

Introductory

This material is exclusive to Matthew. If you take away the first two verses – Peter’s initial question and Jesus’ initial response – then it is the text appointed to be read on Trinity 22 in the TLH lectionary. In the LW three-year lectionary, the entirety of this reading as it appears here is the text appointed for Pentecost 17A.

The reading is to be seen in the context of what preceded it, and as a continuation of last week’s discussion. That text dealt with what the church should do in the case of a sin by a “brother,” and concludes with the instruction to “loose” the sin of the repentant Christian, or not. Peter’s question follows immediately after that and is prompted by it.

What becomes immediately noteworthy is that Peter’s question is not about how the Church deals with the sin of a Christian, but about how he, the individual should deal with a sin against him. It could, and it has been argued that a sin against one Christian is a sin against every Christian, and of course every sin is fundamentally a sin against God.

But his question, using the first person singular, as well as the ultimate answer (v. 35) in the second person singular, make this about Christian on Christian sin, and the response of Jesus indicates that the way that the *corporate Church* deals with a sin “against you” is not exactly the same as the way that the *individual person* deals with a sin “against me.”

The Church is instructed to initiate a process that ends either in the sinner’s repentance and the sin being loosed, or the sinner’s non-repentance ending in his expulsion from the Church. The instruction here to the individual is very simple; if your brother sins against you, forgive him, and do that every time, however many times he sins against you.

The individual in and of himself has no keys, no power to loose and to bind, but only the command from Jesus to determine in his own self to forgive the one who has sinned against him. The rationale is simple; you have been forgiven of a lot, so therefore you must forgive a little. Our debt because of sin to God is large. Their debt to us is small.

There is here no explicit command to verbalize that forgiveness, to proclaim the Gospel, to render absolution. The Lutherans have never limited the pronouncement of absolution to ordained clergy. They have never been against, and we have always been for every Christian pronouncing absolution on the other, and it’s not an either/or.

The Pastor is obligated by his calling and vocation, but both shepherd and sheep can and should do that. What a wonderful Church world it would be if the pastor were pronouncing absolution to individuals and those same individuals were pronouncing absolution on one another. But that’s not the world in which we live.

Pastors are looked upon with suspicion for even suggesting that an individual come to him confessing sins, and in interactions we hear very little along the lines of, “I forgive you,” and very much along the lines of, “no problem” and “it’s okay,” and “don’t worry about it.” That’s probably because people don’t know how to say, “I’m sorry.”

We may hear, “I made a mistake,” and “oops,” and “sorry if I offended anybody,” and we hear those things all the time, and that was easy. In a nutshell, we have forgotten how to live out the very basic Christian life that includes the inevitable sinning against one another and forgiving with one another, even among Christian family members.

I do not anticipate the Church getting back to the norm of confessing sins to one another and receiving forgiveness from one another until people start privately confessing their sins to the pastor. That’s the biblically mandated forum for confession and absolution, and among other things it teaches the methodology – just how does that work anyway?

The story Jesus tells centers around debt and the inability to pay debt and the consequences of that during the days of Jesus. Except for fans of Dickens and people who have heard this parable, the concept of “debtors’ prison” is not familiar to most Americans. But it’s a pretty basic concept, and very common in the ancient world.

We Americans are far enough removed from debtor’s prison to have forgotten the utter helplessness of one unfortunate enough to land there. Tell a story about a person in “debtor’s prison,” or tell how a debtor’s prison works and then describe life in one. You may want to quote a paragraph from Dickens. Why a quote, and why Dickens?

We quote people for several good reasons and for a lot of bad reasons. Among the good reasons why we quote people are: the person quoted knows more than we do about a subject; he may even be an authority or an expert, and that person says it better than we can. Because of his feckless father, Dickens qualifies on both counts.

