

GORDON CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FORGIVENESS IN MATTHEW
A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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FORGIVENESS IN MATTHEW A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

As foundational to his Gospel concerning Jesus Christ, Matthew advances a unique presentation of the theology and ethics of forgiveness. Although Matthew's theology of forgiveness is biblically consistent within the larger canon, it stands on its own as a complete biblical theology. Matthew carefully outlines his forgiveness theology and ethics in the following pericopes (in order of appearance):

- The Disciples' Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount [Matt 6:12-15]
- Healing of the Paralytic [Matt 9:1-8]
- The Unforgivable Sin (Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit) [Matt 12:31-32]
- Church Discipline [Matt 18:15-20]
- Unlimited Forgiveness [Matt 18:21-22]
- The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant [18:23-35]
- The Lord's Supper [Matt 26:26-28]

Together these teachings construct a biblical theology of forgiveness, which then informs an integrated individual and community forgiveness ethic.

Jesus Christ calls His disciples to accept Him as Lord and Savior and be forgiven. Those that accept Christ's call become His disciples and members of His Church. Within the Church, disciples are called to forgive their fellow brothers and sisters should they sin against them. But, if a fellow brother or sister sins and refuses to repent and accept forgiveness, Church Discipline comes into effect. Through Church Discipline, disciples are called to bring one another to repentance and forgiveness. However, if someone refuses to repent and accept forgiveness¹, through His Body the Church, Jesus Christ expels him, as he was never one of His disciples in the first place, but could be if he repents and accepts the forgiveness He offers.

¹ A concept to be discussed related to hardening of heart and blasphemy of the Holy Spirit.

Disciples' Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount [Matt 6:12-15]

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray the Disciples' Prayer [Matt 6:9-13]. The Disciples' Prayer is comprised of six prayer petitions, structured as two sets of three each. For the most part, it appears that the prayer is fully self-contained and complete. However, in Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides some important commentary [Matt 6:14-15] regarding the 5th and 6th petitions, which ought to be prayerfully considered.

“[Matt 6:14-15]... is apparently of great importance to the evangelist... [since it]... interrupts the flow of [Matt 6:1-18].”² “The basic symmetry of [Matt 6:14-15 is a] ... parallelism ... broken by the chiasm, wherein according to v14 παραπτώματα is the object of the protasis while in v15 it is object of the apodosis, thus creating an effect of emphasis.”³ Because of this unusual insertion, Matt 6:12-15 forms an interesting alternative pericope:

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|-----|---------------|--|
| (A) | ¹² | ... And forgive us our debts, |
| (B) | | as we have forgiven our debtors. |
| (C) | ¹³ | And carry us not into the judgment, |
| (D) | | but deliver us from the Evil One. |
| (E) | ¹⁴ | For if you forgive others their offenses, |
| (F) | | your Heavenly Father will also forgive you, |
| (G) | ¹⁵ | but if you do not forgive others their offenses, |
| (H) | | your father will certainly not forgive your offenses. ⁴ |

This pericope has 4 well-known elemental parallelisms: AB, CD, EF, and GH. Since Jesus likely taught in Aramaic, these parallelisms would have been understood as Hebrew poetry by the original audience, suggesting that Jesus, in the tradition of the prophets, desired to highlight the inter-relationship between the prayer petitions of the Disciple's Prayer.

² D. A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 152.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Author's Translation.

Consequently, if understood as Hebrew⁵ poetry, other parallelisms logically appear between AB/EF and CD/GH, demonstrated as follows:

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|-----|---------------|---|
| (A) | ¹² | ... And forgive us our debts, |
| (B) | | as we have forgiven our debtors. |
| (E) | ¹⁴ | For if you forgive others their offenses, |
| (F) | | your Heavenly Father will also forgive you, |
| (C) | ¹³ | And carry us not into the judgment, |
| (D) | | but deliver us from the Evil One. |
| (G) | ¹⁵ | but if you do not forgive others their offenses, |
| (H) | | your father will certainly not forgive your offenses. |

AB/EF reinforces the same idea: those who forgive will receive forgiveness [Matt 6:15]. Or in other words, mercy will be shown to those that do mercy [James 2:13] (see especially Matt 25:31-46 which is the measuring stick that Christ will use to judge all people). To some degree, this does suggest a certain works based righteousness. However, as CD/GH will demonstrate, this is a sloppy exegetical idea.

