

Relationships in the Kingdom

In Matthew 16, Peter received the revelation concerning the person and commission of the Lord Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). The Lord’s response strengthened, confirmed, and enlarged Peter’s revelation: “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in the heavens. And I *also* say to you that...I will build My church” (vv. 17-18, emphasis added). The Lord’s use of *also* indicates that Peter’s initial revelation was only the first half and foundation of the complete vision of God’s economy concerning Christ and the church. God’s intention in this age is to gain a group of people to whom He can reveal Christ, and into whom He can work Christ, to make them the living members of the church as Christ’s Body to be His full expression in this age, which will consummate in the New Jerusalem as His universal expression for eternity. On the day of His resurrection Christ breathed Himself into the disciples to be their life and content essentially (John 20:22), and on the day of Pentecost He poured Himself out on them to be their clothing and power economically (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:2-4), thus fully bringing the church into existence.

Immediately following this, the church became present, local, and very real in the experience of the believers:

And they continued steadfastly in the teaching and the fellowship of the apostles, in the breaking of bread and the prayers....And day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they partook of their food with exultation and simplicity of heart, praising God and having grace with all the people. And the Lord added together day by day those who were being saved. (vv. 42, 46-47)

From that day until the present, the proper living of the church life has been the grace, blessing, and obligation of all believers. As such, the normal Christian church life is a matter very dear to the Lord’s heart, and our proper participation in it constitutes our responsibility before Him. This is so true, in fact, that the New Testament promises that we will give an account to the Lord at His judgment seat concerning the way we conducted the church life, particularly with respect to our relationships with our fellow believers. Because of this, our relationships in the practical kingdom life fall under the scope of

the “word of righteousness” (Heb. 5:13), the faithful word in the New Testament concerning our accountability to the Lord for our life and work in this age.

Receiving the Believers

Our first obligation in the practical church life is to properly receive all the genuine believers in Christ. Romans 14 and 15 deal with this crucial matter from several angles. In order to practice the Body life revealed in chapter twelve, we must learn the practical lessons of receiving the believers in chapters fourteen and fifteen so that the church life may be all-inclusive, able to include all genuinely regenerated Christians, including those whose views are different from ours in doctrine or in practice. Verse 1 of chapter fourteen says, “Now him who is weak in faith receive, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his considerations.” Following this, Paul speaks of particular eating and the keeping of days, which exemplify the many matters in Christian consideration and practice that are secondary, that is, having nothing to do with our salvation and basic faith. The New Testament indeed speaks of crucial issues, concerning which we must make an unyielding distinction in order to keep the church pure and the Lord’s table undefiled. These include idol worship (1 John 5:21; 1 Cor. 8:4-7), fornication, rapaciousness, reviling, and other such gross sins (5:9-11; 6:9-10), division (Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10), and the denial of the incarnation of Christ (2 John 7-11). Apart from these, however, as long as one is a genuine Christian and has the fundamental faith of the New Testament, we should not exclude him, even though he may differ from us with respect to some doctrine.

In this portion of the Word, Paul’s heart is tolerant, his attitude is broad, and his view is noble. On the other hand, though, many who love the Lord and seek to live the church life have failed because they were either negligent or mistaken in this matter. In Paul’s example of eating, those who have a stronger conscience despise those who are weaker, and those with more tender sensibilities judge those who are less strict (Rom. 14:3); both categories esteem their doctrinal consideration and religious practice more highly than they care for their fellow believers. Paul uses this occasion of improper judgment to speak of the Lord’s own judgment of all

believers: “Who are you who judge another’s household servant?” (v. 4), and

You, why do you judge your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God, for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall openly confess to God.” So then each one of us will give an account concerning himself to God. (vv. 10-12)

The judgment seat of God here is the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10), which will be before the millennium, immediately after Christ’s coming back, to judge all the resurrected and raptured believers for reward or punishment in the millennial kingdom. This judgment will take account of the believers’ life and work after they were saved. Romans 14, one of only two passages in the New Testament that refer to this judgment by name, associates the judgment seat of Christ with the receiving of believers. This indicates the seriousness of our attitude toward our fellow believers.

Paul goes on to exhort the believers not to misappropriate their strength and freedom, thus stumbling one another by what they allow, for to do so is to destroy that man for whom Christ died and to break down the work of God (vv. 15, 20). Rather, we must walk according to love, pursue the things of peace and the things for building up one another, bear one another’s weaknesses with a view to what is good for building up, and be of the same mind toward one another according to Christ Jesus (vv. 13, 15, 19-21; 15:1-2, 5). In 14:17 Paul says, “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” The kingdom of God is the sphere in which God exercises His authority so that He may express His glory for the fulfillment of His purpose. Such a sphere exists today and is carried out in the proper church life. In such a “kingdom life” today—that is, in the church life as the present reality of the kingdom of God—righteousness, peace, and joy characterize the relationship that those who live in the kingdom should have with others and with God.

