

If Brother or Sister Sins, Go and Point Out Their Fault

Matthew 18: 15-35

DIG: Whom is Jesus addressing? What kind of **brother** is this? For what desired result? This reconciliation process involves what four stages? What obstacles frustrate the process? What authority is given to Christ's followers to aid this process? Offenders in Messiah's day were forgiven up to three times; a fourth offense would not be forgiven. What does Yeshua's answer say about forgiveness in the Kingdom? How does **the parable of the unforgiving servant** explain the Lord's teaching on forgiveness?

REFLECT: What happens to this process of reconciliation short-circuited by someone "going public" right away? What has driven home the importance of forgiveness to you? How can we forgive, yet not encourage irresponsibility? Since God through Jesus has forgiven us a huge debt, should we not be gracious and quick to forgive those around us today? How can you forgive someone from the distant past who hurt you deeply? What is the connection between forgiveness, health and wholeness? In refusing to be merciful to others, what do we deny ourselves? Do we forgive others so ADONAI will forgive us, or does ADONAI forgive us so that we will have a forgiving attitude?

In the previous file, Christ had commanded believers to **be at peace with each other** (Mark 9:50 CJB). Since it is inevitable that divisions will arise among believers, Yeshua now teaches the Twelve how these divisions may be reconciled so that the unity of the congregations of God would not be broken. Messiah was giving principles by which one believer should deal with another believer when one has been offended by the other.⁹⁰⁸ The context here is the local **church** or **messianic synagogue**, not natural family relationships.

When your brother (*adelphos*) or sister **sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you** (Mattityahu 18:15a). The word **brother** (*adelphos*) can mean either "from the same womb," or a **brother** or sister in the Lord. It is presumed here that the situation has risen to the point where personal offense had not been forgiven. It is crucial to note that the situation is to be confronted with a spirit of humility. This keeps the problem at the lowest possible level, and avoids gossip because the offended person is not to talk to anyone else before confronting the offender. In addition, the offended party might avoid the embarrassment of discovering their own culpability for part of the problem, and then having to go back and explain that sorry fact to all the people they blabbed to inappropriately before confronting the person who supposedly offended them!

There are four steps in discipline for believers, but first let me say that in this litigious society that we live in today it would be wise to distinguish between members and visitors. Trying to go through this process with someone who does not consider your church or messianic synagogue their spiritual home is like trying to discipline your neighbor's kids. It can only lead to bad feelings at best or a lawsuit at worst. Non-members who continually cause problems can be asked to attend somewhere else. And even if they are members many places of worship are including this information in their membership classes so that people seeking membership have a chance to agree to this process. Some churches or messianic synagogues, have been sued and lost their property because they tried to discipline someone who did not agree to this process beforehand. In my humble opinion this is wisdom for today.

First, the offended person goes to the offender privately (not during refreshments). If you talk to anyone else before hand, then you have already violated the principle. **If they listen to you** and make the adequate adjustment, **you have won them over (Matthew 18:15b)**. This is always the initial step to consider. **Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins (First Peter 4:8)**. If agreement is reached, then the relationship is repaired. But the person may **not listen**, does not see the sin you are talking about, or may disagree about your judgment. If no agreement is reached, how can you know the truth? You wouldn't have to go privately if this was a natural **brother** or sister.

Messiah's second step answers that problem in a very practical and spiritual manner. But if they will not listen, privately **take one or two others along** to try to restore the broken relationship, **so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses (Mattityahu 18:16)** as seen in the Torah principle of **Deuteronomy 19:15**. Now it would be time for some outside assistance. In practical terms, it would be best if **the witnesses** were from the spiritual leadership of **the church or messianic synagogue**. In fact, an unqualified person or someone who would take sides in the disagreement could blow up the entire process. It is still kept private to avoid gossip and further complications with anyone outside the two people involved. And a qualified person or two might be able to give some objective insight toward resolving the situation.

Thirdly, but if they still refuse to listen, there will be more serious consequences. By then, it should be coming clear what really took place between the two people. It's moved beyond the personal opinion of each party because an objective witness or **witnesses** have prayerfully evaluated the evidence and interaction between the two. At this point it should be confirmed that there is indeed sin on the part of one person. Because this truth was not received in the individual or group confrontation, the next step is **to tell the church or messianic synagogue** the details of the sinful action. As mentioned above, I think it is wise

to only discipline **church** or **messianic synagogue** members who have voluntarily placed themselves under the authority of elder leadership. At this point, there is still a chance of restoration if the guilty person listens to the larger body of believers. But every step is taken with the hope of restoration and not retribution. The context here is wide and not narrow as it would be if it were just in your immediate family.