Many scholars have pointed out that GH (Matt 6:15) reinforces the same idea in EF (v14) “in negative form.”⁶ However, CD/GH presents a radically different idea: those who do not forgive are slaves of sin (meaning undelivered from the Evil One) and being carried (εἰσφέρω) into the judgment, presumably to be thrown into the eternal fire with the fallen angels [Matt 25:41]. The key to becoming a forgiving person is deliverance from the Evil One, something that should extinguish any flicker implying a works based righteousness. Only our Father in Heaven can deliver us. We cannot deliver ourselves, hence the petition in Matt 6:13.

Amazingly, in Matt 6:15, “your father” is unqualified, opening two interpretive options: either our Father in Heaven or the Devil. Through Matthew’s use of Hebrew poetry, the latter is preferred. In other words, those who are forgiven and forgiving have solace in their Father in

⁵ Given Matthew’s use of Aramaisms throughout his Gospel, this shouldn’t be surprising.

⁶ D. A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*, 152.

Heaven; whereas, the unforgiven and unforgiving person will find no such solace in his father the Devil. Consequently in this alternative pericope, Matthew grounds his biblical theology of forgiveness on election theology. Only those that receive the forgiveness God offers and initiates through Jesus Christ can truly forgive others.

Healing of the Paralytic [9:2-7]

“The sixth miracle story... concerns the dramatic healing of a paralytic. We have seen how in previous instances Matthew has dealt with themes of faith and discipleship in connection with the wonder narratives of [Chapter 8]... Now for the first time the theme of forgiveness of sins is introduced into a healing narrative. So important is this theme that it dominates the pericope: the actual healing of the paralytic is nearly eclipsed by it, being performed mainly to demonstrate the reality of the forgiveness of sins.⁷

Although true that all sickness and suffering is brought about because of sin in a fallen world, it is not true that everyone merits their circumstances, as in the case of Job and particularly Jesus Christ. However, Israel was in a special relationship with God through the Sinai covenant, and through this covenant, God promised blessing to Israel if she was faithful to it. But if she was unfaithful, she would merit the covenant’s curses, recorded using a well understood Ancient Near Eastern covenant formula:

Deut 28:15-19 (ESV): ¹⁵“But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. ¹⁶Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. ¹⁷Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. ¹⁸Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. ¹⁹Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.⁸

Since the Sinai covenant provided a system of retributive justice which God Himself administered, the prevalent thinking of the time was that those who did good merited blessing

⁷ D. A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 230

⁸ *Holy Bible: English Standard Version*, (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

and those who did evil merited curses. After all, it's a given that God does what He promises to do.

Unfortunately, due to lack of faith, what isn't understood is God's timing and more especially His grace. Consequently, many people make the mistaken conclusion that the converse is true: Those that received blessings deserved them and those that received curses deserved them. In other words, the poor deserve to be poor and the rich deserve to be rich. If mistakenly understood this way, then material blessings imply both spiritual and eternal blessings, a sort of heretical Prosperity Gospel.

This heretical background helps explain the disciples' astonishment in Matthew 19:25, when they exclaim "Who can be saved?" after Jesus explains that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" [Matt 19:24]. From the preceding discourse with the Rich Young Ruler, the disciples' thinking was that the young man had somehow merited his material and therefore spiritual blessings (i.e. – eternal life) through faithfulness to the Sinai covenant, which was evidenced by his obedience to the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Decalogue Commandments. However, Jesus challenges him to sell everything, give to the poor, and follow Him, implying that the Rich Young Ruler is breaking the First, Second, Third, Fourth, and Tenth Commandments.

The Rich Young Ruler sadly departs, held captive by his great wealth. He is a slave to sin and having broken five of the Commandments, he has broken them all. He doesn't deserve his blessings. Instead, he deserves curses, which God will justly appoint in His own timing, if the Rich Young Ruler will not accept God's grace and repent. Again, Matthew reinforces that only God can save us – "with man ... [salvation]... is impossible but through God, all things are possible" [Matt 1:26]

Although true that faithfulness to the Sinai covenant would merit blessings, Israel was always unfaithful and therefore merited curses instead. Thus, the flaw in the disciples' thinking was that healthy and wealthy people had somehow earned their blessings, whereas the sick and poor had fully deserved their recompense. *According to this heretical Prosperity Gospel, the rich were not in need of forgiveness.* However, truly, both deserved much worse. However, in grace, God usually withheld the judgment that Israel deserved (as he does for all people). Within this background, the Healing of the Paralytic may now properly be understood:

Matt 9:2-7 (ESV): ² And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." ³ And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." ⁴ But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? ⁵ For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? ⁶ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, pick up your bed and go home." ⁷ And he rose and went home.