If we are righteous, right, and proper toward others, toward things, and toward God, we will have a peaceful relationship with others and with God. Thus, we will have joy in the Holy Spirit and, in particular, before God. In this way we will be filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:52) and will live out righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, which are the reality of the kingdom of God. (Recovery Version, Rom. 14:17, note 2)

The entire exhortation of Romans 14:1—15:13 should be considered in the light of the judgment seat of God (14:10). If we live in the condition of righteousness, peace, and joy, with a loving and liberal mind and practice

toward our fellow believers in the kingdom life today, we will be qualified to enter into and enjoy the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens in the millennial age. If, on the contrary, we do not practice the church life by receiving the believers according to God’s receiving, in the principle of love, and according to Christ, we will be found lacking at the judgment seat of Christ and in consequence will be excluded from the joy and bright glory of the kingdom in the coming age. How important our receiving of one another is, and how dear it is to the heart of Christ!

Being Reconciled with Our Brother

After receiving the believers according to God’s receiving, in the light of the judgment seat, in the principle of love, for the kingdom life, and according to Christ, we enter into a long life of walking together “on the way” (Matt. 5:25), that is, on the path of the proper Christian life and church life. In Matthew 5 the Lord gave His disciples an indispensable teaching concerning the stumbling blocks

If we do not practice the church life by receiving the believers according to God’s receiving, in the principle of love, and according to Christ, we will be found lacking at the judgment seat of Christ and be excluded from the joy and bright glory of the kingdom in the coming age.

we encounter on the way in our relationships with one another. It is useful to consider the Lord’s word in detail. In verses 21 and 22 He says,

You have heard that it was said to the ancients, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders shall be liable to the judgment.” But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, Raca, shall be liable to the judgment of the Sanhedrin; and whoever says, Moreh, shall be liable to the Gehenna of fire.

The words *you have heard* are the law of the old dispensation, whereas the words *I say to you* are the new law of the kingdom of the heavens, which complements the law of the old dispensation. The law of the old dispensation deals with the act of murder, but the new law of the kingdom deals with anger, the motive of murder.

It is important to understand that this word was spoken by the Lord to and regarding the New Testament believers in

the practical church life. We can see this first by the contrast between the parallel structures *said to the ancients* in verse 21 and *say to you* in verse 22. The former word was spoken through Moses to the people of the old dispensation, while the latter was spoken by the Lord directly to those of the new dispensation, the two recipients being, as Chrysostom suggests, the children by the same husband of the maidservant and of the free woman (Alford 45, cf. Gal. 4:22-26). The children of the free woman are the believers in the church. Second, the use of the word *brother* in Matthew 5:22 indicates that the parties spoken of are the regenerated children of the Father who have entered into an organic relationship with the firstborn Son of God. This further proves that the Lord's word here is spoken to His disciples as representatives of the New Testament believers. This fact is important for interpreting the words that follow. The Lord is not here establishing or altering the religious or civic laws of the Jews, as if to replace the old law of the letter with a new law of the letter, nor are the judgments to be taken literally, since no civil court can take cognizance of angry thoughts or feelings. Rather, the Lord used figures from the Jewish background of the listeners, all of whom were Jewish by race and training, to illustrate the spiritual truths of the new kingdom of the heavens, of which Matthew 5—7 may be considered the constitution.

Matthew 5:22 speaks of three degrees of offenses between brothers. The first case is simply anger in the heart toward a brother, bespeaking an inward condition and motive. *Angry* here is the participle form of ὀργή, denoting an abiding, nurtured, lingering anger, as opposed to θυμός, a short-lived, passionate outburst of wrath. It may indicate not so much an event as a condition of offense among brothers. In the second case, anger is manifested in an expression of contempt. *Raca* is the Aramaic *reqa'*, *empty*, denoting empty-headed, stupid, good-for-nothing, a haughty, deprecatory address to an inferior. In the third case, the anger is expressed through a more serious term, *moreh*. This word may be treated simply as the Greek μωρός, as in the King James Version's "Thou fool." It is more likely, though, that it is from the Hebrew *marah*, *rebel*. This is the word used by Moses in his anger against the people of Israel—"Listen now, you rebels"—for which he was denied the entrance into the good land (Num. 20:10-12). Whereas *raca* denotes an intellectual vacuousness and scorns a man's mind, *moreh* is a moral and spiritual reprobation and scorns a man's heart and character before God. The former may be used to slight one who is seen to be slow and dull, while the latter implies a rebuke for an alleged spiritual failing or shortfall. The former is haughty and academic, constituting a contempt before man, while the latter is Pharisaical, being a condemnation before God and man. The former tends to damage a man in the eyes of the community, while the latter threatens to estrange a brother from the

fellowship of the house of God. Both are the manifestation of the sin of nurtured anger in the heart, but the latter, presuming a religious high ground and invoking the greater condemnation, is more serious and impugnable in the eyes of God.

The Lord applied this general, parabolic word in a practical way. Matthew 5:23-24 says,

Therefore if you are offering your gift at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and first go and be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

A gift, as distinguished from a sacrifice at the altar, is for fellowship with God. The interruption to fellowship here is not the feeling of offense toward a brother but the remembrance in the conscience of the offerer that a brother has something against him. Therefore, *something against you* must refer to an offense caused by the anger or scolding in verse 22. Not only is the sin of anger and the angry word a cause for judgment, but the offense caused in the one slighted also creates a need for reconciliation. Such a reconciliation must be carried out before fellowship with God can be restored. The Lord speaks again in parable in verses 25 and 26, concluding, "Be well disposed quickly toward your opponent at law, while you are with him on the way, lest the opponent deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, You shall by no means come out from there until you pay the last quadrans." We will consider these verses shortly.

