

18:15 *Moreover*- Thus the previous theme is continued. Having spoken of such radical inclusiveness, the Lord foresees and tackles the obvious objection- that there may be cases where a believer has sinned against us, and that, surely, would be a reason for exclusion from the circle of disciples. But of course that would be illogical- if we are to be open to the little ones coming into the circle, then once they are within it, it would make no sense to then throw them out of it because they sinned against us. And the Lord now spells that out clearly.

*If your brother trespass*- Luke's record adds: "*Take heed to yourselves*; if your brother trespass... forgive him" (Lk. 17:3). This is alluded to in Acts 20:28, where Paul says we should *take heed* of the likelihood of false teachers. Surely what he's saying is 'Yes, take heed to forgive your brother personal offences, take heed because you'll be tempted *not* to forgive him; but have the same level of watchfulness for false teaching'. On another level, "take heed" suggests that in the case of personal offence, the tendency may be not to actually talk to your brother about it, nor to consciously forgive him in your heart. And it is these undealt with issues which create so much damage, both to us and to others. The purpose of the process outlined here is *not just* for the sake of the brother who has erred, it isn't just a polite protocol to follow; it is for *our sake too*, who have seen the weakness of our brother. *Unless* we talk frankly to him about it, between us *alone*, then we will end up hating him in our heart (even though it may not feel like that) and we will gossip about him. The frank raising of the issue with our brother is associated with loving our neighbour as ourselves. This is actually the opposite to what we would think; we would imagine that it would be more 'loving' to say nothing to our brother. But in this case, we will inevitably gossip about him and be bitter against him. The practice of true love will result in an open community in which we can frankly discuss with each other the issues which concern us, with love and not hatred in our hearts. This is the teaching of Lev. 19:16-18. No wonder the Proverbs expand upon it so much. And no wonder the Lord appropriated it as a ground rule for His ecclesia- there must be no gossip in the church. See on 5:22.

"Trespass" is the same word translated "sin" in 18:21 where Peter alludes back to these words and asks how many times his brother can "sin" [s.w. "trespass"] against him and be forgiven. The Lord's answer is basically 'An unlimited number of times', which indicates that Peter is to forgive without analyzing the integrity of the supposed repentance. Luke's record in Lk. 17:3,4 could suggest (if read in isolation from the context) that the sinning brother should only be forgiven if he repents. But the way the Lord clarifies this to Peter effectively offers a far higher level of response to the brother's sin. If he is to be forgiven multiple times for the same sin, even the same day, and if the genuineness of his repentance is irrelevant- then in practice the Lord is teaching to forgive without requiring repentance. The lower level is to forgive only upon repentance; but the only problem with that is that as we behave in this matter, so we shall be dealt with by the Lord. In the Lord's prayer we are taught to ask for forgiveness *as* we forgive

others. It's therefore important for us to be as generous as possible in forgiveness. As so often in spiritual life, taking the lower and easier path (in this case, forgiving only if we receive repentance first) creates a far harder situation for us- in this context, only being forgiven ourselves if we consciously repent of absolutely every sin. Not for us, therefore, could be David's prayer to be forgiven for his "secret faults" (Ps. 19:12), those that were secret or hidden from himself.

This whole section about 'taking matters up' with our brother and forgiving upon repentance (Lk. 17:3,4) seems out of step with the spirit of the material which precedes it (about doing absolutely anything to receive our weak brother), and with that which follows it (the teaching about unconditional forgiveness regardless of repentance). I suggest it is purposefully out of step with it, and is in fact an allusion to and parody of synagogue disciplinary rules; it is certainly alluding to the procedure for discipline mentioned in the Qumran documents as being practiced in the Qumran community (1 QS [Rule of the Community] 5:24-26; CD [The Damascus Document] 7:2; 9:8). The synagogues had a disciplinary sanction of *Niddui*, casting out with no further association, and it would seem clear that the Lord is alluding to this when He speaks of making the disciplined brother as a Gentile and publican. There is evidence that later Christian excommunication was called "the judgment of the Jew", so clear was the Judaistic basis for the later Christian practice of excommunication (1). This kind of parody of the language and practices of Judaism is common on the Lord's lips, and I have mentioned such cases throughout this exposition. This would explain the way that He goes on to assume there is some kind of established meeting with a congregation, witnesses etc. Admittedly He uses the word *ekklesia*, often translated "church", instead of synagogue, but the synagogue was the *ekklesia* for the very first disciples (we note how the early ecclesia is called a "synagogue" in James 2:2, and early Christian writers like Ignatius and Hermas likewise call the church a "synagogue"). When recounting Old Testament history and quoting from the Old Testament, Josephus at least nine times replaces the LXX *sunagoge* with *ekklesia* (2). *Ekklesia* as a word doesn't have any religious connotation. And strictly speaking, the *ekklesia* was not so much the body of believers or synagogue as the called-together assembly of the members at a specific time and place, which in the synagogue context ratified disciplinary decisions. The word developed into meaning 'the church' generally in the later New Testament, but initially it meant a specific local gathering of called individuals at one place and time, and had no universal sense to it. There was no established Christian congregation at the time the Lord was speaking, and yet He speaks as if such a system was well known by the disciples. Hort comments on the use of *ekklesia* in Mt. 18:17: "The actual precept is hardly intelligible if the *ekklesia* meant is not the Jewish community, apparently the Jewish local community, to which the injured person and the offender both belonged" (3). To therefore follow this section to the letter in *church* life today may be totally missing the point, and acting as the synagogue did- rather than as did the ever forgiving

Lord of unconditional 'receiving' of little ones, sinners, the lost etc. This is only a suggestion- my notes on the passage don't always assume that this is the only interpretation.

*Tell him his fault*- The Greek word carries the sense of convicting a person, persuading them; it carries with it the hope of success. It's not a case of merely telling a person that we have noticed their faults, it is an attempt to convict a person of them with a view to their positively changing. The Lord uses the word later when He comments that He does this in love and hope of reformation: "As many as I love I rebuke [s.w. 'tell a fault' here] and chasten; be zealous therefore, and repent" (Rev. 3:19).

*Alone*- This is so difficult! We would far rather notice the fault and tell others about it. This teaching is likely one of the most disobeyed principles of the Lord. The sense of being alone together is supported by the command to "go and tell him his fault... alone". The command to "go" and tell him he fault would seem a mere literary flourish until we perceive that *hupago* means not simply 'to go', but to go away, to depart. We are to depart from the time and place of realization of the offence against us, and then *alone* with the brother, attempt to convict him of a better way.

*Gained your brother*- The question arises as to whether the gaining / regaining of the brother is to us personally, or to God. It *could* mean that personal regaining of relationship is in view. But the word translated 'gain' is elsewhere used about gaining or regaining a person *to God* (1 Cor. 9:19-22; 1 Pet. 3:1), and the word is repeatedly used in the parable of the talents, whereby the servants 'gain' more talents *for their Master* (Mt. 25:17,20,22). In practice, this surely refers to gaining *people* for Him. The two are of course related, because to gain a brother for the Lord is to gain a brother for ourselves.

Here the Lord says of a sinful brother: "If your brother sins... go and point out the fault... if he listens to you, you have [re]gained your brother". But in Lk. 17:3, He says: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him". This would parallel the brother's 'repentance' with him 'listening' to you. Seeing repentance is a state of the heart, and we simply can't know the hearts of others, it seems to me practically impossible to judge the level of another's repentance. The Greek and Hebrew words translated 'repentance' strictly mean a change of mind, and not necessarily any works / actions. God in this sense can 'repent'. It seems to me that we have to recognize a changed state of heart in our repentant brother, without demanding 'works'.

18:16 The principles of Mt. 18:16,17 concerning dealing with personal offences are applied by Paul to dealing with moral and doctrinal problems at Corinth (= 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Cor. 5:4,5,9; 6:1-6). The context is indeed of personal offences, but as with all Scripture, we are not using it out of context if we extract the principles and apply them in different contexts.