The feckless father was often in debtors’ prison, so he knows what he’s talking about, and in his writings, he talks about such prisons often. Dickens wrote during the Realism period of fiction, a school of authors who went to great pains to be accurate in their writing of fiction. That the man has a way with words goes without saying.

An 1862 letter to the editor, quoted in WIK “Debtors’ Prison,” paints a vivid picture of life in such a place in Victorian England. If it seems like I’m mentioning a lot of English instances and sources, it’s because the English seemed to be particularly fond of the idea of throwing people into prison for inability to pay debts, or for just being poor!

In *The Tudors*, in what he calls “The Punishment of the Innocents,” C.J. Meyer describes just such a thing, being punished for being poor, actually coming to pass during the Elizabethan years (pp. 517ff.). Historically, the modern Christian West pays a lot more attention – as well as time and money – to the plight of the abject poor.

When we are talking about amounts of money, your hearer will not be familiar with the unit of currency known as the “talent” or the one known as “denarius.” Do the currency exchange for them, and if you go ahead and do the math from the pulpit you will engage their minds, as they do the math with you, and that will be a good thing.

Go ahead and quote the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer at some point, for the same reasons that you may quote Dickens. This incident and parable might rightly be seen as an extension and explanation of what Jesus taught in that petition, and it’s entirely possible that Peter had that petition in mind when he asked the question.

Textual Notes

21. Remember that one guy in seminary who always asked the question everybody was thinking, but was afraid to ask? Peter is that guy. The question asked by Peter is obvious, and it has been asked many times and in many ways over the church’s history, and it is one of the glaring paradoxes of Law and Gospel in Christian theology.

The question seems to presuppose that a lot of people, when confronted with their sin – as per the section immediately prior – will repent of the sin and be ready for forgiveness. The short dialogue is between Peter and Jesus, but likely the rest of them heard it as well, sort of like the seminary classroom. He answers the question, and then He tells a story.

The question, “προσελθὼν ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν αὐτῷ Κύριε, ποσάκις ἁμαρτήσῃ εἰς ἐμὲ ὁ ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀφήσω αὐτόν; ἕως ἑπτάκις – Peter said to Him, ‘Lord, how often should my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’” The phrase “against me,” we noted last week, is included in some manuscripts and left out of others.

The aorist participle “προσελθὼν – approaching,” indicates that Peter has come to Jesus alone. The question posed by Peter to Jesus presupposes that one’s “brother” will sin against him, and that he might even sin against him multiple times, and we know from experience that such a thing is not only possible, but in a fallen world inevitable.

In fact, there are several places in the Bible where Christians are instructed as to what to do when such a thing occurs. We note in addition that this conversation is about Christian on Christian sin, not about the sin of a non-believer against the Christian. It is expected that the pagan will sin against you. It’s disappointing when a Christian does it.

Not all sin is “against” a particular person or persons, but some are. All sin is against God, but some sin – most of it? – is against other people as well as being against God. Moving now from what The Church does in the case of a sin, the focus here is on sin done to the individual “against me,” requiring individual forgiveness if requested.

We are all familiar with what Peter is asking here; how often do I have to forgive that person who keeps sinning against me over and over and over again? Probably that

person is somebody close to you, a friend or a relative, perhaps a spouse. If forgiveness is to be freely given, then what's to keep that person from sinning against me constantly.

If Peter is that one guy in seminary who asked the question that was on everybody's mind, then he is also the guy who wanted the teacher to know that he already knows the answer, and that he is more or less looking to the teacher for confirmation of what he already knows. Jesus confirms that Peter has the correct answer, and then one-ups him.

22. In response to Peter's answer of his own question, “λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς Οὐ λέγω σοι ἕως ἑπτάκις, ἀλλὰ ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ – Jesus said to him, I do not say to you until seven, but until seventy seven.” The singular “auto – to him” tells us that He's still talking to Peter only, and “ἀλλὰ” is the emphatic “but,” indicating that Peter is wrong?

