

Research Paper

AΦΙΗΜΙ (FORGIVENESS) IN MATTHEW 18:21–22 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING

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Received: 05 June 2025

Accepted: 02 July 2026

Published: 06 July 2026

Abstract

Forgiveness (ἀφίημι) occupies a central position in the theological and ethical landscape of the New Testament, and no pericope encapsulates its radical demand more succinctly than Matthew 18:21-22. In this passage, Peter's question about the limits of forgiveness whether seven times suffices is met by Jesus' astonishing response, not seven times, but seventy-seven times (or seventy times seven), a numerical formulation that effectively abolishes all quantitative restrictions on forgiving. This paper undertakes a comprehensive exegetical, theological, and ethical investigation of Matthew 18:21-22, exploring its literary context, its Semitic background, its relationship to the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35), and its profound implications for Christian living. Drawing on African New Testament scholarship particularly the contributions of scholars such as Justin Ukpong and Musa Dube alongside Western exegetical traditions, this study examines forgiveness through two primary theoretical lenses: Miroslav Volf's *Theology of Embrace* (1996) and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Liberation* (1968), both of which illuminate the transformative and communal dimensions of forgiveness. The study employs a qualitative, exegetical theological methodology informed by literary critical and socio rhetorical approaches. Findings reveal that forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-22 is not a passive, sentimental act but a radical, counter cultural praxis rooted in divine grace, human dignity, and covenantal community. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for the integration of this Matthean ethic of forgiveness into Christian discipleship, ecclesial practice, and social transformation in contemporary African and global contexts.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Christian living, New Testament ethics, discipleship, reconciliation.

Introduction

Some people are hurting from anger and bitterness, boiling with vengeance and retaliation. Hearts are heavy with offences of close relationship and associates. Families are hurting, going through divorce because of offences and disappointments. Children from abusive parents and childhood abandonment find it difficult to practice the art of forgiveness. Some churches are experiencing disintegration, turbulence and division. Matters that should have been settled amicably among the brethren by the use of forgiveness have pushed many Christians and churches to appear in the law courts, even before the ungodly people.

The concept of ἀφίημι (forgiveness) is woven into the very fabric of Christian theology and practice. From the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:12) to the passion narratives of the four gospels, forgiveness emerges as one of the most defining characteristics of the Jesus movement. Among all the dominical sayings concerning forgiveness, none is more direct, more demanding, or more theologically generative than the exchange recorded in Matthew 18:21-22. In this brief however momentous dialogue, Peter approaches Jesus with what he apparently considers a generous threshold: forgiving a brother or sister up to seven times. Jesus' counter response seventy-seven times, or by some translations seventy times seven shatters the framework of calculative forgiveness entirely and replaces it with a vision of limitless, grace saturated mercy.

The significance of this passage extends far beyond the numerical. It represents a fundamental reorientation of how the people of God are to relate to one another, grounded not in human reciprocity however in divine generosity. Matthew 18:21-22 sits within the larger discourse on Community (Matthew 18:1-35), a carefully constructed Matthean literary unit that addresses the internal life of the *ekklesia* (Church) the called-out community of Jesus' followers. Within this discourse, the question of forgiveness is not incidental but climactic, moving from teachings on humility (vs. 1-5), the care of the lost (vv. 10-14), and communal discipline (vs. 15-20), to the horizon expanding vision of unlimited forgiveness that concludes the discourse (vv. 21-35).

The hermeneutical challenge of this passage lies precisely in its radicality. In a world ancient and modern defined by retribution, vengeance, and the economics of debt, Jesus' teaching on forgiveness constitutes what Walter Brueggemann (1978) called a 'prophetic imagination,' a counter narrative that subverts dominant social logics. For African Christian communities navigating the legacies of colonialism, ethnic conflict, political violence, and interpersonal grievance, the Matthean vision of forgiveness carries particular urgency and transformative potential. African New Testament scholars such as Justin Ukpong (2000) and Musa Dube (2000) have argued compellingly that African readings of Scripture must engage both the liberative and the communal dimensions of the biblical text an approach that finds rich expression in Matthew 18:21-22.