*Two or three witnesses-* The “two or three witnesses” were required in order to execute someone under the Mosaic law (Dt. 17:6; 19:15; Heb. 10:28); having ‘witnesses’ was very important to the Jews in the way they operated their judicial thinking (Mt. 26:65; Acts 6:13; 7:58). Surely the Lord didn’t intend His new Israel to as it were re-enact the death penalty by excluding someone from the community if they personally offended you, didn’t repent and therefore were unforgiven by you? That would be absolutely in conflict with His teaching which surrounds this section. This kind of legalistic, judgmental approach, and the need to establish “every word”, seems so out of step with the radical grace, acceptance, patience, forgiveness without repentance and non-judgmental of the preceding and subsequent teachings of Jesus. The sharp difference in tone confirms me in thinking that the Lord here is not merely speaking tongue in cheek, but is parodying synagogue disciplinary procedures, as suggested on 18:15.

18:17 *The church-* I have suggested in commentary on :15 and :16 that the allusion is to the synagogue methods of discipline, rather than to the church of Christ which had not then been established. There is no hint that this procedure was intended for application in the future, after the church was established. Greek tenses are specific, and this could have easily been conveyed. But it isn’t; indeed, the whole procedure is spoken of as if it were already in existence and was what those offended by their brother could do right away.

*Let him be unto you-* It seems that we have here a case of the Lord offering a concession to human weakness, to live His Truth on different levels. For the parable of the lost sheep shows Christ never giving up; but then there is the teaching of :15-18 concerning us trying to gain the brother that has offended us (Mt. 18:15 = Prov. 18:19), resulting in finally throwing him out of the church if we fail to reach an understanding with him. The teaching here seems to be that it is legitimate in such a case of personal offence to give up with the brother and separate from him. But the preceding parable shows Christ saying that He never gives up. And then in :22 Christ tells Peter (“I say unto *thee*”, singular) never to stop forgiving his brother in a case of personal offence, up to 70 times seven. My summary of all this is that the ideal standard is never to give up in trying to regain our brother; but it is possible to live on the level of 'taking up' every issue with him, and eventually parting from him. 'But', the Lord continued, 'For you Peter, I expect a higher level; constant forgiveness of your brother, all day long!'.

*Unto you-* If your brother sins against you, you can go to him, then get the church involved, and then, the Lord says to the person sinned against, let him be unto “thee” as a Gentile / publican. About the only advantage from the KJV is the way 'thee' signifies a 'you singular' as opposed to 'ye / you' which in KJV English meant 'you plural'. Modern English no longer makes a distinction. So, let such a person be unto *thee*- you singular, not your ecclesia- as a Gentile and Publican. And what was Jesus' attitude to them? To mix with them, eat with them in table fellowship, and try to win them. Clearly this is talking about personal relationships, not ecclesial disfellowship.

*A Gentile-* The Lord's attitude to Gentiles was so different to that of religious Jews. He ate with them, thereby sharing religious fellowship; spoke positively of them, healed them and looked forward to the way that His death would end the spiritual status difference between Jew and Gentile; and therefore the Lord acted as if it were effectively ended anyway. The intention of 'being as a Gentile' was surely that it meant 'Have nothing to do with him'. But the Lord *did* have much to do with Gentiles, and by implication He did not think that the Jewish religious attitude to them was correct. Surely He is alluding here to Jewish 'disfellowship' practices, speaking tongue in cheek. For are we to really imagine Him now teaching that we are to only forgive our brother if he repents, and if we feel he has done wrong to us, drag him through a whole procedure of meetings and then declare him 'a Gentile', one not to be associated with? Surely not.

*A publican-* Matthew, the human author of this Gospel, had been a publican (10:3). The Lord did not ignore publicans as the religious Jews did; He had shocked the Jews by eating / fellowshiping with publicans (9:10,11). So the command to treat someone whom you won't forgive because they haven't repented (Lk. 17:3,4) as if they are a publican makes little sense if this is what Jesus is personally commanding us. Because He had taught by example that we should share religious fellowship with publicans, and He looked forward to sharing eternity with them (21:31,32)! It seems therefore almost certain that He is simply re-stating the well known procedures for disfellowshipping someone from the synagogue. The Lord is surely teaching that unless we practice radical acceptance and forgiveness of others, then we will end up disfellowshipping the little ones rather than receiving them. It would be fair enough to conclude the translation of each verse in Mt. 18:15-17 with a question mark- as if to say, 'Is this *really* how you want to carry on, endlessly taking up issues with your brethren, initiating procedures against them and then refusing to receive them at your meetings?'. The sense here in :17 would then be 'If he won't hear your witnesses- what, tell it to the church? And if he doesn't hear the church- make him to you as a Gentile and publican?'.

How we treat each other should be a reflection of how God treats us. We can make concessions for each other's weaknesses, accepting that some will live on higher levels than others; or we can demand a rigid standard of spirituality from them. I would venture to say that neither of these attitudes are *morally* wrong in themselves; it's just that as we judge, so we will be judged. For some time I have struggled with Matthew 18. It's a chapter all about forgiveness, of forgiving until 70 times 7, of never giving up our search for the lost sheep; *of being soft as shy children in dealing with each other* (a matchless, powerful analogy if ever there was one). But wedged in the middle of the chapter is this passage which says that if your brother personally offends you, go to him and ensure that he sorts it out; and if he doesn't, take someone else with you, then tell the other believers about him, and throw him out of the church. This always seemed to me rather out of context in that chapter. But there must be a point behind the paradox presented here. Perhaps it's something along these lines: 'If your brother offends you, you are quite justified in 'taking it up' with him, demanding he acknowledge his wrong, and eventually expelling him from the church. But- why not just forgive him, without demanding an apology from him?'

18:18 *Bind... loose*- 'Binding' is associated with the binding of the rejected in condemnation at the last day (Mt. 13:30; 22:13; Rev. 20:2). The idea of binding and loosing occurs here in the context of warning us not to be too hasty to cast a brother out of the ecclesia. The earlier context of this section is of not causing others to stumble. It doesn't mean that any ecclesial decision has God's automatic sanction. But because salvation is related to remaining in the Christ body, the Lord may be saying: 'By unnecessarily expelling someone from association with My people, not 'receiving' them, you are endangering their salvation. I won't necessarily come to their rescue; I have delegated the keeping of that brother to you. You are your brother's keeper. If you throw them out, they will probably lose their salvation. What you do on earth in these decisions is not necessarily overridden by Heaven. The eternal saving of a man is delegated to his brethren, and therefore you also have the possibility of causing him to stumble from salvation'. The implication of this is surely that we should only cast out of the ecclesia those who openly and beyond doubt have placed themselves outside of God's salvation- and we cannot judge whether they have or not. And the Lord surely meant us to compare this against His command not to judge. He is surely saying in this passage: 'You can argue it out with your brother, and eventually get the ecclesia to disfellowship him. But by this you'll be saying that he is out of the way of salvation, and what you do may well drive him to condemnation; for it's a hard and unlikely way to the Kingdom without your brethren. And you know that you mustn't condemn him. So better just forgive him, 490 times / day, unconditionally'. Paul takes this idea seriously when he says that if he forgives anybody, he does it "in the person of Christ", and so, by extension, the church at Corinth did too, seeing they were partakers in that same one body of His (2 Cor. 2:10).

Another approach is suggested by the consideration that the Greek words for binding and loosing, along with their derivative words, are often used in the NT for binding in prison, and loosing from prison's bonds. In this case, as in 16:19, the Lord may simply have the idea that through the power of the Gospel (16:19) and through forgiving and receiving sinners (here in chapter 18), we have the power to loose people. The "keys of the Kingdom" are in our hands. And if we don't do that, then we effectively bind them. And God ["Heaven"] will not as it were come rushing in to change things. He has given us genuine freewill, which means that our decisions with regard to others have significances which He doesn't necessarily mitigate. For otherwise, human behaviour would lose meaning and ultimate significance.

