

Forgiveness

By Paris Reidhead*

Will you turn, please to Matthew, Chapter 18. We have read the portion together. May I remind you that verses 15 through 17 are Christ's provision for the possibility of broken fellowship in the Church. Verses 18 and 19 are Christ's provision for authority to His Church. Verse 20 is one of those key verses that stand in contrast to the 20th verse of the 5th Chapter. You recall that in Matthew 5:20, you read, "...Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of Heaven." Our Lord has from that point been proceeding to show that everything in His Church is other, completely different, altogether of a new and higher order than anything that has been known in the past. The Pharisee system had grown up largely during the 400 years from Malachi to the beginning of Matthew with its Synagogues and its system of thinking. Of course it antedated that by a good while, but it had become the expression of Judaism largely at the time of our Lord, and He is trying to tell the people to whom He speaks that what He is doing is altogether of a different sort and nature than anything they have seen before. And so that key statement to the Book of Matthew, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter the kingdom of Heaven."

Now in verse 20 of this 18th Chapter, He puts the strength of the assembly on an entirely different basis. The importance of the system of the Synagogues and the whole Pharisaical religion of the day was in numbers, influence, money, and power, in all of these things which men coveted and sought after. And our Lord, following this same thought of showing to His hearers how completely new is this thing He is doing, takes the irreducible number, two or three, and He is saying that it is not in a sacred building any longer that the strength lies, not in a large organization any longer. These things that the Pharisees have sought after, these things which have been the measure of success do not prevail as standards any longer in the thing that He is doing. But it is not the number that is of the utmost importance. You see that He has established a principle here upon which the strength of the Church, yea, the meaning of the Church, rests. For where two or three are gathered together in My Name... This is far more than simply using the Name of Jesus at the end of prayer. This is far more than simply having it over the door, or on the bulletin, or in some other conspicuous place, indicating that the people are gathering in the Name of Christ. But we could put it in this type of paraphrase: Where two or three are gathered together, totally agreed that the whole purpose of gathering is the Glory of God in Jesus Christ: on account of His reputation, on account of His praise, there has to be some basis and foundation. So He provides a foundation for the strength, and the authority, and the ministry of the assembly.

Then Peter again, the spokesman who has a very poor average up until now; the first instance he was right as you will recall. He said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But since that time, he has not been nearly as accurate, suggesting first to the Lord that He could escape the Cross, suggesting to the Lord that they should build Tabernacles on the Mount of Transfiguration. Well now at least he has approached it from a little different point of view, and he is asking a question, but it is still characteristic of the thinking of a man who tries to enter into the spirit of what the Lord is doing.

Now you recall that he had been brought up under Judaism. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. This was the Law. And, by the way, when Moses gave that it was a great improvement. Now trying to sympathize with what the Lord is doing, Peter asks a question, as much as to say, "Lord, is this the type of thing that You are doing? Is this the way You are doing it? Now, Lord, I want to just show you how generous I am, and how far along I am in understanding this. How oft, if my brother shall sin against me, shall I forgive him? Well now remember, forgiveness was quite unknown. It was, as I said, a Law of reprisal, an eye for an eye, but only one eye, not two. It used to be a life for an eye, a life for a tooth, and the Lord has, as I say, improved on it. Well now, Lord, is this your heart? Suppose I should forgive a brother seven times, seven whole times, Lord, is this the principle? And the Lord says, No, it is seventy times seven, and just carries it completely away. He says, You have misunderstood the matter, Peter. It is not a matter of a numerical consideration. It is a matter of a heart attitude. This new thing that I am doing has in it a new kind of people, a people that have had something radical and transforming and glorious take place within them. And then He proceeds to give an illustration, a story which brings this matter into focus and to a point.

He said, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And then He proceeds to present the one who owed 100 talents, a tremendous sum of money by any calculation that you would wish to use. And the man, unable to pay, falls before the lord entreating that he be not sent to prison, but be given an extension of time. And the master graciously gives the extension of time. And then he proceeds to forgive the entire debt, an immense amount of money. And this man going out, relieved now and reinstated, finds someone that owed him, not 100 talents, but 100 pence, the smallest unit of money, just a mere bagatelle, no significance at all. And he grabs him by the throat and shakes him, and puts him in prison till the debt be paid. Now he was within his legal rights, but in so doing he completely violated all the principles that are set forth by the example of the good master who forgave him, the immense sum. This was carried back to the lord who called his wicked servant before him, and demanded the full payment, and then had him put into prison. And the answer is at the conclusion. So likewise shall My Heavenly Father do also unto you if from your hearts ye forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses.

