

Matthew 18D

- Today we reach the final part of Jesus' discourse in Matthew 18, and probably the most important topic in this chapter
 - This next part of Jesus' teaching is so frequently quoted out of its context that most people have probably misunderstood it
 - So as we walk through it today, we need to do some careful scholarship if we're to follow the thread of Jesus' teaching
 - Beginning by remembering the context of His teaching
 - Because everything Jesus says in this chapter is part of a single, connected conversation
 - It began when Jesus rebuked those twelve men for having interfered with another disciple's efforts to serve Jesus
 - They intervened out of pride and in the process they became stumbling blocks for that individual
 - Then Jesus explained His disgust with anyone who stumbles another brother
 - We need to handle wayward, wandering sheep correctly, and last week Jesus gave us the method to use in dealing with sinning believers
 - The method consisted of three steps, beginning with one-on-one private counsel by an individual and then by a small group
 - Secondly, it graduates to a public call to account before the church
 - Then ultimately it moved to ostracizing the individual as a last resort
 - The whole process is applied in love and in the hope of bringing the person to repentance and a restored place of fellowship
- Then at the end of our passage last week in v.18 Jesus tells the apostles that as the church engages in this process, the leaders represent Jesus
 - He said that in process of carrying out these difficult decisions, the outcome will reflect the Lord's will for that person

- Whether the church binds (meaning convicts) or looses (meaning acquits) a person, Jesus says the outcome is God-ordained
- Jesus works behind the scenes to manage the affairs of the church in matters of disciples ensuring that the process reflects His purposes
 - Which Jesus explains in the next part of our passage

Matt. 18:19 “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.

Matt. 18:20 “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”

- As I mentioned, these two verses have been frequently misquoted out of context and usually moved into a context of fellowship or prayer
 - But as you can see, the context here is church authority and discipline
 - Notice in v.19, Jesus says “again I say to you...” which indicates that this thought is connected to His previous statement
 - We might say it this way: “Let me emphasize this point further...”
 - So Jesus’ statement in v.19 is not a new thought...it is a continuation of His earlier thought intended to emphasize it further
 - Jesu says when two believers agree on earth about anything that they may ask, then it shall be done by My Father in heaven
 - Jesus is still on the subject of the discipline process for a wayward believer and we see this by His reference to “two”
 - Two believers agreeing on some matter points us back to the correction process He just outlined where two or more go to confront a lost sheep
 - When 2 or more witnesses confirm the matter of a believer’s sin, then that judgment has been done or confirmed by the Father
 - The process has the backing and authority of Heaven, because we are working in unity by the Spirit to carry out Jesus’ instructions
- Likewise, Jesus adds in v.20 that where two or more are gathered in His name, He will be there in their midst confirming the outcome

- Once again, this promise refers specifically to the process of church discipline and once more we see Jesus using the 2 or more reference
 - So when we work through the disciplinary process, we can know Jesus is working in that moment through us
 - He is in our midst, as it were
- This is a striking statement of the Lord's sovereignty in overseeing the adjudication of church discipline through its leaders
 - Jesus is promising to move hearts, direct decisions and drive outcomes in order to arrive at His purpose in the end
 - We may not always like the outcome, especially if we are the one under scrutiny
 - And we may believe that the church's decision wasn't right or fair and in some cases, it may be incorrect or unjust
- But Jesus is telling us that those decisions will happen under His authority despite any perceived flaws and work to the greater good
 - Knowing this we have all the more reason to submit to the process and accept its outcome as God ordained
 - And it also means that when we run away from a church disciplinary process, we disobey Christ
 - Look, Jesus is *really* serious about His Church reaching out to help those who are not walking closely with Him
- Now before we move further in this passage, I want to take a moment to consider other ways in which these two verses are often interpreted
 - I don't normally take time to do this, but in the case of vs.19-20, there is so much poor interpretation out there, I feel I need to address it
 - The first of these misinterpretations relates to v.19
 - That verse says if two or more agree about something on earth, then it shall be done for them by the Father
 - When this verse is taken out of context, it's often used to support the "name it, claim it" heresy
 - That heresy claims Jesus is promising that the Father will do anything we request of Him so long as we have a group praying with us for it

