

Kingdom (Part 6) The Kingdom of Heaven is Like

3/16/2025

In 1974 the Hungarian sculptor and professor of architecture Ernő Rubik created a 3D puzzle. I think most of us are familiar with a Rubik's Cube. Some of you may have tried to solve one. And some may even have succeeded at it. I personally have tried but have never succeeded. I know there must be a key, method or sequence for solving it, but I don't know what it is. Therefore I just seem to be endlessly moving the pieces around without ever getting anywhere. Sometimes I feel like I am getting close, but then there is that one piece that I just can't get right. For many God's Word, including the parables, are somewhat like a Rubik's Cube.

When it comes to understanding the parables of Jesus there are two main schools of thought in solving their meaning.

1. That all the parables stand alone unto themselves.
2. There is a thread, key, or method of learning in them which ties them together and once you understand what that is you can then understand them. Kind of like knowing the key to a Rubik's Cube enables you to solve it.

Recently we have been looking at parables from chapter 13 of Matthew's account. Here is a brief summary of that chapter - It begins with Jesus telling a parable. Then Jesus tells them the meaning of that parable. This is followed by his disciples asking - "*Why do you speak to the people in parables?*". To which Jesus gives a detailed answer. Then we have more parables by Jesus one of which the disciples can't decipher and have to ask Jesus for an explanation. Then more parables followed by Jesus asking his disciples - "*Have you understood all these things?*" And his disciples answer "yes".

It appears Jesus' disciples have learned the key to understanding these parables.

This morning we will be looking at another of the parables spoken by Jesus. This one is often referred to as the parable of the unforgiving/unmerciful servant. And we might think this parable to be about forgiving others. Which it is. But there is more here than first meets the eye. This morning we will be looking at this parable from within the context of which it appears in Scripture. This will encompass Matthew 17:24-18-35.

Beginning in Matthew 17:24 we find Jesus and His disciples arriving at the city of Capernaum. There are a number of subjects discussed between verses 17:24 and verse 18:23 where the parable of the unforgiving servant begins. I believe all of the subjects leading up to this parable can add to our understanding of the parable itself.

For consideration of what is going on in the opening scene of Matthew 17:24-27 let us turn to Exodus 30:11-13 -

*"And Jehovah spake unto Moses, saying, When thou takes the sum of the children of Israel, according to those that are numbered of them, then shall they give every man **a ransom for his soul unto Jehovah**, when thou numberest them; that there be no plague among them. This they shall give, every one that passeth over unto them that are numbered, **half a shekel** of the sanctuary; (the shekel is twenty gerahs) half a shekel for an offering to Jehovah.*

Note the reason for this offering - **a ransom for his soul unto Jehovah.**

The opening Scene (1) - Matthew 17:24-27 - The Temple Tax

*“And when they came to Capernaum, they that received the **half-shekel** came to Peter, and said, Doth not your teacher pay the **half-shekel**? He saith, Yea. And when he came into the house, Jesus spake first to him, saying, What thinkest thou, Simon? the kings of the earth, from whom do they toll or tribute? From their sons, or from strangers? And when he said, from strangers, Jesus said unto him, Therefore the sons are free. But lest we cause them to **stumble**, go thou to the sea, and cast a hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up: and when thou hast opened its mouth, thou shall find a shekel: that take and give unto them for me and thee.*

Here we see a question about paying the temple tax. To which Peter gives an answer. Then Jesus begins to ask Peter questions. Taxes and Tribute in Roman and Greek societies were paid by the people. But the king, his family and at times some high ranking officials were exempt. Thus the sons of the king were exempt (free). Remembering why this temple tax was being paid as per the Command in Exodus we see Jesus the king and his disciples, the sons, should be free of paying this tax. We now know our souls have been ransomed (paid for) by The Son of God on The Cross. But Jesus says *lest we cause them to **stumble*** pay it Peter.

A common belief among Jews in the past was that if one caught a fish with a jewel or jewels in its mouth or stomach that this was a sign or blessing from God. Peter was a fisherman! So Jesus says go catch a fish with a hook, and the first one you catch will have what is needed within it. What do you think Peter thought when he opened the mouth of that fish?