We should note that here the language of "the keys of the Kingdom" used in 16:19 to Peter specifically is now repeated to all the disciples. It is not so that Peter was given some unique power which the others were not.

18:19 *If two of you*- Surely to be connected with the "two or three witnesses" of :16, and the "two or three" of :20- see note there. The idea may be that in your decisions about how far to go in 'receiving' a little one, you will be confirmed in that decision by Heaven. Or the sense may be that seeing the little ones should be 'received' without limit, if the group of you making the decision pray for strength to do that, then it will be granted.

*Any thing*- The Bible nowhere offers such a blank cheque assurance that literally whatever we ask for we shall receive. Always there is a specific context to such assurances that prayer will definitely be answered and requests given. That specific context here is concerning not offending others, efforts in winning them back and receiving them. We note that this is foreseen as a collective activity, involving more than you- because decisions regarding fellowship involve at least two or three.

*It shall be done*- An allusion to the saying of 'Amen', so be it, may it be done. Your 'Amen' will in this case surely come true. Some of the assurances that prayer will surely be answered are in the context of praying for others. "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them" is in the context of concerned brethren trying to win back a weak brother. Likewise "If we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us... if any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for

them that sin not unto death" (1 Jn. 5:14-16). Again in a forgiveness context, Solomon asked that God would hear Israel "in all that they call unto thee for" (1 Kings 8:52).

*My Father which is in Heaven-* The whole section emphasizes how God in Heaven is intensely involved with what we are doing on earth with regard to these decisions about excluding or including others (see :10,14,18,20).

18:20- see on 18:4.

*Two or three-* This obviously connects with the two or three witnesses just mentioned in :16. There the Lord had said that if you won't unconditionally forgive your brother, then before two or three witnesses you can disfellowship him. I suggested that this was said tongue in cheek, for the Lord's intention in the surrounding context is that we should unconditionally forgive. But if we choose not to, then we can take this lower level of responding to sin against us. But He warns that we take this decision with Him in the midst of us, very much present. He has made this point in other language when reminding us that the representative Angels of the sinner are in God's presence in the court of Heaven, and what we do, how we decide, is being played out in the very presence of God. This saying about His presence in the midst of the "two or three" is saying the same thing. This evidently alludes to a Rabbinic saying preserved in the Mishnah (*Aboth* 3.2) that "If two sit together and study Torah [the first five books of Moses], the Divine presence [*shekinah*] rests between them". The Lord was likening Himself (His 'Name') to the Torah, the Old Testament word of God; and His presence would be felt if that Law was studied as it ought to be. Surely the hint is that if we agree together to show grace and acceptance to a little one, then this is the outcome of the true study of Torah. But whatever decision we come to regarding issues of forgiveness, acceptance and exclusion of others, we must accept the Lord's laboured and sober warnings that we are taking them in the very presence of the Father and Son. And we must recall how this whole section begins in 18:1,2 with the disciples thinking that their strivings against each other were somehow hid from their Lord- when He knew exactly what the thoughts of their hearts were about these things.

The personal presence of Jesus amongst us when gathered may suggest that He is especially manifested / revealed in the gathered together groups of believers, in a special and far different way to which an isolated believer reading a Bible may know the presence of Jesus. All this must especially be true of the breaking of bread- the only other time in the New Testament we meet the three Greek words translated "I am in the midst" is in Lk. 22:27, where the Lord comments how He is in the midst of the disciples at the first breaking of bread. Of course, mere church attendance doesn't mean we perceive Christ there, in the midst of us; we perceive Him there



insofar as we perceive the spirit of Christ in our brethren. The context is of two or three being gathered together in united prayer and receiving the answer. Receiving the gift of answered prayer is paralleled with the personal presence of Jesus in their midst. Answered prayer is part of His presence with us. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" surely promises a special closeness of Christ when we are physically gathered together. All those who have made real effort to gather together for the memorial meeting will know the truth of this. Our community increasingly features many in semi-isolation; this promise of special spiritual blessing in meeting together is something which they can and surely *do* know the truth of. The close fellowship which was engendered by the Passover feast, as Israel huddled together in family units around the slain lamb, the focus of their love and gratitude to God, explains why Israel were repeatedly warned not to share that meal with those not in covenant with God. However this cannot mean that the presence of Christ is *only* available if two or three physically gather together, and that He does not tabernacle in the individual. We could also read the clause as meaning that if two or three gather in His Name, this is because of Him being in their midst; i.e. unity, gathering together, is only possible around the person and presence of Christ.

*Gathered together-* Literally, 'synagogued'. I have suggested above that the Lord is parodying the process of synagogue discipline, and teaching that His followers should not follow that but rather unconditionally accept the little ones. By doing so, they would no longer in practice be able to be part of the synagogue structure, which was based around excluding rather than including. I would read the Lord here as yet once again teaching that He is establishing a new Israel; the new synagogues would be comprised of twos and threes of secular but sincere believers earnestly praying together that the lost might be found, for forgiveness for those who have sinned against them without repentance.

18:21 *Lord-* Peter asked: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?". Jesus responds with a parable in which a man who calls his king "Lord" is himself forgiven, but refuses to forgive another man. Surely that parable was specifically for Peter, the one who delighted to know Jesus as Lord. He was warned through the parable that calling Him 'Lord' wasn't enough. An appreciation of Him as Lord of his life would mean quite naturally that he had a spirit of frank forgiveness for his brother, not carefully measuring it out, but rather reflecting his Lord's forgiveness of him. If Jesus is really Lord, then everything which He does and all that He shows becomes an imperative for us to follow.

*How often-* Jesus replies, 70 x 7. i.e. to an unlimited extent, even when the repentance is obviously insincere. It's as if He's saying that yes you can go through the procedure of sorting it

out with your brother and rejecting him from your personal company. But, the higher level, is to simply forgive him. It's like adultery under the Law. There were several options for the husband. Do a trial of jealousy and make her infertile. Stone her. Divorce her. Or, just forgive her. We surely all ought to be aiming for the higher level. Those who quote Matthew 18 as a reason for withdrawal are in my view living on a lower spiritual level than those who forgive 70 x 7. But the gracious Lord doubtless shall accept them too in the last day.

*Shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?*- The Lord's comment that "If your brother shall trespass against you" (:15- see notes there) is picked up here by Peter. The Lord's reply was that Peter should forgive his brother to an unlimited extent, each and every day. It seems to me that the Lord was saying that the 'one-two-out' attitude which He had just described was very much the lower level of response, the way of the Jewish synagogues; He wished His followers to take the higher level, of unconditional forgiveness. Indeed, the whole passage where He speaks about going to see your brother and then telling the church is wedged in between His teachings about grace and forgiveness. It's so out of place that one wonders whether He wasn't saying it very tongue in cheek, in allusion to the synagogue discipline methods. At the very least, He seems to intend the contrast between His surrounding words and those about 'one-two-out' to sink in, to the point that we realize, as He told Peter, that there is indeed a higher way.