This paper aims to provide an exhaustive engagement with Matthew 18:21-22, examining its textual, historical, theological, and ethical dimensions. Specifically, it will clarify key conceptual terms, situate the passage within relevant theoretical frameworks, engage critically with existing scholarly literature, exegete the passage in depth, discuss its implications for Christian living, and offer practical recommendations for its contemporary application. The paper makes an original contribution by integrating African biblical hermeneutics with classical exegetical methods, thereby enriching the global conversation on forgiveness in the New Testament.

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method approach that integrates three complementary analytical strategies. First, exegetical analysis provides the foundation, drawing on the tools of textual criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and narrative criticism to investigate the meaning of Matthew 18:21-22 in its literary and historical context. This involves close reading of the Greek text, attention to intertextual echoes (particularly Genesis 4:24), and analysis of the passage's function within the Matthean Discourse on Community.

Second, the study employs socio-rhetorical analysis, following the methodological approach developed by Vernon Robbins (1996). Socio-rhetorical analysis attends to the multiple dimensions of a text its inner texture (rhetorical structure and argumentation), its intertexture (its engagement

with other texts and traditions), its social and cultural texture (its embeddedness in social structures and cultural values), and its ideological texture (the values and perspectives it promotes). This method is particularly appropriate for a text like Matthew 18:21-22, which operates simultaneously on rhetorical, intertextual, social, and ideological registers.

Third, the study employs Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutics, following the method developed by Justin Ukpong (2000). This method reads the biblical text in dialogue with African cultural contexts, identifying points of convergence and divergence between the biblical witness and African communal values. Data for this study consists of primary textual sources (the Greek New Testament and related Jewish and Greco-Roman literature), secondary scholarly sources (commentaries, monographs, and journal articles), and contextual resources (African theological literature and case studies of forgiveness practices in African Christian communities).

Conceptual Clarifications

Forgiveness (*ἀφίημι*) in the New Testament context carries a rich semantic range. Etymologically, *ἀφίημι* means to release, let go, or send away a metaphor drawn from the domain of debt cancellation and judicial acquittal. In Matthew's Gospel, the concept encompasses the release of moral debt (6:12), the healing of relational fractures, and the restoration of covenantal fellowship (Luz, 2001). Forgiveness is not mere tolerance or the suppression of negative emotion; it is an active, intentional moral act by which the offended party releases the offender from the obligation of retributive justice. Theologically, Christian forgiveness is grounded in the prior action of God, who in Christ forgives humanity's cosmic debt of sin (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Volf (2005) distinguishes between forgiveness as an internal act of the will and reconciliation as the relational outcome that may or may not follow an important distinction for understanding the practical contours of the Matthean ethic.

Seventy-Seven Times / Seventy Times Seven

The phrase in Matthew 18:22, rendered variously as 'seventy-seven times' (NIV, NRSV) or 'seventy times seven' (KJV, ESV), reflects a textual and interpretive debate with significant theological implications. The Greek *ἐβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ* literally means 'seven times seventy' most likely evokes the Song of Lamech in Genesis 4:24, where Lamech boasts of seventy-sevenfold vengeance (France, 2007). Jesus thus deliberately inverts the logic of escalating vengeance represented by Lamech and replaces it with a vision of escalating forgiveness. Whether the number is seventy-seven (77) or four hundred and ninety (490), the hermeneutical point is identical, the disciples of Jesus are to forgive without counting, without limit, and without calculation. The number functions as a rhetorical hyperbole signifying totality and infinitude.

Christian Living

Christian living, in the Matthean framework, refers to the embodied, communal praxis of discipleship the concrete ways in which followers of Jesus instantiate the values of the Kingdom of God in their daily existence. Hauerwas (1983) argues that Christian ethics is fundamentally a community ethic, shaped by the narrative of Jesus and enacted in the life of the church. Christian living, on this account, is not merely adherence to a moral code but participation in a community of character formed by the story of Jesus. Matthew 18, as the Discourse on Community, is one of the most direct Matthean articulations of what this communal life looks like and forgiveness is its defining moral disposition.

