

**“Those Who Observe the Day, Observe It in Honor of the Lord”
Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35; Psalm 114**

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹Then Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on

you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Romans 14:1-12

¹Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

¹¹For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God. ■

The Sermon

When I was leading church youth groups in the early 2000s, I would occasionally issue them copies of a mostly blank journal assembled by Linda Kranz, which was called *Through My Eyes*,¹ in which each page had a question or two, and then the rest of it was a blank page.

“If you could change three things about yourself—appearance, personality, or something else—what would they be and why? How would you go about making these changes?”

“If you could start today over, what would you do differently?”

“What makes you happy?”

One page asked the questions: “Are you open-minded to other people’s opinions? Do you listen to all sides before you respond?”

Paul wrote to the fractious church in Rome:

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?

Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?

For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”

Some people were coming into the church with ideas about faithful practice that were diametrically opposed to other people’s ideas about faithful practice.

Paul said, OK, some of you say one thing, based on your faith, and some of you say something different, also based on your sincere desire to be faithful. The important thing is you are all trying to be faithful.

This is very different from saying, “There are no right or wrong answers here.”

It is true that sometimes more than one argument, angle or perspective can be right.

It is also true that somebody can be wrong and still be an entirely worthy human being.

And it is most definitely true that we have all been wrong a lot in our lives—morally, factually, ethically, and in a hundred other ways—and yet we are still made in the image of God. Sometimes we blur that image. But the Holy Spirit still animates, and the cross still redeems. And God still loves. And forgives.

And instructs disciples to do the same—in no uncertain terms.

Miller Williams had a great line in a poem called Compassion:

“Have compassion for everyone you meet
even if they don’t want it. What seems conceit,
bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign
of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
You do not know what wars are going on
down there where the spirit meets the bone.”ⁱⁱ

One of the countless gifts of being the Church is not only to realize, but to bask in the beautiful truth, that the people around us are flawed humans, too, just like me: they have their own wars going on.

And their responses to those journal questions might look very different from mine in ways I probably couldn’t even imagine.

More of the questions from that journal for teenagers:

“[Complete this sentence:] You don’t know how difficult it was when...”

“Write about what you have learned over the last year. How have you changed or grown as a person?”

“Write about your saddest day and how you made it through that difficult time.”

Speaking of youth groups, back in the late 1990’s when I was bringing groups here for the Montreat Youth Conference, the church I was serving had seen what a powerful thing it was and that it looked like a lot of fun for the young people, but it was also quite evident that it was spiritually deep, rigorous, and intense.

I had developed a list of six criteria that were used to decide whether people were eligible to come with our group, and the young people and their parents knew this from Day One when they came into the group; this was a year-round focus.

Attitude was one: is this someone that other people can live in close quarters with for a week? Responsibility: there would be a lot of time during the day when young people are on their own; we had to have absolute confidence they were going to be where they needed to be. And a few others: during the year, did they participate in the opportunities we gave them to help other people in the church and the wider community?

One night I went over these with the session of that church, and one of the elders said, “I don’t know if I could live up to those criteria. I don’t know if any of us could.” And I said, “Yep.”

But our young people can. They do, every year. And so can we. Of course we can.

One of the ways we do it is to recognize we’re all going to fall short sometimes, we’re all going to make mistakes. And we can help each other by being open to forgiveness.

And sometimes we will have perspectives that don't align with each other. So, all the more, we can help each other out by giving each other a break. And we can listen. Especially when somebody says or does something that I don't agree with.

Where are they coming from? Why would they think that, or say what they said?

The Church is a place where we can be human beings together. And even when the place is not available, the Church is still a reality in which we are human beings together—all made in God's image. All coming with our own individual relationships with God, each bringing our own personality.

It doesn't mean I have to open up with people all the time if I'm an introvert, and it doesn't mean I have to isolate myself in contemplation for weeks at a time, if I'm an extrovert who feels like I'm supposed to be like the introverts.

It means I understand that faithful people sometimes see and react to things differently and come to differing conclusions about what is faithful.

The point for Paul is: all of that is taking place among people trying their best to be faithful, to God and each other. And who is any one of us to judge?