Now the analogy is not difficult to see. You came to the Lord with a mountain of guilt, the accumulation of your spiritual debts were beyond calculation. Certainly far beyond any numeric figure represented by 100 talents. And of such a nature were they that a lifetime of obedience could not have served to have atoned for one sin. Do you realize the nature of sin when I put it in this fashion? Sin is of such a horrendous quality and nature, were you to from this day on perfectly obey God in everything that He asks and demands, your perfect obedience from today until the day you die would not acquire enough merit to atone for one sin, because there is no merit in obedience. Obedience is that minimal law that God demands, and simply doing what is demanded carries no merit. And a lifetime of obedience would not provide merit sufficient to atone for one sin. What will you do with the myriad of your sins? How will you ever deal with them? And so He is bringing us face to face with the fact that the only possible way that sin can be dealt with is by the forgiving grace of God.

Now in this sense the good man can forgive the debtor because it is his money. But sin had to be dealt with on an entirely different basis, because it was not simply God's character and reputation and honor that were involved. It was the very foundation of moral government of the universe. God said through Moses, The soul that sinneth it shall die. This is an irrevocable law, a law that even God could not abrogate, and still retain His place of moral government in the universe. It was necessary for this law to be fulfilled. And thus the only way it could be fulfilled was for God Himself to become flesh, dwell among us, identify Himself with us, die for us, and not only to die for us but to die as us. He not only died for you, but He died as you. Since He was there for you as your representative, in the eyes of the Father it was you that died. And thus the Law is fulfilled. The soul that sinneth, it shall die. When you come to the Cross, realizing that you ought to have died, realizing that Christ died for you as your representative and as your substitute, realizing that the sword of God's justice was driven to His Heart, and the arrow was plunged into His very Being, and that He died as you with God's Law poured out upon you and Him, and you thus embrace Christ, you are forgiven. But you are forgiven of your sins. The sin itself was paid for in Christ. You can be forgiven of your sins because your sins were paid for by a substitute. But sin as such must be paid for. And so the only way that this immense debt that you would accumulate could ever be satisfied was for God Himself to die.

Now we have raised our illustration to an entirely different level. It is not mere money that a man can part with at whimsy, and never feel the loss if he has sufficient remaining. This was God Himself dying that the debt of your sin might be paid, dying in your place and in your stead. And the only way that you could ever know forgiveness was to come, broken and bankrupt, hopeless and helpless to the foot of the Cross, there seeing Christ die as you in your place and in your stead.

Now, dear heart, do you see then the strength of what He is saying? Someone sins against you, as in the terms of Peter's question, seven times or a one time. What are you going to do about it? You say, "Well he can't do that to me." Yes, but now let us define "me." Who is this "me" that is taking umbrage now, and feels that he cannot thus be dealt with. That me is one who came and stood at the cross a self-confessed criminal, laden with a mountain of guilt, utterly unable to do anything to help himself. Not one good thing to commend him to God. Not a place on him as big as the lobe of his ear that he could say, Lord, this has not been defiled, and this is clean. No. That me that now is taking offence saying, you can't do that to me, just a little while ago stood in the presence of God, beating the breast, God be merciful to me a sinner. But now he is forgiven; now he is pardoned; now he is a child of God, and now he is saying, "But I have my rights." Whence are your rights? Whence came this me? The only kind of people that God has ever saved are lost people, lost people, broken people, and helpless people.

When did you ever lose the character of bankruptcy? When did you ever lose the character of lost? When did you ever lose the character of hopeless and helpless, as far as you were concerned? Forgiveness did add nothing to your intrinsic worth, or mine. When we stood there and pled for mercy, and mercy was granted, we were no less the paupers after the mercy was granted than we were before. And yet how is it that now we can become so sensitive and so insistent upon our rights, and so demanding of our dues. My dear, if we insist upon our due from others, God will insist upon His due from us. And where are we? Hopelessly ensnared again.

