

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

MATTHEW 18:15-35

IN this whole paragraph we have practically one discourse of our Lord to His own disciples.

There are two great subjects with which He dealt.

- The first is that of greatness;
- The second, that of forgiveness.

In our last section we considered the King's teaching concerning greatness. Here we have another side of the same truth, that namely, of the attitude of the subjects of the King towards a man who offends. The theme therefore is that of forgiveness.

We should hardly relate these two things, greatness and forgiveness; and yet they are intimately related, for the final proof of greatness is ability to forgive. This is true of God, and therefore it must be true of men.

In words that seem to scorch us, He warned His disciples not to offend.

But, supposing that some man has offended, has been a stumbling-block to someone else, what shall we do with him? We cannot study this teaching of Jesus without being startled at the way in which the thunder merges into the love-song, and the lightning into the sunlight. This Teacher, so severe, so terrible, Who makes one tremble lest one should offend, when a man has offended, summons us by the compassion of God's heart, to go after him, to bring him back.

That is the whole story of the relationship between greatness and forgiveness. We put them far apart in these days, and speak of the man who forgives as a weak man. But Christ shows the greatness of the man who forgives.

This passage divides itself quite naturally into two parts.

We have in verses fifteen to twenty the King's definite instruction concerning forgiveness, commencing with the words, "**If thy brother shall sin against thee**". Our responsibility against our sinning brother is not created by the fact that he has wronged us, but by the fact that he has sinned and harmed himself.

Then in verses twenty-one to thirty-five we have an account of how the disciples misunderstood Him; and of the King's correction.

Now let us, first of all, look at the King's instructions.

Before looking at some of the things particularly, let us observe the spirit and purpose of them. The underlying purpose of Jesus concerning the sinning brother is expressed in the words, "**Thou hast gained thy brother.**"

In considering our Lord's use of the word "**gained**" here, it is very interesting to trace it through the New Testament. It is a commercial word, a word of the market place. It is a word which is used to characterize the processes by which a man accumulates wealth. The use of the word in this connection, so far as the sinning brother is concerned, recognizes loss. A man who has sinned is in certain senses lost; when he is restored he is gained, and the gain is interpreted by the context.

We are personally to attempt to gain our brother, because we have lost him as a brother through his sin. If he will not hear us, we are to take two or three with us, because by persisting in sin, his friends have lost him, he is lost to comradeship. If he will not hear them we are to go to the Church, because the Church has lost him; by his sin. The Church is to take the matter to heaven, because heaven has lost him by his sin. It is the great tragedy of a man lost which colors all this instruction; and the purpose that is to be in our heart when we deal with a sinning brother, is that of gaining him.

This word "**gain**" suggests, not merely the effect on the one lost, but the value it creates for those who seek him.

When presently we have done with the shadows and the mists of the little while, we shall understand in the light of the undying ages that if we have gained one man we shall be richer than if we have piled up all the wealth of the world, and never won a human soul. What a blessed thing to gain a man, to possess him for oneself, for the fellowship of friends, for the enterprises of the Church, for the program of high heaven. But now how is this to be done? Our Lord was very careful in His revelation of the method. We are to begin by personal effort.

"If thy brother sin against thee, go, and tell him his fault between thee and him alone."

This is not gentle permission. It is definite instruction. Any Church of Jesus Christ is weak in the proportion in which its members allow false pity or sentiment to prevent their being faithful to this great work of attempting to show an erring brother his fault, in order that he may be restored.

Jesus said, "**If thy brother sin against thee, go, and tell him his fault,**" declare it unto him. Charge him with it. By no means in the spirit of jealousy or judgment, but bring him to realize it as a fault, as sin.

It is not enough to convince him that we count it as sin.

Our business is to bring the man to see that he has sinned. And if an erring brother shall say to us when we go to him, I know it in the depths of my soul, then we begin the ministry of restoration. There may be a great many things necessary with regard to the man's relationship to the Kingdom and the Church, but so far as his relationship to us is concerned, we have gained him when he confesses his sin. Out of such conviction contrition comes, and out of such contrition, the face is set back again towards God, and right, and purity. That is the first method.