*Seven times*- Lk. 17:4 adds "in a day". Perhaps Peter had in mind how Jacob bowed seven times to Esau and was forgiven (Gen. 33:3), or perhaps he had wondered whether the sprinkling of blood seven times in the Mosaic rituals spoke of forgiveness of a maximum of seven sins in one day, as some Rabbis taught (Lev. 4:6,17; 8:11; 14:7,51; 16:14,19; Num. 19:4). Or perhaps Prov. 24:16 was another source for his thinking- "a just man falls seven times and rises up again". The Lord's answer was that we need to forgive far more than seven times because we too sin far more than seven times / day- which is the function of the hopelessly indebted servant in the following parable. Peter's phrase "until seven times" is strangely lifted right out of Dan. 4:23, where Nebuchadnezzar was to be punished "until seven times" passed over him. Peter often alludes to Old Testament scripture in his recorded speech; he was very Bible-minded. He may have been suggesting 'Even if someone's as bad as Gentile Nebuchadnezzar, we should still forgive them, I suppose, but that surely is the limit'. But the Lord's subsequent comment about 70 sevens is from the prophecy of Daniel 9 regarding the far longer "times" which were to pass over Israel for their sin. So His comeback on Peter's clever allusion was: 'No, Peter. Don't forgive people "till seven times", as much as God did Gentile king Nebuchadnezzar- but as much as God forgave *Israel*, which was an infinite amount, 70 times, more than that!'. Such level of dialogue with Peter would've been perfectly possible and normal, for he really knew and loved the Old Testament and was quite the amateur Bible student- see 'Peter: Bible Student' in my *Peter and Paul* (Sydney: Aletheia, 2008). See on 18:27 *Forgave him the debt*.

18:22- see on :15.

*Seventy times seven-* The Lord's command to forgive 490 times per day (Lk. 17:4,5) is surely teaching that we have no ability to judge the sincerity of repentance; all we can do is forgive. Seven being the number of completeness, we are surely to understand this saying as not so much 490 times, but an infinite number of times.

18:23 *Therefore-* This word is crucial. Because we must forgive 490 times / day regardless, therefore, of the sincerity of repentance, *therefore* the Kingdom of God [i.e. the behaviour of those who claim to be under the domain of God's Kingship] is like the forgiveness of the King of that Kingdom. How was it that he had a servant who was so hopelessly in debt? 10,000 talents can be seen not as a literal number but as meaning 'a huge, infinite amount'. How did the position arise? Because the King had repeatedly forgiven him debts without demanding repayment, and had given in to requests for yet more debt. This is the connection between the parable and the fact we have to forgive 490 times / day. It's because we too repeatedly sin each and every day. How many times do you catch yourself each day muttering or thinking a brief prayer for forgiveness of some failure? If it's not 490 times, then that's because you're not sensitive enough to human failure and Divine standards. And how really sincere is our repentance each time? Do we not find ourselves asking for the same basic sins to be forgiven, hour by hour, day by day? If we have been forgiven so much, then we simply *must* accept the little ones and forgive them, regardless of their repentance.

*A certain King-* Gk. 'an *anthropos* King', a human king. This strange phrase emphasizes how the King in view here, the Lord Jesus, was and is only exalted to Kingship because of His humanity. He is judge *because He is* the "son of man". In the issues and feelings regarding forgiveness and acceptance, the Lord Jesus fully understands our humanity.

*Take account-* The word is only used again in 25:19 about the last judgment. And yet the parable seems to speak as if the last judgment is only at the end of the story, after the forgiven servant has had time to grab his fellow servant, demand the debt, get him into prison, and the other servants have gone to inform their Lord, who then punishes him with "torment". There is an intended confusion here- because the essence of judgment day is going on now, and we 'make the answer now' every time we are confronted by a little one needing acceptance into our closed circle, every time we are sinned against, every time a sheep goes astray. This is seamlessly in the spirit of the earlier part of this block of teaching, where the Lord has spoken of those who offend the little one by not accepting and not forgiving as being sure of future damnation, and has urged

us to cut off any parts of our lives which have stumbled others and cast them from us, as a symbol of self-condemnation now, so that we are not condemned in the final judgment.

The Lord spoke of how when we sin, He 'takes account' of us and forgives us- and we are to respond by being frankly forgiving to those in our debt (Mt. 18:23,24). But the Lord uses the very same words and imagery in speaking of how at His return, He will "take account" of His servants and utter an unchangeable verdict upon them (Mt. 25:19). The connection of thought is surely to indicate that in our repeated experience of sin, coming before the throne of grace, receiving the judgment of condemnation, seeing it changed and responding by showing grace, we are living out the essence of the meeting with God which is yet to come. This is how God uses our experience of sin, repentance and forgiveness. The whole process is in order to give us an insight into the future judgment. The reality is that in those experiences of today, we can change the verdict. But in the last day it will be too late.

*Account- A logos.* He asks us even in this life [see on *Take account*] to share our inner motives and core feelings / ideas with Him, the *logos* of our lives. Especially in this area of rejection of others and unforgiveness of them. The king (Jesus) makes a reckoning with His servants right now, and it is for us to be influenced by the gracious accounting He shows towards us, and then in this life reflect an appropriate grace to our brother (Mt. 18:23 RV). The reckoning is going on right now, indeed in a sense it occurred on the cross.

18:24 *Had begun to reckon-* See on :23 *take account*. These words were spoken to Peter, and he seems to have later grasped their meaning when he wrote of how judgment is now beginning at the household of God, the church, "us" (1 Pet. 4:17- the same Greek word for 'beginning' is used). Every time we engage with those who sin against us, each moment we remember them and the associated situations, we stand at the day of judgment making our own answer according to how we think and feel towards them. It is a very personal question. We simply cannot exclude them just because the circle of disciples around us [with which this section began] are hard set against those persons. We are to be as the Lord, and break the circle, putting the child in the midst. In a sense the judgment process has already begun; Mt. 18:24 says that the Lord has "begun to reckon" now, and so now we must urgently forgive one another. He is watching our attitude to each other here and now. Mt. 18:33,35 teach that the attitude we have towards our brother deep in our heart will be revealed and discussed with us at the judgment.

*Brought unto Him-* The same word used about the little ones being brought unto Jesus and being rejected by the disciples (19:13). The word is so often used of how people were brought unto Jesus.

*Which owed-* The Greek is also translated 'a sinner', so clear is the connection between debt and sin. The Lord is clearly alluding to His own model prayer, where He taught that we are to ask for forgiveness "as we forgive our debtors" (s.w. 'one which owed', Mt. 6:12). It seems that although the disciples presumably obediently prayed that prayer, the reality of the implications wasn't felt by them.

*Ten thousand talents* - One hundred million denarii (Mt. 18:23). This was a monstrous, unimaginable sum- in 4BC, the whole of Galilee and Peraea paid only 200 talents per year in taxes, one fiftieth of the amount. The annual income of Herod the Great is estimated at only 900 talents (New Jerome Bible Commentary). The Lord was using shock tactics to show how great is man's debt to God... and to throw into strong relief the sharp contrast with the way the fellow servant has such a trivial debt. The story is plain. The sins we perceive others have committed against us should be as nothing compared to the huge debt we feel personally before God. This explains why the acceptable man in another parable prays with his hands on his breast- when every Palestinian Jew would have expected a story about a man praying to feature him with uplifted hands, as was the custom. The unusual element to the story brought out the extent of the man's contrition. Indeed, the total acquittal of the indebted man, with no further penalty at all, would have caught the early hearers by surprise. The man, they imagined, would have walked off surprised by joy, ecstatic, thankful, relieved. And yet he goes and does something totally unexpected and illogical- he grabs another man and demands he pay up his debts. The unexpected twist of the story of course brings out the madness of any unforgiveness on our part, and the awful nature of human ingratitude for forgiveness- just as in the two carpenters parable.

The hopelessly indebted slave had the whole debt reckoned up with him and *then* the Lord wrote it off (Mt. 18:24,25). This was surely for the benefit of the servant. The servant hopelessly, desperately in debt to his Lord is a picture of the believer's debt to God (Mt. 18:25). The Lord didn't say 'Well, don't worry about it, I've got plenty, just forget it'. He reckoned up the exact debt, calculated it with the servant progressively panic stricken as the full figure registered: and "his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made". Only *then*- and this is a crucial feature of the story- "the servant therefore fell down, and besought him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all". This was of course a nonsense; he had no way of paying it. But in his desperation, at the very and utter limits of human feeling, he fain would pay it all. And only then, "the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him". This is not to say that the Lord is a hard man. But His frank forgiveness is not lightly given. Remember that God is elsewhere described as the magistrate who is to be feared, "lest he hale thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and the officer cast thee into prison. I tell thee, thou shalt not depart thence, till thou hast paid the very last mite" (Lk. 12:58). And yet again, the Lord is not a hard man. In the context of

our spiritual bankruptcy, "He constantly lendeth to thee" (Job 11:6 Heb.); and yet He demands our deep recognition that He deserves and in a sense should be given it all back. This will be our attitude, if we appreciate that indeed sin is serious.