- Obviously, that interpretation is not only wrong, it's completely nonsensical and even comical
- It is nonsense to expect that we can control God
- Much less that He delights to do our bidding, giving us what we want no matter how selfish or outlandish our requests may be
- This teaching portrays the Creator God as a genie in a bottle, Who responds to us rather than the other way around
 - Word faith proponents manipulate scriptures like these in a calculated and manipulative appeal to the flesh
 - And it's no wonder that this kind of false teaching has found an audience in our day and culture
 - In our age of materialism and instant gratification, people flock to any teaching that says God gives you what you ask for
- The craziest thing about this false teaching is just how easy it is to disprove...you only need to *try it*
 - Try asking another Christian to pray with you for something you want and then see what God does next
 - Ask God that you win the lottery, or that He cure some incurable birth defect, or for the Dallas Cowboys to win a playoff game
 - Clearly these things require miracles, and though God *could* do these things, the real question is *will* He?
- The name it, claim it heresy teaches that Jesus' words in v.19 assure us that He always will...that God's will turns on what we say and do
 - But both the Bible and our real world experience proves the exact opposite
 - God does only as His will desires in all matters, and He calls His followers to pray for His will to be done, not for our will
 - Furthermore, when we do slip into a selfish mindset praying only for things we want, we quickly discover we were on the wrong path
 - For what we wanted will not come to pass in the end

- So what do the “blab it and grab it” teachers tell us when we point out this inconsistency in their logic?
 - They will usually respond saying we didn’t have enough faith to bring it about, which is a distortion of another New Testament passage
 - But even a young Bible student knows that what they are proposing is not biblical theology...it’s Abbott and Costello logic
 - It’s a complete farce, it’s a shell game where they keep changing the answers to keep you from noticing the lie underneath
- So v.19 does not promise we can claim anything we want from God and so long as we have others in agreement, God is obliged to give it to us
 - That’s not the true God, that’s a genie and genie’s don’t save
 - And any god who would obey our will is simply no god at all
- And then in v.20, we often encounter another misinterpretation that produces an opposite effect from the one associated with v.19
 - Taken out of context, we are told that v.20 says when 2 or more Christians gather in any circumstances, Jesus becomes present with us
 - We typically hear this verse quoted as a positive encouragement to the church body to expect Jesus to be where the church is
 - Yes, when we gather as the body of Christ, Jesus is among us, but the error in this interpretation is in what is implied
 - When we read this verse absent the context, we may conclude that somehow Jesus is less around us when we are alone
 - And that is completely wrong...Jesus is always with us at all times
 - Jesus has placed His Spirit in each of us...100% of His Spirit, and that doesn’t change no matter where you are or who you’re with
 - If you are marooned on a deserted island, you will have no less of Jesus with you on that island than you have right now here
 - So when we teach that 2 or more are needed to have Jesus present, we’re inadvertently suggesting that Jesus comes and goes
 - We’re distorting His words and confusing believers concerning the nature of Jesus’ presence in our lives

- To be clear, Jesus delights to see His body gathered and we should gather together regularly
- But that doesn't limit how much of Jesus we can know and experience on our own
- So v.19 can be twisted to suggest we can have more in our relationship with God than is true while v.20 can be twisted to imply we might get less
 - And the common denominator in both cases is that these verses are taken out of context
 - Anytime we divorce a single verse or passage of Scripture from its surrounding text, we're on the road to misinterpretation
 - Proper context is the key to understanding the Bible properly, because context connects the dots driving us down a path
 - I think of context in biblical interpretation like the steel spheres hanging from wires in a pendulum swing
 - As the first ball strikes the second in the swing, the force is transferred and the motion continues down the line
 - If you were to remove one of those spheres in the middle, the action stops immediately because there is no transfer of energy
 - That's the way context works in interpreting the Bible...each verse conveys the thought forward one step at a time in a continuous action
 - If we remove one verse from the passage and try to study it in isolation, we've stopped the movement of the idea
 - We've lost the thread of the conversation in the text, which then forces us to substitute our own conversation in its place
 - In this passage the conversation is about a process of discipline and restoration, so vs.19-20 must be understood in that context
- So speaking of thread, where does Jesus go next in this conversation? Well, he takes us to the next logical place, the place we *must* go when believers sin