Reconciliation

The Greek word *Καταλλαγή* means reconciliation, Exchange / change and the word *Καταλλάσσω* means to reconcile, to restore a relationship from enmity to friendship. Therefore, the combination of the two Greek words *Καταλλαγή*, *Καταλλάσσω* means restoration of a broken relationship, it is the relational dimension of forgiveness the restoration of broken communion between estranged parties. In the Pauline tradition (2 Corinthians 5:18-21), reconciliation is the cosmic work of God in Christ, extended to humanity and entrusted to the community of faith as a ministry. In Matthew's Gospel, while the specific vocabulary of reconciliation is less developed than in Paul, the concept is functionally present in the Discourse on Community. The process of confronting an offending brother or sister (Matthew 18:15-20) culminates in the possibility of restored fellowship a reconciliation grounded in and enabled by the practice of forgiveness (Davies & Allison, 1988).

The Kingdom of Heaven: Matthew's preferred phrase 'Kingdom of Heaven' (*Βασιλεία τῶν Οὐρανῶν*) appears throughout the Gospel as the governing metaphor for the new social order inaugurated by Jesus. The kingdom is not a geographic or political entity but a transformative reality that reshapes human relationships according to divine values of justice, mercy, and love (Snodgrass, 2008). Matthew 18:23 introduces the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant with the formula 'the Kingdom of Heaven is like...,' explicitly linking the ethic of forgiveness to the kingdom's social logic. To practice forgiveness in the Matthean sense is, therefore, to embody the Kingdom of Heaven in concrete communal life.

Theoretical Framework: The first theoretical lens through which this study examines Matthew 18:21-22 is Miroslav Volf's Theology of Embrace (1996), most fully articulated in his seminal work *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (1996). Volf, a Croatian theologian who wrote in the shadow of the Balkan wars and ethnic cleansing of the 1990s, developed a theology of reconciliation that takes seriously both the reality of violent otherness and the Christian imperative to embrace the enemy.

Volf's framework proceeds through four movements: repentance, forgiveness, making space for the other, and healing of memory. For Volf, forgiveness is not the erasure of the past or the denial of harm rather, it is the refusal to allow the past to determine the future of the relationship. Forgiveness, in his account, is a 'will to embrace' an orientation of the self toward the other that makes space for restored communion even in the face of grave moral injury. This framework is directly relevant to Matthew 18:21-22 in several ways: first, it captures the unconditional character of Jesus' command to forgive without limit; second, it roots forgiveness in a prior divine embrace (God's forgiveness of human sin); and third, it articulates forgiveness as a social and political practice, not merely a private psychological event.

The relevance of Volf's theology to Matthew 18:21-22 is further sharpened by his insistence that forgiveness does not require the precondition of repentance by the offender a point that resonates with Jesus' teaching, which makes no such stipulation. Volf (1996) writes that the will to embrace must precede any possible reconciliation, mirroring the way in which Jesus commands unlimited forgiveness irrespective of whether the offender has apologized or changed. For African Christian communities navigating post conflict realities from Rwanda to South Africa to Nigeria

Volf's theology provides a rigorous theological rationale for the Matthean imperative to forgive seventy-seven times.

The second theoretical framework employed in this study is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in Portuguese in 1968 and translated into English in 1970. Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, developed a critical pedagogy rooted in the lived experiences of the marginalized, arguing that genuine education is a process of conscientization the awakening of critical consciousness that enables the oppressed to name their world and transform it. Freire's liberationist framework has been extensively appropriated in African theological discourse, particularly in the work of scholars such as Ukpong (2000) and Dube (2000), who apply it to biblical hermeneutics.

The relevance of Freire's framework to Matthew 18:21-22 lies in its attention to the dynamics of power, oppression, and liberation in human relationships. Freire argues that authentic dialogue characterized by love, humility, hope, and faith is the foundation of genuine human community. Forgiveness, in this Freirean reading, is an act of radical humanization, it refuses to reduce the offender to their offense, insisting instead on the full humanity of both the forgiver and the forgiven. This resonates powerfully with the logic of Matthew 18:21-22, where Jesus' command to forgive limitlessly subverts the dehumanizing logic of retribution and opens space for genuine community.

Moreover, Freire's (1968) concept of 'limit situations' the seemingly insurmountable barriers that prevent human flourishing illuminates Peter's question in Matthew 18:21. Peter's assumption that seven times represents a generous upper limit reflects a 'limit situation' in human moral imagination. Jesus' response performs a Freirean 'untested feasibility' pushing beyond the horizon of what seems humanly possible to envision a different moral world. Applied in contemporary African Christian contexts, Freire's framework helps communities understand forgiveness not as passive submission to injustice but as an active, transformative praxis that reconfigures social relationships and humanizes both the forgiver and the forgiven.

