

## Chapter 18

This is a practical chapter dealing with forgiveness. It focuses on what it means to be a member of the Kingdom of Heaven, and how to conduct our personal relationships. This is what sets us apart from the world, how we treat one another.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the Gospel, and it's the hardest thing that the Gospel calls us to do.

Vv. 1-6: What it means to be a member of God's family in the Kingdom. Jesus tells us that we must be like children. Not that we must be childish, but that we must bear in mind that God is our Father, and that we must relate to him accordingly. Children recognize that they are dependent on their father, and so they will listen to him and obey him, because they know that he is guiding and leading them.

Vv. 10-14: Teaching on guardian angels: Jesus says that our angels always "behold the face of the Father in heaven." The Church has always taught that each of us has an angel to watch out for and protect us, not in the sense of serving us but to serve God's will regarding our lives.

Jesus is showing his shepherds how to care for the little ones. That's what this chapter is all about—how to care for one another in the Kingdom of God, because God has put us all together in the Church. There have always been problems in relationships within the Church. In his first two missionary journeys, the apostle Paul went about founding churches. By the time of his third journey, his preaching and writing was dealing with nothing but trouble and problems among the people of God, problems with relationships.

Our witness is ineffective if the world sees us as Catholic Christians not relating well to one another. It's when they see us loving and forgiving that we get their attention in a positive way. In the early days of Christendom, Roman soldiers who were supposed to kill Christians were converted because of the love that they saw among the Christians.

Vv. 15-20: Jesus gets into the details of how to deal with conflict and problems, but it's probably the least adhered to of all of his teachings. When a member of the Kingdom strays from the way of Christ, that person is still considered to be a brother or sister. Fraternal correction is mandatory in the Kingdom. If a brother or sister has offended you, it is the way of Jesus to go to them one-on-one, explaining how you have been offended and then working it out. If that does not work, bring one or two others as witnesses, so that everything may be based on the word of several witnesses. If that does not work, bring it to the Church, and if that does not resolve the problem, the offending member is said to be cut off from the family of the Church.

Excommunication is not kicking someone out of the Church, but rather a declaration that someone's own actions have placed them outside the Church.

Binding and loosing—Peter possesses this authority, and it is extended to others in the Church as well. The Church has juridical power to forgive or not, and this power is extended to the Apostles. In 1 Cor. 5:1-5, there is a problem with immorality, and Paul says that the offended is to be separated from the

Church, but the goal of the separation is to make the offender realize his error, so that he can correct his ways and be reunited with the Church. See 2 Cor. 2:5-11.

It takes maturity and confidence in God to go one on one with someone who has offended you, because we want to focus on defending ourselves and not on correcting the situation.

When Christ speaks of two or three gathering in his name, he is not just speaking of our community prayer. He is also referring to ecclesial discipline. Christ is truly present when the Church as a body joins together to deal with one who has offended and to consider how to restore the offender to the Body of Christ.

V.21: What to do? Forgiveness is not easy. In vv. 21-22, Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive: seven, the number of completeness? Jesus responds that he must forgive seventy times seven, a reference to the exile and return of Israel from slavery.

In the Old Testament, God frequently instructed the Israelites to do to others what I have done for you. Israel is considered to be God's first-born among the nations, and like a "big brother," Israel is to set a good example for the other nations. Israel fails to do this—fails to do the right thing, and as a result she is exiled, i.e., picked up from where she is physically and brought to where she is spiritually, far away from the presence of the Lord. Jacob's sons sinned against their younger brother Joseph, and they ended up in bondage for 400 years. Joseph, in his faithfulness, released his brothers and forgave them.

