

Pentecost XVII: Matthew 18:21-35: The Danger of Refusal to Forgive

1. The 25th edition of Nestle/Aland begins a subparagraph at vs. 23. The 26th makes it a major paragraph. We consider the 25th edition preferable here. Likely the 26th makes a major paragraph because vs. 23 introduces a kingdom parable, but surely Jesus spoke vss. 23-35 immediately after vs. 22.
2. There is a serious difference between Stoeckhardt and Kretzmann on the one hand, and Lenski on the other hand, with reference to vss. 15 and 21. With reference to vs. 21 Stoeckhardt says: "Now the Lord deals with an opposite case, how we are to deal with a brother who has sinned against us, but repents of his sin and apologizes, even without us admonishing him." And Kretzmann: "The entire discourse (vss. 15-20) had really concerned the question of dealing with an erring brother. The need of saving the brother, if there were any possibility of doing so without denying the truth and bringing dishonor upon God, had been emphasized. But Peter now (vs. 21) wanted to know whether there is any limit to the number of times one should forgive a repentant brother." (Underlinings our own). But Lenski identifies the brother (ὁ ἀδελφός) of vss. 15 and 21: "This remission on the part of the wronged brother is an entirely separate thing and is not to be confused with the remission God may grant. We must at once forgive every wrong, whether the wrongdoer repents and makes acknowledgment to us or not. That clears us. We hold nothing against the man who has wronged us. But he has his sin to settle with God. It is to help him settle it aright with God, so that God, too, will remit and dismiss his sin, that Jesus orders the procedure outlined in vs. 15 etc." This is a serious difference. The whole point of vss. 15-18 is that when Christians withhold forgiveness of sins from an impenitent sinner, so does God, and when Christians forgive a penitent sinner, so does God. When Christians use Law and Gospel properly, in keeping with the Word of God and for the purpose of saving the brother, they are acting in God's stead. As Luther said: "This is as valid and certain in heaven also as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself." But in vs. 21 nothing is said about convicting a brother of his sin. Stoeckhardt and Kretzmann are surely right in saying that vs. 15 speaks of an impenitent brother while vs. 21 speaks of a repentant brother. What caused Lenski to go awry here? It is another instance of error caused by his denial of objective justification. There is only one justification, reconciliation, atonement, accomplished by Christ FOR ALL MEN. Christ is the Lamb of God Who took away the sins of the world. Man's impenitence is the only thing which renders this ineffective. For Lenski to say that we forgive, whether a brother is repentant or not, and then to have him settle his account with God, makes shambles of the Office of the Keys.
3. Vs. 21: Τότε, obviously immediately after vs. 20. The disciples must have been deeply impressed by what Jesus had said. They were learning but needed more instruction. The whole point of Peter's question centers in the word ποσάκις "how many times?" καὶ amounts to "and then". ἕως ἑπτάκις practically amounts to "Is seven times sufficient?" The commentaries point out that the Rabbis, on the basis of Amos 1:3; 2:6 and Job 33:29.30, limited forgiveness to three times, a plain misapplication of these passages. Peter was more generous than the Rabbis but his generosity amounted to limitation which destroys it all. By the way, Nestle/Aland notes Mt. 6:12 as a parallel passage here. This passage involves no limitation.
4. Vs. 22: Οὐ λέγω σοι denotes the divine authority of Jesus. Cf. the beginning of vss. 18 and 19. ἀλλὰ after a negative means "but quite to the contrary". The lexicons (*BAG, M-M, Thayer*) are ambivalent on the words ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτά. These very words appear in the LXX at Gen. 4:24 where NASB and RSV translate "seventy-sevenfold" and AV has "seventy times seven". Eight of our translations read Mt. 18:22 as "seventy times seven". Only NIV and JB read "seventy-seven times". We think the eight are correct. In any case, Jesus is NOT setting a limit. He means "without limit".

Note that Nestle gives Lk. 17:4 as a parallel: "And if, during the day, he (your brother) sins against you seven times and seven times turns to you saying 'I'm sorry' you will forgive him." The point is that forgiveness toward a repentant brother must be limitless, no matter what the sin.

