

July 20th, 2008

“The Last Year of the Life of Christ, Part 8”

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Matthew 18:21-22

Then Peter approached and said, “Lord, how often do I have to forgive a brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Jesus replied, **“Listen to Me: not up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven!”**

Thank you very much for coming to hear the message for today. Before we begin our next lesson, let us reiterate our reason for attending Church.

We attend Church to obtain the mind of Christ, meaning, to have the Bible illuminated in our minds so that we can clearly understand the principles that Jesus taught and base our daily personal decisions on those principles.

We come to Church because we want to be obedient to the Bible, which is the doctrine of Jesus Christ, in an informed, insightful and intelligent manner.

In our last lesson, we discussed the procedure for bringing sinning brothers to a state of repentance. **Matthew 18:15-17** tells us:

Now, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him privately what he did to you. If he'll listen to you, you have won him back. But if he refuses to listen, take one or two others with you because it takes two or three witnesses to verify any accusation.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the congregation. And if he refuses to listen even to them, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

This process is obviously designed restore fellowship among Christians. The restoral process has two stages, recognition and repentance. Recognition and repentance are separate processes, because, assuming that we are in the wrong, just having another person point our sin against them to us does not automatically lead to our repentance. Sometimes, even though we know that we are wrong, we may choose not to repent because of the way that we feel about the other person, or because we feel justified in sinning against them as payback. Sometimes, we sinfully hurt people on purpose to make a point, and feel that the end to which we want to get justifies the sinful means that we use.

When we feel as though we are being put upon, we find it difficult to follow the Biblical admonition to repent, because basically, we don't want to. That is the big problem.

Of course, our desire to disobey has been the problem from the beginning. I refer once again to the second and third chapters of Genesis, passages of Scripture that clearly make the point that Adam and Eve sinned against God in the Garden strictly because they wanted to. Both the man and the woman disobeyed God voluntarily because they wanted something; they hoped to receive the knowledge of good and evil as a benefit of eating the fruit, rather than receiving the curse of death of which God warned them. They ate because they wanted to.

We disobey because we want to; we desire to act in a way that makes us feel better in the short term, notwithstanding the potential long term consequences. It may cost us more in the

long run to disobey, but we are willing to risk paying the larger price later in order to have the feeling that we want right now. Before we were saved, our desire to sin was willful and ignorant.

Acts 17:30-31 tells us:

30 Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,

31 because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained, [Jesus Christ]. He has given assurance of this to all by raising [Jesus Christ] from the dead.”

So, we are commanded to repent to avoid the Day of Judgment. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoēō*, which means to change one’s life, based on a complete change of attitude and thought concerning sin and righteousness. Repentance leads us to obey God and reconcile with one another, regardless of old animosities. Repentance requires us to change the way that we think.

Julie was talking to her counselor about her daughter. She said, “I taught my seventeen year old daughter to value herself and to wait until she was married to have sex, but she did it with some boy, and now she’s all depressed about it. She wants to go live with her Dad in another state to get away because she feels so poorly about what she has done. I want to help her forgive herself, but I don’t know how.”

The counselor asked, “Is she a Christian?”

Julie replied, “Yes.”

The counselor responded, “Then, rather than focusing on forgiving herself, your daughter needs a little education on repentance. You need to teach your daughter that it is her responsibility to repent before God, completing the four “R’s”, and then, rather than trying to forgive herself, she can accept God’s forgiveness. Let me give you the four “R’s” of repentance.

The first “R” is Responsibility. She has to own up to what she did, and take responsibility for it. I know that she missed her Dad’s influence after your divorce, that it was intriguing to find out about sex, that all her friends are doing it, and that society that tells her that having sex is no big deal, like blowing your nose into a tissue, so she gave in to the impulse. But her reasons are explanations, not excuses. She needs to acknowledge that having sex with this boy was wrong, that it was not something that happened to her but that it was something that she did intentionally knowing that she should not have, and she needs to take responsibility before God for her misbehavior. She can’t blame it on your divorce, her Dad, the boy, her friends, or anyone else. She needs to confess her sin to God and take responsibility for the decision that she made.