Being Liable to the Judgment

Corresponding to the three degrees of offense in verse 22, three kinds of judgment also are mentioned. The first is simply called "the judgment" (τῆ κρίσει), a judgment of the council at the gate of the city, the district judgment (Deut. 16:18). The second is the judgment of the Sanhedrin (τῶ συνεδρίῳ), the judgment of last recourse, the council in Jerusalem authorized to try and punish cases of greater significance, including heresy. The third is the judgment of the Gehenna of fire (τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός). *Gehenna*, valley of Henna, is equivalent to the Hebrew *Ge Hinnom*, valley of (the sons of) Hinnom. Also called Tophet, or Topheth (2 Kings 23:10; Isa. 30:33; Jer. 19:13), it is a deep valley near Jerusalem where, during the apostasy of Israel, the service of Molech was celebrated (1 Kings 11:7; 2 Chron. 28:3). Josiah converted it into a place of abomination, the refuse-place of the city, where all kinds of filth and the bodies of criminals were cast for burning. Because of its continual fire, it became the symbol of condemnation and the place of eternal punishment. As we indicated above, these judgments are

figures and are not to be taken literally. It does not follow that a hidden sin in the heart results in a civic, legal judgment or that an angry word of one kind results in a higher legal judgment while an angry word of another kind results in immediate condemnation by God and perdition in fire. Rather, these judgments must be considered for their spiritual significance.

However, due to an inadequate revelation of the word of righteousness in the New Testament, many expositors of the Bible know of only one way to interpret passages that speak of the judgment of God, that is, to apply them to the final judgment and perdition of unbelievers in the lake of fire. Matthew Henry is representative of these:

The Jews had three capital punishments, each worse than the other; beheading, which was inflicted by the judgment; stoning, by the council or chief Sanhedrin; and burning *in the valley of the son of Hinnom*, which was used only in extraordinary cases: it signifies, therefore, that rash anger and reproachful language are damning sins; but some are more sinful than others, and accordingly there is a greater damnation, and a sorer punishment reserved for them. (59)

All three cases, he says, are cases of “damning sins,” to be met with “capital punishments,” that is, with perdition; all three result in final condemnation, as signified by death by the sword, death by stoning, or death followed by burning, respectively. This view, shared in degree by others, converts the Lord’s entire teaching in Matthew 5:21-26 to a pronouncement on unregenerated unbelievers, for it is they alone who will be damned to eternal death at the Lord’s final judgment. According to this interpretation, the entire purpose of this passage is to expose the condition of the unregenerate under the burden of sins, even the least of which is worthy of death and deserving of hell fire.

If we hold to the Lord’s intended meaning that the opponents at law in verse 25 signify offended parties in the church, yet we still insist that those who abide in their anger and offense are in danger of eternal perdition, we end up with a perversion of the gospel, that is, that reconciliation with an offended brother—rather than saving faith in the Lord’s person and work—becomes a factor of salvation for the believer. It is well said that perdition is the result of sin (Rom. 5:17-18), but salvation as a result also has a cause, which is the Lord’s redemptive work as appropriated by our faith. Therefore, if salvation were the issue here, we would expect the Lord to say, “Repent and believe for forgiveness of sins.” Instead, He says, “Be well disposed quickly toward your opponent.” Henry tries to resolve this discrepancy by interpreting the opponent at law as the Lord Himself, with whom the sinner does well to agree and toward

whom he must quickly be well disposed. This interpretation, however, does not find many subscribers. Therefore, on the whole, the foregoing interpretation of this passage leaves us with an irresolvable contradiction and a confusion of the gospel. We should not say, therefore, that the judgments in Matthew 5:22 apply to those who perish in unbelief. Rather, they apply to believers who are not reconciled one to another in their lifetime.

In regard to the kingdom people, the believers of the New Testament to whom the Lord spoke this passage, all the judgments in verse 22 refer to the judgment seat of Christ, as revealed in 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Romans 14:10. At His judgment seat, not only will the deeds of the believers be tested by fire, but even the counsels of their heart will be made manifest (1 Cor. 3:13-15; 4:4-5). The New Testament believers, although assured of eternal salvation, are still liable to the Lord’s judgment, a judgment not for perdition but for discipline, if they sin against the new law of the kingdom given by the Lord in Matthew 5. If we are in a condition of offense with a

*The New Testament believers,
although assured of eternal salvation,
are still liable to the Lord’s judgment,
a judgment not for perdition
but for discipline, if they sin against
the new law of the kingdom
given by the Lord
in Matthew 5.*

brother in the church, we must first be reconciled to him so that our remembrance of the offense can be removed and our conscience can be void of offense. Then we can come and offer our gift to the Lord and fellowship with Him with a pure conscience. Such a reconciliation must take place during our lives, in this age, as signified by “while you are with him on the way.”

