

# Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.  
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.

## Matthew 18:21-35

*Jesus is calling us to give up calculating offenses and forgivenesses; and instead to have a forgiving heart; a forgiven heart; a heart for forgiveness. This is a shift of ATTITUDE. But it is not an "anything goes" attitude. Forgiveness actually stands FOR some things; and therefore, does NOT stand for everything.*

Listed on The Text This Week, [www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com): Contemporary Commentary, Studies, and Exegesis for the Gospel reading.

### Year A

### Pentecost 13

### September 11, 2011

*Sunday Between September 11 and September 17 Inclusive*

*Proper 19, Ordinary Time 24*

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: [Matthew 18:21-35, The Message](#) or [Matthew 18:21-35, The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click here, [Matthew 18:21-35](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Sermon by the [Rev. Dr. George Hermanson](#), "."

The previous passage, Matthew 18:15-20, outlines a detailed process for resolving conflicts **WITHIN** the community. At a minimum this should give us a heads up that there will be conflict within the church. We will fight. There is no question of that. The question is: How will resolve conflicts? (We will resolve conflicts, won't we? Not just hold silent grudges for the rest of our lives. Just asking.)

Good old Peter can see a loop hole in the advice Jesus gives.

*This is good advice Jesus. But what should we do if the offender DOES listen, and there is reconciliation. But then they do the same sin again. And reconcile again. And sin again. And again. How often should I forgive?*

The answer Jesus gives, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times," is like saying:

*Forgive them until it works.*

That is, "seventy-seven" is an exaggeration not to be taken literally.

This particular teaching is very problematic for everyone who is in an abusive relationship.

Taken by itself, it implies an abused woman should never stop forgiving her man no matter how many times he beats her. This is not what Jesus means.

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Jesus does not want anyone ever to get beaten up. Jesus wants all beatings to stop. And Jesus wants for the cycle of violence that leads to beatings to stop.

This is a case of Jesus wanting us to forgive the sinner but not the sin. "Yes, I forgive **YOU**, but not the violence. For the relationship to continue, the violence must stop. And even if the relationship does not continue, my heart will be in a state of forgiveness, not fear / anger / resentment / etc."

While it does not directly address this specific concern, the parable that follows touches on this issue.

Once again Jesus uses exaggeration to illustrate his point.

According to Bruce Malina (Page 95, see footnote below.), a "talent" was equal to 6,000 denarii; and a denarius is the coin used to pay for one day's labour. So one talent is approximately 20 years of labour. Which makes the slave's debt about 200,000 years of labour. So when the slave falls on his knees and begs for "patience" from his master, he is making an impossible request.

Nonetheless, the Lord opts to demonstrate the extent of his honour by forgiving the large debt.

However, by turning around and not forgiving an insignificant amount owed to him, the forgiven slave, in effect, mocks what the king has just done. Instead of reflecting the honour of his Lord, the slave dishonours his Lord by his mean-spirited behaviour.

When it is brought to the King's attention what has happened - and especially, what people are gossiping about his servants - he is angry. The behaviour of his servant is a direct reflection on the honour of the King. And in this case, the servant's behaviour has brought shame and dis-honour to the King. And so the King responds in a way to restore his standing - the hard-hearted slave is sent away for appropriate punishment.

Notice here that the slave is NOT forgiven "seventy-seven times." So the parable which Jesus tells to illustrate how we must be forgiving, does NOT mean, "Be a door mat and let people abuse you." So, what does forgive seventy-seven times mean?

Among other possibilities, if we come back to consider the case of an abusive relationship, and apply the parable, we find that the abuser ought to show the same quality of mercy and forgiveness that has been shown to him. When the cycle of violence reaches the trigger point again, the appropriate response is NOT anger and violence but the same mercy and forgiveness that has previously been granted to him. Otherwise, he brings dishonour on God, and will be treated accordingly.

At the time of Jesus, forgiveness was about restoring a right relationship.

This means that both parties understood that there was in fact a proper and right way to be in relationship - and that this "rightness" was what God desired for them - neither of them had the authority or power to

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decide what was right - both of them were accountable to God to act as God desired them to act toward the other.

When one of them broke the relationship they created a debt: they now owed the other a payment of some kind to make amends, to show remorse, to compensate for the damage done to the relationship.

But then, as now, often the debt owed for breaking a relationship was beyond any possible material gift. Then, as now, the only solution, the only means to restore the relationship was for mercy to be shown; for the debt to be forgiven.

But notice. It is not the behaviour that is forgiven. It is not even the other that is forgiven. It is the debt that is forgiven.

And what forgiveness does is this: it transfers the obligation and responsibility to pay the debt to the obligations and responsibilities of the right relationship.

Forgiveness is not a "Get out jail free" card.

In fact, according to the parable, having been forgiven creates an unbreakable obligation to respect, honour, and fulfill the obligations of right relationships - without exceptions or excuses.

These are terribly hard teachings.

Jesus is calling us to give up **calculating** offenses and forgivenesses; and instead to have a forgiving heart; a forgiven heart; a heart for forgiveness. This is a shift of ATTITUDE. But it is not an "anything goes" attitude.

Forgiveness actually stands FOR some things; and therefore, does NOT stand for everything.

Figuring out how to live this out in community can sometimes be complex and difficult beyond our capacities. Nonetheless, with God's grace - and forgiveness - we are called to reflect God's mercy AND God's honour AND God's righteousness.

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Historical background information in this post is drawn primarily from Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, see link below, pages 94-96.

\* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

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## Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV)

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

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## Matthew 18:21-35 (The Message)

<sup>21</sup> At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, "Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?"

<sup>22</sup> Jesus replied, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.

<sup>23</sup> "The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. <sup>25</sup> He couldn't pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.

<sup>26</sup> "The poor wretch threw himself at the king's feet and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' <sup>27</sup> Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

<sup>28</sup> "The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, 'Pay up. Now!'

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<sup>29</sup> "The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' <sup>30</sup> But he wouldn't do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.

<sup>32</sup> "The king summoned the man and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?' <sup>34</sup> The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he paid back his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> And that's exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn't forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy."

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