There are degrees of sin- in God's sight. But this parable teaches that for us, our perception is to be that the colossal extent of our sin is such that we should be eager to forgive anyone anything, because whatever they have done is so small compared to *what we perceive* that *we* have done. The difficulty is that it may actually be that in God's judgment, some have sinned less than us- and we get a strong hint at the nature of that judgment in the Bible. But *from our perspective* we are to feel that our sin is so much hugely greater than anything anyone else has done. Paul was a great example of this, progressing over time as he wrote his letters from considering himself "least of the apostles" to being "less than the least of all saints" to finally being "chief of sinners".

18:25 *He could not pay*- Neither of the indebted servants in the parable could pay. It's an urban myth to think or assume that in cases of sin against us, the sinner can put it right. He cannot. The only way forward is unconditional forgiveness on our part, which must be granted knowing that the person cannot put anything right. This is a window onto the issue of whether or not we should forgive only if the person repents. The parable is at pains to demonstrate that personal debt cannot be repayed- all that can be done is to write it off. Even if letters of regret are written in total sincerity and with absolute meaning behind every word, they can never repay the debt. All we can do is to forgive, and therefore the person's repentance to us is in that sense irrelevant.

It could be argued that the man truly wanted to pay the debt, but was unable. This should be our feelings about our sins. The man was forgiven his debt due to his *desire* to repay it, even though in fact he couldn't repay it. Sin can, in a sense, never be put right, it can only be covered over. And the man was expected to reflect his experience of forgiveness in how he dealt with his brother. Our fellowship of failure should be bound close together by our common experience of God's forgiveness. What we owe to God can never be repaid. Realizing this affects how we define what is repentance. Just one sin brings eternal death; after sinning, we cannot go back and re-live those minutes, hours, days or years when it was committed. All we can do is trust in God's grace and believe that God will negate the just results of that sin. Because we are forgiven debts which we can never repay, we are asked to liberally forgive our brethren for their far smaller debts. It appeared that the man who owed a small amount was better able to repay it than he who owed much. But the *ability* of our brethren to repay the debt of their sin is not something we should consider. Surely this is what the parable teaches. The *ability* of people to repent is something we should not *consider*. God does not consider *our* ability to repay Him- for we are utterly unable to do so.

A case can be made that the man did in fact have some of the money, because he had stolen it [rather than borrowed it] from the King, and had at least some of it stashed away- see on 18:34 *The tormentors*.

*Commanded him to be sold-* This King is clearly angry and hurt at the extent of the debt; but he also has a heart of compassion (:27). According to the story line, he really intended the servant to be sold to another master. He didn't want anything to do with this man any more. But then he changed. Without this detail about the King's anger, we would be left with the impression that he is a soft hearted type who didn't take the personal loss, betrayal and pain with any real personal suffering. But the Heavenly King, God Himself, does indeed have these feelings, and it is this reality which gives backdrop and meaning to His frequent movement with compassion in subsequently forgiving us. His forgiveness of sin, just like ours, doesn't mean that He is indifferent to sin. This is therefore a recognition by the Lord that forgiveness isn't instant nor automatic, but that like God, we will legitimately feel hurt and anger before moving on to forgiveness.

*His wife and children-* The Lord spoke this in the first instance to Peter personally, in answer to his question. Peter had a wife (1 Cor. 9:5) and at least one child (1 Pet. 5:13). Likewise the way the servant "fell down" before the King (:26) is just as Peter had recently done before Jesus (Mt. 17:6 s.w.).

*All that he had-* But he "had" [s.w.] nothing to pay with, "he had not to pay" [AV]. What he did have was not even the right currency with which to repay what he owed. Even if he and his family were sold to be someone else's slaves, the amount received would be tiny compared to the huge debt. We are maybe intended to imagine that it was reflection on this fact which led the King to simply show compassion. We cannot repay our debt to God, even if we give our bodies and very being to Him. All we can do is hope for His grace, and so it is with our forgiveness of others.

*Payment to be made-* The idea is of repayment, putting things right. The powerful point of this parable is that when someone sins against us, they *cannot* put it right, they cannot repay. We must forgive without that- which meshes well with the impression we get from this entire section that we are to accept, receive and forgive the little ones in an absolutely open manner without demanding repentance or them restoring a situation. So much forgiveness and reconciliation fails

to happen in practice because of this assumption that the one who has done wrong must somehow put it right. Even if e.g. a stolen item is restored, the damage done in other ways by the theft cannot be put right. Except by our forgiveness.

18:26 *Fell down*- This is precisely what the second servant does to the forgiven servant (:29 s.w.; he also asks for “patience” just as the first servant did). Our situation before God is exactly mirrored by the situation of others before us who have sinned. The Lord’s prayer had made this point, in asking that we be forgiven *as* we forgive others. Forgiving them, therefore, becomes of utterly crucial importance in our personal salvation. Nothing else we may do or be can compensate for unforgiveness, rejection of little ones, and the subsequent causing them to stumble which this causes. See on :25 *His wife and children*.

*Fell down and worshipped*- The two words often occur together. The basis of real worship is thereby defined for us as being a deep conviction of the depth of our sin. Such worship isn’t therefore something that can just be turned on or turned off. True worship has very deep roots, in deep conviction of personal debt and a core desire to somehow beseech God’s grace.

*Have patience*- See on :26 *Fell down*. The servants both ask for “patience”, and yet the story invites us to see how irrelevant is that request- no amount of time can repay such a huge debt. Even although the servant therefore doesn’t throw himself on the King’s grace to the extent he ought to have done, and still entertains the absurd idea that he can actually somehow repay the debt- the King shows grace. Again, the attitude of those ‘little ones’ we engage with will be far from ideal, they miscalculate their debt just as the servant genuinely thought he could “pay all”, they fail to appreciate the damage done, the hurt caused, believing that they can put right what clearly they never can. But the King’s forgiveness of that servant is our pattern for forgiving those indebted to us by their sins and poor behaviour. Yet again we see the hint that forgiveness based upon repentance and restoration is not what is needed at all. Sin cannot in that sense ever be restored or put right by the sinner, but only by the grace of the one sinned against.

*I will pay you all*- The servant is presented as insincere, to those who meditate a bit upon the information given. His falling down at the feet of the King was not sincere, surely; for instead of admitting his fault and begging for grace, he claims that with time, “patience”, he can actually repay it. No amount of work could repay his debt. The huge sum which he ‘owed’ the King was so large that we are invited to imagine that the debt had arisen more by theft than by being lent that huge amount. For why would he, a servant, need to borrow such a huge amount? We are led



to expect a confession of theft from the King- but there is none. Likewise the huge sum of debt is an element of unreality in the story that attracts our attention. The King typically would have killed such a person- but this unusual King doesn't do that. He offers him a way out apart from death- and still the man isn't grateful, he doesn't even want to do a period in bonded slavery for his sins. Within the context of Israel, a slave could only be held for seven years. And "in the seventh year he shall go out a free person, without debt" (Ex. 21:2). In the seventh year, all debt was to be forgiven (Dt. 15:1-3). So this gracious King was willing to actually forgive the debt and give the man a path to total freedom. But he didn't want even that- he wanted time so that he could pay the debt. He clearly had no real conception of the extent of his debt. And he even implies that the problem is with the King not being patient enough- as if to say 'If only you were patient, I can pay all this back'.