Through Israel's unique covenant relationship with God, there was a clear biblical causality between sin and sickness within Israel. In his Gospel, Matthew draws upon this background to present Christ as God and Savior. The forgiveness of sins precedes the healing, showing that indeed the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins. Within the context of the Sinai covenant, it would have otherwise been impossible for the paralytic to get up and walk, if his sins had not been forgiven, as sickness was the result of sin through the covenant curses. Thus, through the Law, this pericope demonstrates both Christ's divinity and power to forgive sins, as all sin is sin against Him.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus Christ is Savior. Only He can forgive all sins. Although human beings may forgive those who commit offenses against them, they cannot forgive offences against others or more poignantly against God Himself. For example, if someone robs me, I can forgive him for robbing me, but I cannot forgive him for robbing God whom he also

robs in robbing me. In other words, to sin against a human being is to sin against God for “God made Humanity in His image”⁹ [Gen 1:27]. For this reason, Jesus’ forgiveness to the paralytic is striking, as only God and Jesus Christ the Perfect Image of God can forgive all sins. Thus, by employing the Mosaic covenantal background, Matthew shows that Jesus is God to his Jewish and Gentile audiences.

Unlimited Forgiveness [18:21-22]¹⁰

Matthew 18:21-22 (ESV): ²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.

Most interpreters reason that Peter had intended to grant his brother forgiveness for his sin against him, but, if the brother continued sinning, he would ultimately break the relationship beyond repair and remain unforgiven.

Peter probably regarded “seven times” (επτὰκις), the traditional number of fullness, as a quite generous proposal. The rabbis had considered three times sufficient for the forgiveness of the same sin¹¹

Under Peter’s thinking, repeat offenders eventually run-out of the fullness of grace.

However, instead of fullness, some interpreters have pointed out that “seven is the traditional number of perfection.”¹² Under this hermeneutic, “the sense of Peter’s question [becomes]: ‘Is perfect forgiveness expected of me?’”¹³ To which, “Jesus could have answered

⁹ Author’s translation.

¹⁰ The author is addressing the Unforgivable Sin [Matt 12:31-32] Church Disciple [Matt 18:15-20] out of sequence from Matthew’s order but will analyze them after an “Ideal” theology and ethics of forgiveness are developed through the other forgiveness pericopes in Mathew’s Gospel.

¹¹ D. A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28* (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 537.

¹² Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 465.

¹³ Ibid.

yes, but his answer calls for even more perfection.”¹⁴ Seventy times seven suggests “the most perfect, boundlessly infinite, countlessly repeated forgiveness.”¹⁵

In either case, Jesus’ response [v22] likely harkens back to Gen 4:24 – “If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy sevenfold.” Lamech intended to dish out punishment beyond measure, where Jesus challenges Peter to pour out grace beyond measure.

This emphasis on the extravagant character of forgiveness is taken up in the parable that follows, which places the disciple’s forgiveness of others squarely upon the foundation of God’s forgiveness of the disciple^{16 17}

Disciples are called to forgive one another beyond measure. However, this forgiveness is somewhat qualified within the preceding discourse on Church Discipline [Matt 18:15-20]. Perhaps, this is why Luke records an important variant¹⁸ on Matt 18:21-22.

Echoing Matt 18:21-22, Luke writes “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him” [Luke 17:3-4]. The important qualification that Luke introduces is the idea of repentance as part of the process of restored relationship. Forgiveness must be accepted through repentance, otherwise there is no forgiveness. In other words, within the Church community, forgiveness isn’t a secret act, but rather, an acknowledged repair and restoration of the relationship amongst disciples through grace.

Christ’s disciples must be willing to forgive but cannot absolve the sin harming the relationship if the forgiveness is refused. But, where there is repentance, there must be forgiveness. Where there is no repentance, there is no forgiveness. It is a disciple’s debt of love,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ D. A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, 537.

¹⁷ Again Matthew grounds forgiveness theology on election theology, as Peter’s question assumes membership within the holy community (the Church).