The commentaries have a lot to say about the number seven, and about Jesus' response that includes the number seventy-seven or seventy times seven, all of them correctly concluding that, “the point is that there can be no limits to the willingness to forgive” (Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 269, as quoted in Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew*, 339).

23. He then launches into the familiar parable, but with a different introduction from what we usually see to a parable. He begins not with “the kingdom of heaven is like,” which will come after this, Διὰ τοῦτο ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ - because of this, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man, a King.” Because of what?

KJV begins the sentence with “therefore,” and many LBT do the same, and what does “therefore” mean anyway? It means that because Peter asked the question about multiple sinned against, and Jesus answers like He did, now He's going to tell a story that will help Peter to better understand, perhaps even feel, the concept of unlimited forgiveness.

The concept of forgiveness is an exclusively Christian concept, and we see from the OT lesson that the idea goes back a long way. It is important to note that the parable is about the King, and Jesus makes him the focal point throughout the parable and the point of comparison, which means that the parable is primarily about God's forgiveness of us.

There is a tendency when preaching this text to focus on the two guys who are not the king. That was easy, and indeed those two are part of the parable, and they take up a lot of space in it, but they are secondary to the King. Preach the Law, but don't forget the focus and the point of comparison given by Jesus; this parable is about the generous king.

That King, “ὃς ἠθέλησεν συνᾶραι λόγον μετὰ τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ - who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.” You may recognize the noun λόγον as the word for “word,” but a quick perusal of BAG is enough to demonstrate that the word is very versatile. Here the word “λόγον” means the settlement or conclusion of business deal agreed on.

You may recognize δούλων as another versatile word, one that can mean either “slave” or “servant” or “employee.” In NT times, those the lines between those three vocations

were more blurred than they are in our time, and we often struggle for the best rendering. Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges seem to have a handle on what it means here,

The picture is drawn from an Oriental Court. The provincial governors, farmers of taxes, and other high officials are summoned before a despotic sovereign to give an account of their administration...i.e. subjects of an Eastern monarch are “slaves.” The scholar will remember how often Demosthenes makes a point of this.

24. Having determined to do so, “ἀρξαμένου δὲ αὐτοῦ συναίρειν – When he had begun to settle...” The verb “συναίρω – to settle” occurs here, in the next verse, and later in Matthew (25: 19), the Parable of the Talents. The word also occurs in contemporary literature, often in the context of business dealings and the culmination of those dealings.

There is more than one person involved, and we zero in on this one “προσήχθη εἰς αὐτῷ ὀφειλέτης μυρίων ταλάντων – brought to him one, a debtor of ten thousand talents.” So just how much money is a “talent” worth? The commentaries deal with the question, and many of them at great length. In the article on *The Attic Talent*, WIK says that,

at the 2009 price of \$414/kg, a silver talent is worth \$10,760...the purchasing power of a talent in ancient times was about \$20,000 of early 21st century money.

If you do the maths – $10,000 \times 10,000 = 100,000,000$, and that’s more money than I’ve ever seen. How would a man run up such a debt? If it were a minister responsible for collecting money for the King, then he could skim a little bit off here and there, but to accrue that kind of debt we would not call it skimming, but large ladles full of cash.

When talking about this debt, use words and images to make your hearer feel the helplessness accompanying the utter inability of a man to ever pay off that huge sum of money. Perhaps tell a modern story about a man who racked up a huge debt that he would have no hope of paying off – perhaps the story would include mobsters.

25. Now use more and different words to make your hearer feel the finality of not only yourself, not only all your goods, but your wife and children being sold off to go towards that account. That was a real thing, you know; people sold and bought people all the time, and the threat to sell the man’s family horrifies us, but to them it was old hat.

The problem was that he and his family were not worth anywhere near the debt. The people, the possessions, those things would have been like drops in the ocean of debt in which he was swimming, a debt that was about to drown him and all his. It’s no wonder that the man does the only thing that one can do at such a time and in such a situation.