And fourthly, if they refuse to listen even to the church or messianic synagogue, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector (Matthew 18:17). In the Jewish context, this would mean that they would be disfellowshipped from the congregation and treated as an untouchable. It is important to understand that there is no indication of the loss of personal salvation. The person is still a **brother** or sister in **Christ**, although, an unrepentant, sinful brother or sister. Even at this point, there should be not judgment on the person's salvation. Such things are left to **ADONAI**. But if they refuse all the attempts at reconciliation and repentance, then they are to be treated **as a pagan**. The lesson would be clear to **Yeshua's** audience. Such a person would be excommunicated and cut off from the fellowship of believers. This is to protect the remaining flock from being affected from the leaven from their midst. It may also be necessary to make the offender face the reality of their sin and repent. The gates of repentance should always be open.⁹⁰⁹ The context here is not your immediate physical family, but the spiritual family of **God**.

In Pharisaic Judaism and in modern rabbinical courts, there are three specific levels of excommunication. The first level is called the *heziphah*, which is simply a rebuke that lasted anywhere from seven to thirty days and was merely disciplinary. It could not be taken unless pronounced by three rabbis. That was the lowest level of excommunication. An example of *heziphah* is found in First Timothy 5:1. The second level is called *niddui*, which means to throw out. It would last a minimum of thirty days or more and was also disciplinary. A *niddui* had to be pronounced by ten rabbis. An example of this second type is found in Second Thessalonians 3:14-15 and Titus 3:10. The third and worst level of excommunication is called *cherem*, which means to be devoted to destruction. This third level was permanent. It means to be *unsynagogued*, or to be put out of the Temple and to be separated from the Jewish community. The rest of the Jews considered someone under the *cherem* curse to be dead and no communication of any kind of relationship could be carried on with the person whatsoever. This third type is found in First Corinthians 5:1-7 and Mattityahu 18:15-20.

In view of the fact that this is a very difficult situation to deal with, **Jesus** gives a special promise to those in spiritual leadership. The mediators and counselors who seek **the Lord's** wisdom on these sensitive issues are assured they will be assisted. **Yes! I tell you**

that whatever you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven (18:18). This is not a blank check for our desires nor is it even related to prayer as many suppose. As in **Matthew 16** (see **Fx - On This Rock I Will Build My Church**), we remember the terminology reflects rabbinic decisions, not personal requests. For example, **the Talmud speaks of binding a day by declaring it a fast day (Tractate Ta'anit 12a), thus making food prohibited**. The Greek perfect tense here points to the fact that whatever is already **the LORD's decision in heaven** will be revealed to the godly church leadership on earth. Whether it is **prohibited** (Hebrew: *asur*) or **permitted** (Hebrew: *mutar*). This passage deals with making legal judgments and halakhah, not prayer. The context of **Christ's** promise here must be kept in mind.

The context here is **church** or **messianic synagogue** discipline, not demonic warfare. Binding demons or binding the Adversary would not fit the context. The authority of **prohibiting** (legislatively) and **permitting** (judicially) was given to **the twelve apostles**. **The church or messianic synagogue** is seen in a judicial sense, but not to the degree of **the apostles**, because they could issue a death sentence (**Acts 5:1-11**). **The church** or **messianic synagogue** can choose to disfellowship or not to disfellowship. By the way, if you have an acquaintance that is binding Satan in their prayer life, we have a big problem. It seems that somebody keeps letting him go! I don't know about your neighborhood, but the devil is pretty active in mine.

Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven (Matthew 18:19). Pulled out of context, people use this as a prayer promise. They pray and say, "Let us agree together, and the Lord will bless it and it will be done." But the context here is not about prayer; it is about **church** discipline. The **two** people who agree are the same **two witnesses** in **18:15-17**, who are confronting the sinner. This is explaining the confrontation of step four in **18:17b**. The disfellowshipping is explained in **First Corinthians 5:1-7**. Their sin has to cost them something. The sinner is placed under the devil's authority for the destruction of the flesh, or physical death. It does not affect salvation. Normally Satan has no authority over the death of a believer. So when a believer dies (**First Thessalonians 4:13-17**), it is **Jesus** who takes them home to be with **Him**. The Greek literally reads that they sleep *through Jesus*, or *on account of Jesus*. But there is an exception to the rule, a disfellowshipped believer. So the actions of **the church**, which were backed up by the **two or three witnesses** is recognized in heaven and **God** allows the ancient Serpent to take that believers life. That is the point of **Matthew 18:19**, and, once again, it has nothing to do with prayer promises.

