's heart for relentless and limitless revenge on those who do him wrong, and he's saying that in my family, in my kingdom, the absolute opposite spirit must be the case.

Relentless, limitless, indefatigable, not revenge, but forgiveness. Do you see, the difference between heaven and earth, between Jesus' family and the world, is not one of quantity, it's one of quality.

If it was one of quantity, then Peter's question would have been right. Yes, Christians are to be that bit more forgiving than everybody else. That's probably what many people think that the church is all about, isn't it?

the church is here to help people be a bit better than they would be otherwise. But no, Jesus' answer is totally different.

It takes us totally out of that realm, out of that whole scale of moral values that measures goodness against our neighbor, against somebody else. And he says true forgiveness is not a quantifiable thing.

[10:40] It's not a quantitative thing. To ask, what extent are we to forgive is to get the whole category wrong. True forgiveness according to Jesus is a qualitative thing.

It's a whole way of thinking and living and acting that issues from a heart that has been changed. A true follower of Jesus is not someone who forgives and then keeps count.

It's not someone who forgives and then sets limits. He forgives, period, end of story. He forgives, as verse 35 will say when we come to it, from the heart.

And you only do that if you've been made like that. And what makes you like that is that you have understood the true nature of forgiveness yourself.

Because you have genuinely experienced forgiveness. Forgiveness from God. And when you've understood the nature of forgiveness you just can't ask that question.

[11:51] How often? You forgive from the heart because you've got a merciful heart, because you have a mercy filled heart, full of the mercy of God.

And that's why in verse 23 Jesus says, therefore, and goes on to explain what forgiveness really is and where it comes from. And, and, points up the very real danger if we will not take that to heart and will not live by it.

So let's look at this parable here that begins in verse 23. And remember, it's all part of Jesus' answer to the question about the extent of true forgiveness. And the parable begins by focusing on the experience of true forgiveness.

forgiveness. The message of the story of the first debtor is absolutely clear, isn't it? True forgiveness flows from a real experience of the infinite forgiving mercy of God.

And in the light of that, anything, anything at all that we are called upon to forgive is simply utterly insignificant. The story just makes two points.

[13:02] Remember, it's all about sin and forgiveness. The first is this, that God requires of man a settling of accounts. Look at verse 24. And that the reality is that when he calls us to account, the debt of sin is absolutely vast.

It is unpayable. The debt is simply infinite. That's the truth about the kingdom of God, says Jesus in verse 23. It's about a king calling his vassals to account.

Now, that is tough, forensic accounting language. A kind of language so despised by the modern theologian. But here it is, on Jesus' lips.

A king calls his vassals to account. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. And verse 25 is very clear, isn't it? This particular servant owes an absolutely vast, vast sum.

It's 10,000 talents. You see, in the footnote it says a talent is about 20 years' wages. So this is 200,000 years' wages.

[14:10] Now, let's say an average wage is about 20,000 pounds. It's actually a bit higher than that, but just say it is. That's 4 billion pounds. Even if Roy Keane came to Celtic Park, it would take even Roy Keane a long time, I should think, to amass that amount of money.

The scholars tell us that apparently the tax for the whole of the region of Galilee and Perea every year amounted to 200 talents, and this is 10,000 talents.

We're talking in GDP terms here. It's even bigger than the European Union rebate that Mr. Bear has been trying to defend this week. It's a vast sum of money for any individual person.

And that's Jesus' point. It's an unthinkable large sum. It's absolutely impossible for this servant ever to even begin to pay it back.

So in verse 25, when the whole household of the servant are thrown into prison, they are facing the full force of the king's justice.

[15:13] It's not that selling him into slavery was an attempt to recover some of the money. One slave was sold for only point one of a talent. So, well, let's say he had a rather large household, put the whole lot into the slave market.

You might get one talent, but he owes 10,000. No, this throwing into prison is an expression of the sovereign's wrath. It's his punishment.

And so verse 26 is not realistic either. Have patience and I'll pay for it. Well, of course he can't pay for it. He knows he can never do that, even if he lives for 200,000 years.

He can't pay back this debt. No, it's a cry for mercy. And that's the second point. of this part of the parable.

Having come to terms with a very real calling to account and a vast debt, we are to recognize a reception of sovereign mercy.

[16:12] A mercy which costs the king very, very dearly. The only hope in this situation is verse 27. The pity, the compassion of the king.