And, consequently, He is saying that in this my house, this new thing, in My Church are only broken people, only helpless people, only people who are at the end of themselves. It is no longer a matter of seven times, Peter. It is a matter of having seen yourself; and thus, having seen yourself, incapable of being offended. This is what He is trying to say: Because you have seen yourself a debtor whose debt can never be paid, and could only be pardoned by the others payment, and therefore thereafter it is not a question of seven times and now, and the other cheek and now, and then retaliation, and vindication, and self-defense. Oh no. He said, The only kind of people in My House are broken people, people that have come hopeless and helpless, and at the end of themselves.

Now is this the thing we find? Is it true that Christian people and church members are generally characterized by such brokenness? No, I am afraid not. Because I am afraid that too often there are people that have had an intellectual assent to the plan of salvation, and an emotional response to the joy of escaping from Hell, and they have substituted their comprehension and their emotional relief for meeting God, and they have never truly broken. He has broken people.

Now He understood in His initial statement that there would be problems. He knew that people were people, and they would still be capable of having problems, but the whole presumption in the instructions that He gives in verse 15, this provision that He makes for the possibility of broken fellowship is assumed that people are of one mind in this matter, and that their hearts have been broken. This is only applicable to broken people. This is only applicable to people that have stood before Him with an immense debt that they never could pay and have been forgiven of it all, and have carried with them the recognition that they are by nature paupers. And so He said in verse 15. "If thy brother shall trespass against thee." He realizes there is a possibility, and He realizes that it could happen, even in the Church, with broken people. And He realizes that you could be the trespasser. And so the instructions are both for you who might trespass, and you against whom the trespass is leveled and aimed. What is His Word? If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone. Why? Because underneath both of you is the fact that you both stood at the Cross, both were helpless, both were hopeless, both were broken, both were bankrupt, and neither wants to hurt anybody. The assumption is that it was done, if it was done deliberately (and we will allow that it does carry this possibility) that it was done without all the facts, or it was done under impulse, done by falling into sin. We do not see in this a calculated, long term intention to hurt somebody, but carried by feeling, by emotion, by circumstances, by situations, someone has had another trespass against him.

What does he do? He is the one that is at fault. He is the one that has been hurt, rather. And so he goes. If thy brother trespasses against thee, go and tell him. Elsewhere we find, "If thy brother hath ought against thee, go to him." But now it is the other way. If thou hast ought against thy brother. The Lord is not allowing any escape from "me." The going is always on my hand. What are you going to do, dear heart? What are you going to do? Are you a broken person? The evidence of the genuineness of God's preparatory work in your heart is seen by your response to this Scripture. This is what He says My people do. This is what My people do. Others may do something else, but My people behave this way. If somebody trespasses against them, My people go to the one who did the thing, alone, so that it won't be spread and it won't hurt, and it won't infect. Go alone. The assumption is both are broken, and both want to do what is right, and both want to please God.

Now let me ask you. Is this your habit in relation to things? When someone trespasses against you, is this your response? If this is the test as to whether or not you are a child of God, are you from this a child of God? If He is saying, as He is in fact, My children do thus, are you His child based on what you have done in the past? When someone has trespassed against you, have you done as the Lord instructed, and gone directly to the person? Oh, you said, "There would not be any use. He would not hear me. He is arrogant and proud, and haughty, and you can't talk with such a person as that." Well our Lord also understood that possibility that someone had under false pretense gotten into a place of testimony and was called a brother who was not.

And so, He said, "If he shall not hear thee, take with thee one or two more." Go first alone and try and settle it, so that thou dost gain thy brother. This is what My people do. It may be that someone is professing to be Mine who isn't. Now this should be made clear, because in the church there are to be only those that are His. And so, if you go alone, and you are not received, and the matter is not settled, then (He said) My people will take two or three more and go back to the same person, over the same issue, and then it will be considered and discussed. And if the person has the same attitude in the presence of the two or the three that he had when you came to him alone, you now have evidence to take to the Church, and then to go before the Church, and out of the mouth of three or four witnesses the matter be established, then the church is to take the responsibility of dealing with this unbroken, unyielding, unbending person. This is the way the Lord said His people would act. This is the instruction that He gave in the possibility of broken fellowship.