But supposing he will not hear, then the Lord says, our responsibility is not over, for the interest is a larger one than personal, in any man who has sinned. There is the interest of the comradeship. And so we must take with us one or two; and we are still going on the same business; to show him his fault, in order to bring him to contrition and return.

But supposing this man will neither hear us nor those whom we take with us, does not realize his sin, will not confess his sin, or is rebellious in his sin, continuing therein, what then? Then we are to tell it to the Church. Here we must be very careful to notice what our Lord really meant, for He clearly declared the alternative that is before the Church, when, lastly, the case is brought to it.

The one side of the alternative is, that he will hear the Church. If the Church can restore this man, when one has failed, when two or three have failed, to contrition and conviction and consciousness of sin, then the Church has gained the man. But if he will not, what then? The other side of the alternative on the part of the Church is that then the man is to be **“as an heathen man and a publican.”**

Now before we examine that, let us notice what follows, because what follows explains the meaning of this power of the Church:

“Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

These are some of the most remarkable things that our Lord said about His Church. They have much wider application than the application Jesus made of them at this point. We are perfectly justified in lifting them out of their setting, and using them over a wider area of thought. But sometimes the danger is that we take these great words of Jesus and use them in the wider application, and so lose the immediate first-hand application which He Himself made of them. All these great words have to do with the Church's attitude towards the sinning man, to which we will return.

Yet they have to do with a much wider area which we cannot altogether pass over now.

For some of us this is the whole ground of truth concerning the constitution and power of the Christian Church.

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

That is the charter of the Church. How spacious, and gracious, and wonderful it is!

First of all it breaks down all idea of a localized meeting-place with God. We have gained a temple everywhere by the loss of the temple in a locality. Mark the magnificence of it. It is not the temple that makes the place of worship, but the gathering "**in My name.**"

There are worshipping souls in the great cathedrals, but they are not all there. On the mountain height, in some shepherd hut, far away from church, chapel, or conventicle, two shepherds are gathered in the name of Jesus. There is the Church. "**Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.**" May God deliver us from putting limits upon His "**where.**" All that is necessary, is that two or three should be gathered in His name.

Again, "**If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.**"

That is the authority for collective praying.

And yet once more, "**Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.**"

That is the Church's ethical authority in the world. The Church teaches the standard of morality, and what the Church says is binding, is binding; and what the Church says is not, is not. But that is only true when we link it with what follows the Church gathering in the name of Christ.

So the great passage is the charter of Church authority, of Church method, of Church foundation.

The Church authority - she binds and looses in the old ethical sense of the words in which the scribes perpetually made use of them. The Church is the authority in the world, which sets up the moral standards; and it has always been so, for the last nineteen centuries; the true standards obtaining in the common consciousness of this hour are those which the Church has established.

How does the Church gain this authority? By asking the Father, seeking from Him the light. But upon what basis does the Church gather to ask the Father for the light which shall make her message authoritative? "**Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.**"

These are some of the wider applications of this teaching.

Now mark this fact, that Jesus used these tremendous truths in this matter of how we should deal with our brother who has sinned. If the Church has consulted the will of God concerning him, because the Church has gathered in the name of Jesus, then her decision is binding, authoritative, final. Heaven ratifies it. The Church, consisting of only two or three units, or of tens, scores, hundreds, gathered waiting before God in the name and nature of God's Son, her conclusions are binding conclusions, and Heaven seals them.

The Church, so gathered, is to deal with the case of this man, and if this man will not hear her, will not accept her ruling, will not be submissive to her authority, what then is she to do? If he will hear, she will fold him to her bosom; if this sinning man, who has offended, and ought to have had a millstone about his neck, is won back by the individual, or the two or three, or the Church, then mother Church is to fold him, and as the father kissed repeatedly the homecoming boy, mother Church, Bride of the Son of God, is to receive him, and smother him with her kisses. God give us hearts like that!

But if not, what then?