5. Vs. 23: διὰ τοῦτο, because unlimited forgiveness in disposition and action is expected of Jesus' disciples. "The Kingdom of Heaven" here is the kingdom of grace, the church on earth. ἠθέλησεν contextually means "decided" (LB, TEV, JB, NEB) not "wished" (RSV, NASB) or "wanted" (NIV, AAT, NKJV). As king he had a perfect and just right to call them to account. Note that no limitation is placed on δούλοι. We think Lenski goes too far when he says that "satraps" not "household slaves" are meant. δούλοι are people who have no will of their own but are completely subject to another. That is the point.
6. Vs. 24: The first four words are a genitive absolute. Whether this man was the first is not stated, nor need it be. προσηνήχθη "there was brought" is passive voice. He did not come on his own. That is important in the interpretation. People do not give account on their own. The Law of God alone brings them to account. The last four words of this vs. are elliptical for "one slave who owed him ten thousand talents". Bengel aptly remarks: "The Greek language cannot express by two words, as a distinct and continuous quantity, a larger sum than this." Correct. We are not told whether these were silver or gold talents which differed in value. Furthermore, the value of silver and gold, as today, fluctuated constantly. Therefore it is impossible to give an exact figure. This is deliberately done by Jesus to show the vast amount. Bengel remarks: "A talent contains about 6000 denarii; therefore a thousand talents contain 60,000,000 denarii." Lenski remarks: "600,000 times as much as was due this debtor by his fellow δούλος." Fahling: "The case was hopeless." How he incurred this debt, we are not told. Nor need we be told.
7. Vs. 25: The first five words are a causal genitive absolute, "because he was unable to pay back." Utterly hopeless. ἐκέλευσεν denotes the justice of the king. Here he is called ὁ κύριος, the lord who acts justly. ἀποδοθῆναι does not mean that the sale would cover the ten thousand talents. But it is significant that the lord does not throw him in prison. Nor is anger mentioned here.
8. Vs. 26: οὖν "in view of the lord's command". Every word in this vs. pictures contrition. The δούλος grovelled in the dirt before the κύριος. He asks only for patience and mercy. The last clause in this vs. is an overstatement, in view of 25a. He was unable to repay but said that he would. All honest Christians can identify with this delusion. When they see their sins in all their awfulness their first reaction is a promise to repay all, but that is impossible.
9. Vs. 27: σπλαγγνίζομαι is consistently used in the NT of the compassion of the Lord, whether used directly of Jesus or, as here, in parables which direct us to Jesus. τοῦ δούλου ἐκεῖνου is genitive of relationship. ἀπέλυσεν "he let him off". Bengel remarks: "'Loosed' as the servant had besought him to do. 'Forgave' which the servant had not dared to ask. He had prayed for one kindness; and he obtained two." It is implied that the δούλος continued to maintain his position and retained his wife and property. His slate was as clean as if he had never incurred a debt.
10. Vs. 28: ἐξεληθὼν indicates action immediately after that of vs. 27. Kretzmann remarks: "Hardly had he left the presence of the king when this happened. . . . 'He found' not accidentally, but after deliberate search; the malice of the deed is brought out." τῶν συνδούλων is partitive, and αὐτοῦ is relational genitive. We do not agree with Lenski who says: "The one (δούλος) stood high in the realm and could owe the king 10,000 talents; the other occupied some humble position at the court." The text does not say that. In application that leads to distinguishing higher and lower fellow

Christians, a dangerous distinction. A δηνάριον is worth about twenty cents, a day's wage in those times. A hundred δηνάρια amounts to about twenty dollars. The last clause in this vs. denotes violent language. He grabbed him and began choking him. Vs. 26 pictures contrition, honest acknowledgment of sin. Vs. 28 pictures the haughty opposite in the same person. Bengel says: "Before the accounts had been examined, he treated his fellow-servant more tenderly; the very joy of recovered liberty, or restored healthy, etc., is accompanied by a greater danger of sin. Cf. Jn. 5:14; II Kings 20:13." His actions and words were the direct opposite of what he did and said in vs. 26. There is nothing so wonderful as the contrition and absolution of a sinner. But there is nothing so frightening as the subsequent haughtiness and refusal to forgive others, in that same person. Nine of our translations read "What you owe" at this point. Lenski says that εἴ τι ὀφείλεις should be maintained as a fact condition; "If (as you well know) you owe anything." These notes suggest (but do not press) that this is a remnant of the Classical Future Most Vivid Condition which generally implied a threat. The κύριος had not said ἀπόδος "pay back" because he knew that the man could not. But the δοῦλος assumes a position even above that of the κύριος. This brings out the horror of an unforgiving spirit.