Down at Mahaffey Camp Meeting about five years ago, I spoke on the matter of the fruit of the Spirit, and made the statement that in my experience and estimation and opinion that probably 95% of all the problems on the Mission Field were personality adjustment problems. And when I had finished, at luncheon, Mr. L. L. King, our Foreign Secretary, sitting next to me, said, "You know, Brother, you were in error this morning in your statistics." Well I had used others and could not recall at the moment which ones, and he reminded me. "Well" I said, "I am sure that this was the case in my experience, and of those with whom I have conversed. I am sure it is this way." "Oh," he said, "the error is not that it is not that high." He said, "It is my opinion that it is probably much higher." I would like to suggest probably 99 and 44/100 percent of the problems on the mission field on the part of missionaries are personality adjustment problems. Well whether the statistics are true or not, the fact still remains that whether it is at home or abroad, this is the source of Satan's greatest handhold in destroying the Church and the work, and the testimony of Christ. And Christ has given specific instruction. And He says, "This is what My people do."

Now, when you do something other – for instance, it might be that someone trespassed against you, and instead of obeying the Scripture and going to the person you go to others about the person. You are, by this, saying, I am not Christ's. I refuse to submit to the Lordship of Christ and the Church. I absolutely refuse to bring myself under His governorship. And though I profess to be saved, I am a hypocrite because I do not mean what I say when I confessed Jesus to be Lord. This is what is being done whenever you go to someone else about an issue, without having first gone to the person, and if you have not been received, taken two or three others, and if not having been received carried it to the church. If you go to another before you have done these three things, you have said, "Though I claim to be a Christian I am not Christ's." This is what Christ's people do. This is what broken people do. This is what the Lord is saying. He is saying, You have got to have some criteria, some means of judging, and some manner of testing. And this is the way it is to be done. My people have stood before the door of Grace, hopelessly helpless under the weight of their sin and their guilt, and because they have been broken they assume that everybody else in the Faith is equally of similar intent to please God, and if they have trespassed the trespass has been done without determined intent to pursue it. If they are determined to pursue it, they give evidence that they are not a child of God.

Now this is, I say, what the Lord has said. This is the implication we draw from it, and we are going to have to adjust our life to it. Because we see that in this particular disobedience, to this particular Scripture and prescription of the Lord, we have given place to Satan to wreck, make havoc, in the church for four hundred years since the time Martin Luther¹ began to bring us back out of the awful wilderness of Rome.

Now we are four hundred years and more since the time Luther declared by the articles on the door at Wittenberg Cathedral the Reformation. Now we are here. Does the Church have the power it ought to have? Does it have the victory it ought to have? Does it have the authority it ought to have? Why? Why did the Lord put the matter of authority in this context? Because it is one of the areas where Satan is most successful in thwarting the purpose of Christ through His Church to bring victory to the glory and cause of Christ.

Now notice, "Verily I say unto you (in verse 18) Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven:" Here Christ provides authority for His Church in spiritual battle and conflict. And, beloved, if there ever has been a day when Satan has

1 Martin Luther (1483-1546) German monk, former Catholic priest, who wrote the Ninety-Five Theses.

been seeking to extinguish the light of every testimony that stands solidly for the Word of God, it is today. The only grounds of authority rests upon obedience to the Lordship of Christ and Christ has made this matter of fellowship with Brethren and dealing with problems the basis for that unity on which the authority of the Church rests.

Therefore, though however much we might understand the authority of the Body, and the authority of the Believer, and the authority of Christ, there is no exercise of that authority, no manifestation of that authority, unless the Church is submitting to the Authority of Christ in relation one to another. And so the whole victory of Christ through His Church can be stopped. And when the Church is dealing on the basis that He has prescribed of confidence in the integrity of others, and elimination of those who do not merit that confidence, then there can be the authority of the Body brought back again to the place where it would be true that whatever is bound on earth should be bound in Heaven.