[Matt. 18:21](#) Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

[Matt. 18:22](#) Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

- Sometime later, the apostles began pondering Jesus' teaching on restoring lost sheep, and questions came to mind
 - And Peter gathers enough courage to ask Jesus a question about this process, specifically does this process have a reasonable limit?
 - In the case of a brother who sins repeatedly how many times should Peter be expected to show forgiveness to that person?
 - And Peter suggests perhaps seven times is a reasonable limit
 - Peter proposed this limit with selfish intent, because he knew it would make him appear magnanimous by Pharisaic standards
 - Under Pharisaic teaching of the day, a Jew was only required to forgive three offenses by the same person
 - After any subsequent offense, a Jew could rightfully withhold forgiveness from a person on the grounds his duty had been met
 - Because of that teaching, forgiveness in Israel became a thing to be earned and deserved, and it was a privilege that could be easily lost
 - In fact, under Pharisaic rule any failure to follow the Law brought severe penalties that were applied without mercy
 - And opportunities for forgiveness and restoration were extremely limited and could require significant restitution
 - So when Peter suggested seven times, he was setting a much higher standard than the Pharisees'
 - And in the process, Peter expected to appear generous by comparison
- Once again, Peter and the rest of the apostles had confused man's way of running a religion with God's way of running His church
 - God ways of viewing mercy and forgiveness is very different than Peter's and Peter's question reveals those differences
 - For example, we can see Peter understood forgiveness to be something handed out by men
 - Because Peter assumes *he* would decide when enough is enough
 - That's what Pharisees did in Israel, and so Peter assumed the same would be true for the Church as well

- But the problem is mankind has a finite limit to the amount of forgiveness we are willing to extend to another human being
 - We may think we can forgive someone forever but our hearts are wicked and our pride gets in the way
 - So despite our best intentions, eventually we will succumb to anger or resentment or bitterness or just grow tired of the effort
 - Knowing this, we take care in how we hand out forgiveness...we conserve it, ration it, only allocating it when it's most deserved
 - Or more often, only when it best suits our interests in granting it
- Moreover, Peter and the other apostles had been taught that granting a person unlimited forgiveness simply wasn't wise
 - After all, if a person could simply say "I'm sorry" and all is forgiven, wouldn't that just encourage more misbehavior?
 - Isn't there a proper place for penance to make repeated violations less likely?
 - And what about restitution? Shouldn't the person satisfy us in some way before we extend our forgiveness to them?
- That's why Peter thought himself generous in offering seven "get out of jail free" cards to his sinning brother
 - He was showing more generosity than most, yet still he wasn't willing to hand out freebies forever
 - At some point a person would have to be made to account for their offense, Peter assumed
- That's how he and the apostles were thinking about forgiveness and it's how we all tend to think about forgiveness in the Church
 - But praise the Lord that this is not how God grants forgiveness in the body of Christ nor is it the way He wants us to operate with one another
 - Jesus explains how it actually works by correcting Peter's standard and explaining God's view of forgiveness

[Matt. 18:22](#) Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

[Matt. 18:23](#) “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

[Matt. 18:24](#) “When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.

[Matt. 18:25](#) “But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.

[Matt. 18:26](#) “So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’

[Matt. 18:27](#) “And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.

[Matt. 18:28](#) “But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’

[Matt. 18:29](#) “So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’

[Matt. 18:30](#) “But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.

[Matt. 18:31](#) “So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.

[Matt. 18:32](#) “Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

[Matt. 18:33](#) ‘Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’

[Matt. 18:34](#) “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.

[Matt. 18:35](#) “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

- Peter proposed a generous limit of forgiving seven times but Jesus responds that the standard should be seventy times seven (or seventy seven in the NIV)
 - Seventy times seven equals 490, which is much more forgiveness, but even then Jesus was not setting a literal limit
 - He was simply playing off of Peter’s words to show how far God wants us to go in forgiveness

- In other words, God's requirement is limitless forgiveness...not seven times, not 490 times...but every time
- Believers who respond to our counsel and repent of sin must be forgiven every time they sin because we don't own forgiveness
 - In the body of Christ, forgiveness is not something we control and hand out to one another as we see fit
 - Forgiveness is exclusively offered by the Lord on His terms, and we merely represent Him in the process of restoring lost sheep
 - We don't get to determine when someone deserves forgiveness, because that choice belongs to Jesus alone
- Jesus says every time someone comes to repentance after having sinned, we are to extend forgiveness to that person and restore them
 - They are restored in fellowship and welcomed back into the body without condition and without limit
 - Forgiveness comes with no strings attached, because their sin is against God, not us, and He sets the standard for forgiveness
- Now of course, in the process of restoring someone, the church may stipulate certain standards for future behavior according to the Bible's teaching
 - We may ask the person to respect certain boundaries in their life to help that person remain in obedience
 - We may ask them to make some amends to those they hurt to facilitate reconciliation
 - And in some cases, a serious sin may require removing someone from serving in a position of authority over the body
 - But in all cases, repentance is sufficient to restore full fellowship
 - So we do not have the right to impose our own, more restrictive standards of forgiveness on the process of restoration
 - No matter how often someone makes a mistake...even the same mistake...if they respond in repentance, we forgive them
 - Because as a practical matter, the unity of the body wouldn't be possible otherwise