26. He does not so much throw himself on the mercy of the King, but like a lot of Christians, he makes a promise that manifestly he can never keep,” πᾶσιν οὖν ὁ δοῦλος

προσεκύνει αὐτῷ λέγων Μακροθύμησον ἐπ’ ἐμοί, καὶ πάντα ἀποδώσω σοι – the minister fell down, worshipping him, saying ‘be patient with me, and all I will pay you back.’”

First we find the man “πεσὼν – falling down,” and then we find him “προσεκύνει – worshipping” this one who not only has authority over him, who not only holds his life in his hands, but who holds the lives of his family in those same hands. The imperative to “be patient with me” is clearly a request, not a command.

Such is the case with the natural man who wants to pay God back for his sins by doing good works. It is impossible for you, O Natural Man, to do that much good to pay back what you owe God for your sins. Brad, who spends \$20,000 to have a well dug in Africa and Leonardo, who wakes up in the morning thinking about how he can save the planet.

You really think those things are enough? I mention those two as examples because both were raised Christian, both have rejected our religion, the first more vocally than the second, and both think very highly of themselves. The Natural Man are everywhere and come in all shapes, sizes, and socio-economic levels, not just in Hollywood celebrities.

27. The King has a better idea. The debtor did not ask for mercy, but “σπλαγχνισθεὶς δὲ ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου ἐκείνου – his Lord had compassion on that servant.” That’s the emotion you feel in your gut, and that makes him do what he did towards the debtor, “ἀπέλυσεν αὐτόν, καὶ τὸ δάνειον ἀφῆκεν αὐτῷ - he released him and forgave his debt.”

The word “σπλαγχνίζομαι – compassion” is often used to describe how Jesus feels, like when He discerns that the people have been three days without food, or when He sees that the masses are like sheep without a shepherd. The noun form of the word is used to describe how the “guts” of Judas fell out when he killed himself. It was a hard fall.

Because of His compassion, not because of the man’s merit, the King does two things; He releases the man, and He forgives his debt. The verb describing his release means to be relieved of an obligation. The other, closely related verb generally translated “to forgive,” means to “let go,” as fishermen let go of their nets or God lets go of our sins.

When I talk about forgiveness, I might talk about how a bank can forgive a loan. I will then point out that such a thing never happens, but that as a concept the forgiving of an obligation is more familiar than we think. Obligations like tax penalties, student loans, mortgage interest payments and credit card late fees are forgiven all the time.

Chances are that most of your listeners have had an obligation forgiven at one time or another and will understand the concept in a personal and therefore in an emotional way. Deliberately use examples like that to cause emotion, pathos, in the hearer. Remember when you got that late fee, you called Chase, and they took it off? Remember that?

28. The man who went before the king deserving and expecting the worst has had the best happen to him. He must have felt pretty chipper. In a sort of “you’re not going to

believe this” manner, Matthew tells us that “ἐξελθὼν δὲ ὁ δοῦλος ἐκεῖνος εὔρεν ἓνα τῶν συνδούλων αὐτοῦ - the same minister went out and found one of his fellow servants.”

My RSV says that the first man “came upon” the second, making it sound like he was sort of just walking down the street and he passively ran into him. The word is εὔρεν, a decidedly active verb meaning “he found,” meaning that the first had actively gone looking for the second. Except for RSV, almost all the other translations have it right.

When he found the man, “ὃς ὀφείλεν αὐτῷ ἑκατὸν δηνάρια – who was owing him a hundred denarii,” which is a lot less than ten thousand talents. The hundred denarii are often referred to in terms that would lead us to believe that it amounts to chump change or roughly the amount you might find in the ash tray of your car or something like that.

It was more money than that. In Matthew 20:2 we see – and this is found in other sources – that the denarius is the amount paid to a day laborer. In John 12:5 we hear Judas talking like the pound of ointment or perfume that Mary had put on the feet of Jesus was worth three hundred denarii, or nearly a year’s worth of wages for a day laborer.