For where two or three gather in My name, there am I with them (Matthew 18:20). This is not the definition of a local **church**, as some have supposed. A local **church** is under the authority of elders or overseers. It has an organized body with a chain of authority. The issue here, once again, deals with **church** discipline. The **two or three** are the same **two witnesses** of **Mattityahu 18:15-17** who are witnessing to **the church** that the sinner has not repented. If their testimony is valid, then **Christ** is among them validating their testimony. Reflecting a similar promise, **the Talmud states, "If two sit together and words of Torah pass between them, the Shechinah abides between them (Tractate Avot 3:2).** And it is because **Jesus Himself** is authenticating their testimony, **God** can remove **His** protection from the sinner. Satan can put the sinner to death.⁹¹⁰

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked: Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times (Matthew 18:21)? Notice that he did not ask Yeshua about prayer, **prohibiting** evil spirits or **permitting** prosperity! Kefa understood that the principle here related to the main theme of forgiveness and restoration. Actually he must have thought he was being quite generous here because **the rabbis required to forgive three times and after that a person was not obligated to forgive again (Tractate Yoma 86:2, which is a rabbinical commentary on Amos 1:2).**

However, **Messiah** once again expanded the current thought on the topic from **not seven times, but seventy times seven times (Mattityahu 18:22).** This limitless number shows that **God's** forgiveness is boundless. The number **seven** is often used as a biblical metaphor as the number of completeness. Perhaps Yeshua had in mind the Torah passage that speaks of Lamech's unlimited vengeance (**Genesis 4:24**), in contrast to the unlimited forgiveness. True forgiveness does not count up the offenses.

This parable is so severe that many people conclude thought that the principle **Jesus** taught could not possibly apply to believers. But just as it is sometimes necessary for a parent to deal harshly with a persistently disobedient **child**, it is also sometimes necessary for **the Lord** to deal harshly with **His** persistently disobedient **children**. The writer to the **Hebrews** reminded his readers of what **God** had taught **His** people almost a thousand years earlier: **For ADONAI disciplines those He loves and whips everyone He accepts as His child (Hebrews 12:6; Proverbs 3:12 CJB).** Some of the **Corinthian** believers had become so immoral that **God** put them on sickbeds and even caused some to die (**First Corinthians 11:30**). He struck Ananias and Sapphira dead for lying to **the Ruach HaKodesh (Acts 5:1-10).** **God** is sometimes strict with **His** sinful **children** because sometimes that is the only way **He** can correct **their** disobedience and protect the purity and holiness of **His** Church.⁹¹¹

Yeshua introduces the parable specifically stating that it is about **the kingdom of Heaven**, whose true citizenship includes only believers. Not only that, but **He** tells the parable **for this reason**, that is, as a direct response to **Peter's** question about forgiving a brother in **Matthew 18:21**, which in turn was a response to **Christ's** teaching about **discipline** within the local church or messianic synagogue. **Kefa** was obviously a believer and his reference to **my brother or sister** points to fellow believers, especially in light of the fact that **Matthew 18** focuses on believers, **the Lord's little ones who believe in Him** (**Matthew 18:6** and **10**). **Therefore, the one major point of the parable of the unforgiving servant is the need for believers to forgive each other.**

For this reason, the kingdom of Heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servant. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him (Matthew 18:23-24). Jesus presents the attitude of **God**, pictured here as **the king**, concerning forgiveness of and by His **children**, or **servants**. The citizens of **God's Kingdom** are also **children** in His heavenly family, and this parable speaks of **Him** both as **master**, representing **the king**, and **heavenly Father**. **The king** appointed governors whose primary responsibility was to collect taxes on **his** behalf. It was probably in regard to such taxes that **the king wanted to settle accounts**, and **the man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold** was probably such a tax-collecting official. At any rate, **he** was a person of great responsibility who owed a great amount of money to **the king**. The occasion was perhaps the regular, periodic time that **the king** had established **to settle accounts** with **his** governors. Just as **seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22)** represents a limitless number of times, **ten thousand bags of gold** represents a limitless amount of money.

Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt (Mattityahu 18:25). Such a payment sounds bizarre to us today, but in the ancient Middle East, it was a realistic option. The Torah allowed indentured slavery as an option for those who were in excessive debt (see my commentary on **Exodus Dz - If You Buy a Hebrew Servant**). It was not the abusive, life long, slavery that was practiced in America in the 1800s. It was the old fashioned way of filing for bankruptcy. While no one wanted to live that way, often the slave was treated more like a family member than a hired servant. The man responsible would certainly sell his own service to repay his debt and, in extreme cases, his family was also enslaved because they were considered his property.⁹¹²

Realizing **his** inexcusable guilt and sensing **the king's** goodness, **the servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything" (Matthew 18:26).** Impossible as it really was, that fact did not deter **him** from **begging** for

a chance to make good on **his debt**. **He** didn't really understand the hopelessness of repaying **his debt**, but **his** heart was in the right place.