11. Vs. 29: Note the similarities, but also differences, from vs. 26. For προσκυνέω here we have παρεκάλει "was pleading". And the word πάντα, found in 26, is not found here. Oddly enough AV and NKJV include the word "all" here. All other translations rightly omit it. This difference brings out the complete and total difference of the attitude of the first δοῦλος.
12. Vs. 30: This vs. is the direct opposite of what Jesus requires at Lk. 6:36. The forgiven should be like their Father in heaven, merciful. This man is merciless. οὐκ ἠθέλην is likely a litotes "he refused". ἀλλὰ "quite to the contrary." ἀπελθὼν, like ἐξελθὼν in 28, denotes immediate action. The κύριος had not imprisoned the first δοῦλος but the δοῦλος did just that to his fellow δοῦλος. "Until he should pay the debt." Who can repay a debt while in prison? He made it impossible for his fellow slave.
13. Vs. 31: οὖν is likely narrative "now". ἰδόντες "after they fully realized". τὰ γενόμενα "what had happened". "They were utterly pained". Lenski remarks: "Jesus is speaking of the members of his church. . . . To them great grief is attributed, to the king anger. . . . Thus God's reaction is his holy and righteous wrath, but ours great grief. . . . In the church we often reach the end of our resources and must turn 'what has occurred' over to the Lord who still rules in his church and knows how to proceed with the wrongs occurring in its midst." By the way, vs. 31 does not contradict vs. 15. The latter denotes a situation in which there is hope. The former a hopeless situation.
14. Vs. 32: τότε, after being informed. The first half of this vs. denotes the patience of the κύριος. But the second part denotes the glaring inconsistency of the first δοῦλος. Note prominence of πάσων. The last three words are a causal clause. πονηρός means "actively evil".
15. Vs. 33: This vs. is an οὐκ question which demands the answer "yes". οὐκ ἔδει "was it not necessary" not only theologically but also logically. The unforgiving man, who was forgiven, violates not only theology but also simple logic. He is mad. Both καὶ mean "also". The first part of the sentence ought be the logical result of the second part of the sentence. The ὡς is like that of Mt. 6:12. God does not forgive us because we forgive others. It's the other way around. Both Mt. 6:12 and 18:33 plainly show that our forgiveness should be commensurate with that of God toward us, not as to amount, but as to spirit. The mercy of God, in Christ, is the very heart of Scripture. Read Lk. 6:36 again. By nature I am merciless. By grace I am merciful. As said the publican (Lk. 18:13): "God be merciful to me, THE sinner," which denotes true contrition and faith.

16. Vs. 34: καὶ "and then". ὀργισθεῖς is a participle denoting manner. It shows how he handed him over. Not only to prison but to the tormentors. This denotes the judgment of God now over the unforgiving person, not just in hell. ἕως-ὀφειλόμενον does not denote possibility but total impossibility. Who could repay a vast debt, or even a little one, while being tormented? It denotes the total impossibility caused by the impenitence of an unforgiving person. The Catholics say that this vs. denotes the possibilities brought about in purgatory. Thus they try to find Gospel where there is nothing but Law. But if the conscience smites, as it probably did in the case of the disciples and as it probably does for the person who is reading this, the Gospel offers forgiveness of even these sins.
17. Vs. 35: With the words Οὕτως καὶ Jesus introduces the point of comparison. Note that Jesus says "MY heavenly Father" for if we refuse to forgive He is not our heavenly Father. Note how Jesus proceeds from the plural ὑμῖν to the singular ἑκάστος. It is an individual matter. Repentance is an individual matter. The resultant forgiveness toward others is an individual matter. "From your hearts" is a prepositional phrase denoting manner, meaning "genuinely" as opposed to "superficially". How easy to say: "I'll forgive but not forget." How easy to go through the motions of forgiveness but not to do it heartily! Peter, the disciples, and all of us are like the Rabbis who counted sins, who set limitations. How easy to refuse to send someone a Christmas card when one was not received!
18. Some concluding remarks: Ylvisaker says: "We must ever be prepared and willing to forgive; for we live always by the grace of forgiveness. This is the main theme in the parable of the unmerciful servant, which needs no comment apart from the explanation which is found in the parable itself." Bengel: "Those who have experienced the mercy of God, ought to be very careful of exciting His anger." Stoeckhardt: "The unforgiving man denies and forfeits God's grace and mercy, to him will be counted his former guilt, the righteous wrath of the Lord burns over him, upon him will finally come His unmerciful judgment, and will be delivered into an agony from which there is no deliverance. What a warning against unreconciliation!" And Kretzmann: "Any man that is unmerciful, hard-hearted, unforgiving toward his fellowman thereby denies and repudiates God's grace and mercy. His former debt is again charged to his account."