The second “R” is Remorse. Once she owns up to the fact that she intentionally disobeyed, she has to actually have remorse, meaning that she has to be sorry that she disobeyed God, not just sorry that she has the physical and emotional consequences of her disobedience.

The third “R” is Repeat. She has to actively develop a strategy to keep her from repeating the behavior. For instance, she needs to resolve to herself, ‘I recognize my human propensity for sensuality, so I’m going to avoid sexually unsafe or tempting situations. I’m not going to be in private with a guy one on one. When I go on a date, I’ll meet the guy at a public place rather than riding there with him. I’m not going to abuse alcohol so that my judgment might be impaired. I resolve not to involve myself in behaviors that might lead me into having sex again before I’m married.’

The fourth “R” is Repair. This is the tough one. She can’t physically repair not being a virgin, but she can once again adopt a virginal attitude. She can re-embrace God’s concept of reserving sex for marriage, and hold to that. Biologically, she has had sex, but philosophically, she’ll be virginal. She didn’t have sex with the guy because of a loving commitment; she had sex because she was curious. She needs to make that distinction. She’s had sex, but she hasn’t made love yet. So, she has to decide that she will never again just have sex, but that, when she marries, she will make love to the man whom she marries and with whom she has a mutual commitment.

If she proactively takes responsibility, has remorse, makes provisions to not repeat, and makes provisions to repair, the repentant activity will likely help her change her feelings about herself. She probably can’t change her feelings by just thinking about them; she actually has to do something to get better. Just talking may not help that much, but a proactive plan to avoid sin usually does.

Julie replied, “Thanks for your help.”

Repentance is necessary because there may be a difference between our understanding that something is wrong and how we feel about it. The four “R’s” are behaviors intended to bring our understanding and our feelings in line with one another. Although we may know right from wrong, we may not have conscious control over our emotions; we may not, by strength of will, be able to force ourselves to feel like doing the right thing. We always, however, have conscious control over our actions.

We may not be able to change our inappropriate emotions by just forcing ourselves to think differently, but if we consciously choose to act in the way that we know that the Scriptures tell us and that God requires, we are very likely to find that God will use His power to honor our obedience by changing our feelings.

Jesus gave us an example when He found Himself at the crossroads of understanding and desire. **Luke 22:41-42** tells us the episode of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane.

**41 And [Jesus] was withdrawn from them about a stone’s throw, and He knelt down and prayed,
42 saying, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.”**

In verse 42, the “cup” that Jesus talks about is the Cross. Jesus is asking His Father to take away the necessity that He go to the Cross. Then, understanding that God’s will was the correct thing to do, Jesus said, **“not My will, but Yours, be done.”** God responded, in the very next verse, **Luke 22:43:**

43 Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him.

The power of God will come to us in the same way that it came to the Lord when we consistently choose to do that which the Lord commands in spite of our feelings. Choosing the instructions of God over our feelings is that which we need to do to receive eternal life. In **Matthew 16:24-27:**

24 Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

25 For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.

26 For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or

what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

27 For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.

Your reward will not be based upon how you feel, but rather, what you do. Doing that which God tells us to do, in spite of our feelings, even in opposition to our feelings, can change our feelings even as enduring the agony of dying on the Cross allowed Jesus to have the joy and triumph of rising from the dead, of saving us from our sins, and of being crowned King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

So, we're clear that sometimes, God requires us to obey even if we don't feel like it. To do so is the essence of godliness.

Consider that it is easy to obey God when He tells us to do something that we want to do anyway. Even non-Christians don't have any problem doing that which God says to do when they agree with God. But, if you really want to be a good Christian, you have to obey God especially when you don't want to. For example, Jesus tells us, in **Matthew 5:43-48**:

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,

45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

46 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

47 And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?

48 Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

The word "perfect" that Jesus uses in **Matthew 5:48** is the Greek word τέλειος, meaning absolute moral correctness and complete maturity. A perfect person is one that does the right thing regardless of their feelings, which is a characteristic of God, who allows the sun to shine on the evil as well as the good. When God evaluated the sinful state to which mankind degenerated, He could easily have justified destroying mankind, but, since God's essential nature is love, God always found a man that He could use to continue the human race. God had to forgive mankind to find Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Elijah and all of the others through which He worked to maintain a relationship with the human race. Even as God was working through these various men, He was preparing His Son Jesus Christ to come and provide a way for all of us to restore our relationships with Him and through which we could all repent and be restored.