The issue of the judgment seat of Christ will be our entrance into and full enjoyment of the manifestation of the kingdom in the coming millennial age or our exclusion from it for a time of discipline. The King of the kingdom will never allow two brothers who are not reconciled to each other either to share the kingdom in its reality today or to reign in its manifestation in the coming age. Those who remain in anger and offense until they meet the Lord will suffer a certain discipline during the kingdom age, as signified by the prison in verse 25. Moreover, those who are disciplined by the Lord in this way will not “come out from there” until they “pay the last quadrans,” signifying that their time of discipline will

last until they are forgiven by the Lord in the coming age (v. 26). This forgiveness in the coming age will preserve their eternal salvation.¹ Watchman Nee calls forgiveness of this kind and at this time the forgiveness of the kingdom, or “kingdom forgiveness”:

This matter is certainly not of salvation, because eternal salvation is based on the Lord Jesus, not on human effort! We are saved by grace and not by works. We are saved by the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. Our sins are forgiven because of the shed blood; our sins are not forgiven because we forgive others. But after we *have* become Christians, after we *have* been called a brother, a “slave of the Lord,” we must forgive our brothers. If we do not forgive, God will deal with us when the Lord Jesus comes back. During the kingdom age the Lord will allot to us what He considers just. We will not be lost, but He will chasten us according to what we have done. Eternal salvation is secure, but our place in the kingdom, the millennial age, will depend on our conduct today. God will deal with us according to what we have done to others. God will deal with us according to His justice. This forgiveness can be called the millennial or kingdom forgiveness. (46:1280)

Caring for the “Little Ones” of the Lord

Matthew 18 may be the most thorough and precious chapter in the New Testament dealing with the relationships between the believers in the church life as the practical kingdom of the heavens. The Lord’s entire discourse is His response to two questions from the disciples. The first question is, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of the heavens?” (v. 1). The second is, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?” (v. 21). The Lord’s answer to these questions indicates that in order to enter into the kingdom of the heavens we must be humble and not despise any believer, but love our brother and forgive our brother. The disciples’ first question exposes the problem of pride, which is the source of stumbling others and of being stumbled. In the practical kingdom life, we must become as little children to avoid the problem of pride and stumbling.

Jesus illustrated His answer by calling a little child and standing him in their midst, saying that all the kingdom people were to become “like this little child” (v. 4). Hence, the Lord’s word concerning the “little ones” in the subsequent verses applies in principle to all the believers, “the children in age and the children in grace” (Alford 186), particularly those who are young, weak, unlearned, untrained, and even sinning and backsliding. In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Paul exhorted the brothers to console the fainthearted, sustain the weak, and be long-suffering toward all. *Fainthearted* here is *δλιγψυχος*, *little-souled*, narrow and feeble in the capacity of mind,

will, and emotion. Thus, the Lord’s warning against stumbling in Matthew 18:6-10 expresses His detailed, jealous, and intimate care for all the believers as His little ones. To stumble one of the Lord’s little ones is a great offense to Him. In His heart of concern, it is more profitable that a millstone be hung around a person’s neck and he be drowned in the sea than that he stumble “one of these little ones.”

Therefore, all measure should be taken to prevent and avoid that offense. Verses 8 and 9 underscore the severity of such offenses by saying,

If your hand or your foot stumbles you, cut it off and cast it from you; it is better for you to enter into life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. And if your eye stumbles you, pluck it out and cast it from you; it is better for you to enter into life with one eye than to have two eyes and be cast into the Gehenna of fire.

If a person is given to expressions of anger, the hand and foot may cause injury, but if one is proud and judgmental, even the eye will despise what it sees. All must be dealt with desperately in order to avoid stumbling a weak one and to preserve the one causing the stumbling in the experience and enjoyment of the divine life both in this age and even more in the coming age of reward or punishment.

Dealing with a Sinning Brother

The Lord’s endearing term for His young and weak believers in this chapter is “one of these little ones” (vv. 6, 10). In verses 11 through 13, however, He changes His metaphor; the little ones become the lost sheep, the one out of a hundred, “that which is lost,” and “the one that has gone astray.” Here the Lord is revealed as the good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to go and seek the one wayward sheep. In verse 14 He explains the parable by returning to His original example: “It is not the will of your Father who is in the heavens that one of these little ones perish.” Then in verse 15 He leaves behind all simile and metaphor to speak directly: “Moreover if your brother sins against you....” The little one who must not be stumbled and the wayward sheep in need of rescue are none other than “your brother” who has sinned against you.

In verses 15 through 19 the Lord shows the way to deal with such a sinning one in several steps. In the first step, the one against whom he has sinned reproves him, the two of them alone, with the goal of gaining the brother. For the wronged brother to go alone, in secrecy, is to carefully cover the sinning brother, that no third party may know his wrongdoing. This is a covering of love (1 Cor. 13:7; Prov. 10:12). *Gain* (*κερδαίνω*) is used in the New

Testament in the truest sense of the word. In Matthew 16:26 it is used for gaining the whole world; in James 4:13, for making a profit in business; in 1 Corinthians 9:19-20, for gaining men through the gospel; and in Philippians 3:8, for gaining Christ. Here the sinning brother is gained by the covering care of the one whom he wronged. Only if the sinning brother will not hear him, should the one seeking reconciliation take with him one or two more as witnesses. Here too the principle is to cover the brother and keep his sin from public exposure. If the brother will not hear them, though, the authority of the church is brought to bear, and if he will not hear the church, “let him be to you just like the Gentile and the tax collector” (Matt. 18:17).