*18:27 Moved with compassion-* The Lord forgave the sinner exactly because he could not put it right. Bearing in mind the insincerity of the man's words and claims even after being called to account, it is clear that the King's pity was not because of the man's genuineness. It was rather pity at the sad state of the man, pity at his pride, at his pathetic wriggling on the hook. The King's pity and forgiveness is set up as the pattern for ours- and this, therefore, must be shown not only to those who appear sincere in their repentance, but to those like this servant, who appear patently insincere, repeating the same sin 490 times each day. The King had pity, realizing that power in this case was solely in His hands. And so it is with our interactions with those who sin against us. We have total power. They are unable to put anything right ultimately. Because they have done what they have done, just as we have done what we have done.

*Loosed him-* This is hard to interpret because *apoluo* can have such a wide range of meaning. It can mean to simply send away. Or it could mean that the man had already been bound as a convicted criminal- in which case, the 10,000 talent debt was due to theft, which is likely what the initial hearers would've assumed anyway.

*Forgave him the debt-* The same word translated "forgive" occurs in 19:14, where the Lord rebukes the disciples for forbidding the little ones to come to Him, and tells them to "Suffer [s.w. "forgive" through the idea of leaving alone] the children". The suggestion is that despite all this emphasis on receiving little ones, the disciples failed to do so still. This shouldn't be hard for us to imagine, because the church is full of those who know these principles in theory but fail to apply them, turning away so many little ones week by week. The king forgave his servant; but in the parable of Lk. 16:7, it seems that the king's servants also have the power to forgive others what they owe to their lord. Our forgiveness of others is therefore recognized in Heaven, although that is not to say that if we will not forgive a person, therefore God will not. The

connection between our forgiveness and God's forgiveness (in the context of this section's teaching about offence) may be that if we don't forgive people, they often stumble out of the way of relationship with God and thereby God doesn't forgive them. Whereas if we forgive them and accept them, they often remain in a relationship with God whereby their sins are forgiven by Him.

I mentioned under 18:26 *I will pay you all* that the King was alluding to the seventh year release for slaves. But this King, despite the insincerity of this servant, simply proclaims the forgiveness and release there and then. This is how King Jesus operates- He makes the seventh year of release the ongoing status in which He lives with men and women. And this is to be our pattern, not waiting until the seventh year, not demanding a passage of time or partial restoration before we forgive, but doing so immediately without attention to issues of sincerity of repentance. The King's example in immediately offering the spirit of the seventh year release is surely saying that we should forgive and accept without demanding any passage of time. Observation of ecclesial life suggests that in the end, members are forgiven about anything, but it just takes time. But if forgiveness is going to be granted, why not grant it immediately... The release from slavery and debt in the seventh year was on the basis that Israel had been released from slavery in Egypt by grace (Jer. 34:13,14; Dt. 15:12-15), an exodus which speaks of our baptism into Christ (1 Cor. 10:1,2). If we have been released, we are to thus release others. They were to "let go" their indebted slave brother (Dt. 15:12 Heb.) just as Israel were "let go" from Egypt (Ex. 5:1). They were to send away the released slave "not empty handed" but with gifts (Dt. 15:13)- exactly as Israel left Egypt *not empty handed* but with the gold and gifts of Egypt (Ex. 3:21,22; 12:35,36).

I noted at 18:21 *Seven times* that Peter's initial question about forgiving "until seven times" was a quotation from Dan. 4:23 about the seven times or years punishment upon Nebuchadnezzar. It could be the Lord is alluding to this in saying that the spirit of the seventh year or 'time' should be lived out all the time; they were not to wait "until seven times" or years to forgive. And the release from debt must be given no matter how insincere the debtor, and no matter how huge the debt. And immediately. The Lord's language of loosing and forgiving debt and His allusion to the seventh year release is therefore radical and far reaching. If we are to show His forgiveness, then we have no option but to be absolutely open and inclusive of all. According to Jer. 34:17-22, Judah's captivity in Babylon was solely because they had rejected the need for granting release to their brethren; for that they were condemned.

*The debt-* An unusual Greek word is used here to express debt. *Daneion* occurs only here in the New Testament. It seems to mean a gift as well as a debt; there were other standard words for "debt" which the record could have used, but did not. Perhaps the strange word choice is to teach us that whatever we think we have borrowed or even stolen from the Lord cannot really ever be

repayed- it is effectively made a gift to us. In our forgiveness of others, we must remember that they can never repay, and so our forgiveness of them is not on the basis that they have repayed something, but on the basis that we consider their theft from us to be a gift from us to them.

18:28- see on 20:15.

*Fellowservants*- He remained in the service of his master, even though the master / King had considered selling him into slavery to another man. But this King retained such a bad and insincere servant- again, setting up the pattern for our unlimited acceptance of others and not rejecting them. The staggering number of unrealities in this parable is in order to direct us towards the need for radical acceptance of others and open forgiveness without repentance- things which are indeed unreal for us in their demands. And yet without this, can we be forgiven? Faced with the teaching here, I end up asking God for what apparently I cannot or should not ask- forgiveness for my unforgiveness. And strength to indeed forgive, quicker and more fully.

*Laid hands on him*- The Greek is several times used to mean 'arrested'. The first servant had the power to arrest and "cast into prison" (:30). We assume therefore that the first servant was a senior one, hence his ability to borrow or steal 10,000 talents. And still he has retained his position!

*Took him by the throat*- The Greek means to choke or strangle, it is only elsewhere used about the choking to death of the Gadarene pigs in the sea, representative as they were of condemnation of the unclean at the last day (Mk. 5:13). He was not only demanding repayment but almost killed the man in order to extort a promise of repayment. All our sympathies are directed by the story to be against this first servant- but he was the one who the Lord who knows all was so forgiving and acceptant towards. And that is set up as our example.

*What you owe*- There was indeed a debt. We are to forgive the person who 'repents' 490 times / day for the same sin. Clearly enough, their repentance wasn't sincere. Yet we are still to show forgiveness without waiting for repentance. The parable of Mt. 18:28-30 implies that forgiveness involves us not requiring of our brother that which we could legitimately demand of him. That surely is saying that we are to forgive our brother without demanding full repentance in terms of 'putting things right'. We are to follow God's example of frankly writing off the debt. This parable of the debtors splits the responsible into two categories; those who forgive their brother, and those who demand that their erring brother pays up what he owes, even though he can't

possibly do so. All of us who walk away from our annoying, spiritually weak brethren (as we perceive them) are playing with our salvation. The day of judgment will be a day of surprises for all of us.

*Went out*- This is the language of condemnation at the last day. By being unforgiving to our brother, we are condemning ourselves. And this has been the Lord's message earlier in this section- for those who make their brother to stumble by not accepting and forgiving him, they have an awful condemnation awaiting them. "Went out" is the language of Judas going out (Jn. 13:30), Cain "went out" (Gen. 4:16), as did Zedekiah in the judgment of Jerusalem (Jer. 39:4; 52:7). Esau went out from the land of Canaan into Edom, slinking away from the face of his brother Jacob, sensing his righteousness and his own carnality (Gen. 36:2-8). Even in this life, those who leave the ecclesia 'go out' after the pattern of Judas, condemning themselves in advance of the judgment by their attitude to the ecclesia (1 Jn. 2:19 cp. Acts 15:24). The unrighteous flee from God now, as they will then (Hos. 7:13). Yet Peter in this life "went out" from the Lord (Mk. 14:68) and then some minutes later further "went out and wept bitterly" (Lk. 22:62), living out the very figure of rejection at the judgment- and yet was able to repent and come back. In this life we can be judged, condemned, weep...but still repent of it and thereby change our eternal destiny. But at the final judgment: it will be just too late. That 'judgment' will be a detailed statement of the outcome of the ongoing investigative judgment which is going on right now.