David Brooks recently wrote,

“To accurately size up a human situation, you have to project a certain quality of attention that is personal, gentle, respectful, intimate and affectionate—more moving with and feeling into than simply observing with detachment.”

He said, “Maybe I spend too much time on Twitter and in media, but I see less and less of this sort of attention in America, even amid the tragedies of 2020. Far from softening toward one another, the whole country feels even more [riven], more hardened and increasingly blind to lives other than our own.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Seth Godin, who has a highly respected business blog, wrote just this week, musing about “the honest mistake vs. the intentional act:”

“Even though the harm may be the same, we’re much more likely to move on from an acknowledged accidental mistake.

“Is it because we know that we’ve made honest mistakes ourselves, and the act of forgiving the other person is a way of forgiving ourselves?”^{iv}

The gospel reading from Matthew, where Jesus tells a parable about forgiveness using slave and owner metaphor, lands awkwardly on our ears.

Sometimes I imagine if I were a public relations manager for Jesus—and I think it’s important for all of us to think about the ways in which we are and are not Jesus’ PR people—on the one hand, “Everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34), and on the other, Jesus doesn’t need us to edit or correct him, or decide what the gospels meant to say—

but if I thought I were a public relations manager for Jesus, and I heard him say what he just said, that parable about slaves and a God who acts in spite and rage, I can imagine myself saying, “I have a couple of notes:

“First of all, I understand that slavery was a fundamentally different phenomenon in your context than the subhuman atrocity as we know it—in your story, a slave being in a position to have loaned another slave 100 days’ wages makes that fairly clear—but as far as telling this parable just like this...maybe not right now?”

“And the thing at the end there about the unforgiving slave being sent to prison and tortured, and how you said that’s what God would do to people—your people, specifically—who fail to forgive... Did you mean it exactly that way? Because if you didn’t mean it I wish you wouldn’t have said it, and if you do mean it, I *really* wish you hadn’t said it, because it sounded like you just said God is a slave owner who reacts in raw anger with violent and retributive results against people.

“Such as errant slaves, who fail or even just forget to forgive other errant slaves, being handed over to be tortured as the result of God’s uncontrollable rage.

“And I frankly don’t believe that God addresses the human failure to forgive by being even less forgiving, enforcing it with the overwhelming might of a great power and the willing participation of committed torturers and jailers. I find it hard to believe because I have seen and experienced God’s grace, love, and mercy as well as God’s justice.

“Aren’t you afraid, Jesus, that this is not going to be a great news cycle for us?”

At which point, I imagine Jesus may or may not look at me for a few seconds, and then get up and go with his entourage to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan, with large crowds following him, and there, he would cure them. Which is exactly what happens next in Matthew’s gospel.

Leaving me to think, “Well, I’ll figure it out later and maybe ask him again what he meant, but in the meantime, obviously it’s hugely important to God that I start participating on both sides of forgiveness, and encouraging others to do the same. Like, it’s urgent, and the time is now, and according to Jesus, it’s hard to imagine anything being more crucial to who we are and who God means for us to be.

Built into a sheer mountainside in northern Italy is a church called the Sanctuary of Madonna della Corona. In the early 1500s it was a hermitage, and for centuries it was only accessible by foot up a long walkway on the side of the mountain.

It is breathtakingly steep; it appears to be literally a part of the mountainside itself. To look out its windows is to see a vast panorama of creation; to look directly down from a window would be the kind of thing I have nightmares about.

But even back when the generations who could have known Jesus of Nazareth personally were forming the very foundations of his Church, Paul knew that it was always perched on a precipice.

And yet even in those early days, the gathering of disciples into the one Church inspired awe and wonder, and announced by its very existence that in God and in each other, we have been given the greatest gifts imaginable.

Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

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ⁱ Linda Kranz, *Through My Eyes: A Journal for Teens* (Flagstaff, AZ: Rising Moon, 1998)

ⁱⁱ Miller Williams, "Compassion," in *Williams, Some Jazz a While* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 254

ⁱⁱⁱ David Brooks, "When a Heart Is Empty" *NYT*, Sept. 10, 2020

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/10/opinion/trump-coronavirus-military-comments.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

^{iv} Seth Godin, "The honest mistake vs. the intentional act." *Seth's Blog*, September 11, 2020