Although some may speak here of “church discipline” and “public censure,” this is not at all the Lord’s goal here, as Alford says, “Nothing could be further from the spirit of the Lord’s command than proceedings in... ‘ecclesiastical’ courts” (188). *Let him be* is simply ἔστω, third person imperative of *be*. The meaning here is to “let him be what he is,” one who loses, who misses, the fellowship as a Gentile or tax collector, who are sinners outside the fellowship of the church. What the sinning brother is, though, is up to him; it is not the doing or the decree of the church. If we value and treasure the church fellowship, we will not cut people off from it. The Lord’s heart toward the Gentiles was to come as a light to them to bring them salvation (Isa. 42:6; 49:6; Rom. 9:25-26). Likewise, His attitude toward the tax collectors was one of tender sympathy, reclining at table with them as their Friend, showing them mercy that He might call them and be the great Physician to them (Matt. 9:9-13; 11:19; 21:31; Luke 18:10-14). This was the way that the Lord dealt with the Gentiles and tax collectors. This, not the discipline of an “ecclesiastical court,” is the Lord’s heart in Matthew 18:17.

Accordingly, the deep thought in Matthew 18 is that the sinning brother still would be gained, though now through the more desperate means of praying by exercising the authority of the church to bind Satan, the one who binds the sinning brother, and loose the sinning brother, the one who is bound (v. 18). Verse 19 says, “Again, truly I say to you that if two of you are in harmony on earth concerning any matter for which they ask, it will be done for them from My Father who is in the heavens.” *In harmony* here is συμφωνέω, a term used primarily for musical instruments, from which root we derive *symphony*. When two or three pray in harmony, with the authority of the kingdom, for a backsliding, sinning one, this prayer to recover him becomes like music to the ears of the Father in heaven. Clearly, the feeling of verses 15 through 20 is not that of retaining or disciplining an offense. Rather, this portion reveals the loving, forgiving, covering, and prayerful care we must show toward a sinning brother. Even the

sinning brother is one of the Lord’s “little ones,” and we must be careful not to stumble him by our improper dealing with him. To despise, expose, damage, or cut him off is to cause us to be liable to the judgment signified by the millstone and the drowning in the open sea (v. 6). Even when dealing with such a brother, we must care for the proper relationships in the church life in the light of the judgment seat of Christ and the coming dispensation of reward and punishment.

Forgiving One Another from the Heart

After this discourse, Peter asked the second question in chapter eighteen: “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”, to which the Lord replied, “I do not say to you, Up to seven times, but, Up to seventy times seven” (vv. 21-22). Then Jesus illustrated His answer with the following parable:

For this reason the kingdom of the heavens has become like a king who desired to settle accounts with his slaves.

*Even when dealing
with a sinning brother,
we must care for the proper
relationships in the church life
in the light of the
judgment seat of Christ
and the coming dispensation
of reward and punishment.*

And when he began to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, the master commanded him to be sold, as well as his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. Then the slave fell down and worshipped him, saying, Be patient with me and I will repay you all. And the master of that slave was moved with compassion and released him and forgave him the loan. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and he took hold of him and began to choke him, saying, Repay me what you owe. Then his fellow slave fell down and begged him, saying, Be patient with me and I will repay you. But he would not; instead, he went away and threw him into prison until he would repay what was owed. (vv. 23-30)

Ten thousand talents, the evil slave’s forgiven debt, is an amount equivalent to much more than a lifetime’s wages. The fellow slave’s debt to him, one hundred denarii, is less than one ten thousandth of this amount. While the

significance of the disparity between the two debts is easily perceived, and the ungrateful, abusive heart of the evil slave readily discerned, the application of this parable is tragically missed if taken apart from the word of righteousness concerning the accountability of the believers to the Lord at His judgment seat. Because of the abrupt severity with which this parable ends (vv. 34-35), it is mostly considered as applicable strictly to unbelievers who do not receive the benefit of the Lord's salvation to take away their debt of sins to God. However, this thought cannot be supported by the language and context of this parable for at least the following reasons.

First, the one who owed the great debt is called the slave of the king, and the second debtor is a fellow slave. In the parables of the New Testament, slaves signify believers viewed from the aspect of their purchase by and service to the Lord. The Greek δοῦλος, as in this passage, is the most common and general word in the New Testament for *slave* or *servant*. It is used for ownership of persons in natural society, as in Matthew 8:9 and many other instances. In the spiritual realm, it is used to describe the believers in their relationship to God: the apostles and their co-workers are slaves of God and of Christ Jesus (Acts 16:17; Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:7; 4:7, 12; 2 Tim. 2:24; Titus 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1; Rev. 1:1); the believers in general are slaves of God and of Christ (Eph. 6:6-7; 1 Pet. 2:16; Rev. 1:1; 19:5; 22:6); the prophets and martyrs are slaves (10:7; 11:18; 6:11; 19:2, 5); and in eternity all the people of God in the New Jerusalem will be His slaves (22:3). In the Septuagint, δοῦλος is frequently used for the Hebrew *'ebed* with the same meaning:² corporately, Israel is the servant of Jehovah (Psa. 136:22; Isa. 49:3); individually, His servants are the redeemed (Psa. 34:22), those who dwell in Zion (69:35-36; 102:13-14), who bless and praise Him (134:1; 135:1), and who join themselves to Him to minister to Him and to love His name (Isa. 56:6); and specifically, the servants of Jehovah include Moses, Joshua, David, and the prophets (Dan. 9:11; Judg. 2:8; Ezek. 34:23; Amos 3:7; Zech. 1:6). In its spiritual application, therefore, *slave*, or *servant*, is a particular term reserved uniquely for the believers as the purchased and redeemed ones of God. It does not refer to the perishing, unregenerated sinners.