¹⁸ Luke 17:3-4

however, to bring brothers and sisters to repentance and not use their un-repentance as an excuse to withhold forgiveness.¹⁹ Secret grudges are not allowed – “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” [Eph 4:26], but rather reconcile your brother or sister to yourself.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant [18:23-35]

Matthew 18:23-35:²³ “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man ruling who desired to settle mutual accounts with his servants.²⁴ When he began to settle, one debtor of ten thousand talents was carried²⁰ to him.²⁵ And since he did not have the ability to repay, his master ordered him to be sold, and his wife and children and all that he had, and also to repay the obligation in full.²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees and was pleading with him saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay everything to you.”²⁷ And having pity, the lord of that servant released him and forgave the debt to him.²⁸ But that same servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he was choking him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’²⁹ So falling on his knees his fellow servant pleaded with him, ‘Be patience with me, and I will pay you.’³⁰ And he was not willing and went out and threw him into prison until he might pay the debt.³¹ Then seeing what had taken place, his fellow servants grieved greatly and went out and reported to their Lord everything that had taken happened.³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘Wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt²¹ because you pleaded with me.³³ Is it not necessary that you have mercy on your fellow servant as I also had mercy on you?’³⁴ And becoming angry his lord delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all which he owed.³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”²²

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant expounds on Peter’s question concerning forgiveness in the community of disciples. By introducing the parable as a comparison of the Kingdom of Heaven [v23], Jesus further explains how forgiveness in the community of disciples

¹⁹ To be addressed in the Church Discipline discussion.

²⁰ The use of *προσφέρω* is striking here given the previous context of the Disciple’s Prayer and being carried into the judgment (*εἰσφέρω*).

²¹ Debt is qualified as “that debt” likely referencing v27.

²² Author’s translation.

should operate. With certain modifications²³ to Hagar's outline²⁴, the parable may be outlined into four sections as follows:

- I. The King and His Subjects (vv 23–27)
 - a. The King's Decision to Settle Accounts with His Subjects (v23)
 - b. The Servant with the Impossible Debt (v24)
 - c. The Decision to Force Payment (v25)
 - d. The Plea for Mercy (v26)
 - e. The Canceling of the Debt (v27)
- II. The Servant and His Fellow Servant (vv 28–31)
 - a. The Servant's Decision to Settle Accounts with His Fellow Servant (v28a)
 - b. The Fellow Servant with a Small Debt (v28b)
 - c. The Decision to Force Payment (v28c)
 - d. The Plea for Mercy (v29)
 - e. The Refusal of Mercy (v30)
- III. The King's Response (vv31–34)
 - a. The Report of the Servants (v31)
 - b. The Rebuke from the King (vv32–33)
 - c. The Deliverance to the Jailers (v34)
- IV. The Application of the Parable by Jesus (v35)

The king of the parable is God and his servants are the people of God. One servant has an impossible debt.

The use of μύριοι, “myriad” or “ten thousand,” which itself could mean “beyond number,” is a deliberate hyperbole pointing to a debt that was so high it was practically incalculable. Although the value of the talent, the largest monetary designation, varied, it was “always comparatively high” (BDAG, 803b). According to Josephus (*Ant.* 17.11.4 §317–20) 600 talents in taxes were collected from all of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria in 4 B.C. The debt of the man, in short, ran into billions of dollars. It was clearly outside the ability of the servant to pay, and thus the sovereign ordered that he and his family members be sold, i.e., into slavery (for OT background: 2 Kgs 4:1; Neh 5:3–5; Amos 2:6; 8:6; Isa 50:1) and his property be liquidated. (Even with this, the payment could never have come close to meeting the amount of the debt...) ²⁵

In desperation, the servant pleads to his king to have mercy upon him, by giving him more time to repay his impossible debt. The king responds compassionately and doesn't just give the servant a reprieve on the obligation put a full pardon. The parable doesn't record the servant's

²³ Author's modified outline based on Hagner's work.

²⁴ D. A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, 537.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 538.

immediate reaction, and thus raises the pregnant question: “how does the servant react to this amazing grace?” The rest of the parable answers that question.