These days, we’re talking about a hundred or two dollars. If we take that hundred dollars, the value of one denarius, and multiply it by one hundred, the number of denarii owed, that makes the debt about ten thousand dollars in modern-day terms, twenty thousand at two hundred per diem. So, more than ash tray money, but a doable amount.

Probably each of you and each of your adult hearers owe at least that amount, for a car, for the mortgage, and people these days do run up that kind of credit card debt. It’s not a small amount of money, and you probably fully intend to pay it off at some point. We don’t know if the man who owed that was intending to pay it off or not, but...

No dialogue is recorded, no ask or response, but only “καὶ κρατήσας αὐτὸν ἔπνιγεν λέγων Ἀπόδος εἴ τι ὀφείλεις – and he grabbed him and began to choke him, saying ‘pay anything you owe.’” Today, we would use words like “physical assault” and “attempted murder” to describe the attack. Have you ever been choked? I didn’t think so.

Have you ever choked another person? I didn’t think so. Homer Simpson aside, you don’t choke a person unless you want to kill that person. The legal term is “murderous intent.” The first man had murderous intent when he attacked the second, shouting as he choked to pay him back any money he owed him, and all over a hundred denarii.

29. The man under violent attack “πεσὼν οὖν ὁ σύνδουλος αὐτοῦ παρεκάλει αὐτὸν λέγων Μακροθύμησον ἐπ’ ἐμοί, καὶ ἀποδώσω σοι – the fellow minister fell down, pleading with him, saying, ‘have patience with me, and I will pay you back.’” Like the man before the King, this man falls down, and pleads for the same patience for which he had asked.

30. The attacker “ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἤθελεν – did not want” to have patience with the man, who promised to repay the money. Emphatically “ἀλλὰ ἀπελθὼν ἔβαλεν αὐτὸν εἰς φυλακὴν

ἕως ἀποδοῖ τὸ ὀφειλόμενον.was not wanting – but instead, having gone away, he threw the man into prison until he should pay back all that was owed,” a not unusual thing.

31. Enter other co-workers, who either saw what happened live or got wind of it, “ιδόντες οὖν οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτοῦ τὰ γενόμενα ἐλυπήθησαν σφόδρα – the fellow ministers, seeing therefore the things that took place, were deeply grieved,” and what does that emotion look like? Like from seeing a peer and his family headed for debtors’ prison.

Men of action, “ἐλθόντες διεσάφησαν τῷ κυρίῳ ἑαυτῶν πάντα τὰ γενόμενα – they went and told their Lord all that had happened.” They went to their common “lord” and the rare verb “διεσάφησαν – to explain” is used only here and earlier in Matthew (13:36) where Jesus is said to explain the Parable of the Sower. It was a thorough explanation.

32. When the King got wind of it, “τότε προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ – then the Lord called him to him” – we would call it a “summons,” then “λέγει αὐτῷ Δοῦλε πονηρέ, πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφῆκά σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσάς με – wicked minister, all the debt I forgave you because you begged me,” and it’s not looking good for the man.

Try paying that impossible debt off without having a job. That’s the problem withgoing to debtors’ prison. You lose your job when you go to prison, and if those days were anything like these days you probably aren’t going to get that job back when you get out, and other jobs will not be easy to come by for an ex-con, but you’re not getting out.

33. He continues, “οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὥς καὶ γὰρ σὲ ἠλέησα – was I not your obligation to pity your fellow minister, as I pitied you?” The word “οὐκ” expects an answer in the affirmative, and it’s a rhetorical question, the answer to which is obvious; yes, I was obligated to treat him with mercy, as you did indeed treat me.

