

**The Justice of Mercy:
A Study of Matthew 6:14-15 & 18:35**

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Introduction

Mercy, forgiveness and the healing of the rifts in the relationship between humans and the divine and amongst humans were among the primary foci of the ministry of Jesus; and they formed part of his commission and mandate to his disciples. To this is added the call to conversion for the forgiveness of sins and the forging of a new relationship between God and humans in Christ. In fact, the entire mission of Jesus is often portrayed, especially by the apostle Paul, as the reconciliation of humanity to God: Christ is thus described as our reconciliation (2 Cor 5:19; Eph 2:14-18).¹

This mandate also seems to be an essential part of the life of the Matthean community for whom mercy and forgiveness were very essential parts of community formation. This is obvious from the double reference of Jesus to the need for his disciples to forgive each other's offences just as they have received forgiveness from God (see 6:14-15 and 18:35). The contexts of both texts and their point of emphasis underscore the importance of these virtues for the community, its self-definition, its mission and its cohesion in a rather hostile environment.

This paper aims to highlight the importance of mercy and forgiveness, with a view to proposing these measures, used to ensure the survival and cohesion of the Matthean community, as models for our Church communities. Both elements underscore the gospel of mercy that pervaded the celebration of the Year of Mercy, and they are necessary ingredients for life and practice in the Church of our time. The importance of our focus texts is hinged on the fact that in the first occurrence (6:14-15), the text comes after the teaching of the Lord's Prayer to the disciples. That universally acclaimed prayer has a variety of injunctions and petitions, and any one of them could have been further emphasized by Jesus. The only one that gained such an extra reinforcement though would be the petition on forgiveness, which Jesus also placed at the end of the discourse on Church life to teach the lesson to be drawn from the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23-34).

The paper shall follow this introduction with a cursory review of the texts concerned, then it will look at the texts in their literary contexts and in inter-textual relation to relevant material in the New Testament. A study of the texts involved and some practical deductions for the purpose of application to and recommendation for the present time will follow. The paper shall conclude with a brief remark on practical ways in which this humble endeavour contributes to the fruits of the Year of Mercy project for the future endeavour of the church as forgiving community.

¹ Mercy and forgiveness shall be used interchangeably in this paper. Strictly speaking, forgiveness presupposes the existence of an offence or sin. Mercy, however, includes forgiveness, but is more inclusive, because it presupposes a predisposition to accommodate the need of the other even when an offence does not exist, as in the case of Jesus having pity on the Jewish crowds, who were scattered like sheep without a shepherd and offering nourishment of word and bread (Mark 6:30-44).

Some Social and Literary Contextual Preambles

It is worthy of note that the Matthean community was far from being a perfect community of disciples, despite the fact that it was a community that was borne out of and called to perfection (5:48) and to the righteousness of excess (5:20). This fact is underlined not only by the very nature of Jesus' call of sinners to repentance, but also, by his other teachings that seem to suggest that the community did struggle with the concern on how to deal with sinners and deviants (18:15-18, 21-35). Two of Jesus' parables in Matthew 13, the Parable of the Tares and the Parable of the Dragnet, are very good examples of Jesus' teaching on such a concern. In addition, his constant rebuff of Pharisaic obsession with perfection and its resultant burden of a skin-deep spiritual orientation are added proofs that we are dealing with a community of fallible human beings.

Also, from a narrative point of view, the presentation of Jesus' disciples as people of little faith (8:26) despite their expressed steadfastness, demonstrated by the understanding of Jesus' teaching and mission (13:51-52), also suggests the struggling nature of the community. In such a community, all are encouraged to understand, first and foremost like Paul, that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). As such, what we have received freely, we must give freely (Matt 10:8), not only by preaching the forgiveness of sins but also by practicing being forgivers (6:14-15; 18:35; cf. 5:7). The logic is simple: God forgives the sinner. Since God forgives the sinner, the forgiven sinner must in turn forgive other sinners who offend them. There lies the justice of mercy, in the context of which the unforgiving person forfeits his/her right to the gift of forgiveness from God.

If it is true, as has been suggested in certain circles, that the Lord's prayer in Matthew contains elements of the *shemoneh eshreh* (*Amidah*) of the Jewish community, and that the polemic social context of the prayer reflected in the comparison of Jewish piety with the ethics of Jesus' ecclesial piety in 6:1-18, present an important clue, then the Lord's prayer is the Matthean community's response to the *shemoneh eshreh* (the 12 Benedictions). In that case, the statement in 6:14-15 (supported by 18:35) was definitely aimed at internal cohesion in the Christian community as they asked God for forgiveness and distinguish themselves from Judaism by enforcing the need for Christians to forgive one another and all who have wronged them.²

To make this point clearer to his community, the evangelist introduces material that is both adapted and special Matthean materials at two different points in his narrative that underscore not just the need but rather the necessity of giving forgiveness just as we have received it from God, all of the time.

Literary Contexts of Matt 6:14-15 and 18:35.