18:29 The words and actions of the second servant are exactly those of the first servant before the King. We are to see ourselves as the first servant- and he was not very sincere, nor did he appreciate the enormity of what he had done. But we are presented as being him, up to the point where he imprisons his fellow servant. The difference between him and us is that we are to forgive our indebted brother. But our repentances and pleadings for mercy are likewise less than totally sincere- the ease with which we repeat sin is surely proof enough of that. And we are not, therefore, to refuse forgiveness to our brother because we sense his repentance is insincere.

18:30 *He would not*- The first servant wouldn't show patience to the second servant, even though he had asked the King for "patience" with himself. He didn't believe that the second servant would repay the money given time. And yet he puts him in prison, from where likewise the second servant will have no possibility of repaying the debt. He has no sensible option than to write off the debt. Just as forgiveness with or without repentance is not ultimately an option for us. The request for patience was exactly what he had made to the King. The King dismissed it as unreal and untrue; the King didn't say 'OK, well, in six months' time, then'. He just forgave him. The first servant was being brought to realize how he had made the King feel. The very similarity with his own position surely beckoned him towards a similarly gracious response. But he would not. The awfulness of the situation becomes even worse if we consider that he was

delivered to the torturers in order to repay the money because he [presumably] did in fact have much of the money, but had stashed it away in secret locations; see on :34 *The tormentors*.

*Cast him into prison-* See on :28 *Laid hands on*. He was a senior servant who still had the power to do this. The King expressed his anger in a more Biblical way- the first servant was to be sold as a slave labourer so that at least some of the debt would be repaid, and then in the seventh year he would go free and the debt cancelled. But that servant now puts the other servant *in prison*. The Law of Moses never envisioned any kind of prison system, even though there were prisons in the surrounding cultures. Rather was correction to be effected more quickly and at the hands of those who had been offended or wronged. In prison, the man had absolutely no chance of repaying the debt, and so to imprison until he should repay the debt is oxymoronic. And obviously so, especially to the initial audience. They knew that those in prison had to be provided for by their families, and so the truth was actually the opposite- imprisoning the man would increase debt, not reduce it. But this is what we do by not forgiving people- we put them in a position where they are a spiritual liability to others, and we assign them to a place where they can never get right with us. Because the earlier section in this block of teaching has demonstrated that to not forgive or to exclude is to cause another to stumble. Not forgiving damages the unforgiven person- that's the point. It puts them in a place where they cannot escape- it makes them stumble, or as in this parable, it imprisons them. This is a powerful picture of the damage caused by unforgiveness.

*Till he should pay-* Another possible twist to the story is that the first servant believed that the second servant had family members or friends who were capable of paying the debt; by throwing him into prison, he was thereby putting pressure on the family to pay the debt. This kind of thing often happens with forgiveness; granting forgiveness or acceptance is made possible only if third parties respond. Typically the argument is 'We will only accept you if you reconcile with X or Y'. The King, by contrast, dealt directly with the offender in offering a way forward- and finally abandoned any attempt at partial and negotiated solutions, and just gave frank and total forgiveness.

18:31 *Saw what was done-* There is a similarity with the workers who notice the weeds sown amongst the wheat and who then go and tell their Lord, rather than taking affairs into their own hands.

*Very sorry-* What are we to do when brethren... refuse to speak to us or others, divide families, cause others to stumble; and all the other long list, the endless sentence, which we could now write or come out with? How are we to feel, how are we to cope with it? When the fellow believers saw the unreasonable attitude of a brother against another, they were "vehemently distressed" (AV "very sorry" doesn't do justice to the Greek)- not about themselves, but about the situation and the punishment of their fellow servant. Matthew uses the same Greek words to

describe how distressed the disciples were to learn that there was a betrayer amongst them (Mt. 26:22). That extent of distress can destroy men and women. So "they came and told their Lord all that was done". They didn't just "tell Him". They went and told Him. We are invited to imagine the process of coming before the Lord's Heavenly presence in prayer, like Hezekiah spreading Sennacherib's letter before the Lord. The parable suggests there was no response from the Lord to the grieving servants. He called the offender to Him, asked for an account, and punished him. This speaks of how we shall be called to account at the Lord's return. But until then, there's silence from the Lord. But that silence is to develop our faith and perspective in the day of judgment. If there were bolts of fire from Heaven in response to our prayers, there would be no faith required, no longing for the Lord's return, no trust in His ultimate justice. The Greek translated "told" means 'to declare thoroughly'. Tell the Lord every detail of what happened, how you feel; what colour shirt he was wearing, exactly how she looked at you. Just as children artlessly retell every detail of a hurtful event. When they saw "what was done", they came and declared thoroughly to their Lord "what was done" (Mt. 18:31). The double repetition of the phrase suggests we should indeed tell all the details to Him; but not more, and stripped of our interpretation of them. Prayer isn't to be merely a list of requests; it's a pouring out of ourselves and our situation before God, as David taught us in his Psalms. And in this sense one rises from their knees healed and able to cope. The believers of the parable told their Lord of the ungrateful behaviour of their brother (Mt. 18:31)- they brought the situation before Him, without asking specifically for something to be done.

18:32 *Then his Lord*- What is the function of the detail about the fellow servants informing their Lord, and His response being to call the wicked servant and punish him? The calling to account and 'eternal punishment' is surely allegorical of the second coming of Christ and the final judgment. The impression is surely that He is encouraged in doing this by His servants coming to Him and sharing with Him their hurt at the way His servants are being treated- both within the household as well as outside of it.

*I forgave you*- The Lord was absolutely sure that He would be victorious on the cross; His parables speak of our responsibilities and blessings on account of what He knew He would achieve for us. Thus the Master in the parable is able to remonstrate with the unforgiving servant: "I forgave you all that debt". The Lord's assumption was that He would attain our forgiveness on account of successfully enduring the cross. Yet He triumphed through His faith; although He was all too aware of the human possibility of failure, He believed He wouldn't fail, He made use of the constant encouragement of the word to this end. He described Himself as the Lord of the servants, and also as the King (e.g. Mt. 18:23 cp. 31- there are other similar parables)- even before His cross. He had such confidence that He would be crowned as a result of His future cross. The tenses in Greek can be used very exactly (unlike Hebrew); it was quite

within the ability of the Lord to build into His parables the concept of future Kingship. He could have implied 'When I'm King, I'll judge like this'. But instead He saw Himself as already having overcome. "Be of good cheer, I have (already) overcome the world... now I go my way to him that sent me (bypassing the cross in His words)... I have glorified thee... I have finished the work thou gavest me to do" (Jn. 16:33,5; 17:4); these are only a few samples of the Lord's remarkable confidence that He would overcome. This confidence is reflected in the parables. He was practising His own preaching concerning believing that we have already received what we ask for. No doubt His words recorded in Jn. 15-17 and the parables which reflected this confidence came back to Him as He struggled to quell His crisis of doubt in Gethsemane.

*All that debt-* The hint could be that the exact amount was still clearly in the King's mind. God forgives sin but He doesn't literally forget it in the sense of as it were deleting it all from memory cells. It is 'forgotten' in the metaphorical sense of not being held against us. Peter was the one initially addressed here, and he uses the ideas in his later letter, when he criticizes some of his converts for having forgotten that they were purged from their old sins, and notes that therefore they were without motivation in living the Christian life (2 Pet. 1:9).

*Because you desired me-* Actually, as noted at :26, the wicked servant didn't actually desire forgiveness of the debt. He asked instead for time, "patience", so that he could repay everything he owed. The pity of the Master was more because of the man's lostness and how little he appreciated his own position. However, the Master kindly and sensitively read through the man's request for 'time to repay' to the desire of the man's heart- that the debt be written off in total. And he did so. The Father and Son likewise perceive the spirit behind our prayers, and see through the surface level word choice which we make. This of itself is a great comfort to those who fear that they 'are not good at praying'. Because it is our inner spirit rather than our word choice which is the essence of prayer.

