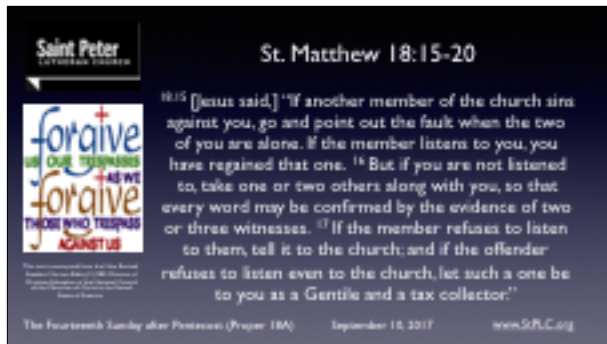




I have a theory: for human beings, law is easier than gospel;
 Rules are easier than grace.
 As Lutherans, we have been profoundly shaped by grace.
 Grace is a word we use to refer to a gift that is undeserved, and
 is freely given.
 When we talk about the forgiveness that is ours in Christ, we
 often use this word.
 We describe God as gracious because we know that we don't
 deserve God's forgiveness.
 We describe God as gracious because God forgives us not as a
 reward, but as a gift.
 And honestly, this makes all the difference in the world.
 As Lutherans, we have been profoundly shaped by grace.



But as human beings, it is hard to stay focused on this.
 By our nature, we tend towards meeting expectations and
 fulfilling responsibilities.
 Our whole lives are measured in this way.
 Students are graded from A to F on their assignments.
 Workers receive a satisfactory or unsatisfactory annual
 evaluation.
 Athletes are measured by inches and seconds.
 Sales clerks are evaluated against goals and quotas.
 Politicians live and die by fund raising totals and vote counts.
 Even congregations fall to this, don't they?
 Average worship attendance; annual budget growth; staff and
 and program increases.
 We tend towards meeting expectations and fulfilling
 responsibilities.
 Our whole lives are measured in this way.



3

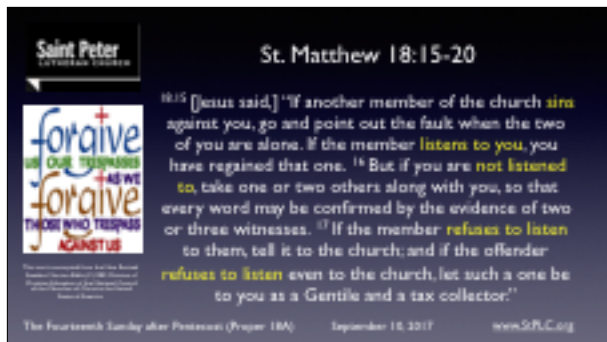
With this in mind, let's take a look at today's Gospel lesson and ask:

Is this about grace?

Is it an undeserved gift freely given to us by God?

Or is it about meeting expectations; fulfilling responsibilities?

I want to argue that as humans, we are predisposed to think of this as having to do with expectations and responsibilities. Everybody in a community has expectations and responsibilities, right?



4

So if someone sins and won't listen, and won't listen, and finally refuses to listen...

Then we have a thoughtful, 3-step process to get rid of them.

If I don't like what you've done to me, I confront you.

If that doesn't work, two or three of us gang up on you.

If that doesn't work, the whole church hears about your offense.

And if you don't respond correctly, you're gone.

What could be simpler?

Expectations and responsibilities.

Accountability.

There are those who think this is what today's text is all about.

In fact, our church has thought this in the past.

You'll see a form of Matthew 18 in our Constitution.

5

Saint Peter
CATHOLIC CHURCH

St. Matthew 18:15-20

15 [Jesus said,] "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

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But what if we look at this passage from another point of view?
What if we see, in verse 15 the actual purpose for this teaching?

6

Saint Peter
CATHOLIC CHURCH

St. Matthew 18:15-20

15 [Jesus said,] "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. **If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.** 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

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"If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."
Here is the purpose of starting this process in the first place,
right?

Not to beat them up, or prevail over them.
But to become reconciled with them.

And if it doesn't work, Jesus commands his followers to try at
least two more times before giving up on the effort.
It may very well be that Jesus is far less interested in a detailed
procedure to drive people out of the church.
And far more interested in a community that is grounded in the
heart of the Gospel.

Where grace and forgiveness are the ultimate goal.