Scene 2 - Matthew 18:1-6 - The Greatest in The Kingdom

*“In that hour came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. And he called to him a little child, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of Heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. And whosoever shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me: But whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to **stumble**, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea.”*

We recognize Jesus as king and that we are God's children. And as little children believe their earthly fathers we should do in kind with our Heavenly Father. Thus Jesus tells his disciples this makes one great in the kingdom of God. As we are told in Scripture Jesus always does the Will of His Father in Heaven! Thus we should likewise be as little children before God and receive God's other little children not causing them to stumble. Then Jesus adds a warning about being cast into the sea. Capernaum was a city situated on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and at least 4 of the 12 disciples of Jesus were fishermen. The fear of drowning would have been a constant concern to them, and many are the stories and legends that accompany this fear. Jesus tells them it would be better to die by drowning than causing one of His little children to stumble.

The Romans had a punishment for someone who killed a parent or family member. This act was seen in their society as being one of the most heinous of crimes one could commit. Punishment for this crime was called 'Poena Cullei' or the "penalty of the sack." It involved having the individual stripped naked followed by having them crawl on all four like an animal through the streets while being beaten by the public. Then they were placed in a sack together with a variety of animals such as live snakes, wild pigs, wild dogs, and roosters. The sack was then sown shut and thrown into the river or sea where all within would drown. Jesus said it would be better for you, more profitable, to have a large milestone tied around your neck and thrown into the sea than to cause one of God's little children to **stumble**. Stumbling was often equated with sinning.

Scene 3 - Matthew 18:7-11 - Woe to the world

*Woe unto the world because of occasions of **stumbling!** For it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh! And if thy hand or thy foot causeth thee to **stumble**, cut it off, and cast it from thee: it is good for thee to enter into life maimed or halt, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into the hell of fire. And if thine eye causeth thee to **stumble**, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is good for thee to enter life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into the hell of fire. See that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, that in Heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in Heaven.”*

Here sin and stumbling now involves not just others but also oneself. It came to be believed by many Jews that one would enter final judgement with the physical body one had on earth, be it missing limbs or crippled. And that the body and soul would both be redeemed or returned to their complete or whole state once in Heaven. Perhaps this is why Jesus referred to cutting off or out that body part if it causes you to stumble (sin).

Likewise many believed angels held various positions in Heaven. The belief was that the higher the level of angel the closer the angel was to God. And the closest ones could see ‘behold’ the glory of God’s face. Thus the image here is that the highest of angels, those closest to God, watch over these little ones.

Therefore we better not cause any of these little ones to stumble, which would include ourselves if indeed we also are the children of God.

Thus far we have 3 scenes before us. Here we find that number 3 again. In Rabbinical writings the number 3 represented the number of times one should forgive another. Note that in all 3 accounts thus far ‘stumbling’ is at the center of the discussion.

Scene 4 - Matthew 18:12-14 Sheep going astray

*“How think ye? If any man have a hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and go unto the mountains, and seek that which goeth astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth over it more than the ninety and nine which have not gone astray. Even so it is not the Will of your Father who is in Heaven, **that one of these little ones should perish.**”*

Here we have ‘those little ones’ being spoken of again. Here going astray equates to perishing. We are not told how the little lamb might perish, but rather that it will perish if it wanders away and is not found by the shepherd. As said in 2nd Peter 3:9 *“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness: but is longsuffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”*

And - *“We all like sheep have gone astray, and he has laid on him the iniquity of us all...”*
(Isaiah 53:6)

We see the end result of going astray. A term often used to describe walking away from God. We will become lost and perish if we do so, which is not the Will of the Father in Heaven. And not doing the Will of the Heavenly Father (God) is sin, which equates to stumbling.

Scene 5 - Matthew 18:15-20 Forgiveness, Mercy, Punishment (Judgement)

In some translations the following passages are separated physically from each other perhaps suggesting they stand alone or on their own. I will list (break then down as such). BUT I believe they actually go together and form a cohesive thought.

First we must consider the subject at hand here is the accusation of one brother or sister sinning against another. Second that all individuals involved in this scene, including Jesus himself, are under the Levitical Law at this time. Thus we must consider these statements from this perspective when viewing the actions called for here. That is using God's system of justice as described under the Levitical law. But also note 'The **church**' is being spoken of here.

But before we look at these verses let us as Christians, those under the law of Christ, consider this idea of 'God's system of justice'. Let us consider the guidelines as described in 1st Corinthians 6:1-7 -

"If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord's people? Or do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother takes another to court—and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already."