18:33 *Should you not-* This doesn't give the force of *dei*, which is the imperative, 'must'. The idea isn't that he *ought* to have been compassionate, but that he was obligated to be, he 'must' be like that. This is exactly the teaching of the earlier part of the chapter- condemnation awaits us *unless* we are forgiving and acceptant of others.

*Had compassion-* The Lord's compassion is clearly intended to be ours, who are to live and move and feel "in Him". The Lord of the servant "*was moved with compassion* and forgave him"- the very words used about the Lord being "moved with compassion" for the spiritual and

human needs of the Galilean Jews He lived amongst in His life. But the point of the parable was: "...shouldest not thou also have had compassion...?" (Mt. 18:27,33). If we have seen and known His compassion, ought we not also to show that compassion in the same way as He did and does? His compassion must be ours. The Samaritan of Lk. 10:33 was clearly intended to be interpreted as the Lord Jesus. He "had compassion" on the dying man of humanity, not counting the personal cost and risk; and then the Lord bids us each to go and do likewise. Our 'doing likewise' will issue in us too sensing the tragedy of those who have not heard, of those without a shepherd, of those who have fallen out of the way. We will be like the Father who was likewise moved with compassion for his wayward son (Lk. 15:20). The crowds of unknowing people who stream before us each day, the sad fact that we are so outnumbered in this world, that those you live and work with are dying in ignorance of the wonderful eternity that *could be* for them... that they live their lives in the darkness of selfishness, as existence rather than real life, without the light of the knowledge of the glory of God as it is in the face of Jesus Christ... all these things will powerfully *move us* to witness after the pattern of our Lord.

*Even as-* This is the very teaching of the Lord's prayer, wherein we daily ask for forgiveness *as* we have forgiven others, in accordance with our attitude to them. This is the very meaning of those who sin against us in life- their function is really to provide us with practice for forgiveness and thereby a basis for our own forgiveness.

18:34 *Was angry-* The wrath of God here stands in sharp contrast to the amazing grace He has just shown to the indebted man. His anger was not that the man had stolen such a colossal sum from him [see on *The tormentors*], not admitted it, not appreciated the depth and gravity of the theft, not repented... but rather that despite that, the man would not forgive another. The purpose of the parable in its end thrust [which is so significant in nearly all the parables] is that unforgiveness of others is the ultimate and worst sin, far worse than anything else, including lack of repentance for our own sins.

*The tormentors-* In the Lord's frank forgiveness of the heavily indebted man, there was no mention of any conditions. But when that same man refused to forgive his debtor, he was brought back into court, the debt was re-instated and he was eternally imprisoned until he paid every bit of it. The frank forgiveness of the debt, the 'release' from it, was actually conditional on him being forgiving to others subsequently. But that condition wasn't mentioned.

In the furniture of the parable, the tormentors may refer to the prison keepers. But the same word is used in Rev. 14:10; 20:10 about the tormenting in fire of the beast and his supporters at the last day. Clearly the point is that self-righteous unforgiveness of the little ones, the obviously



immature and even insincere, will lead to the same condemnation as the very worst of the world. The same point was made by the Lord talking about offenders of little ones having a millstone put around their neck and cast into the sea- the very punishment of Babylon.

Another option is that the man needed torturing- and that is the essential force of the Greek word used- because clearly his huge debt was a result of theft, and he did actually have the money stashed away somewhere. Hence the need for torturing to get him to confess where it was hidden. This would mean that his claim not to have anything at all to pay back was simply a false plea, a fake repentance. Which would be a function within the story exactly relevant to the context, which is that we should forgive others without limit, regardless of the sincerity of their repentance; and realize that so much of our own repentance is hardly that genuine either, resulting as it has done in the huge debt which we personally owe to God; a debt so great we are to perceive it as far more serious than anything anyone has done to us. If this interpretation of the torturers is valid, and it is hard to interpret it any other way really, then this throws into an even worse perspective the man's demand for the 100 denarii from his fellow servant. He already had considerable wealth stashed away... Remember that this unpleasant, insincerely repentant man is our representative right up to the point where he encounters his fellow servant who is in his debt. All his insincere representations about his debt, his complete failure to appreciate the extent and gravity of what he had done- these are all typical of our shallow repentances. And this serves to remind us not to refuse forgiveness to others because we consider their repentance somehow insincere. We also reflect that the King surely knew that the servant had stolen the money- it was such a huge sum. But He chose not to 'take the matter up'; He didn't make that specific allegation. And this lends weight to my suggestion that the earlier language of 'taking up a matter' with a brother who has wronged us is not a command for us to do so, but is rather a parody of Jewish and legalistic thinking.

There are of course those who misuse this verse to support their view of literal torture at the last day. But remember that this is a parable, and that every other entity in the parable has a fairly obvious interpretation. The torturers likewise must represent someone or something, rather than be the only element of the parable which is taken literally. That they represent something is clear, but what- is not so clear. In Matthew's pictures of judgment, the Angels have a major part to play in punishing the wicked (Mt. 13:41,42,49,50; 22:13). So perhaps they refer to how Angelically-ministered punishment will bring the wicked to some state of self-knowledge and confession, although tragically all too late.

*Pay all-* The teaching is surely not that through the experience of torment, the man somehow could earn the 10,000 talents. Then he would finally be free and justified before God, as if

through some kind of Roman Catholic purgatory. Rather I suggest the Lord is demonstrating His principle of judging people from their own mouths and according to their own words (Lk. 19:22- the context is likewise of a “wicked servant”). The servant had claimed to be able to “pay all” if given time (:29). Now, that untruth is being quoted back to him.

*All that was due-* The same Greek word is used elsewhere in this chapter only with regard to how the wicked servant perceived the debt of his brother- he uses the word in saying “Pay me what you owe me [‘what is due to me’]” (:28), and demanding the man “Pay the debt”, ‘that which was due’ (:30). Again the words and attitudes of the wicked servant are being quoted back to him, and he is being treated as he treated his brother.

The big debtor was rejected because he wouldn't forgive his brother. The Lord says that He will make such a person pay all the debt. There is a connection here with an earlier parable, where He spoke of how unless a man agrees with his adversary quickly, the adversary will drag him to court and jail until he pays all that is due (Mt. 5:26). The adversary of the parable, therefore, is the Lord Himself. He is the aggressive invader marching against us with an invincible army (Lk. 14:31), with whom we must make peace by total surrender. Putting the Lord's teaching in context, He is showing Himself to be very harsh and demanding on the unforgiving believer, but very soft and almost unacceptably gracious to those who show forgiveness.

18:35 *Also unto you-* The unpleasant wicked servant is therefore symbolic of us each one- at least up until our meeting with our fellow servant, after our own experience of forgiveness. And the wicked servant up until that point is not presented positively, but rather as insincere in his repentance, and totally miscalculating the extent of his own sin.

*From your hearts-* By adding this detail, the Lord seems to recognize that forgiveness (like all spiritual characteristics) can appear to have been achieved on the surface, when it has not been achieved in the heart.

*Each one his brother-* The same ideas are repeated, relentlessly. This most sober warning applies to each one of us, not to some of us. None are exempt, none are in a position where this problem of forgiveness doesn't apply to them. It applies to each of us. If we consider that we do not struggle with the issue of forgiveness, then it seems to me that we are not in touch with ourselves.

## Notes

(1) Lawrence Frizzell, 'Excommunication', in E. Kessler and N. Wenborn, *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2005) p. 152; see too G. Forkman, *The Limits of the Religious Community. Expulsion from the Religious Community within the Qumran Sect, within Rabbinic Judaism and within Primitive Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1972).

(2) F.J.A.Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia* (London: Macmillan, 1898) p. 7).

(3) Hort, *ibid.*, p. 10.