Literary Context: The Discourse on Community (Matthew 18:1-35)

Any adequate interpretation of Matthew 18:21-22 must begin with careful attention to its literary context. The passage forms the penultimate unit of Matthew 18, the Fourth of five great discourses in Matthew's Gospel (5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25). Scholars have recognized Matthew 18 as the Discourse on Community (or the Ecclesiastical Discourse), addressing the internal life of the Christian community (Luz, 2001). The discourse is carefully structured: it opens with a question about greatness and a teaching on humility (vv. 1-5); continues with warnings against causing others to stumble (vv. 6-9); includes the parable of the Lost Sheep and its communal application (vv. 10-14); develops a procedure for handling offenses within the community (vv. 15-20); and culminates in the exchange about forgiveness (vv. 21-35).

The structural logic of Matthew 18 is important for understanding vv. 21-22. The discourse moves from the problem of offense in various forms to the community's response to offense. The procedure in vv. 15-20 addresses the formal, disciplinary dimension of communal conflict; vv. 21-22 addresses the personal, dispositional dimension. Together they present a comprehensive vision of communal life that neither avoids conflict nor allows it to fester into permanent division. Davies and Allison (1988) observe that the placement of the forgiveness teaching at the end of the

discourse gives it climactic weight it is the final, overarching principle that governs all other aspects of communal life.

Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 18:21-22

The Greek text of Matthew 18:21-22 reads: **Τότε προσελθὼν αὐτῷ ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν· Κύριε, ποσάκις ἁμαρτήσῃ εἰς ἐμὲ ὁ ἀδελφός μου, καὶ ἀφήσω αὐτῷ; ἕως ἑπτάκις;**

λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· οὐ λέγω σοι ἕως ἑπτάκις, ἀλλὰ ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ.

Translation in English

Peter asks, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus replies, “not seven times, but seventy times seven.”

The passage begins with a narrative introduction “then Peter came to him” (*Τότε προσελθὼν αὐτῷ ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν*) that signals a formal question of discipleship, characteristic of Petrine interactions in Matthew's Gospel (France, 2007). Peter's address, 'Lord' (*Κύριε*), reflects the elevated Matthean Christology and signals that the question carries theological weight.

The phrase 'my brother' (*ὁ ἀδελφός μου*) is significant. In Matthew's context, 'brother' functions as a technical term for a fellow member of the Christian community (cf. Matthew 18:15, 17). The question, therefore, is not about forgiveness in the abstract but about the specific practice of interpersonal forgiveness within the *ekklesia* (Church). This contextualizes the teaching firmly within the communal life of the church, not as a general philosophical proposition about human relationships (Keener, 1999).

Peter's proposed limit of 'seven times' (*ἑπτάκις*) is significant in the light of contemporary Jewish discussions. Rabbinic tradition, as reflected in the Talmud (Yoma 86b-87a), suggested that forgiving the same person three times was sufficient; Peter's offer of seven times thus represents a doubling plus of the expected standard, perhaps influenced by the symbolic perfection associated with the number seven in Jewish culture (Snodgrass, 2008). That Peter frames his question as a generous proposal '*Is seven times enough?*' suggests that he is seeking validation for what he considers a commendably liberal position. Jesus' response dismantles this framing entirely.

The numerical formulations of Jesus' answer 'not seven times but seventy-seven times' (*οὐ λέγω σοι ἕως ἑπτάκις, ἀλλὰ ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ*) has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. The Greek phrase can be rendered as either '77 times' or '70 x 7 = 490 times,' depending on how one interprets the syntax. Most modern commentators favor '77 times,' both on grammatical grounds (the Greek more naturally yields 70 + 7 = 77) and because of the allusion to Genesis 4:24 (France, 2007; Luz, 2001). In Genesis 4:24, Lamech declares: 'If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.' The deliberate echo of this text transforms the meaning of the exchange profoundly: Jesus is not merely extending Peter's proposed limit; he is inaugurating an eschatological inversion of the primeval culture of revenge represented by Lamech.

