

BaptistWay Bible Series for Feb. 13: Church discipline, forgiveness flow together_20705

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Church discipline, forgiveness flow together

Matthew 18:15-35

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Last week, we commenced our study of Jesus' fourth discourse in Matthew's Gospel by considering the Master's instruction on who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven, namely, children (18:1-5). Additionally, we reflected upon the fact that Jesus holds his disciples responsible for the spiritual well-being of the so-called "little ones," likely recent converts and/or immature believers. Even as the heavenly Father is extremely concerned that no "little ones" are lost, so also Jesus' followers should take extreme measures, if necessary, to ensure the spiritual maturation of such persons (vv. 6-14).

This week's lesson covers the remainder of the fourth discourse. We will overview Jesus' teaching on the restitution of a believer overtaken by a transgression (vv. 15-20). Furthermore, we will examine Jesus' parabolic response to Peter's question regarding the limits of forgiveness (vv. 21-34). These passages offer practical and radical counsel regarding Christian relationships.

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Although verse 15 begins hypothetically (“if”), sin amongst and against believers is a sad and sobering reality. More frequently than we Christians would care to admit, we transgress against God and one another. When a believer sins (against another church member and by extension the entire congregation), what course of action should be taken?

Verses 15-17 set forth a pattern for reconciliation between fellow Christians. Should a brother or sister sin (against you), the onus of responsibility falls upon the aggrieved party. Earlier in Matthew, believers are admonished to seek reconciliation with the brother or sister who has something against them before giving their offering (5:23-24). Elsewhere, Paul enjoins the Romans “If it is possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all” (12:18).

In the first instance, the offended is to seek out the offender in private and to point out to him or to her the error of his or of her way. If this person should listen to the admonition of a fellow Christian, then restitution will

result (18:15). In the event that reconciliatory efforts on a one-to-one basis fail, then the person seeking to affect restored relations is instructed to take another believer or two along.

This enables individuals not directly involved to serve as witnesses (v. 16). Deuteronomy 19:15 states: "A single person shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offense that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained."

If the erring member should refuse to listen to a small band of believers, then the entire church is to get involved. Should even the admonition of the congregation be rebuffed, then the insider is to be treated as an outsider, that is, as a Gentile and a tax collector (v. 17). The disciplinary action of the congregation against a wayward member is to be viewed as authoritative (vv. 18-19) and in keeping with the presence of Jesus in their midst (v. 20).

Most contemporary Christian assemblies are wary of church discipline. This is understandable, for the practice is notoriously susceptible to abuse. This fact notwithstanding, Christian communities should take sin, as qualified as such in the Scriptures, seriously and act restoratively toward those caught in sin's ugly snare (Galatians 6:1).

Contrary to popular opinion, in some instances the most compassionate step a Christian or a church can take is to help a believer remove the speck from his or her eye, acknowledging all the while the log they have just removed from their own (Matthew 7:1-5). However, any and all action taken against another believer by a congregation should be done in a spirit of gentleness, remembering all the while that the very people with whom Jesus mixed and mingled during his earthly ministry were tax collectors and sinners (9:10-12; 11:19).

The spirit of forgiveness and mercy that marked Jesus' ministry and should

characterize those who seek to follow in his steps is poignantly illustrated by Jesus in his memorable parable of the unforgiving servant (vv. 23-35). In response to Peter's question if he should forgive another believer who has sinned against him up to seven times (a number in Scripture that signals completeness), Jesus answers, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times (or, as some manuscripts read, seventy times seven)" (vv. 21-22). In essence, Jesus is saying to Peter (and to us) that believers who tally up the wrongs done to them by others are barking up the wrong spiritual tree.

To illustrate this point, Jesus tells a story of a slave, easily likened to a Christ-follower, who owed a king, a thinly veiled allusion to God, an insurmountable, indeed an unimaginable, debt (some 150,000 years of labor). In response to the slave's desperate plea for leniency and his foolish promise he would pay the debt entirely if the king would but have patience with him, the king is moved with pity and forgives the debt entirely.

Subsequently, this slave moves to extract a comparatively paltry sum (one hundred days' wages) from a fellow slave. When the king gets wind of such, he summons the "wicked slave" and asks him if he should not have been merciful since he himself had been shown mercy (5:7). Having previously been spared from a grisly judgment, this slave was now to be subjected to the same.

In driving home the primary point of this parable, Jesus warns his disciples, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (18:35).

When we pray collectively, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," we should mean it. It would be the height of spiritual hypocrisy and tragedy if we who have been forgiven much did not also forgive much. In the final analysis, none of us want to experience God's judgment. We would be wise to relate to others in a merciful manner,

mindful of the fact that we, too, are sinners.

Discussion question

- ◆ Why has church discipline fallen out of use?
- ◆ Is it still practical to employ? If not, what system would work better?

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