

# Rightly Dividing the Gospels

— Installment 73 —

Jesus teaches forgiveness, reconciliation and church discipline

Peter inquires as to the extent of obligation

Parable of the unforgiving servant

Matt. 18: 15-35

Capernaum

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## I. Review of recent events

- A. In the final year of his ministry, the Year of Opposition, time and opportunity draw short for Jesus to complete his pre-crucifixion labors
- B. He travels extensively following the death of John, seeking solitude with his disciples in order that he might prepare them for the awful events coming
  - 1. The interval of retirement lasted approximately six months, from the third Passover to the following Feast of Tabernacles
- C. Early in this interval, Jesus declines to go to Jerusalem and Judea even for the Passover
- D. He makes himself inconspicuous in the northern districts, visiting wilderness areas, skirting Galilee's borders and even leaving the Herodian kingdom for a time
- E. While traveling in the north, he ascends Mt. Hermon with Peter, James and John, and is transfigured before them with Moses and Elijah
- F. After the transfiguration Jesus partly emerges from his retirement, briefly returning to his usual base at Capernaum in Galilee, before finally returning to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles
  - 1. The return to Jerusalem will mark the end to this period of secrecy ..... (John 7: 3-4)
- G. During his short stay at home, Jesus pays the temple tax
- H. He asks his disciples about a dispute that had arisen among them on the return journey from Mt. Hermon and uses the occasion to give them private instruction
  - 1. They admit to have been seeking primacy among themselves
  - 2. He rebukes their worldly ambition and teaches them the great principle of servant leadership
  - 3. He uses the figure of a child to teach them to be simple and without guile
  - 4. He warns them against being the cause of stumbling among the children of the kingdom
  - 5. He expands his theme of offense with a discourse on forgiveness, reconciliation and church discipline

**II. Responding to offense in the church ..... Matt. 18: 15–18**

- A. Having warned them about giving offense, he teaches them how to respond righteously to offense and other trespass
- B. This passage is one of the more critical with respect to our special interest, rightly dividing the gospels
  - 1. To which dispensation does Jesus speak?
    - a. The present, with reference to OT Jewish law and Jewish synagogues?
      - i. This dispensation is in its final 6 or 7 months
    - b. The future, with reference to NT Christian law and Christian churches?
      - i. This dispensation will arrive in 6 or 7 months
  - 2. To whom does Jesus speak?
    - a. Unlike the majority of Jesus' teachings, this colloquy is in private ..... Mark 9: 33–35
    - b. He specifically addresses the twelve he selected to take his gospel to the world
    - c. He gives them instruction that could be carried out in the Jewish synagogue, but is meant for the Christian church
  - 3. Matthew's gospel, believed to have been written several decades into the Christian era, uses here the same Greek word used throughout the NT to refer to the Christian church
    - a. Strong's 1577 ἐκκλησία *ekklesia*
      - i. Literally, "the called out"
      - ii. Assembly
      - iii. Congregation
      - iv. Church
        - (i) Nearly every author of the NT (excepting only Mark and Jude) refers to the Christian church using the Greek word *ekklesia*
  - 4. Matthew did not choose the word for the current Jewish assembly
    - a. Strong's 4864 συναγωγή *sunagoge*
      - i. Gathering (assembly)
      - ii. Gathering place (house of worship)
      - iii. Anglicized transliteration: synagogue
  - 5. When the gospels tell of Jesus and his disciples gathered in local assemblies, the Greek word is always synagogue, not church
  - 6. "Church" appears only three times prior to the establishment of the church in Acts 2
    - a. Twice in this passage
    - b. Once in the Keys of the Kingdom speech
      - i. Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church ..... Matt. 16: 18
        - (i) There the modifier 3450 μου *mou* means "mine own," unmistakably differentiating it from the Jewish church

7. Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek
    - a. Matthew's choice of *ekklesia* instead of *sunagoge* clearly conveys he understood (with the infallible help of the HS) that Jesus referred to the Christian church
  8. Jesus' declaration "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth..." here exactly repeated from the earlier Keys of the Kingdom speech, confirms that he is speaking of the same body, his very own
  9. This instruction, though given several months before the establishment of the church, is meant for application in the church
- C. Righteous response to trespass
1. Scope of application
    - a. Thy brother
      - i. Implicitly, a brother in Christ
      - ii. This course of action applies only within the church
        - (i) It is not applicable to worldly people who may harm us
    - b. Trespass (sin) against thee
      - i. Broadly, causing any kind of sinful harm against you
      - ii. Specifically, offense: something that causes you to stumble
  2. Responsibility for action
    - a. In the discourse we consider today, the responsibility lies with the offended brother
    - b. In the SOTM, the responsibility lies with the offending brother..... Matt 5: 23–24
      - i. We conclude that both brethren are responsible for pursuing reconciliation
        - (i) Both parties are in sin until reconciled
  3. Plan of action
    - a. Rebuke the sin
    - b. Seek reconciliation
    - c. Escalate if necessary
      - i. One to four carefully graduated steps
    - d. Discipline if unsuccessful
  4. Step one: thee and him alone
    - a. Go tell him his fault
    - b. The Greek verb carries the sense of chasten or rebuke
    - c. Reconciliation is the aim
      - i. Hear: hearken
        - (i) Implicitly, repent
      - ii. Not revenge, humiliation, score settling, etc.
      - iii. Reconciliation is the aim of all four steps
  5. Step two: two or three witnesses

- a. Repeat step one, but with witnesses who may be needed if escalated further
- b. Invokes (and carries forward) OT law regarding witnesses for serious accusations
6. Step three: tell it to the church
  - a. Here church should be understood as the local congregation
    - i. *Church* has various degrees of specificity in the NT, ranging from a particular local congregation to the entire body of Christ throughout time
      - (i) Predominantly, it refers to a local congregation
      - ii. It clearly is not possible to adjudicate offenses before the universal church
      - iii. In exceptional cases outside brethren might be involved ..... II Cor. 13: 2, 10
    - b. But the natural scope of action lies with the local congregation
      - i. Ex: judging matters of moral or civil law ..... I Cor. 5: 9 – 6: 5
7. Step four: excommunicate
  - a. *Excommunicate* (literally, <to send> out of communion) is not a NT word, but it correctly conveys the sense here and has become the usual English expression for the act
    - i. *Dis-fellowship* and *withdraw from* are English synonyms
  - b. Let him be to you as a
    - i. Gentile (heathen, pagan)
      - (i) An alien, unwelcome in the assembly
    - ii. Publican (tax collector)
      - (i) A despised person, corrupt and unwelcome
  - c. Even in this final step, the aim is reconciliation, though Jesus doesn't say so here..... I Cor. 5: 4–5
8. Jesus again declares the binding authority of the church
  - a. In the earlier declaration, he gave a broad authority to bind and loose with little context
  - b. Here, he vests the church with an awesome and fearsome specific authority: to bind judgments of communion (fellowship) on earth which will be honored in heaven
  - c. Excommunication means the unrepentant brother is truly delivered to Satan
    - i. Unless he repents, he is lost
  - d. The church has also the authority to adjudge reconciliation, likewise binding in heaven
9. This instruction may rank among the most routinely disobeyed among Christians
  - a. Our usual approach:
    - i. Take offense
    - ii. Broadcast our offense to any who will hear it
    - iii. Recruit allies for battle
    - iv. Demonize opponents
    - v. Split the church
10. In the SOTM, Jesus taught that reconciliation is more important than acts of sacrificial service

- a. We must discipline ourselves to follow the Lord's plan, not our wicked instincts