- If repeating the same sins disqualified us from other's forgiveness, who could ever remain in fellowship?
- How many of us can say we've managed to avoid ever committing the same sin twice?
 - Who among us can say we always acknowledge our sin, and then we successfully avoid ever committing that same sin again?
 - Truly, I would like to meet that person, but I'm confident I won't ever find that person because they don't exist
 - We all sin every day and usually in the same ways over and over again
- And when we do that, aren't we expecting continual forgiveness from those who know us and love us?
 - And yet how often will we tell someone else that they've gone too far and we can't forgive them any longer for what they do?
 - Jesus says in the body of Christ the only test for extending forgiveness is repentance and there is no limit
- And let's remember that learning to forgive without condition is not just doing a nice thing for someone else...it's doing the best thing for yourself too
 - Chuck Swindoll once said:

"Every time an offense occurs, forgive. Every single time. If you do not, you will never be happily married. If you do not, you will never find a church you'll be content with. If you do not, you will never find a group you can get along with. You'll never be able to work for any company. You're just going to spend your entire existence looking for and expecting perfection but never finding it. That's not a happy way to live. Nor is it realistic."

- Finally, Jesus gives us this wonderful parable to explain why God's standard for His Church is unlimited forgiveness
 - Jesus opens the parable in v.23 by saying "for this reason", meaning here's the reason why I expect you to show such unconditional mercy
 - And in the parable we have a king settling a debt with a slave

- Indentured servants (slaves) lived and worked in a master's home, and on occasion a master might extend credit to a slave
- The slave would be granted additional provisions or materials beyond the value of their work
- These loans had to be repaid through additional hours of work or by some other means
- In this example, the king has allowed a particular slave to amass an unbelievably huge debt
 - A talent was a measure of weight equal to about 75 pounds
 - So 10,000 talents of silver was a debt of 750,000 lbs of silver, which would be worth \$195,000,000 today...it's ridiculous
 - Could you imagine the look on your spouse's face when they open the credit card bill and see a balance of \$195M?
- So the day comes for the king to demand repayment, but the debt is so high that there is no way this person could ever repay it
 - Not even the Caesar of Rome could pay back such a debt
 - In fact, the Greek word Jesus uses for ten thousand is "myriad" which was the largest numeral in the Greek language
 - Furthermore, a talent was the largest unit of money in that day (like a \$1,000 bill today)
 - So Jesus selected the largest Greek number and the largest unit of money to emphasize how deeply in debt this man was
- Now the king has no choice but recover what he can on his bad loan, beginning by selling the man, his possessions and his family to other masters
 - The slave would be separated from his family, left with nothing and subject to the whims of a new master who knew his poor history
 - So the slaves pleads for mercy asking for patience and promising to repay the debt
 - It's a ridiculous promise...imagine a day laborer promising to repay you \$200M? Would you accept that guarantee?
 - Given the person has squandered \$200M already, what are the odds he can amass that fortune for himself? Zero

- And yet he asks the king to consider his request, but the king does the man one better...the king forgives the debt altogether
 - The king was no fool, so he knew that the debt would never be repaid despite the slave's promises
 - So out of compassion he wipes the slate clean forgiving it entirely
- Then that slave goes to his debtors to collect what he is owed, and despite having received so much mercy himself, this slave shows no mercy to others
 - He finds a fellow slave who owed him 100 denarii, or about 3 months wages, and begins to choke him, forcing him to repay
 - When that slave asks for patience as he had done earlier, he refuses to extend the mercy that he himself received
 - A moment earlier he had been buried under so much debt, he couldn't possibly recover
 - Yet now, though he owes no bills, he acts ruthlessly against one who owes him money
 - When news gets back to the king, he calls the ungrateful slave to account for his lack of mercy to his brother
 - And when he realized how the man responded to his grant of grace, he reverses himself and demands the man pay his debts through torture
 - And Jesus compares the king's response to the Father's view of us when we live with an unforgiving heart toward our brothers
- So let's make the proper application, beginning with the obvious that Jesus is the king and we are His slaves
 - As obvious as that point may be, it's central to understanding the entire lesson Jesus is teaching here
 - Because unless and until we adopt an appreciation of our relationship to Christ, we will not deal with others properly in matters of forgiveness
 - We are under the authority of Jesus, our King, Who has forgiven us an immeasurable sin debt