He makes also this matter of fellowship in the Body of Christ, and unity among the Believers on the level that He has outlined the ground for the answer of prayer. If two or three agree as touching anything, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in Heaven. There you have the matter in strict and clear outline and focus. If two or three shall agree as touching anything. But the assumption is that they have agreed to the Lordship of Christ in the matter of relationship. They have done what He has expected them to do. There is no broken fellowship. There is that unity. For He said here, If two or three are agreed as touching anything. There can be this agreement only on the basis of agreement with one another about each other, and about the Lord and about the Church. And it is this unity that is the true spiritual ecumenism for which our hearts ought to yearn. While other men can give their time to a horizontal amalgamation of the denominations, in trying to get power to counter that of Rome, it simply an erection of a monolithic system of religious organization. And it will have the same effect that every other such System has had. It will sooner or later come under the hammer of God's wrath and God's destruction. And while some can worry about this, and fret about this, and work on this, it seems to me that we of another opinion ought to be working on that true spiritual ecclesia, that calling together of one basis. What is that? The glory of God in Jesus Christ. Where you have come as a bankrupt sinner to the door of Grace. You have been pardoned. You have been forgiven. And now you want to have the sweetest unity and fellowship with everyone else of the same mind and heart, and should trespass come against you, you immediately submit to the Word, to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace. This people, on this basis, have authority over principalities and powers. And they have authority in prayer. Prayer is answered. For this unity releases God to work in the Church.

And I plead with you today to make absolutely sure. Perhaps even you have, unconsciously, and I attribute no other motive, done just exactly contrary to what the Word prescribes. When you have had someone genuinely trespass against you (I am not speaking of cantankerousness now, and meanness, and criticism, as a general principle and attitude of the mind. I believe this must be dealt with as the crass carnality that it is.) I am talking about a real occasion when someone has trespassed against you, and you have not gone to the person involved, but you have gone to others. Then I submit to you that we will assume that you have done it in ignorance, done it thoughtlessly, and you have not had intention to be a rebel against God and destroy the Church. But whether thoughtlessly or determinedly, it has had the effect of making powerless the church of Christ. Will you not, therefore, accept the Word for this relationship, this Church, in any place that you may be, and wherever you may go, and remember that He has said, "If a brother trespass against you, go to the brother. If he won't hear you take two or three. If they won't be heard, then carry it to the Church and let the Church deal with it." Are you prepared to deal with it on this basis? Then you truly own yourself to be His, at least in this. And if you do not, then you will have this Word of the Father with which you must ever deal, "So shall My Heavenly Father do also unto you if from your hearts ye forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses." The Lord loves the Church and is very careful about anything that touches it. He wants to preserve it for Himself, spotless and pure, and holy, that He can use it, that it can be the means of exercising authority, and bringing answer to prayer.

You do not want to be responsible for hurting the Church, His Body. Then let this be the rule in your life. Shall we bow in prayer?

We know, our Father, that as we came to the door of Grace, sinners, with a mountain of guilt, that enormous accumulation of our crimes against Thee, we saw the wounded Lamb. We saw the cleansing Blood. We plunged and received forgiveness. But, Father, should it be that some of Thine Own, Thy dear children have unconsciously, whatever the motive might be Thou

knowest, sinned against the Church in sowing discord and dissension by failing to walk in the light of our Lord's clear prescription. Oh we know there is forgiveness for this if we will but break before Thee, and deal with it. And so we plead the precious Blood. We are coming to the Table this morning. We are coming to the Table of the Lord, and there we see that cup as the Testimony of His shed Blood, and the wafers His broken Body. Might we, before Thee as broken people, come. Might there be in our hearts just now that time of searching. Meet us. Minister to us. Make Thy Name to be great and glorious. We are trusting Thee to meet us now. Bless us richly. Give, we pray Thee, Lord, hearts of courage that we may deal with everything that needs to be dealt with, that we come not with guilt to the Table of our Lord.

While our heads are bowed and our eyes are closed, look well to your heart. We all have problems; personality adjustment problems are not peculiar to the Mission Field. Have you been dealing with them the way the Lord prescribed? Do you love His Church? Do you love His Body? This is the way He would have it done. Do you call Him Lord? This is the way you will do it. Have you been born of Him? This is the way you will want to do it. If you have not, won't you set it right? Won't you go to whomever you may have involved with you in your sin by reporting trespass to them instead of to the one. For when you talked to another you involved them. Oh, dear heart, won't you make this the rule of your life from today on? Do you love Him as Lord?

Father, search us out. There is so much You want to do, so much You have. It takes such a little fox to pull down the vines and spoil the grapes. We do want our lives to count for eternity, count for Thy glory. We want Thy Church to be what it ought to be. Mighty, as an army with banners. And so we ask Thee to deal with us right here at this point. For Jesus sake. Amen.

* Reference such as: Delivered at The Gospel Tabernacle Church, New York City on Sunday Morning, July 2, 1961 by Paris W. Reidhead, Pastor.

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