Whatever the precise numerical value, the rhetorical function is clear. Jesus is using hyperbole to abolish quantitative thinking about forgiveness altogether. A community that counts to 490 and then stops forgiving has entirely missed the point, the absurdity of counting those high signals that counting itself is inappropriate. Forgiveness, in Jesus' teaching, is not a resource to be rationed but a disposition to be cultivated a *habitus*, in Bourdieu's (1990) sociological terminology,

that shapes the character of the community. This reading aligns with Volf's (1996) account of forgiveness as a 'will to embrace' that is fundamentally unconditional and unlimited.

Intertextual Background: Genesis 4:24 and the Song of Lamech

The allusion to Genesis 4:24 in Matthew 18:22 is one of the most hermeneutically rich aspects of the passage and has been consistently recognized by commentators (Davies & Allison, 1988; France, 2007; Luz, 2001). The Song of Lamech (Genesis 4:23-24) represents the apex of the primeval narrative's portrait of human violence. Lamech, a descendant of Cain, boasts to his wives of killing a young man who struck him, claiming divine protection seventy-sevenfold far exceeding even the protective mark placed on Cain (Genesis 4:15). The song encapsulates what anthropologists call the 'honor-shame' dynamics of ancient Mediterranean culture, in which the escalation of vengeance is both expected and celebrated.

By invoking this tradition and inverting it, Jesus situates his teaching within the broadest possible moral framework the whole arc of human history from Cain to the present. He is not merely offering pastoral advice about how many times to forgive a troublesome neighbor; he is announcing a new anthropology, a new way of being human together. Where Lamech represents the pinnacle of the old humanity defined by escalating revenge, the disciples of Jesus are to embody a new humanity defined by escalating forgiveness. This eschatological dimension of the passage has been well developed by N. T. Wright (1996), who argues that Jesus' ethical teaching consistently operates within an eschatological framework: the new age is breaking in, and the community of Jesus' followers is to embody its values in the present.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:23-35) as Narrative Commentary

Matthew's placement of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant immediately following the exchange in vv. 21-22 is hermeneutically significant. The parable functions as an extended narrative illustration of the theological rationale for unlimited forgiveness. In the parable, a servant who has been forgiven an astronomical debt (ten thousand talents equivalent to millions of dollars in modern currency) refuses to forgive a fellow servant a trivial debt (a hundred denarii approximately a day's wages). The king's response revoking his forgiveness and handing the servant over to tormentors is the narrative's stark moral: those who have received God's limitless forgiveness are morally obligated to extend forgiveness to others.

Snodgrass (2008) notes that the parabolic logic is grounded in analogy: the vastness of divine forgiveness makes all human offenses, however serious, relatively minor by comparison. This does not trivialize human suffering, rather, it establishes the theological ground of human forgiveness in the prior, inexhaustible generosity of God. For African Christian communities, this narrative has particular resonance in post conflict contexts where the enormity of experienced injustice can seem to make forgiveness impossible. The parable's logic that the experience of extravagant grace creates the moral possibility of forgiving others provides a theological foundation for the practice of forgiveness that does not minimize harm but transcends it (Katongole, 2011).

African Hermeneutical Perspectives on Matthew 18:21-22

African New Testament scholarship brings distinctive and enriching perspectives to the interpretation of Matthew 18:21-22. Ukpong's (2000) inculturation hermeneutic reads the passage in dialogue with the African concept of Ubuntu the Nguni philosophical principle that human

personhood is constituted through relationships with others ('I am because we are'). From an Ubuntu perspective, the Matthean ethic of unlimited forgiveness is not merely a moral command but an ontological necessity: the community cannot be itself cannot be fully human together if interpersonal offenses are allowed to calcify into permanent enmity. Forgiveness, on this reading, is the communal practice by which the Ubuntu community restores its relational integrity and reaffirms the personhood of all its members.

Dube's (2000) postcolonial reading raises more critical questions. She notes that forgiveness teachings have historically been used by those in power to demand the silence and compliance of the oppressed. In colonial and patriarchal contexts, the command to forgive 'seventy times seven' has sometimes functioned as a mechanism of social control, preventing victims of systemic injustice from naming their experience and demanding accountability. Dube's critique does not negate the validity of the Matthean ethic but demands that it be read critically and contextually, attending to the power dynamics within which forgiveness is enacted. This critical perspective enriches the interpretation by insisting that genuine Matthean forgiveness must be accompanied by truth telling, accountability, and structural change a point echoed by Maluleke (1997) in his reflections on the South African TRC.

