



YEAR 1—The God of Life: A Story of God's Redeeming Shalom

Module 4—Coming Alive by Being Human: Jesus Stories on What it Means to Be Human and Fully Alive

Lesson 4—Matthew 18

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

(A theological and biblical reflection on today's Scripture passage.)

GOD'S STORY

If we tried, we could all find a common thread to the variety of metaphors, parables and messages Jesus tells in Matthew 18. Despite all the ideas we might develop, the real unity of these images lies in the one who offers them. How Jesus is calling his disciples—and us—in this story only makes sense as we understand the overarching nature of God's story. This is a relational passage. God's vision for life in the way of Jesus is aimed at the reestablishment of the richness of life in relationships.

God has not given up on this vision of life for humanity and creation. Jesus has pursued us in our lostness, just the like the shepherd going after the one lost sheep, in order to bring us back into a relationship of wholeness and life. The love of God for God's creation is a pursuing love, and God doesn't wait for us to make the first move in order for that relationship to be reestablished. God's mission is God's priority and he has pursued us in Jesus Christ in order that we might be participants in his life-giving mission in the world. The relational intimacy of *shalom* that God has intended from the beginning of God's story in creation lies at the heart of this passage.

God's forgiveness is not meant simply as a way to get to heaven. Sin is relational. It drives us away from one another and God, destroying the life-giving context of community in which we are created to live. In our sin we set ourselves against God, and began to live for ourselves. God's forgiveness of us in Jesus Christ, therefore, has a relational dimension as well. In forgiving us of our sin God is drawing us back into the fullness of life he always intended for us. God's forgiveness frees us to be who he created us to be in community with others in and through the Spirit of Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus can say that when we gather in his name as community, Jesus is there with us.

OUR STORY

Grasping the way in which this passage is immensely relational helps us understand why and how this is also our story. God has created us to be fully human in relationship with him, and we know this way of life by following Jesus. Our sin has turned us in on ourselves, pushing us away from life-giving relationship with God and others. Our own restoration to life starts when we recognize God's forgiveness of us in Jesus as the only way to true life. Beginning to live in this way starts first with repentance.

Repentance is turning away from our sin, or that which cuts us off from God. This is the point Jesus is trying to make when he hyperbolically suggests that if our hands or feet causes us to sin, we cut them off. We are not to literally dismember ourselves. Jesus is calling us to once again turn away from anything and everything that keeps us from joining our life with his and in that discovering the fullness of life. This process of turning away from ourselves and what we think brings us life in repentance seems painful, and it often can be. Yet we are being invited to turn away from ourselves and towards God's gracious forgiveness offered to us in Jesus

Christ. Jesus is offering us participation in the lavishness of God's forgiving grace. God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ is meant to compel us to become people turned outward again toward others, and in that discover the fullness of life in relationship with others. Our practice of forgiveness becomes a reflection of God's forgiveness of us, and that becomes a way of life for us to become more fully alive.

This is why Jesus instructs Peter that as his followers they are called to forgive seventy times seven times (18:22). Jesus is actually suggesting that we are to be unlimited in our forgiveness, precisely because God has been so lavishly graceful in his forgiveness of us. In other words, we are to be the kind of people who are looking for places to be forgiving, because in practicing the art of forgiveness we are actually living into our true humanity. Forgiveness turns us toward one another in reconciliation and restores relationship in which we recognize our need for one another in community. In the community of Jesus Christ, where God's forgiveness is effervescent, we become fully alive by practicing the way of Jesus together.

OTHERS' STORY

Since we are created to exist in loving, mutually life-giving relationships with others we learn to live in the fullness of life by participating in communities marked by the kind of forgiveness envisioned by this passage. Forgiveness leads us more deeply into life with others because we are forced to confront, together, the ways in which our lives do not match up with God's vision of *shalom* being made real through discipleship to Jesus. Practicing forgiveness that opens our lives to others does not guarantee that life in community with others will be easy. In fact, as we look for ways to both seek and offer forgiveness in life with others, there is more potential for misunderstanding, conflict and hurt. Living vulnerably and open with one another in community is necessary to become the kind of forgiving community Jesus calls us to be together, yet also exceptionally challenging. Community will let us down. Others will hurt us, and we will hurt others.

Jesus gives very clear instructions about how to set about seeking the restoration of *shalom* with others in our community when we have been hurt or sinned against. Simply put, we go to them. We, like God has done in Jesus, pursue them in order to reestablish a relationship that is life-giving for them and for us. If this does not work, then we are to take others with us. The point in bringing others into the process of repentance and restoration is not to gang up on the other person. Instead, they are there to make sure that the whole story is heard and together everyone seeks the goodness of life together again. If this doesn't bring about restoration, then Jesus calls us to involve the whole community. The lack of restoration and repentance is a threat to the entire community, so this is the chance to practice discipline and forgiveness together. If even this doesn't work, then we are told to treat them as we would a "pagan or a tax collector" (18:17). In other words, by their unwillingness to repent and seek forgiveness and restoration they are showing themselves to be outside of God's community being called together in the name of Jesus Christ.

This confrontation is rooted in *shalom*. Every step that seems to ratchet up the process is not intended to embarrass or shame, but to graciously extend ourselves more fully into relationship with that person. We are actually exposing ourselves to more potential hurt. Even the final step in the process is intended to restore. In seeing them as someone who is unrepentant and living outside of God's way of life in community with others, we see them as an object of God's mission. This person is now to be viewed as someone who needs the lavishness of God's grace to transform their life and so we continue to hold out our forgiveness in the hopes that they will be restored to the fullness of life with us and others. We continue to pursue restoration with them in the hope that they will repent and discover life with others. The relational dynamic that we have said is at the heart of this passage applies especially now. Pointing out the sin of others in community is not meant to shame them into doing what we want. Rather, it is meant to restore them to life in the community and become a moment for us to practice the same lavish forgiveness that God has shown us in Jesus Christ.

THE WORLD'S STORY

Our world has moments when we see God's restoration breaking in around us. We see life being restored in moments when relationships are mended and people, whether they recognize it or not, are partly living into the *shalom* of life together as God intended. Yet, even as these moments do occur, there are many ways in which the world is still marked by other stories of how to become fully human and alive that seem to turn people in on themselves, and thus suck the life out of them.

The world will continue to supply stories about how to become fully alive. Yet, what the world needs to see is an alternative community that lives from a center in Jesus Christ, where forgiveness and grace are the lynchpin of their life together. The world needs the church to hold out a way of life where the restoration of true, open, and vulnerably dependent relationships is the norm. As the church does this it becomes part of God's life-giving mission for the world by bearing witness to Jesus Christ, who has restored us by becoming open and vulnerable to death in our place, in order to bring us back into the fullness of life with God.

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