### III. Power invested in the church ..... Matt. 18: 19–20

- A. Having given a specific case of the binding authority of the church, he generalizes it as in the earlier declaration to apply to anything on which the church agrees
  - 1. Even if the congregation is only two or three in number
- B. We must constrain our understanding of this authority within the remote context
  - 1. We are not free to alter the gospel as declared by the apostles..... Gal 1: 6–9
    - a. Add or subtract from his Word..... Rev. 22: 18–19
  - 2. God will not grant us wicked requests..... James 4: 3
  - 3. And he will deny even righteous requests if they contradict his will ..... Matt. 26: 38–39
- C. But within these obvious constraints, Jesus declares an astonishing degree of acquiescence to the Godly aims of Christians in the communion of the church
- D. And he blesses each congregation, however small, with his personal, if incorporeal, presence

### IV. Peter inquires as to the extent of obligation ..... Matt. 18: 21–22

- A. Peter's question shows him to be instinctively grasping the generosity of forgiveness Jesus intends
  - 1. Jesus' instruction gave the offending brother three chances to repent of a single sin
  - 2. How many such sins must I forgive?
  - 3. Although the OT (Tanakh) itself does not answer Peter's question, rabbinical judgments found in the Talmud indicate a limit of three times for forgiveness
    - a. This understanding may inform why both Jesus and Paul pressed their denied requests only three times
- B. Peter's proposition of seven times more than doubles the rabbinical judgment
- C. Jesus' reply may be "seventy times seven" (490) or "seventy-seven" (77); the Greek can convey either number and we can't determine which he meant
- D. In either case, the number is impossibly large to be understood as a real limit
  - 1. It should be understood to mean an unlimited number
  - 2. Keeping account of 490 offenses, or even 77, would be sinful in its own right..... I Cor. 13: 5 (NIV)
    - a. "Forgiveness, prayer and charity know no arithmetic" ..... McGarvey
- E. Again, obedience to this command is poor among Christians
  - 1. We struggle to forgive even a single instance of a serious offense
  - 2. We tend to become embittered after a few offenses, and neglect our Christian duty to forgive

### V. Parable of the unforgiving servant..... Matt. 18: 23–35

- A. Jesus powerfully illustrates this principle of generosity in forgiveness with a striking parable
- B. This parable is easily deciphered: the King represents God, and the two servants represent two Christians

- C. The first servant is evidently a man of very high rank
  - 1. He has accumulated an incomprehensibly great debt
    - a. A denarius is a day's wage for a common laborer ..... Matt. 20: 2
    - b. A talent is 6,000 denarii (20 years' labor)
      - i. Assuming he means a silver talent; a gold talent was worth about 20 times as much
      - ii. A single talent would be a comfortable retirement account (sumptuous if gold)
    - c. 10,000 talents x 6,000 denarii/talent x day's wage/denarius = 60 million day's labor
      - (i) Sold into slavery as a common laborer, it would take him 200,000 years to repay his debt (4 million years if gold)
- D. The second servant seems to be a common laborer, and owed the first 100 days labor (4 months)
- E. This second debt is not a trifling amount; it would be a serious debt for a laborer, and a substantial sum even for a wealthy and powerful official
- F. But the ratio between the two debts is on the order of a million (20 million if gold)
- G. The first servant was within his legal rights to imprison the second; but his action is easily understood as a moral outrage framed in the generosity of his lord
  - 1. Again Jesus teaches that the legality of an action is insufficient to ensure it is not sinful
- H. Other servants sorrowfully complain against him
- I. He is delivered to torture—the conventional means of finding hidden assets for repayment, and terminating in grisly death—when his earlier sentence was mere slavery for himself and his family
  - 1. Returning to sin, once forgiven, is worse than never having been forgiven ..... II Pet. 2: 20–22
- J. Interpreting the parable
  - 1. As the deciphering is easy with this parable, so is the interpretation obvious
    - a. Our debts to God are terrifyingly high
      - i. None of us can expect any just recompense better than torment and death
      - ii. Nor can we hope to repay the smallest portion
  - 2. Others may wrong us substantially, but not in proportion to our own debts to God
  - 3. God will forgive so much as to defy imagination or thanks
    - a. But he will not forgive the unforgiving ..... Matt. 6: 14–15
      - i. Judgment without mercy ..... James 2: 12–13 (NIV)