The servant goes out and encounters a fellow servant. Although the parallels between the king’s forgiveness and the servant’s unforgiveness speak for themselves, a couple of important points ought to be considered. First, the small debt of a hundred denarii is miniscule compared to the ten thousand talents forgiven by the king, demonstrating the ridiculousness of the servant’s claim against his fellow servant. Second, the servant “choking” or “strangling” his fellow servant [Matt 18:28] suggests more than just physical assault, but rather premeditated murder and complete lawlessness. Whereas the king acts justly by calling servants to the legitimate royal court, this unforgiving servant acts lawlessly and unjustly, dealing out punishment “beyond measure” like Lamech. Clearly, the unforgiving servant is operating outside of anything that resembles justice and a legitimate legal authority. Finally, what is surprising is that the king summons the unforgiving servant and holds him accountable for his debt.

The common view is that the king reinstated the myriad of debt and threw the unforgiving servant into prison until he should repay it. However, if we believe that the king acted righteously and honored the pardon of the myriad of debt, then a better, alternative explanation arises: the unforgiving servant had acquired new debts and these now remain unforgiven. What was this new debt? It was essentially the sin of Lamech: usurping God’s rightful place as judge, exacting unjust retribution to the point of murder, and acting without mercy. The unforgiving servant stands condemned with debts that simply cannot be repaid, most especially by money, as these are clearly sins against both God and Humanity made in God’s Image. For his offenses, he will be in prison eternally, unless freed by Jesus Christ and His perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.

The Lord's Supper [Matt 26:26-28]

Matt 26:26-29 (ESV): ²⁶ Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you,²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."²⁶

Matthew appropriately concludes his basic theology of forgiveness in the Lord's Supper. The symbolism of the Passover meal is unmistakable, with Jesus presenting himself as the Passover Lamb "who takes away the sins of the world" [John 1:29]. Jesus offers himself as the perfect sacrifice for sins [Matt 26:28], for all those that enter into covenant with Him. According to Matthew, Jesus is the only true Savior able to "save His people from their sins" [Matt 1:21], "a mission to be carried out in Jesus' teaching, healing, and above, all, in His death and resurrection."²⁷

Matthew's Basic Biblical Theology of Forgiveness

At this point we can make a summary set of conclusions regarding Matthew's theology and ethics of forgiveness:

1. Jesus Christ came to save His people from their sins [Matt 1:21]
2. Jesus Christ has the authority and power to forgive sins [Matt 9:2-7]
3. Jesus Christ delivers us from Satan and the power of sin [Matt 6:13]
4. Jesus Christ does this by offering Himself as the perfect sacrifice [Matt 26:28]
5. Jesus Christ commissions His disciples to bring unbelievers into forgiveness and repentance through His Gospel [Matt 28:19]
6. We cannot save ourselves [Matt 19:24]
7. We should forgive as we have been forgiven [Matt 6:12]
8. We should actively seek to forgive and restore brothers and sisters [Matt 18:21-22]
9. Those that do not forgive will not be unforgiven [Matt 6:15]
10. Those that do not forgive are held captive by Satan and the power of sin [Matt 6:13]

²⁶ *ESV*.

²⁷ Donald Senior, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Nashville: Abington Press, 1997), 89.

The next task is to understand the Unforgivable Sin and Church Discipline which offer a pragmatic theology and ethic for bringing people to repentance inside God's Church who have somehow stumbled and are in need of forgiveness and restoration.

The Unforgivable Sin (Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit) [Matt 12:31-32]

After understanding the basic outline of Matthew's theology of forgiveness, we must now address the Unforgivable Sin and understand how it incorporates into it:

Matt 12:31-32: Therefore I tell you that all sins will be forgiven of people, except blasphemy of the Holy Spirit which will not be forgiven. And, whoever may speak a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven by Him, but whoever may speak against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven by Him, neither in this age or in the one coming.²⁸

The nature of the Unforgivable Sin is hotly debated. This topic deserves its own separate analysis, but the idea of blaspheming the Holy Spirit and committing the Unforgivable Sin is closely related to the concept of "hardness of heart"²⁹ which is addressed in Jesus' teaching on divorce found in Matt 19:3-12.

["Hardness of heart" is classically used] with regard to Pharaoh, whose "heart was hardened" to refuse God's call for the liberation of Israel...it is a term for rebellion against God to whom obedience is due.³⁰

In Matt 19:3, the Pharisees approach Jesus and ask him if it's lawful to divorce one's wife "for any reason."

The issue was not divorce itself, the right to which they took for granted, but rather the justifiable grounds for divorce. Would Jesus side with the school of Shammai, which allowed divorce only on the grounds of sexual immorality, or would he side with the school of Hillel, which sanctioned divorce on the most trivial grounds?³¹

²⁸ Author's Translation.