Second, the parable of the evil slave must be considered in its context in Matthew 18. The entire chapter is a unified, integrated whole with a single thematic purpose from the first verse to the last. It is introduced with a question concerning who is greatest in the kingdom of the heavens, it proceeds with the Lord's reply concerning the "little ones," the "sheep," and it turns to the practical application of a sinning brother, in which the spirit of the Lord's word is contrasted with the spirit of the original question. Then Peter, recognizing the theme of humility

and forgiveness in the Lord's reply, asks further about the limits of forgiveness, to which the Lord responds with a parable. Once again, the spirit of the response is in contrast to the question, and it is in these stark contrasts that the continuity of the chapter is strengthened. Lange provides an example of employing the unity of the chapter in its interpretation, in which he refutes the use of "tell it to the church" as justification for the passing of formal judgments by church authorities:

On the contrary, the ἐκκλησία [church] is in this passage [v. 17] put in antithesis to the question touching the μέγιστον...ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν [greatest in the kingdom of the heavens, v. 1]. Hence this would have been the most unsuitable place for anything like the sanction of a hierarchy. (329)

In other words, to interpret verse 17, he refers to verse 1 to maintain the thesis of the chapter as a whole. This illustrates the correct way to deal with Matthew 18. In this principle, we can identify the child, "one of these little ones," the one sheep, "your brother," and the fellow slave in the parable all as the same person—a weak believer in need of forgiveness from God and from his fellow believers. Who then is the first slave, whose great debt was forgiven? It is Peter, who asked the question, "How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" In the Lord's parabolic answers, the person of the one who posed the question is often perceived as a character in the parable (21:45). In Peter's question, we see two parties—Peter and "my brother." In the Lord's parable there are also two parties—the evil slave and his fellow slave. In principle, then, the unforgiving slave refers to all the believers, as represented by Peter, who fail to grasp the Lord's heart of forgiveness.

The parties of the parable should be considered as New Testament believers for a third reason. *My Father* in verse 10 becomes *your Father* in verse 14. Both *Father* and *brother* are organic terms, applicable only by virtue of our new birth. The believers are children of God, begotten of God (John 1:12-13). Only as such are they sons of the Father and brothers of Christ, the first-born Son of God (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 2:11). Hebrews 2:12 says, "I will declare Your name to My brothers; in the midst of the church I will sing hymns of praise to You." *Brothers*, therefore, is equivalent to *the church*. The parable in Matthew 18 is in the context of dealing with a sinning brother (v. 15) and is the response to Peter's question, "How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" Thus, it is contrary both to the language and to the context of this parable—and contrary to proper biblical exposition—to interpret the unforgiving slave as an unbeliever. Rather, we must interpret the elements of the parable in this way: The slaves are both redeemed believers, brothers. After becoming a slave, however, the

first party incurred a great debt to his Master, the Lord. No mention is made of the life of the man before he became a slave, nor can we infer in the least that he was born in that estate. Rather, the debt spoken of here was incurred after he entered into slave service to the Master. This debt, therefore, must refer to the heavy debt of our sins against the Lord accumulated after we are saved. Correspondingly, the release from the debt in verse 27 refers to the forgiveness of our debts in our defeated Christian life, incurred after we are saved and become slaves of the Lord, for the restoration of our fellowship with the Lord (1 John 1:7, 9).

Delivered to the Torturers

The parable of the unforgiving slave ends in this way:

Then his fellow slaves, seeing what had taken place, were greatly grieved and came and explained fully to their master all that had taken place. Then his master called him to him and said to him, Evil slave, all that debt I forgave you, because you begged me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave even as I had mercy on you? And his master became angry and delivered him to the torturers until he would repay all that was owed. (Matt. 18:31-34)

The Lord concluded, “So also will My heavenly Father do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from your hearts” (v. 35). The Lord’s settling of accounts with His believers will take place at the judgment seat of Christ, which will determine our reward or need for discipline in the coming kingdom age. If we do not forgive a brother from our heart today, we will not be allowed to enter into the kingdom. Rather, we will be disciplined by the Lord until we forgive from the heart, that is, until we repay all that is owed. This will transpire in the coming age, the kingdom age. Watchman Nee says,

Every Christian should learn not to be a “judge” and should avoid judging others with self-righteousness. If we do not forgive others, we will receive the most severe punishment in the millennium. We are destined to have eternal life because salvation is eternal. But if we do not forgive others who offend us in this life, God will not forgive us in the future....God will not allow two people in His kingdom to be divided against each other, nor will He permit hatred in the hearts of His people. God will not allow a ruler of five cities to be in conflict with the ruler of another five cities. He cannot use anyone who is not a peacemaker to rule a city. He can only hand them over to the tormentor until they have paid all their debts. How do they make payment? They must be willing to pardon and forgive others from their hearts. (20:192)

That our forgiveness from the Lord is affected by our

forgiveness of others is not a new revelation at this point in Matthew. The Lord already had said, “If you forgive men their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you also; but if you do not forgive men their offenses, neither will your Father forgive your offenses” (6:14-15). Similarly He said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy” (5:7), as James later added, “For the judgment is without mercy to him who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:13).