Ukpong (2000) further argues that African communal values of mediation, palaver (the traditional African practice of communal dialogue for conflict resolution), and restorative justice provide important contextual resources for actualizing the Matthean ethic of forgiveness in African Christian communities. Traditional African mechanisms of conflict resolution in which community elders mediate between estranged parties, restoring relational harmony through a process of dialogue, truth telling, and symbolic restitution bear significant structural similarities to the process outlined in Matthew 18:15-20, suggesting deep points of cultural resonance between the Matthean community ideal and African communal values.

Forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-22 and Its Implications For Christian Living

The implications of Matthew 18:21-22 for Christian living are profound, multidimensional, and far reaching. They operate at the level of personal spirituality, communal ecclesiology, and social ethics.

Forgiveness as Personal Spiritual Discipline

At the personal level, Jesus teaching in Matthew 18:21-22 calls every Christian disciple to a habitual, ongoing disposition of forgiveness toward those who have offended them. This is not a single dramatic act but a way of life what Jones (1995) calls a 'craft' or 'practice' that must be cultivated through prayer, spiritual formation, and community support. The Matthean ethic of forgiveness challenges the natural human tendency toward resentment, rumination, retaliation and retributive fantasy. Psychologically, research by Worthington (2006) and Enright (2001) has demonstrated that the practice of forgiveness is associated with significant benefits for psychological and physical wellbeing reduced anxiety, depression, and stress; improved immune function and greater sense of personal agency and meaning. However, the Christian practice of forgiveness is not primarily justified on therapeutic grounds but on theological ones, it participates in and reflects the character of God, who 'forgives all your iniquities' (Psalm 103:3).

The limitlessness of Jesus' command 'not seven times but seventy-seven times' confronts every Christian with the reality of their ongoing dependence on divine forgiveness. The Matthean

connection between divine and human forgiveness (cf. Matthew 6:12, 14-15) suggests that the practice of forgiving others is both made possible by and expressive of the believer's own experience of God's forgiveness. Theologically, this creates what might be called a 'grace cycle': the experience of divine forgiveness generates the capacity and the obligation to forgive others, whose experience of human forgiveness in turn witnesses to and mediates divine grace (Volf, 2005).

Forgiveness as Ecclesial Practice

Matthew 18:21-22 is addressed not to individuals in isolation but to the community of disciples gathered around Jesus. Peter's question is framed communally "when my brother sins against me" and Jesus' response is given within the context of a larger ecclesial discourse. This communal framing indicates that forgiveness, in the Matthean vision, is fundamentally an ecclesial practice a characteristic activity of the church as the community of the Kingdom (Hauerwas, 1983). The church is to be a community defined by its practice of forgiveness, distinguishing itself from the surrounding culture's logic of retribution and revenge.

This has concrete implications for the life of Christian congregations. It means that the church must develop intentional practices of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and forgiveness not leaving individuals to navigate interpersonal offense alone but providing communal structures of support and accountability. Jones (1995) argues that the church's ministry of forgiveness requires specific practices, honest acknowledgment of wrongdoing, genuine expressions of repentance, works of restitution where possible and patient accompaniment of those who are struggling to forgive. The Matthean procedure of Matthew 18:15-20, read alongside vv. 21-22, suggests a multi stage process that combines accountability (confronting the offender) with unlimited mercy (forgiving without limit).

Forgiveness and Justice: A Necessary Tension

One of the most challenging aspects of applying Matthew 18:21-22 to Christian living concerns its relationship to justice. Does the command to forgive seventy-seven times preclude the pursuit of justice? Does it require victims to accept ongoing abuse? These questions are especially acute in contexts of systemic oppression, domestic violence, and structural injustice (Dube, 2000; Maluleke, 1997). A careful reading of Matthew 18 in its entirety suggests that forgiveness and justice are complementary rather than contradictory. The procedure of Matthew 18:15-20 involves naming the offense, confronting the offender, and involving the community all of which are acts of justice as well as mercy. Forgiveness, in the Matthean framework, does not require the victim to deny the reality or severity of the offense; rather, it releases the offender from the obligation of retributive punishment while still affirming the moral order that was violated.