Because of the example of forgiveness and restoration that God has provided for us, including His provision of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins, it becomes incumbent upon any of us that believe in Him to make a conscious effort to increase our level of moral maturity by developing the relationship with our brothers that God has developed with us.

But Peter had not yet come to the conclusion to which Jesus was trying to bring the Apostles. In our text, Peter tried to define limits on forgiveness because he had not thought the situation through clearly. In **Matthew 18:21**:

Then Peter approached and said, “Lord, how often do I have to forgive a brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Well, Pete, think for a minute. Would you like God to put a limit of seven on the number of times that He will forgive you, since you have the same sin problem as your brother? It might not be wise to put a numerical limit on the number of times that you will forgive someone else, because you may find that you yourself need to be forgiven by God more times than your number allows. You probably didn't think about that, Pete, because you, like most people, even Christians, are pretty self-centered, and although we can clearly see the sins that others commit, we are somewhat blind to our own. We are trying to do better, but I think that we still have a long way to go. I know I do. So the number thing is not really a good idea.

Ron and Tara saw their counselor about their marital problem. They have been married for six years and have four children between them. Tara had a child out of wedlock who is twenty years old, and then she married and had two more children, who are eighteen and fifteen. She divorced their father and then married Ron. After they married, Tara had a child by Ron who is five years old. Ron did not bring any children into the marriage.

Tara started the conversation. “Ron feels that I haven't been a good wife and that I need to improve. He bought me a book on marriage and asked me to read it. At first I was insulted, but then I decided to read it with an open mind. The book said that I have most of the power to make our marriage work, but I think that it takes two to do so.”

“Well”, the counselor began, “it is certainly correct that it takes two. A woman can no more enjoy life with a disagreeable man than a man can enjoy life with a contentious woman. Both parties have to try to make the marriage work. However, men are generally more simple creatures emotionally than women. Generally, unlike women, men do not have mercurial moods like PMS or hypersensitivity to interpersonal slights. When was the last time you heard a man complain about his father-in-law? Men are born of women and spend the rest of their lives yearning for a woman's acceptance and approval. A man is putty in the hands of a woman they love unless the man has a mental illness or a personality disorder, which is the exception, not the rule. Give a man direct communication, respect, appreciation, food, and good loving, and he'll do just about anything you wish, within reason.

So, you are correct that it takes two, but do you really know that? Do you really know that you need your man?”

“Well, yes, of course I do”, replied Tara.

“I'm not sure”, said the counselor. “You have four children by three men and are having a hard time getting along with the man you have now. That doesn't sound like a person that thinks that they need a man to me. If you think that you need a man, why do you choose not to get along with one? Why don't you choose to create the atmosphere that makes your marriage the two of you working together?”

“Well”, Tara said, “this is my problem. Ron has said some very hurtful things to me. He's asked me to leave our home on a couple different occasions.”

“Just a second”, interjected the counselor. “Ron, what provoked you into asking Tara to leave your home?”

“Just getting in fights, you know, arguments”, said Ron. Sometimes I say things that are hurtful, but, I also believe that she’s not being completely honest. It works both ways. But I don’t dwell on these things, I don’t tend to bring them up, but she...”

“Well”, interrupted the counselor, “It is typically male not to bring them up, and it is more typically female to constantly bring them up. That’s sort of a gender difference that we have here. But, just a second, Ron.

Tara, Ron says that both of you say unkind things to each other. Ron admits that he says unkind things to you, but do you admit to saying unkind things to him?”

“I’ve never asked him to leave our home”, Tara said.

“Maybe you haven’t said those words, but you have said other things that are just as hurtful, wouldn’t you agree?” asked the counselor.

“I’ve never asked him to leave our home”, Tara repeated.