We must be fair to point out that a number of notable writers are not willing to admit of a punishment for unfaithful and unforgiving believers at the Lord’s judgment seat. If we consider their arguments, though, we find that such an unwillingness persistently leads to confusion, contradictions, and ambiguities in their understanding of Matthew 5 and 18. We will point out a few here. Lenski begins the exposition of 18:23-35 with the kingdom of the heavens: “It is the rule of God’s grace on earth through Christ. Wherever God exercises his grace through Christ, there this heavenly kingdom is found in

*If we do not forgive
a brother from our heart today,
we will not be allowed
to enter into the kingdom.
Rather, we will be disciplined
by the Lord until we forgive
from the heart, that is,
until we repay all that is owed.*

all its blessed power” (710). Taking the slave to be a sinner, he sees the remission of sins in verse 27:

The moment the sinner realizes his sin, confesses it, and turns to God, God pardons the guilt....This is Biblical justification, the central doctrine of the Christian faith: God declares the sinner free from guilt and righteous in his sight. (715-716)

By this point, at least, the one whose sins are remitted must be a genuine believer, justified in the eyes of God and righteous in His sight. However, his pardon is still mainly forensic; it is not yet manifested by a full appreciation of the grace of God, which will still come in time: “Contrition is to deepen when he thinks of what he has escaped, and his faith and joy will increase when he thinks what has been granted to him” (716). However, once he refuses to remit the debt of his fellow slave, the remission of his own sins is retracted, and his latter state is worse than his former: “Not only did this man forfeit his own remission, his penalty is made vastly worse”

(721). Now he is consigned to hell, which is “full of hideous devils whose one occupation it will be to plague and to torture the damned” (723). Thus, the slave has passed from justification, to grace, to forfeiture, and into hell. “The Christian,” Lenski says, “stands in a middle point, between a mercy received, and a mercy which he yet needs to receive” (725). The consequence of not reaching the latter end is the revocation of the pardon once granted, unto eternal damnation. Although many evangelical Bible students do not share Lenski’s theology of revocable remission, this is illustrative of the errors inherent in being unwilling to call the evil slave a forgiven but unforgiving believer, liable to judgment in the next age, but still heir to eternal salvation.

Matthew Henry begins by rightly identifying the setting of the parable. “The parable,” he says, “represents the *kingdom of heaven*, that is, the church, and the administration of the gospel dispensation in it. The church is God’s family, it is his court; there he dwells, there he rules” (263). He notes that the occasion of the Master reckoning with His slaves is the inquiry of divine justice in the conscience of an “awakened Christian” (263). Yet later in his interpretation we see the real end of this “awakened Christian”: he is sent to hell, to the “devils, the executioners of God’s wrath...tormentors for ever” (266). Henry concludes, “Intimations enough we have in scripture of the forfeiture of pardons, for caution to the presumptuous....Those that do not *forgive their brother’s trespasses*, did never truly repent of their own, nor ever truly believe the gospel.” Henry’s reasoning is that although someone may appear to be a believer, certain sins manifest the fact that he never really believed. Is it unbelief, though, or the evil deed itself that damns him? Henry does not make this clear, for he says, “Rash anger and reproachful language are damning sins” (59), apparently even to “awakened Christians” in “God’s family.” The doctrine of “forfeiture of pardons” has a certain logic to it which is adhered to by some today, such as the teachers of “lordship salvation.” However, its inherent ambiguities and contradictions ultimately trouble the weak believer’s assurance and security of salvation and threaten to pervert the pure message of the gospel of grace. For more on this, please see *Affirmation & Critique*, VIII.1, April 2003, pp. 54-68.

M’Neile says, “Because unlimited forgiveness is the duty of a disciple, *therefore* when the Kingdom of Heaven comes those who have not followed the divine example will be punished, as this parable represents” (268). As we read on in his commentary, though, we learn that the disciple’s punishment is perpetual and unending in Gehenna. Even the eminent Dean Alford uses confusing language to describe the unforgiving slave in Matthew 18. “We may observe,” he says, “that *forgiveness of sin* does not imply a *change of heart or principle in the sinner*” (190). This we

know, of course, from the Scriptures and from experience, because it is evident that Christians who “‘go out’ from the presence of God in prayer and spiritual exercises” may sin again. Yet, he concludes darkly, “He who falls from a state of grace falls into a state of condemnation” (192), that is, eternal condemnation. This language also troubles our basic belief in the perseverance and assurance of salvation.