Compassion for a ruined, hopeless, and helpless wretch of a servant. That's what this is all about. It's the same word, that pity word that Jesus used in Matthew 9.36 when he saw the crowds and had compassion, pity, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

They were lost, they were harassed, they were helpless. The same word in 15.32 where he had compassion on the crowd because they had nothing to eat. And it's the king's compassion, his merciful pity alone, verse 27, that forgives this debt, that releases him from the slavery caused by the debt.

And it's a real, real liberation for him, it's a liberation for his whole household. It's a work of sheer sovereign grace. It's freely given. But of course it's not without cost to the giver.

In fact it's vast cost to the king's exchequer. Ten thousand talents. And Jesus says that is the nature of God's forgiveness.

[17:29] It is vast, it is merciful, it is sovereign. It's free to you, but it's vast cost to God. And your forgiveness, your forgiving heart towards your brothers and sisters flows from a real experience of that forgiving God, of the mercy of God, of the pity of God for you.

That's the message. But of course the parable doesn't end there and we wouldn't expect it to, would we? Let's read on, verse 28. And that servant and all his household rejoiced long into the night.

And behold, a fellow servant came to him and said, I owe you a hundred denarii. And that servant threw his arms around his brother and said, this is a day for rejoicing in the mercy of our master.

He has forgiven me the weight of an infinite eternal debt. He has set me free. He has blessed me beyond all earthly dreams. And you, my brother, you must share the joy with me.

What he has done for me, I do for you. How could I do other? Your debt is forgotten forever. Come, join the joy of celebration with me. And I'm not reading a different version from you, don't worry.

[18:47] But I'm reading what should have happened. Isn't that right? You see the point. In fact, Jesus makes the point all the more starkly by framing the story in the opposite way, doesn't he?

It's one of those necessary negatives, by the way. You release the word people that we were speaking about the other night. Makes us sit up and notice. It makes us see the point all the more starkly, doesn't it? Instead, he tells us this negatively.

And he goes on, instead of spelling out the exercise and expression of a forgiving heart, he shows the stark contrast. Because verses 28 to 30 instead show up not evidence of forgiveness, but evidence of unforgiveness in this servant's heart.

Notice that this second debtor is a fellow servant in verse 28. It's emphasized several times. Verse 29, the fellow servant. Verse 31, their fellow servants.

Verse 33, fellow servants. You see, Jesus is making the point that here is another one who, just like the first, is in debt to the same master. Well, of course, because Jesus is teaching us in this parable about our relationship to our father, which is one of mercy and forgiveness, and about relationship to our brothers, which is also to be one of mercy and forgiveness.

[20:12] It's all about how we deal with our brothers, our fellow servants of the master. Jesus is explicit in verse 35. He sums it up by saying it's about you and your brothers. And his words are plain enough.

This fellow servant, this brother, owes the first servant a paltry sum, verse 28, a hundred denarii. The footnote says a denarius is a day's wage, so he has about three months' wages, a few thousand pounds, nothing more, paltry sum.

But here's this brother, notice this, he's actually quite penitent. He's willing to acknowledge his debt, and he's willing and perhaps even able to actually put matters right.

Verse 29, have patience and I will pay you. Unlike the first debtor, it seems that it was possible that he could do that. So perhaps there would be some hardship.

But not only does the first servant not write off his debt, he doesn't even wait to give him a chance to repay, does he? Verse 30, straight to the debtor's prison. Even though this second man uses exactly the same words asking for mercy as he said to the master, have patience and I'll pay.

[21:25] The same cry for mercy, but this servant's heart is totally closed. His ears are closed. There's no mercy at all. And you see, in what he does, he simply displays evidence of his own unforgiveness.

Now, we're not to get tied in knots about how these things all fit together in this story. How someone can be forgiven and then unforgiven. No, Jesus is making a simple point.

The first part of the parable displays the magnitude of God's mercy and forgiveness to helpless sinners, enslaved in a debt that they can't pay. That's what his message is. And truly to have grasped God's forgiveness, to have received it, to have experienced it, without having your heart changed, without becoming a lover forgiveness.

And the liver of mercy yourself is impossible. Because true forgiveness, if it is received, if it is experienced, does change our hearts.

Forgiveness isn't a commodity that you can just receive in a vacuum. Forgiveness from God is a transforming power. It's a liberating power. Release from the debt releases you from the prison.