“Tara”, said the counselor, “You had three children by two men, and Ron agreed to marry you and take on your kids. You made another baby. Now, you have a choice as to whether to make this marriage good or bad. But, it is not useful to make your marriage bad by saying, ‘I don’t want to be nice. I don’t want to be loving. I don’t want to give up being mad about things that you said. I intend to hold on to these hurts and punish you for the rest of our marriage.’ That’s a terrible way for both of you to live. Tara, you need to make a decision. Either decide to work past those hurts, or there is no point in staying in the marriage. It won’t improve with you pouting.”

“I’m not pouting”, replied Tara.

“Yes you are”, said the counselor. “Holding on to being angry about things that have been said is pouting.

“You don’t think that I should be angry about being asked to leave my home?” asked Tara, angrily. “I have to leave my house with my baggage, with my children, and I shouldn’t be angry.”

“Well, Tara”, replied the counselor, “do you want to save the marriage or not? If you are so mad about being asked to leave that you are willing to destroy the marriage, then you should pack up your stuff and go.”

“Not mad”, said Tara. “Hurt.”

“Tara”, said the counselor, “If you are so hurt about being asked to leave that you are willing to destroy the marriage, then you should pack up your stuff and go. But, if you’re going to stay, you should try to make things better.”

“I feel I have”, said Tara, “but he asked me to leave. How can it ever get better?”

“No”, said the counselor. “I guess it can’t. You want to pout.”

“You think that I’m pouting?” asked Tara.

“I hear “pout” in what you are saying”, said the counselor. “You want to be right. You want to be the victim. You want to keep the control by being angry instead of using the control that you have to make your marriage better. That’s pouting. What else would you call it?”

“I never said that I wanted out of the marriage, but he has. I said that I made a commitment”, said Tara.

“Good for you”, said the counselor, “but he didn’t leave. And, he didn’t pack your bags and drive you anywhere.”

“He asked me to leave”, said Tara.

“That’s true”, replied the counselor, “but it didn’t happen. He didn’t make it happen. And, I’m sure that you’ve said some juicy things to him.”

“Is it acceptable for him to tell me to leave?” asked Tara.

“I’m sure that you’ve said some juicy things to him that are equally unacceptable, haven’t you?” replied the counselor. “Remember, he’s right here, and I can ask him what you said.”

“Well, I guess I have said some things”, admitted Tara.

“I didn’t hear you going on about what you said”, replied the counselor.

“Well”, answered Tara, “I could tell you what I said.”

“I don’t want to hear it”, said the counselor. “After I know that both of you said some unacceptable things, listening to a list of them doesn’t move the conversation forward. Going over old hurts doesn’t make the marriage closer. That is my point. As long as you’re holding on and pouting about him telling you to leave, you two can’t move forward. He can’t unsay what he said, but he didn’t actually put you out, so bringing it up over and over again is just you pouting and trying to keep the power. But you have the power anyway, without bringing up old hurts, and you could use the power to bring the two of you closer rather than to tear you apart. But you have to decide to stop pouting.”

You didn’t say, “He’s said some hurtful things to me, and I’ve said some hurtful things to him.” You only wanted to tell me how you’ve been victimized and how horrible he was to tell you to leave. But he couldn’t stand it anymore. So he said leave. He’s looking at a woman who is so angry, who is so unhappy, who is so pouty, so he said, ‘then go’.

But you should asking yourself, ‘Is it in my best interest and that of my children to stay angry and hurt, or is it in my best interest and that of my children to put my pride aside, and focus in on the possibility of making this family better for myself and my children?’

For the third time, with the third man, you have a decision to make. Are you staying or going? It’s up to you. Stay and try to make it better, or pout and leave. It is up to you. But Tara, this is your third man. Maybe you should think, ‘Since I can’t seem to get along with a man, maybe it’s me’. Maybe it’s you, Tara. Maybe being angry all the time is not the way to win friends and influence people. But right now, you just want to be pouty and powerful with your rage and hurt. And your kids are going to go through another loss, and that’s the big tragedy.”