Volf (1996) is helpful here: he distinguishes between forgiveness (an act of the will that releases the offender from debt) and condoning or excusing (denying that a wrong was done). Forgiveness presupposes that a real wrong has been committed; it is precisely because the offense is real and serious that forgiveness is needed. This distinction has important pastoral implications: Christian communities must be clear that commanding forgiveness does not mean commanding silence, compliance, or the continuation of abusive relationships. Forgiveness may coexist with the pursuit of legal accountability, the establishment of protective boundaries, and the demand for structural change.

Forgiveness as Social and Political Practice

Beyond the personal and ecclesial dimensions, Matthew 18:21-22 carries significant implications for the social and political life of Christian communities. The passage's inversion of the Lamech tradition suggests that the community of Jesus' followers is called to embody a counter cultural politics of forgiveness in the public sphere. This has been dramatically illustrated in the history of Christian communities that have practiced forgiveness in the face of political violence and injustice from the martyrs of the early church to the nonviolent civil rights movement of Martin Luther King Jr., from the Amish community's response to the Nickel Mines school shooting to the South African TRC's model of restorative justice.

Katongole (2011) argues that Christian communities in Africa are called to embody 'a different story' from the dominant narratives of tribal conflict, political violence, and systemic corruption. The practice of forgiveness, in Katongole's account, is not a withdrawal from politics but a form of political witness demonstrating in concrete communal life that human beings are not condemned to cycles of vengeance and counter vengeance. This prophetic dimension of Christian forgiveness resonates with Brueggemann's (1978) concept of the prophetic imagination, the church's practice of forgiveness is a form of social critique that exposes the bankruptcy of retributive social logic and enacts an alternative.

Forgiveness and Healing of Memory

A final implication of Matthew 18:21-22 for Christian living concerns the relationship between forgiveness and memory. The passage's command to forgive 'seventy-seven times' raises the question of whether genuine forgiveness requires the forgetting of past wrongs. Volf (2006) argues compellingly that forgiveness does not require amnesia but involves the 'redemption of memory' the reframing of past wrongs within a larger narrative of grace. What changes are not the factual record of what happened but the weight and power of the memory, the past offense no longer defines or governs the present relationship. This understanding has profound pastoral implications for individuals carrying the burden of traumatic memories of abuse, betrayal, or violence.

Neuropsychological research supports the distinction between forgiveness and forgetting: forgiveness is associated with the cognitive and emotional reappraisal of a memory, not its erasure (Worthington, 2006). This scientific insight converges with the theological tradition to affirm that forgiveness is a real and transformative human capacity challenging but possible, costly but liberating. For Christian communities, the sustained practice of worship, prayer, and Eucharist provides the formative context within which the healing of memory can take place, embedding individuals in a larger story of divine grace that progressively reframes their own stories of hurt and loss (Jones, 1995).

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are offered to Christian communities, church leaders, and theological educators seeking to embody the Matthean ethic of forgiveness in their contexts. These recommendations are grounded in the exegetical and theological findings of this study and are informed by both Western theological resources and African contextual realities. Christian communities at every level individual, congregational, denominational, and ecumenical are urged to take seriously the radical imperative of Matthew 18:21-22 and to develop intentional, sustained, and contextually sensitive practices of forgiveness:

First, Christian congregations should develop intentional programs of spiritual formation focused on forgiveness as a habitual disposition and communal practice. This should include regular preaching and teaching on the theology of forgiveness, drawing on the full range of Matthean and broader New Testament resources, as well as small group practices of mutual accountability, prayer for enemies, and the healing of relational wounds. Formation programs should be sustained over time rather than limited to occasional sermons, recognizing that the cultivation of a forgiving disposition is a long-term, community supported spiritual journey requiring regular catechesis, pastoral guidance, and sacramental practice including the Eucharist, confession, and absolution.

Second, African Christian communities should intentionally integrate indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution and reconciliation including palaver, community mediation, and traditional restorative justice practices with the biblical ethic of forgiveness, developing culturally appropriate models of Christian peace building that draw on both biblical wisdom and African communal values. As Ukpong (2000) demonstrates, the Ubuntu philosophy's emphasis on relational personhood and communal harmony provides a deeply resonant cultural matrix for the Matthean vision of forgiveness. Church leaders in Africa should work with traditional elders, cultural practitioners, and biblical scholars to develop such integrated models, ensuring that the practice of forgiveness is both theologically grounded and culturally accessible to the communities they serve.