So how should one handle the following situation we are about to read?

Matthew 18:15-17

*"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, **tell it to the church**; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector."*

This passage is often cited as an example of how to conduct discipline within the church. And while I certainly agree with this perspective, it is also in keeping with the principles found in the Levitical law. The comparisons of which are many and worth a much deeper study than time allows here this morning. But for us as Christians to understand the principles behind the words of Jesus spoken here there are a few things for us to consider from the Levitical law. Or that which Jesus and his disciples had to work with at that point in time.

First of all resolving the disputes among brothers is the primary concern. The solution is first sought by a one on one approach. If that fails you need witnesses to proceed. Note witnesses not a witness (singular) for it to go beyond one on one or person to person. Then if it still can't be resolved you take your brother before God's people for a decision. Keeping in mind these next words -

Matthew 18:18

"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The Greek words used here for 'bind' and 'loose' are both used in a number of ways within Scripture. Here they are being used in a legal sense. Of physically binding and unbinding

someone convicted of a crime. Thus the judgements we make concerning one another and how we handle the situation of our brother or sister sinning against us should be carefully considered. As in binding and loosing under proper application of the law. Again God's law not the worlds version of law.

Consider these words from what we call the Lord's Prayer - *"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, **your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**"*

Then Jesus continues with these words in **Matthew 18:19-20**

*"**Again**, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."* How do we ask for things from God? We pray! Keep this in mind as we proceed.

Here we see the word translated as '**again**' (Greek 'Palin' meaning back, backwards again, further, on the other hand again, once more.)

This word 'again' links this passage with what has already been said (the previous verse). Consider what Scripture has to say about witnesses and the number of witnesses necessary under Levitical Law for bringing accusations against someone. If we properly conduct ourselves according to the law of Christ then Christ will be with us in our decisions. Also consider that under Levitical law the one who first raised an accusation of wrong doing against another was also the first one to enact judgment on that person should that person be found guilty by the group. But the accusing person was also to be the first to forgive if that person was found to be innocent.

Let him without sin cast the first stone!

Now The Parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35)

*"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him **ten thousand bags of gold** was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

Having spent a little time this morning looking at the words of Jesus leading up to this parable in Matthew 18 perhaps we are better able to understand the parable itself.

Understanding things like the degree of forgiveness and mercy shown to us by God, verses that which we extend to others.

In this parable an amount of money is used to represent the amount of forgiveness expected or required. We see this vast gap between what God our Father is willing to forgive and what we are willing to forgive concerning our own brothers and sisters in Christ. That is those in this household of God who may sin against us. Consider the following -

A practice common throughout history was for the winner in war to exact tribute from their defeated enemy. The amount of tribute was often set so high that the losing party would never be able to get out of debt. Rome exacted tribute of this type on Carthage after defeating them in battle twice. The second time they charged Carthage 10,000 talents. A talent was a specific weight of a precious metal, usually silver or gold, and therefore of enormous value. Thus an enormous price was to be paid. And history tells us Carthage never did recover.

If we do not forgive our brothers and sisters this may cause them to stumble and never recover.

What God asks of us is so small compared to the price Jesus paid for our sins.

We sing a song about a debt he (Jesus) paid to ransom us from sin.

*He paid the debt he did not own, I own the debt I could not pay
I needed someone to wash my sins away
And now I sing a brand new song, "Amazing grace"
Christ Jesus paid the debt I could never pay
He paid the debt at Calvary
He cleansed my soul he set me free
I'm glad that Jesus did all my sins erase
I now can sing a brand new song, "Amazing grace"
Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay
One day he's coming for me to live with him eternally
Won't it be glory to see him on that day?
I then will sing a brand new song, "Amazing Grace"
Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay*

We often hear of a call for us to count our blessings. But do we ever here of a calling for us to count our sins! Then why are we tempted to do so for others? Oh! he or she did this or that. But there is a better way isn't there. God's Word tells us how.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1st John 1:9)

Are we not called to confess our sins one to another?

In closing let us turn to Malachi chapter 6 where Israel asks - what do you want from us God? His answer - *"He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but **to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?**"*

For sure this parable is about forgiveness, but it is also about acting justly by showing our love for one another and God by showing mercy towards others. And not just showing mercy but loving mercy as we walk humbly with our God.