It is interesting that the Bible never tells us to apologize. I searched all eighteen modern and ancient English versions of the Bible that I have in my digital library looking for the word apologize, and I found it in four passages of Scripture.

In **Luke 14**, Jesus tells a parable about a king that called his servants to come to a feast, and the servants made excuses for not coming, and the modern versions of the Bible call their excuses apologies. In **Acts 16** the authorities that arrested Paul for preaching the gospel released him, and apologized because they did not recognize that Paul was a Roman citizen. In **Acts 19**, the word “apology” is used in its old English definition, meaning “argument” or “debate”. In **2Corinthians 12**, Paul tells the Corinthians that his lecture to them is not an “apology”.

But God never tells us to apologize. God tells us to repent. Repentance is much more than apology; repentance means performing the 4 “R’s,” taking responsibility, having remorse, making provisions to not repeat, and making provisions to repair. So, Christian reconciliation requires much more than an apology. But, once a person repents of their sin, God forgives them.

Jesus tells us, in **Luke 17:3-4**:

3 Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.

4 And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."

Holding on to old hurts is not Godly. Holding on to old hurts is just a way to keep the upper hand in the relationship. But Jesus doesn't want one of us to have the upper hand over the other. He wants us to be one. He tells us, in **John 17:20-23**:

20 "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word;

21 that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.

22 And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one:

23 I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

Do you want to be one with your brother or sister, with your husband or wife, or do you just want the upper hand?

Do you want to build a relationship with your brother or sister, with your husband or wife, or do you just want to pout about old times?

Have you reached your limit of forgiveness, or do you want to be like God and live His grace and mercy?

Before Jesus could complete His sacrifice on the Cross, He had to do two things. On the Cross, Jesus found Himself hanging between two criminals that were condemned to death. **Luke 23:39-42** tells us:

39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us."

40 But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?"

41 And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong."

42 Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

The criminal took responsibility for his crime by admitting to it, and showed remorse by acknowledging that his death was a just penalty for his crime. On the cross, there was no possibility of the criminal repeating his crime, and the criminal could not repair the damage caused by his crime, and so he had done all that he could do to repent. Since his asking Jesus to remember him was an expression of his faith in Jesus, Jesus acknowledged the criminal's repentance. **Luke 23:43** records:

43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Jesus assured that criminal, and assures us by extension, that God will forgive the repentant sinner, even if he has been convicted of the most heinous crime imaginable. Jesus also made provision for the future repentance of unrepentant criminals, in His prayer from the Cross, in **Luke 23:33-34**:

33 And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified [Jesus], and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left.

34 Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” And they divided His garments and cast lots.

Our self-centeredness blinds us to our sins. We can clearly see the sins of others, but we fail to see our own. But God has given us the record of the life of Jesus Christ to open our eyes, to take us out of that self-centered place and to put us into a place in which we could recognize that when we can't get along with our brothers and sisters, maybe the problem is us. Maybe we are pouting, maybe we are holding on to anger to get the upper hand, and maybe we are unhappy because of ourselves, not because of someone else. Maybe we are not a victim of our circumstances, but a co-conspirator with them. But Jesus made a way for even the most self-centered of us, the one that hates Him the most, to understand the sins that they are committing.

Jesus made a way for us to understand the truth of repentance and reconciliation by His resurrection from the dead, and to be saved from sin, death, hell and the grave by acknowledging His Lordship.

But we have to be willing.

We can choose hang on to our sin if we want to.

It is our choice.

Jesus' death on the Cross was the sacrifice for sin. But His Resurrection from the dead gives us the knowledge that we can be forgiven. We were lost, ignorant souls, but now that we have had our eyes opened, we have the opportunity to take responsibility for our sins, to have remorse for our sins, to make provision to not repeat our sins, and to repair our relationships so that we can point others to the Kingdom of God even as Jesus Christ rose from the dead to point us there. Jesus has forgiven an infinite number of times over the last two thousand years.

Matthew 18:21-22 records:

Then Peter approached and said, “Lord, how often do I have to forgive a brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Jesus replied, “Listen to Me: not up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven!

Let us emulate His example, and not limit our forgiveness to seven times.

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