Third, church leaders must distinguish clearly and consistently between forgiveness and the condoning of injustice, ensuring that the command to forgive is never used to silence victims, demand premature reconciliation, or exempt perpetrators from accountability. Pastoral care programs must be developed that walk with victims through the complex process of forgiveness without pressuring them to forgive before they are ready or to reconcile with those who have not demonstrated genuine repentance and changed behaviour. This recommendation is particularly urgent in contexts of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and systemic oppression, where misapplied forgiveness teaching has historically caused significant additional harm to already vulnerable people (Dube, 2000; Maluleke, 1997).

Fourth, theological seminaries and Bible colleges should integrate African biblical hermeneutics including inculturation hermeneutics, postcolonial biblical criticism, and liberationist approaches into their curricula for New Testament studies, ensuring that future church leaders are equipped to read texts like Matthew 18:21-22 with both exegetical rigor and contextual sensitivity. The inclusion of African scholars such as Ukpong, Dube, Maluleke, and Katongole alongside Western theological voices in seminary curricula will enrich the theological formation of Christian leaders and equip them to interpret the Bible in ways that are both faithful to the text and responsive to the complex realities of African and global Christian communities.

Fifth, Christian communities should engage in public witness and advocacy for restorative justice models in their national and local political contexts, drawing on the Matthean vision of unlimited forgiveness as a theological resource for public discourse about crime, punishment, reconciliation, and social healing. The Matthean ethic of forgiveness has transformative potential not only for the inner life of the church but for the social and political life of nations. Christian advocacy for restorative justice, prison reform, truth and reconciliation processes, and community-based conflict resolution reflects and enacts the counter cultural politics of Matthew 18:21-22 in the public square.

CONCLUSION

Matthew 18:21-22 stands as one of the most demanding and most luminous texts in the New Testament's vision of Christian community. Jesus' response to Peter's question not seven times but seventy-seven times is not merely a numerical escalation; it is a theological declaration that reshapes the moral universe of the disciple. By deliberately invoking and inverting the Song of Lamech, Jesus announces the eschatological reversal of the primeval culture of vengeance and calls his followers to embody, in their communal life, the limitless mercy of God. The Discourse on Community in Matthew 18 presents this limitless forgiveness not as a sentimental ideal but as the governing principle of the *ekklesia*, the community called out from the culture of retribution and constituted by the grace of the Kingdom.

This study has demonstrated that the Matthean ethic of forgiveness is rich, complex, and multidimensional. Exegetically, it is grounded in a profound engagement with the Hebrew Scriptures and first century Jewish traditions. Theologically, it is rooted in the prior and inexhaustible generosity of divine forgiveness, dramatized in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. Ethically, it operates at the level of personal spiritual formation, communal ecclesial practice, and social and political witness. African hermeneutical perspectives particularly the Ubuntu philosophy of Ukpong and the postcolonial critique of Dube enrich the interpretation by insisting on the communal, contextual, and critically engaged character of genuine Christian forgiveness.

The theoretical frameworks of Volf and Freire have illuminated complementary dimensions of the Matthean ethic: Volf's Theology of Embrace highlights the unconditional, grace grounded character of forgiveness as a will to embrace the other, Freire's liberationist pedagogy highlights its counter cultural, humanizing, and transformative character. Together they provide a robust theological-ethical account that is adequate to the radicality of Jesus' teaching and responsive to the complexity of contemporary Christian life.

The church in every age and perhaps especially in contexts of conflict, injustice, and division needs to hear afresh the astonishing word of Jesus: not seven times but seventy-seven times. This word is not a burden but a liberation, the announcement that in the community of Jesus' followers, the endless cycle of vengeance can be broken, the dehumanizing logic of retribution can be refused, and the new humanity of the Kingdom can be made visible. As African Christian communities navigate the legacies of colonialism, ethnic violence, and political corruption, and as Christian communities worldwide face the challenges of polarization, conflict, and moral fragmentation, the Matthean vision of unlimited forgiveness remains an inexhaustible resource a word for our times from the Lord of all times.

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