

PREGO EXTRA

Background notes
for the Gospels of
SEPTEMBER 2011
Year A



23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Matthew 18:15-20

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The 18th Chapter of Matthew's gospel is often called "The Sermon on the Church". It mainly concerns teachings about how to resolve conflicts between individuals and between people and their Christian community in the spirit of Christ. Verses 15 to 35 are only to be found in Matthew's gospel.

This passage is framed with 2 parables emphasizing mercy, forgiveness and restoring to the fold the one who was lost: the parable of the lost sheep and that of the unforgiving debtor.

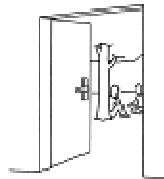
This week's passage can be divided into three sections:

1. Resolving conflict

In a society where saving face and not having one's honour publicly sullied was extremely important, Jesus proposes conflict resolution in 3 steps:

* *Speak to your brother alone.*

The term brother here indicates a close relation, a friend, someone from the close-knit community of Christians. Matthew has already mentioned a similar one to one approach to disputes earlier on (Matthew 5: 23-24)



* *Take two or three witnesses with you.*

Matthew who writes for a Jewish community refers here to the instructions given in Deuteronomy 19:15. The evidence of 2 witnesses is required to sustain the charge against someone.

* *Report the conflict to the whole community.*

At the time of Matthew these communities of believers would be quite small, no more than 20-30 people.

The reluctant son who changed his mind.

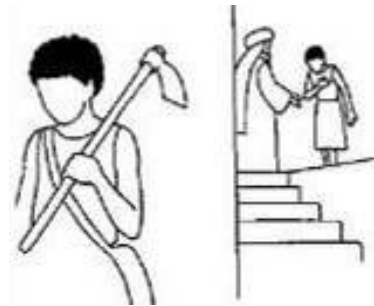
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The first son flatly refused to do his father's will and later, on reflection, obeyed his father by carrying out his wishes to work in the vineyard.

In Matthew's gospel, the vineyard is often an image representing Israel, so "working in the vineyard" can be equated to preparing for the coming of the Kingdom.

Jesus compares this son to the 'tax collectors and prostitutes' of the time. They represent the class of people who at one point in their lives make no pretence of obeying God's will, but later are able to accept the teachings of Jesus, have a change of heart and amend their way of life.

The son who was unable to put his words into action.



The second son immediately said that he would do what the Father asked of him and then, for reasons we do not know, decided against it. Jesus is clearly comparing this son to the chief priests and the elders.

These Jewish leaders and their ancestors had a long tradition of following God's law to the letter. However they refused to accept John the Baptist's '*pattern of true righteousness*' — i.e. doing God's will—and to hear the teachings of Jesus which disturbed their way of life. Instead they seek to question his authority. (Matthew 21: 23)

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Matthew 18: 21-35

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We continue Matthew's 'Sermon on the Church'. The passage starts with Peter's question to Jesus on forgiveness.



Lord, how often must I forgive my brother...?

When Peter asked his question he would have thought that to forgive someone as many as seven times was generous; seven was seen as a symbol of completeness. Indeed the Rabbis of the time taught that to forgive three times was sufficient. The biblical proof for this was taken from the opening chapters of the book of the Prophet Amos in the Old Testament.

'Seventy seven times seven.'



Jesus replies to Peter, also using the symbolism of numbers, indicating that forgiveness must be without limit. He multiplies Peter's seven, a symbol of completeness, by ten, a number seen as a symbol of infinity.

As a result many farm labourers, small tenants and artisans had to look for work on a daily basis from the town square or market place, the "agora". The grape industry was the most common source of employment. For Matthew's Jewish readers, the vineyard is also an important symbol of the People of God in need (Cf Isaiah 5 and Jeremiah 12:10, Psalm 80)

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Daybreak and the eleventh hour.

In Jesus' time, the hours were counted from dawn. So daybreak would be the first hour, about 6.00, the third hour would be 9.00, the eleventh hour 17.00.

One denarius a day, a fair wage

This sum was enough to keep a family for a day or two. By law hired workers had to be paid every evening so that they could provide for their families. Jews were familiar with this since the rules for paying labourers figured in the book of Deuteronomy (24: 14-15)

Pay the workers starting with the last arrivals

This is significant for the development of the parable. It raises expectations amongst the long standing labourers: they assume they are going to get more. It also refers to the pivotal phrase at the beginning and end of the parable.



Why be envious because I am generous

Matthew writes at a critical time for the 1st century church. The communities are composed of original Jewish converts, present from the first hour and newer Gentile converts who had joined the communities at the eleventh hour and yet were given the same treatment and recognition. There was general discontent and grumbling.

The parable shows that all are equal in God's eye and that the gift of his grace is not the result of strict "accountancy", but of his love for all.

Parable of the vineyard labourers

Chapters 19 and 20 of Matthew's gospel recount the 80 miles journey between Galilee and Jerusalem.

We encounter Jesus the teacher, more often than Jesus the miracle worker.

Although Matthew's gospel normally follow Mark's gospel quite closely, this parable is unique to Matthew.

The parable of the vineyard labourers which we read today comes immediately after the story of the rich young man.

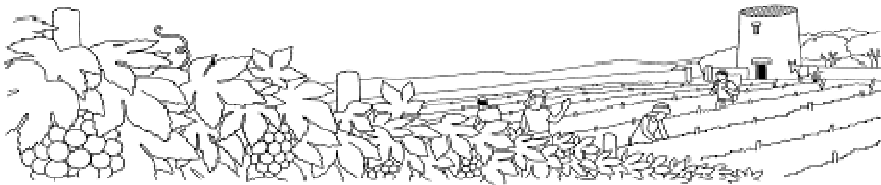
The disciples, who have left everything to follow Jesus are disconcerted and he is comforting them.

His last sentence "many who are first will be last, and the last, first" mirrors the last sentence of the parable "The last will be first and the first, last".

A parable

Can be described as a story drawn from everyday life with an unexpected twist, thus leaving some doubt in the audience's mind in order to stimulate reflection.

In this parable, there are many gaps in the story which are left to our imagination: why were so many extra workers needed, why had the workers hired last not been chosen earlier on etc

**The landowner hires workers for his vineyard**

The disciples and indeed Matthew's audience will have been very familiar with landowners, vineyards, hired labourers.

As a result of the reorganisation of Palestine by the Roman General Pompey the Great (63BC), large sections of the population had been dispossessed of their land.

Herod the Great also expropriated large areas. He gave the land to officials in his court.

The real meaning of forgiveness.

Jesus teaches the people that their attitude towards forgiveness is at fault, with a parable that forms one of the sternest and most challenging passages in the Gospels. The parable of the unforgiving debtor has been referred to as a dramatisation of the fifth beatitude:

Happy the merciful:

they shall have mercy shown them (Mt. 5:7)

The debt that could never be repaid.

One of the most important points in the story is the significant contrast between the two debts. The first servant owed his master 10,000 talents, a talent being the equivalent of 15 years wages. This huge debt was more than the total budget of an ordinary province. The total revenue of the province which contained Idumaea, Judaea and Samaria was only 600 talents, the total revenue of a wealthy province like Galilee was only 300 talents.

This first servant was himself owed 100 denarii, a denarius being a day's wage, a fraction of the debt which had caused him to beg for mercy.

'Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow servant just as I had pity on you?'

The King was an Oriental despot. To take a man's family in lieu of his debt was common practice, especially among the pagans. Tyrants, particularly in the Orient, made use of torture to extract confessions or to force the victim's family into paying the debt.



Regardless of this we see that the King, in his pity for the servant cancels the entire debt and expects the forgiven one to do the same.