- And that fact obligates us to respond differently to the sin debts of others who share the same relationship to that King
- First, you cannot possibly imagine how much sin Jesus has forgiven you to date, because you have no idea how much you have committed
 - You may agree that you've done some bad things in your time, but you have no idea how many or how bad
 - Can you imagine what a debt \$200M feels like? Can you even imagine what \$200M in cash looks like?
 - Neither can you fathom how much sin is present in your life from birth...you don't know the half of it
- And maybe in the beginning of your walk with Jesus, you came to him like that slave, bargaining over your debt
 - Perhaps you made promises to live a better life or to make good on your past offenses or in some other way "pay back" Jesus
 - Maybe you went to church regularly thinking you were paying Jesus back, or gave money to the church or said your prayers
- But the reality is you owed so much more than you could possibly pay, Jesus couldn't accept any of those bargains because they weren't enough
 - The only solution was for Jesus to wipe your debt clean to forgive it all, which is why Jesus died for you
 - That was the only payment possible or acceptable to the Father, and by His death, he cancelled your debt, the Bible says
 - You had an unimaginably high mountain of sin debt, and Jesus just took it all away
- Before we can learn to forgive others without condition or limit, we must first learn to live every day with an appreciation of how much forgiveness we have already received from Jesus
 - Then as we approach another believer who is sinning against us, we will have the right perspective on that moment
 - When they confess and repent of their sin, we will be ready to extend forgiveness because we know Jesus has forgiven them

- And like the slave in the parable, we realize that whatever we may feel that person owes us pales in comparison to what we owed Jesus
- And if Jesus has wiped clean their debt as He did ours, then we have no right to demand our brother pay that same debt to us
- Now maybe you're tempted to respond that sometimes we need to set conditions for forgiveness as a form of accountability
 - If we forgive someone unconditionally, won't it give the person incentive to sin again in the future?
 - Oh Christian, be careful the standards you apply, for woe to you should God used the same standard in your case
- Would you want Jesus to approach your sin debt in the same way?
 - Do you want Jesus to withhold His forgiveness waiting to see if you straighten up first?
 - How well do you think you would survive that test?
 - That's not love, and it's certainly not God's heart, and we have no right to do less for your brothers and sisters than Jesus did for us
- If we are hard-hearted against our brothers and sisters in their moments of weakness and repentance, Jesus says the Father will do the same for us
 - To understand Jesus' point, we have to remember that every part of a parable must be translated into literal terms
 - Everything in the parable is a picture of something, not the literal of that thing
 - For example, in the parable the slaves owed money, but in the real world application we don't owe Jesus money
 - Ours is a debt of sin, and that debt must be repaid with a life, not with money, which is why Jesus died on the cross in our place
 - Likewise, in the parable the king tortures the slave when he discovers the slave's ungrateful attitude but we must translate that into a literal
 - So when Jesus says the Father will do the same to us, He means the Father will also hold us accountable for our hard heart

- But obviously, the Father isn't going to torture us, or cast us into Hell as some might claim
- Jesus means that just as the slave had consequences, so will the Lord bring consequences upon us both here and perhaps later at the Judgment Seat of Christ
 - Any believer who lives in bitterness, forever holding others' sins against them or mercilessly demanding others pay restitution taking a great personal risk
 - They are testing the patience of God, so although they remain saved by their faith, they may experience other repercussions
 - For example, the Lord may allow them to experience the consequences of their own sins while on earth
 - Or at their judgment, they may discover that their lack of mercy toward others was met with a lowered reward
- Here's the fundamental point to walk away with today...we all sin...we sin a lot...and Jesus died to erase all that debt
 - We gladly accepted His forgiveness when we needed it badly, so we can certainly afford to show a little mercy to one another now
 - None of us owe anyone anything in the area of forgiveness
 - We all owe Jesus everything, and He said forgive one another without limit to encourage the unity of the body
 - That is what it means to grow in the grace of Jesus Christ
 - And if we do this, we'll restore many sheep and keep the body of Christ strong in faith and obedience