The king knew that, despite **his** good intentions, **the servant** could never do what **he** promised; but **the king** didn't criticize **him** for **his** foolish and worthless offer. Instead, **the master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go (Matthew 18:27)**. That is what **God** does with **the debt** of sin when we come to **Him** and ask for forgiveness (**First John 1:9**). It was not until **the prodigal son** reached the absolute bottom of life that **he** came face to face with **his** foolish ways. **He** had turned **his** back on **his father** and family to live an utterly selfish life in a pagan land. And when **his** money was gone so were **his** phony friends. The only work **he** could find was the most demeaning possible for a Jew - sloping pigs. While in the pigpen **he came to his senses and said** to himself: **How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants."** But even before **the son** could speak to **his father**, while **he** was still a long way off, **his father** saw **him** and was filled with compassion for **him**; **he** ran to **his son**, **threw his arms around him and kissed him**. **The father** did not criticize or accept **his** offer. Instead, **he** said to **his** servants: **Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and now is found (Luke 15:11-24)**.

What happens next seems inconceivable, until we realize we are very capable of doing the same exact thing. **But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants** (or a fellow believer) **who owed him a hundred silver coins**. Greek *a hundred denarii*; represented a hundred days labor for a common laborer during **Yeshua's** day. An insignificant amount when compared to the limitless amount of money that **he** owed **the king**. Although the second debt was extremely small by comparison, it still represented a real offense. **Messiah** was not teaching that sins against fellow believers are insignificant, but they are minute compared to the offenses we have committed against **God** and for which **He** has freely and completely forgiven us. But instead of remembering **the king's** compassion, **he grabbed his fellow servant and began to choke him**. **"Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded (Mattityahu 18:28)**.

His fellow servant also **fell to his knees and** made **his** plea with exactly the same words as the unforgiving **servant** had previously said to **the King**, and **begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay it back" (Matthew 18:29)**. **But** with unimaginable callousness, the

unforgiving **servant refused. Instead, he went off and threw his subordinate into prison until he could pay the debt (Matthew 18:30). The king forgave his** limitless debt, but **he** was unwilling to forgive **someone** who owed **him** such a small amount. This parable is an unflattering illustration of the sinful flesh that resides within every believer and that has caused great conflict and damage within the Church since its birth (**Acts 2:1-47**).

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened (Matthew 18:31). Believers should be **outraged** when a fellow believer is unforgiving. Hardness of heart not only tends to drive the offender deeper into sin but also causes dissention and division within the congregations of **God**, tarnishes our testimony before the world, and deeply grieves **the Lord Himself**.

As would be expected, **the king** was incensed when **he** heard the news **and called the unforgiving servant in.** **"You wicked servant," he said, "I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you" (Matthew 18:32-33)?** When a believer allows sin to control an attitude or action, he or she is being **wicked**, because sin is always sin, and it doesn't matter if a believer or an unbeliever commits it. The sin of unforgiveness is in some ways even more **wicked** in a believer because they have the power of **the Holy Spirit** to help them resist it. How can a person accept **God's** mercy for all his sin, an unpayable debt, and then not forgive some small offense committed against himself?

Earlier, the unforgiving **servant's** plea for **patience** had moved **the king** to compassion and forgiveness. But now **the man's** refusal to forgive **his fellow servant** moved **the king** to action. **Moved with anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured** (not executed), **until he should pay back all he owed**, that is, until **he** had a change of heart and forgave **his fellow servant his debt (Matthew 18:34).** When believers forget their own divine forgiveness by **God** and refuse to extend human forgiveness to fellow believers, **the Lord** puts them under such **tortures** (we must remember that the details of a parable cannot be pressed) as stress, hardship, pressure, or other difficulties until the sin is confessed and forgiveness granted. As **James** reminds us: **Judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy (James 2:13 NASB).**

Then highlighting the main spiritual point of the parable. **Yeshua** exhorts **Kefa** and the other talmidim: **This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart (Matthew 18:35).** **Jesus** is not speaking here of the forgiveness that brings salvation, saying that **God** only saves those who are forgiving. That would be works righteousness. **He** is speaking of people forgiving each other after they

have experienced His free grace. Those who are saved and indwelt with **the Ruach HaKodesh** generally will display that changed life by having a forgiving attitude (**Matthew 6:14-15**). But there will be times when we fall into the sin of unforgiveness, and this instruction is for those times.

When someone says or does something against us that seems unforgivable, it is helpful to pray, "El Shaddai, put in me the **heart** of forgiveness, so that I may fellowship with **You** and not experience the discipline that comes when **You** don't forgive me because I won't forgive a brother or sister in **the Lord**. May I remember that for everyone who sins against me I have sinned countless times against **You**, and **You** have always forgiven me. At no time has any of my sin caused me to forfeit my eternal life; therefore, no one else's sin should cause them to forfeit my love and my **mercy** toward them."⁹¹³