²⁹ Hardness or un-circumcision of heart is rejection or blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. See Mark 3:5, Acts 7:51, Eph 4:18.

³⁰ R.T. France, R.T, *The Gospel of Matthew, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 720.

³¹D. A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, 547.

Jesus doesn't side with either school, but rather answers “

Matt 19:8-9: ... "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

Jesus' response is intimately related to the issue of forgiveness explained in the preceding chapter (Matthew 18). If a man can't forgive his own wife, who can he forgive? And, if he can't forgive his own wife, God will certainly not forgive him. In other words, divorce is permitted but woe to him that divorces his wife through a hard heart, for he has blasphemed the Holy Spirit and committed the unforgivable sin. This of course begs the question: is divorce ever permitted? Within the Church it is, but only through the process of Church Discipline where Christ acts as Judge against those that harden their hearts and blaspheme the Holy Spirit.

Church Discipline [Matt 18:15-20]

Matt 18:15-20 (ESV) ¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Jesus Christ calls his Church to restore those who may stumble and sin against one another. For this purpose, Christ has instituted Church Discipline. In terms of process, the pericope [Matt 18:15-20] is self-explanatory, but what is striking is that Christ is Judge throughout the entire process [Matt 18:16, 18:17, and 18:19] because where two or three are gathered in His name He is with them [Matt 18:20].

Because Christ is Judge, this eliminates the perceived need for disciples to be judge. Although Christ does want His disciples to use their minds to reach thoughtful conclusions, where judgment is concerned, He demands that no one act on their own authority.

Matt 7:1-5 (ESV) ¹ “Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.

Thus, if somehow harmed, a disciple ought not to take matters into his own hands and be angry and bitter, condemning the sinner in his heart. Rather, he should commence the process of Church Discipline so that the sinner has opportunity to repent. If the sinner hardens his or her heart and refuses to repent, thus blaspheming the Holy Spirit, then this person should be expelled from the Church. However, in this case, the offended brother has no right to be angry but ought to be sad as his brother has become lost to Christ.

Returning to Matthew’s discourse on divorce, we can now see how the divorce process should operate. Divorce is allowed but only because of hardness of heart [Matt 19:8]. Within the Church, Christ calls husbands and wives to love one another and as part of this to forgive one another. Christian spouses must forgive and restore spouses who commit even acts of marital infidelity. Furthermore, as long as the spouse is repentant, then forgiveness must be granted, time and time again [Matt 21:-22].

If the sinner is unrepentant and refuses to listen to his spouse and even the whole Church, then the unrepentant sinner should be excommunicated. “When he has been put outside of the church and still evidences no signs of salvation, the believing partner may deal with him as with

an unbeliever.”³² In this case, divorce is permitted as the unrepentant spouse has hardened his or her heart and committed the Unforgivable Sin. In terms of process, civil divorce is now possible as the unrepentant spouse should be treated like a “Gentile or tax collector” [Matt 18:17], as he or she is now outside the Church. Thus, this case study completes Matthew’s biblical theology and ethics of forgiveness.

Completing Matthew’s Biblical Theology and Ethics of Forgiveness

From these two brief studies on the Unforgivable Sin and Church Discipline, a few final points may be made to complete Matthew’s biblical theology and ethics of forgiveness:

11. We have a debt of love to bring fallen brothers and sisters to repentance [Matt 18:15]
12. We mustn’t judge them [Matt 7:1-2], but we must air our grievances [Matt 18:15]
13. Jesus Christ alone is able to judge His people [Matt 18:19-20]
14. Jesus Christ judges through His Church using Church Discipline [Matt 18:16-20]
15. Those that are unrepentant have hardened their hearts [Matt 19:8] and blasphemed the Holy Spirit [Matt 12:31-32]
16. Jesus Christ excommunicates those that have hardened their hearts [Matt 18:17-20]

The unrepentant remain in rebellion to Jesus Christ and continue to reject the Holy Spirit. For this reason, they have committed the Unforgivable Sin because they have turned their backs on the only One who is able to forgive them. Thus, we see that the Unforgivable Sin is simply to be unforgiven and unforgiving, living in rebellion to Jesus Christ.

³² Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible: A Fresh Look at What Scripture Teaches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), 58.

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