The parable of the unforgiving slave is often quoted in the discussion of the question, “*Utrum peccata semel remissa redeant*, whether sins once forgiven return on the sinner through his subsequent transgressions” (Lange 334). We find the foregoing commentaries to be very unsatisfactory in answering that question, and even less helpful in striking the central thought of the warning in Matthew 18. That one declared by God to be free from guilt and righteous in His sight has the remission of his sins retracted, that an awakened Christian in the family of God condemns himself to hell by anger and reproachful language, that a “disciple” can be punished forever, that one can fall from the state of grace into eternal condemnation when he loses his spiritual exercise—all these are the errors and contradictions inherent in the failure to view Matthew 18 as a unified, thematic whole: a word of love and warning applicable not only to Peter and the disciples but to all genuine believers as the people in the kingdom of the heavens, the practical church life in this age, those who are eternally saved yet still accountable at the judgment seat of Christ as to whether or not they forgave their brothers from the heart.

Becoming Sons of the Father to Practice Love as the Most Excellent Virtue for the Church Life

The need to receive one another and forgive one another in the church is a simple, pastoral homily. However, a shortage of revelation on the part of many Bible students concerning the kingdom reward requires a more polemic tone. Yet neither a homily nor a polemic should distract us from the central line of the economy of God in the New Testament, that is, that God desires to work Himself into us that we may be His expression in full. Immediately before the Lord spoke the words in Matthew 5:21-26, which we have considered here, He said, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall by no means enter into the kingdom of the heavens” (v. 20). Righteousness here is the subjective righteousness, which is the indwelling Christ lived out of us as our righteousness that we may live in the reality of the kingdom today and enter into its manifestation in the future. Such a life can be produced only by a higher life, the resurrection life of Christ. Following this, He said, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become sons of your Father who is in the heavens, because He causes

His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (vv. 44-45). God is love (1 John 4:8); love is the nature of His essence. As the children of God, we have been begotten of Him to be the same “species,” to be “like Him” (3:2), the same as He is in life and nature but not in the Godhead. It is only by living out the nature of God that we can have “love out of a pure heart” and “love one another from a pure heart fervently” (1 Tim. 1:5; 1 Pet. 1:22). It was by living Christ in this way, according to God’s New Testament economy, that Paul could forgive even the sinning brother “in the person of Christ” (Phil. 1:21; 2 Cor. 2:10).

Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her (Eph. 5:25). However, since Christ came to call not the righteous but the “tax collectors and sinners” (Matt. 9:10), we must be ready to receive believers of every kind. The Father runs to meet the returning prodigal son, and the Son leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one which is lost (Luke 15:20, 4). Only by becoming the same as He is in life and in nature can we be “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48), and only in this way can we practice love as the highest and most excellent virtue for the practical church life, which is the expression and practice of love as the nature of God’s essence (1 Cor. 12:31—13:13).

Since offenses are unavoidable in such a practical living, we must be ready to manifest the loving and forgiving heart of our Father God and the shepherding and seeking spirit of our Savior Christ. Matthew 5:21-26 and the whole of chapter eighteen emphasize the need of two parties—the one who offends and the one who is offended—both to forgive and to be forgiven while they are with one another “on the way,” that is, during their lifetime in the church. Yet the reader will no doubt have seen, to one extent or another, the tragedy of a church life practiced apart from the nature of God, resulting in unforgiven offenses between believers, between Christian workers, within Christian meetings, over doctrinal opinions, over preferences of practice, due to censure and rebuke, in natural relationships (which begin sweetly like honey but ferment in time—Lev. 2:11), in failed relationships, in financial affairs, in business dealings, and in a myriad of other circumstances. In all these cases, we must live by the nature of God, who is love, to become sons of the Father practicing love as the most excellent virtue for the church life, and in such a love to forgive one another. Otherwise, we will stumble one another, beat our fellow slaves (Matt. 24:49), annul the kingdom life among us, and cause ourselves to forfeit the church life. Then at a time in the future the Lord will return to settle accounts with us, His household slaves, and mercy will be shown to us as we have shown mercy to others, and we will be forgiven as we have forgiven others. Accordingly, if our sins cannot be forgiven in this age, then they will be

forgiven only in the next age, after a time of discipline in the kingdom. If we do not practice the proper church life with respect to our brothers and sisters, in the nature of God and of Christ, then during the millennium we shall be under God’s discipline so that we will repent of our offense or forgive the one who offended us.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹To be cast into prison until the last debt is paid is not to be mistaken for purgatory. Much of the published exposition of Matthew 5:21-26 takes special care to remove all ground from this Catholic fabrication. We too absolutely refute the notion of purgatory, but we will not dilute the Lord’s word in Matthew 5 in order to strengthen the case against this false teaching.

²In the Septuagint, *‘ebed* is also rendered *παις* (child servant), *οικέτης* (house servant), and *θεράπων* (dignified servant) in much the same sense as *δοῦλος*. The verses referenced above cite the use of *δοῦλος*, the word used in Matthew 18, to show its consistent use in the Bible for the servants of God.

If we do not practice the proper church life with respect to our brothers and sisters, in the nature of God and of Christ, then during the millennium we shall be under God’s discipline so that we will repent of our offense or forgive the one who offended us.

Works Cited

- Alford, Henry. *Alford’s Greek Testament, An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980.
- Henry, Matthew. *Commentary on the Whole Bible*. Vol. 5. Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.
- Lange, John Peter. *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*. Vol. 8. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978.
- Lee, Witness. *Footnotes. Recovery Version of the New Testament*. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991.
- Lenski, R. C. H. *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964.
- M’Neile, Alan Hugh. *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1915.
- Nee, Watchman. *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*. 62 Vols. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1992.