It's not a hard concept, one embodied in the Fifth Petition, which you might want to talk about this Sunday. The people who demand liturgical uniformity and who decry the Children’s Sermon an “interruption” in Divine Service are the same people who insist on interrupting Divine Service to read from Luther’s Small Catechism.

Don’t do that. Teach the Catechism in the sermon.

And the Children’s Sermon is an interruption.

34. The King is angry, “καὶ ὀργισθεὶς ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν τοῖς βασανισταῖς – and his Lord being angered delivered him to the torturers,” and he won’t be coming back until he pays it all off. The aorist passive participle “ὀργισθεὶς – angry” is used to describe the emotion that the king was feeling as what has just happened here sinks in.

The translations mostly miss the import of the passive voice. This verb appears in the passive voice six times in the NT, and each time there is something to be angry about. The king was not just angry or angered for no reason, as if he were an Angry Beaver or something. The king had been made to feel justly angry by the actions of this man.

The angry king delivers the wicked man to the βασανιστάζ, a hapax in the NT, a noun related to a verb that speaks, according to BAG, “literally of torture in judicial examination.” Torture is frowned upon in our modern culture but for the ancients, torture and deliberately causing pain and suffering was simply a part of the judicial system.

They would be baffled at our questioning of their common practice of torture, sort of like I am baffled when people questioned the water-boarding at Gitmo. If debtors’ prison was bad, then being delivered over to the torturers was even worse. On a very basic level, it was never a good idea in ancient times to anger the king, and bad often followed

On a theological level, if this parable means what it clearly means, then the man is going to hell, and just what did we think hell was going to be like? It’s never a good idea to anger the One True God. The man would be in the hands of the torturers until his entire debt was paid, and we already covered how long it would be before that happens.

35. If these next words don’t send chills down the spiritual spine of the Christian, “Οὕτως καὶ ὁ Πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφῆτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν – in this manner My Father in heaven will do to you, if you should not forgive each sin of your brother from your hearts,” then I don’t know what words would.

The word οὕτως means “*in exactly the same manner*, my heavenly father will do to you (plural), and the forgiveness must come from the heart, not just with lip service. Shepherds need to alert the sheep to this very grave warning from God, to preach the Law in all its hardness. After that, they should be ready to hear the Gospel in all its sweetness.

Law/Gospel

Forgive/Forgiven – The Law, the command from Jesus, is to forgive those who have sinned against you. The Gospel, what Jesus has done, is that His death and Resurrection paid the price for all sins of all times and all places.

Sermon Titles

Forgive Him Again?

How Many Times?

Two Men and a King

Day of Reckoning

About the Talent and the Denarius

Hymns

Lord, to You I Make Confession – LSB 608

Jesus Sinners Does Receive – LSB 609

Chief of Sinners Though I Be – LSB 611

Anything from the *Redeemer* or *Justification* sections

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa

Resources

ACC – Manlio Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Matthew)*.
Intervarsity Press, 2002

BAG – Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Translated by
William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979

BCLY – William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*. The Westminster Press, 1975

FGG – James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar*. Concordia Publishing House,
1993

GBS – Jeffrey Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary, Matthew*, CPH, 2006

GND – Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*,
Eerdmans, 1982

MGM – W.F. Moulton, A.S. Geden, H.K. Moulton, *A Concordance to the Greek
Testament*. T & T Clark LTD., 1978

MM – James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek
Testament*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982

ODCC – F.L. Cross, Editor, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford
University Press, 1978

RNK – Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, 1976

RSV – Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Zondervan Publishing House, 1965

SCR – David Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church*, CPH, 2004

UBD – Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, 1977.

WP – A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Baker, 1930

VINE – W.E.Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984

WIK – www.wikipedia.com

BIB – www.biblos.com

GBO – www.greekbible.com

Digital Classics Library - www.perseus.tufts.edu

Internet Classics Library – www.classics.mit.edu

Christian Classics Ethereal Library - www.ccel.org

Project Wittenberg - www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html