God told Pharaoh through Moses to "let my people go," to release them from all that they were in bondage to. When Pharaoh refused, God delivered Israel, and in return expected them to treat others as they had been treated, to treat sojourners, foreigners and even animals with kindness. God told Israel that there was to be a Great Jubilee every fifty years, when they were expected to release others in recognition of the fact that they had been released. Ex. 25:10; Dt. 15:1-3; Dt. 31:10. This was to be done on the Feast of Booths (reminiscent of Israel's release from slavery) every fifty years, when creditors were to release debts, masters were to release slaves, and landowners were to give back land to those from whom they had gotten it.

Every seven years, there was to be a minor jubilee as well within Israel, marked by release and forgiveness. Jer. 34: Israel went into exile because they failed to release others on the jubilee as God had instructed. They treated the jubilee as lasting only for the occasion itself, like a family that gets along on Christmas or Thanksgiving, only to return to gossip and withholding of forgiveness the next day. The day after the jubilee, masters continued to own their slaves, and debts and other obligations remained in effect. 2 Kings 25:7.

Daniel Chapter 9: Israel was to be in exile 70 years, but Gabriel visits Daniel and tells him that 70 years is not enough. The exile is to be extended to 70 times 7 years, or 490 years, leading right up to the time of Christ. Jesus echoes this when he tells Peter that he must forgive 70 times 7 times, i.e., he must forgive as God forgives, with mercy. At the end of 70 years God could have destroyed Israel for her disobedience. Israel's exile was extended not to heap more punishment on Israel, but to mercifully extend to Israel the opportunity to repent and reform. Israel did come back physically from exile after

70 years, but Jesus explains that the exile had to last longer than that, because Israel had not returned spiritually.

Jesus had started his ministry by proclaiming a great jubilee in Lk. 4:16-21, where he reads from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me....” With these words, he is proclaiming a great Jubilee, requiring all in Israel to release and forgive all those who were indebted to them, as God had forgiven them so often in the past.

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant: The servant owes his master an unpayable debt, equal to 150,000 years’ wages. He asks for mercy, and his master forgives the entire debt. When the servant fails to forgive a trifling debt that another owes him, the master calls him a “wicked servant” and hands him over to be tortured until he pays the entire original debt. “Shouldn’t you have had pity on your fellow servant as I had pity on you?” Jesus then applies this parable to all of us: “So will my heavenly father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart.”

Marcion heresy: Marcion was a second-century bishop who taught that our Lord was a manifestation of the Holy and Good God, opposed to the vindictive God of the Old Testament. He rejected most Old Testament writings as the revelation and law of an inferior, evil principle. He believed that there would be no resurrection of the body and that Baptism should be denied to those living in the married state. But Jesus explains that there is no difference in his Father’s insistence on forgiveness and release. The New Testament God is just as serious as the Old Testament God about the need for each of us to forgive. The consequence for the failure to forgive is no different now from what it was in the Old Testament: exile from God.

Father Lauer, founder of the Couple to Couple League in Cincinnati, says that when he was first ordained, he thought that fifty percent of all problems were due to unforgiveness. After ten years, he revised that estimate and concluded that 75-80% of all health, financial, family and marital problems came from unforgiveness. After 20 years in ministry, he has concluded that 90% of all problems are rooted in unforgiveness.

The ability to forgive someone is a gift from God, given to maintain harmony both with God and with your home, whether you are married or single. John 16:33: “These things I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you may have tribulation, but take courage: I have overcome the world.” Tribulation means to be pulled apart on the inside, something that Jesus tells us will happen to us as it happened to him. But he shows us that there is a better way to deal with this—to forgive.

It is inevitable that we will be hurt by someone. How should we react to this? Should we bury it and stuff it down inside ourselves? We have a tendency to do that, to deny that we are hurt, while at the same time we are spinning inside, plotting our revenge. Christ shows us that the way to suffer is to acknowledge that it hurts and then to offer it up in union with him, who was hurt for us all. The evil one wants us to take the bait of offense so that we are trapped in our feelings of anger and revenge, but this puts us in the impossible situation of expecting from another what they cannot provide, because only Christ could atone sufficiently for sin.