Then the pity of the Church is to be more than false pity for the individual, and the holiness of the assembly is to be of greater importance than the sheltering of a man that has done wrong, and is unrepentant. **"Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."** It is a terrific sentence. It is first, that the Church must put that man outside her fellowship, that the Church must exercise her authority on the side of Heaven's unsullied purity.

But is that all? If we have so read it, we have misread it. We may take these words of Jesus Christ and make them blasphemous by the very tone in which we read them.

There is a hymn we often sing,

"Lord, speak to me, that I may speak
In living echoes of Thy tone."

He never put the tone of thunder and denunciation into those words. He never put into them the tone of an unholy and unchristian excommunication. That is what we have too often done.

What did He say?

- This man you have been after, and could not gain,
- This man that two or three of you saw and could not gain,
- This man that the Church would fain have folded to her motherly bosom, and could not gain

" Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

You must put him outside the fellowship, and you must put him outside the shadow of the Church. He must not have the shelter of the Church for impurity.

But the moment he is there, he is the man I came to win, he is the man for whom I came to die.

"The Son of Man is come to save that which was lost."

You must keep him from the privilege and the shelter of the Church, in order to bring him to consciousness, first of his need, and then of My exceeding grace and free forgiveness.

Now let us glance at the misunderstanding of the disciples, because we are in succession to them, and are liable to make the same mistakes.

Peter said, "**Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?**"

Observe Peter's magnanimity and Peter's meanness; and whether you count it magnanimity or meanness will depend upon that with which you put his proposition into contrast. Now there is no doubt whatever that when Peter came to Jesus with that question, and that suggested answer, How oft shall I forgive my brother, "**until seven times?**" he thought he had climbed to the seventh heaven of greatness; he thought he had uttered the last word of magnanimity, "**Until seven times?**"

The teaching of all the scribes and Rabbis was, forgive once, forgive twice, but the third offence merits no forgiveness. We find it scattered throughout all the Rabbinical teaching.

Peter had been told that he was one of the new scribes, and so he borrowed the language of the scribes to show how graciously he went beyond it. The scribes had said thrice, Peter said, I know more than those men; I am prepared to go beyond that; "**seven times.**"

It was magnanimity by the side of the teaching of the scribes. How some things perpetuate themselves through the centuries. There are some things that never die until submerged in the life of God. The proverb of to-day says, "The third time pays for all." The world at its best forgives a man twice, and damns him at the third time.

Peter said, Master, I am beyond that, "**until seven times.**"

John Wesley makes a very caustic comment on this story. He said, "If this be Christianity, where do Christians live?"

Now note the Master's answer. May there not have been a smile of love or pity for the meanness of this conception of His own Spirit? "**I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven.**"

Then He gave a parabolic illustration, which is a picture fair and wonderful. It was a picture for Peter.

How much did this man owe the king? Ten thousand talents. Translate it into the coinage of England, and it was at least two million pounds; or of the United States, roughly ten million dollars. This man had involved the whole State, and he owed the king at least ten thousand talents, and the king loosed him from all his bondage, and set him free. And then he went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a hundred pence. Let us take a penny as the Roman denarius, and say this man owed him less than five pounds, or twenty-five dollars. I owed the king two millions sterling, and he let me go; and I got my brother by the throat for five pounds! What did Christ mean? You have been forgiven a debt immeasurable. You have no right to exact a hundred pence from a man who, if you will give him three months, will pay you.

Mark carefully Christ's last word, "**So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.**"

The arrest of the man that had been released, and his imprisonment, not for the debt which he had been forgiven, but for the brutality against his brother conveys its own teaching.

The two sections of this chapter as they reveal the two sides of the one attitude toward the subjects of the King, are very remarkable.

Absolute absence of pity towards sin in oneself which may cause a brother to offend; and unceasing pity toward a sinning brother with never-failing attempts to gain him. To fail in the first is to make the millstone a profitable investment; and to fail in the second is to be dealt with in severe and dire punishment by God Himself, for the one thing God will not forgive is an unforgiving heart.

~ end of chapter 52 ~

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