

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

18:21-35

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

In these verses the Lord Jesus deals with a deeply important subject, the forgiveness of injuries. We live in a wicked world, and it is vain to expect that we can escape ill-treatment, however carefully we may behave. To know how to conduct ourselves when we are ill-treated is of great moment to our souls. In the first place, the Lord Jesus lays it down as a general rule that we ought to forgive others to the uttermost. Peter put the question, "How oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Till seven times?" He received answer: "I say, not unto thee till seven times, but until seventy times seven." The rule here laid down must of course be interpreted with sober-minded qualification. Our Lord does not mean that offenses against the law of the land and the good order of society are to be passed over in silence; he does not mean that we are to allow people to commit thefts and assaults with impunity. All that he means is that we are to study a general spirit of mercy and forgivingness towards our brethren. We are to bear much, and to put up with much, rather than quarrel; we are to overlook much, and submit to much, rather than have any strife; we are to lay aside everything like malice, strife, revenge and retaliation. Such feelings are only fit for heathens: they are utterly unworthy of a disciple of Christ. What a happy world it would be if this rule of our Lord's was more known and better obeyed! How many of the miseries of mankind are occasioned by disputes, quarrels, lawsuits, and an obstinate tenacity about what men call "their rights"! How many of them might be altogether avoided if men were more willing to forgive, and more desirous for peace! Let us never forget that a fire cannot go on burning without fuel; just in the same way it takes two to make a quarrel. Let us each resolve, by God's grace, that of these two we will never be one. Let us resolve to return good for evil, and blessing for cursing, and so to melt down enmity, and change our foes into friends (i.e. Romans 12:20). It was a fine feature in Archbishop Cranmer's character, that if you did him an injury he was sure to be your friend. In the second place our Lord supplies us with two powerful motives for exercising a forgiving spirit. He tells us a story of a man who owed an enormous sum to his master, and had nothing to pay. Nevertheless at the time of reckoning his master had compassion on him, and forgave him all. He tells us that this very man, after being forgiven himself, refused to forgive a fellow-servant a trifling debt of a few pence. He actually cast him into prison, and would not abate a jot of his demand. He tells us how punishment overtook this wicked and cruel man, who, after receiving mercy, ought surely to have shown mercy to others. Finally, he concludes the parable with the impressive words, "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do unto you if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespass." It is clear from this parable that one motive for forgiving others ought to be the recollection that we all need forgiveness at God's hands ourselves. Day after day we

are coming short in many things, leaving undone what we ought to do, and doing what we ought not to do. Day after day we require mercy and pardon. Our neighbors' offenses against us are mere trifles, compared with our offenses against God. Surely it ill becomes poor erring creatures like us to be extreme in marking what is done amiss by our brethren, or slow to forgive it. Another motive for forgiving others ought to be the recollection of the day of judgment, and the standard by which we shall all be tried in that day. There will be no forgiveness in that day for unforgiving people. Such people would be unfit for heaven: they would not be able to value a dwelling-place to which mercy is the only title, and in which mercy is the eternal subject of song. Surely if we mean to stand at the right hand, when Jesus sits on the throne of his glory, we must learn, while we are on earth, to forgive. Let these truths sink down deeply into our hearts. It is a melancholy fact that there are few Christian duties so little practiced as that of forgiveness: it is sad to see how much bitterness, unmercifulness, spite, hardness and unkindness there is among men. Yet there are few duties so strongly enforced in the New Testament Scriptures as this duty is, and few the neglect of which so clearly shuts a man out of the kingdom of God. Would we give proof that we are at peace with God, washed in Christ's blood, born of the Spirit, and made God's children by adoption and grace? Let us remember this passage; like our Father in heaven, let us be forgiving. Has any man injured us? Let us this day forgive him. As Leighton says, "We ought to forgive ourselves little, and others much." Would we do good to the world? Would we have any influence on others, and make them see the beauty of true religion? Let us remember this passage. Men who care not for doctrines can understand a forgiving temper. Would we grow in grace ourselves and become more holy in all our ways, words and works? Let us remember this passage. Nothing so grieves the Holy Spirit, and brings spiritual darkness over the soul, as giving way to a quarrelsome and unforgiving temper (i.e. Ephesians 4:30-32).

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