[22 : 46] And it changes your life. It involves a reconciliation. A change in our relationship with God himself. And therefore, it involves a reconciliation in relationships within God's family.

Our fellow debtor servants. Our brothers and sisters in Christ. And the latter is evidence of the former. If there is no evidence of that forgiving relationship with our brothers and sisters, then there is no evidence of our forgiving relationship with God.

The heart attitude of the heavenly family is loving and living mercy. It's loving and living forgiveness.

The heart attitude of unforgiveness is the characteristic not of heaven, but of hell.

That's how this world's people, those who are under the sway of the evil one. That's how they behave. The world says revenge is sweet. It's Walter Scott who said revenge is the sweetest morsel ever cooked in hell.

And that is, according to Jesus, where that attitude of unforgiveness belongs. And where it inevitably leads. And that's the forceful point, the chilling point that he makes forgiveness in the final verses, 31 to 35, where he speaks clearly not now about the evidence of unforgiveness, but the end of unforgiveness, where it all leads to.

[24 : 23] And it's a stark end, isn't it, in verse 34. The first servant is delivered to the jailers, literally to the torturers, until he pays all his debt.

Of course, we've been told he's got an infinite debt. And if he's in prison, how could he ever pay it? And that's the point. The master's quite clear, you see.

This servant's conduct makes it clear that he's despised and scorned the mercy that the master had extended to him. It hasn't changed in one iota, so it's clear.

He's neither understood the master, or loved the master, or wanted in any way to be like the master. And so he's brought judgment on himself.

And we just can't avoid the full frontal piercing gaze of Jesus as he turns to us in verse 35. Do you see it? So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

[25 : 30] 70 times 7. Infinitely. Persistently. Without limits. It's either that, the heavenly attitudes of my heavenly kingdom, or it's hell.

The place where unforgiveness belongs forever. It's pretty stark, isn't it? What do you think Peter made of that? Well, the rest of the disciples are Matthew's readers.

I wonder what we make of that this morning. See, what Jesus is saying is this. That the experience of forgiveness offered by God tells the truth about God.

He is infinitely merciful. He loves mercy. But our expression and exercise of forgiveness, or lack of it, tells the truth about us.

Expression of mercy is evidence of reception of mercy because true mercy changes the heart.

Whereas expression of unforgiveness shows that our hearts have not changed.

[26 : 44] And Jesus is clear. Only changed hearts can enter his kingdom. Verse 3. Beginning. Unless you turn and become as little children, you cannot enter my kingdom.

See, Jesus holds two things here together as absolute truth. First, we must have experienced true forgiveness in order to exercise it.

But second, and equally true, we must exercise forgiveness if we are to receive it from God. If we don't, there's no evidence at all that we've received God's mercy.

In fact, there's clear evidence that we haven't. So it's, it's forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, or else it's verse 35 for us.

That's what Jesus is saying. So in conclusion to this chapter, let me say three things. First, relationship breakdown in the church due to sin is dangerous.

[27 : 55] Jesus says sin leads to judgment, both temporally in this world and eternally in the next. The offending brother, verse 15, the brother who sins is at risk, Jesus says, if he will not be restored, if he willfully resists the effort of the church, he reaps judgment.

We are to treat him, verse 17, as an outsider. But worse than that, as verse 14 had made clear, if he wanders away and is not restored, he risks perishing.

Eternally. But also the offended brother, the one who has sinned against is also at risk. If he, and that could be you or me, if he will not forgive from the heart, then verse 35 is true.

He too is at risk of judgment forever. Second, this means that we must all search our hearts and we must do it continually.

Doesn't it? As Paul says to the Corinthians, examine yourselves and see if you're in the faith. Will I be in the kingdom when the master comes again?

[29 : 11] Very easy, isn't it, to sing, when the role is called up yonder, I'll be there. But what do we base it on? Do we base that on some decision that we made in 1953 or 1962 or 1997 or whenever it was?

Jesus does not, not want to erode true Christian assurance. Don't misunderstand me.

But Jesus, on the other hand, does an awful lot to erode false assurance. Remember Matthew 7? It's not Lord, Lord, it's he who does the will of my Father who will enter the kingdom.

And here in chapter 18 it's exceptionally clear. You cannot be in his kingdom unless, as verse 5 says, you have been humbled by grace. The evidence of that is that you share the Father's heart.