7

Saint Peter
EPISTOLAR LECTURE

You Have Regained That One

Leading Up to Today's Text:
A Shepherd leaves 99 sheep
to save the one that is lost. [18:10-14]

Following Today's Text:
Followers of Jesus are commanded
to forgive 70 X 7 times. [18:21-22]
And an Unforgiving Servant. [18:23-35]

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All you have to do is nose around chapter 18 a bit,
and you'll see this is what Jesus is up to.
In the passage before today's text a shepherd leaves 99 sheep
alone in the wilderness to seek the one who has become lost.
In the passage following today's text, Jesus commands his
followers to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven
times.

And then he tells a story about a servant who was forgiven a vast
amount, but refuses to forgive a fellow servant who owed a
much smaller amount.

Restoring the lost.

Forgiving a fellow church member.

Forgiveness received transforming us into agents of forgiveness.
It's the heart of today's Gospel, and the heart of Jesus' ministry.

The question is: is it at the heart of our lives as well?

8

Saint Peter
EPISTOLAR LECTURE

You Have Regained That One

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We live in unforgiving times.

You've seen the signs:

Road rage. Racial tensions.

Political divides. Culture battles.

Conflicts at work, in the neighborhood, at home.

Sometimes even here in church!

We're encouraged to stand up for ourselves.

Not to let others take advantage of us.

Not to give an inch when we feel like we're being wronged.

Retaliate, if necessary. Use your strength.

Don't be a pushover.

Stand your ground.

All of these are common responses today.

9



But as Tevya said in “Fiddler on the Roof,”
To a villager who declared, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a
tooth!”

“Very good. That way the whole world will be blind and
toothless.”

We live in unforgiving times.

But this is nothing new.

Truth is: we live in an unforgiving world.

A world that desperately needs another vision for what it means
to live in community.

A world that desperately needs what Jesus offers to us this day.

A vision for what it looks like to live with grace and forgiveness
at the center of who we are and what we do.

And you and I are called to live this out together as a sign of
what God can do.

10



So what does this look like?

A community meeting at the foot of the cross, in all of its
brokenness.

A community where the central purpose is to regain
relationships and friendships that have become damaged.
A community where individuals go the extra mile; leave the
ninety-nine to seek the one; forgive seventy times seven; in
order that at the very center of who we are we might be well.

This isn't easy work, but it is Gospel work.

To be part of a community with this ethic at its core is a
powerful experience.

A tremendous witness to Christ, who continues to live among us.

Bringing grace and forgiveness and healing and hope
to our unforgiving world.




By our nature, we may tend towards meeting expectations and fulfilling responsibilities.
 Our whole lives are measured in this way.
 But by our faith, we are called to live lives of grace and forgiveness.
 Forgiving not because the other deserves it.
 But forgiving because that's who we are.
 A forgiven people, committed to share this gift with the world.




I hope you'll spend some time thinking about this in days to come.
 Imagining what it would be like to live in a community that cares so much about each other,
 That when divisions arise, and relationships are tested, we find ourselves deeply committed to share with each other what Christ first shared with us.
 A forgiveness that knows no bounds.
 One we practice day-in and day-out, as a way of living in this world as a reflection of our Christ.

As you leave today, our hosts have a 7-day devotional for you. Let's spend the next couple of days reflecting on this morning, and preparing ourselves for next Sunday.

13



The Last Word



Let us not listen to those who think we ought to be angry with our enemies, and who believe this to be great and manly. Nothing is so praiseworthy, nothing so clearly shows a great and noble soul, as clemency and readiness to forgive.

[Marcus Tullius Cicero]


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Cicero said it well.


Let us not listen to those who think we ought to be angry with our enemies, and who believe this to be great and manly. Nothing is so praiseworthy, nothing so clearly shows a great and noble soul, as clemency and readiness to forgive.

May the strength of our forgiveness be a witness to the world of the depth of our faith.
It is what it looks like to be a people of God.

14



Hymn of the Day



Please stand as we sing today's Hymn of the Day.

1st Service: God, When Human Bonds Are Broken (page #18)

2nd Service: Bind Us Together (page #28)

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Please stand with us as we sing today's Hymn of the Day.

1st Service: God, When Human Bonds Are Broken (page #18)
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St. Matthew 18:15-20



¶ 15 "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¶ 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¶ 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¶ 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. ¶ 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ¶ 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

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18.15 “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. 16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 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. 19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”