Remember in chapter 15 he said, it is what comes out of the mouth that reveals our hearts. So what comes out of my mouth? Is it forgiveness and mercy?

[30 : 21] Or is it unforgiveness? Is it hardness? Is it revenge? And if it's the latter, Jesus is warning me. So also my Heavenly Father will do to you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

Because doing the will of the Father means loving mercy. Verse 33, should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?

I forgave you all that debt. Very, very challenging, isn't it? Very challenging when we think about all the tiny, the trivial things that so often we refuse to forgive.

Things that we allow to fester. We harbor them in our hearts. They make us bitter. All of these things together are nothing in comparison to all that debt that our Heavenly Father has forgiven us. But you know, Jesus' point is much stronger still even than that. What he's saying is that even the big things, even the huge wrongs that some have heaped on us, the things some people have done to us, even these are nothing in comparison to all that debt that we owe.

[31 : 45] Even these are like a hundred denarii in comparison to ten thousand talents. And if we are truly forgiven people, then we will forgive even these from our hearts.

because our hearts are changed. And that is very, very hard. Listen to C.S. Lewis. There's no use talking as if forgiveness were easy.

For we find that the work of forgiveness has to be done over and over again. We forgive. We mortify our resentment. A week later, some chain of thought carries us back to the original offense, and we discover the old resentment blazing away as if nothing had been done about it at all.

We need to forgive our brother 70 times 7, not only for 490 offenses, but for one offense. It's hard to forgive and to go on forgiving.

It's costly to forgive if we've been sinned against by a spouse who's sinned desperately against us and hurt us and maybe abandoned us and maybe irreversibly damaged us.

[33 : 08] If that's you, you know how hard it is to forgive. It costs. It's like tearing off a limb. It's agony. Remember, Jesus says, better to enter life crippled than to let unforgiveness carry you into hell.

If you've been sinned against by a parent who's abused you, who's let you down, who's abandoned you, who's disgraced you and the family by their behavior or whatever it might be.

Oh, the cost of true forgiveness in that situation. It's like pulling out an eye, surely. But Jesus says, far better enter life maimed than let the bitterness, the unforgiveness destroy you and shut you out of the kingdom.

How can I forgive such things, you say? It's absolutely against all natural justice. Well, the answer is only by the true experience of God's abundant mercy to you.

Only that can change your heart. But that will change your heart. It must change your heart if you are to enter his kingdom.

[34 : 38] Only if you learn to love God's mercy can you live God's mercy. thirdly and finally, forgiveness isn't just soft sentimentalism.

It's quite clear in this chapter that we're not to overlook sin. We're not just to pretend it's not there. We are to be faithful. We're to confront sin and attitudes of sin. And we must be realistic. Forgiveness is not always received. And relationship is not always restored as we want it to be. But what Jesus is saying to us brothers and sisters to you and to me is that we must ensure that it is not us it's not me who cuts off and withholds mercy. Whatever the circumstances we are to hold out and offer forgiveness seventy times seven seven thousand times seven. We are to be indefatigable. in the forgiveness and mercy of our hearts. Let me tell you it is hard. It is costly. But Jesus says this is living for heaven on earth.

[35 : 55] This is what it means to be the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to be a people who do justly. Who love mercy.

and who walk humbly before our God. And it can only begin when we come to Jesus like helpless little children and we turn and we receive from him a heart like his.

And when we go on coming to him day by day by day and receiving afresh the experience of the mercy of God to us.

The experience of being forgiven all that debt. And we do this and we will be as Jesus says great in his kingdom.

Well let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Heavenly Father how dreadful a thing it is to us to contemplate that you know the depths of our hearts and we too know something of our hearts because we hear our own words and we see our own actions and we know that so often a spirit of unforgiveness seems to rule in our hearts.

[37 : 31] so we pray by your great mercy turn us and let us like little children come to you knowing that we have nothing and knowing that you nevertheless will give us everything.

Help us to walk the way of mercy with hearts full of deep forgiveness because they are hearts which have plumbed the depths of your immense and infinite depth of forgiveness for us.

And may we we pray exhibit in our lives the wonderful forgiving mercy of Jesus Christ and by that may we truly be a community where your wonderful redeeming restoring merciful justice is displayed that together we might live on earth for heaven for the glory of our Savior Jesus Christ Amen well well