The occurrences of the texts under consideration are within the purview of two discourses that are considered to have the community of disciples either as exclusive audience (chap. 18) or as primary audience (chaps. 5-7).³ Matt 6:14-16 is appended to the end of the Lord's Prayer that falls within the second large division of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Together with the Lord's

² For an illustration of the basis for this claim, see the discussion by Daniel J. Harrington, S. J., *The Gospel of Matthew* (*Sacra Pagina*, 1; ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S. J.; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 97-99.

³ Matthew's insertion of special notes at the beginning of these discourses, 18:1 and 5:1, respectively, determines the audience as the disciples in both discourses. Also, in both blocks of material, the proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of the heavens is in focus. The kingdom of the heavens, as used in Matthew, helps the evangelist to avoid calling the name of God directly, an action that could be offensive to his predominantly Jewish Christian audience. Such a periphrastic use captures the meaning of the kingdom as God's domain of operation, God's reign.

Prayer (5:7-13), verses 14-15 are located at the very centre of the Sermon. That section on almsgiving, prayer and fasting (6:1-18) also marks the second call to a higher righteousness. Even though verses 14-15 do not form part of the Lord's Prayer, they are specially preserved here as comments of the great teacher of the Matthean community on one of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer.⁴ In Matthew 18, the saying in verse 35 captures an entire discourse on the Church's life and discipleship that has the disciples of Jesus (that is, the Church) as the exclusive audience (18:1). Matt 18:35, therefore, sums up the discussion on true greatness in the kingdom of the Heavens (18:1-4); on ensuring that the Lord's little ones within the community are properly guided and cared for (18:5-10); on God's unbounded mercy towards the stray disciple and the Church's obligation to ensure that none of Jesus' little ones is lost from the fold (18:12-14); on brotherly correction and the excommunication of the unrepentant sinner, thus giving the church the mandate to ensure that God's boundless mercy is not abused by recalcitrant disciples (18:15-18); on the effectiveness of the common prayer of the disciples as Church (18:19-20); on the need for limitless forgiveness, thus balancing and checking what might be excesses in the enforcement of the injunction on excommunication in 18:17-18; and on the need for disciples to be dispensers of the mercy they have received from the Father as enunciated in the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23-34). Mercy in that parable is to be found in the fact that in addition to being forgiven for defaulting in the repayment of his debt, the forgiven servant had his entire debt liquidated in exchange for nothing but a simple plea.

Within that broad concept and the larger context regarding the formation of the Church and disciples' community, beginning in chapter 16, Matt 18:35 stands out as an injunction to ensure that the Church, both as a body and in its members, manifests the mercy and the justice of God in her dealing with individual members. It is notable that within this larger context, beginning from chapter 16, is to be found the only two mentions of the word, Church, *ekklēsia*, in the gospel tradition (16:18 & 18:17). And it is within this context that we also have the dual injunctions to both Peter and the community that the Church's decree is heaven's command (16:19 and 18:18).⁵

Matt 6:14-15 and 18:35 in their Synoptic Context:

In relation to the Gospel of Luke, where we have the other version of the Lord's prayer, it is noteworthy that our focus text (6:12) was absent from the end of the Lucan Lord's prayer (Luke 1-4). There Matthew adds the injunction *ean gar aphēte tois anthrōpois ta paraptōmata autōn, aphēsei kai humin ho patēr humōn ho ouranois: ean de me aphēte tois anthrōpois, oude ho patēr humōn aphēsei ta paraptōmata humōn* (for if you forgive human beings their sins [transgressions], your heavenly father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive human beings, neither will your father forgive your sins [transgressions]) to the end of the Lord's prayer. None of these additions is found in Luke. However, the first part, 6:14, has a parallel in another context in Mark

⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (A Continental Commentary; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 212, 353-91; originally published as *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus 1* (trans. Wilhelm C. Linss; 1985).

⁵ It is worth noting that the parts of these contexts that are important to the discussion on hand are special Matthean material. For a more detailed discussion on the structure of Matthew's gospel, see Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 35-37; David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (JSNTSup 31; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 21-54; Davies and Allison, Jr., *Matthew 1-7*, 58-72; and J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 1-25. The structural format within which the contexts of the focus texts are taken is derived from Jack Kingsbury's tripartite division of the gospel that sees 16:21 as the beginning of the third part of that division, leading on to the climax of the gospel. The sole reason for that choice is that this third part also has important information on discipleship and church formation. For details, see J. D. Kingsbury, "The Structure of Matthew's Gospel and His Concept of Salvation History," *CBQ* 35 (1973), 451-74.

11:25. The second part, 6:15, which is reflected in some manuscripts of Mark as 11:26, has been identified by many as a later addition that was influenced by Matt 6:15.⁶ The only thing common to both Matthew and Mark contextually here is the setting, which has Jesus instructing the disciples on prayer. The other similarity is that the Markan text also uses the word *paraptōmata*. The only other representation of that word, which probably reflects influence from Matthew's gospel, is in the *Didache* 8.2-3.⁷ The Lord's Prayer is, however, absent from Mark.

Our other focus text, Matt 18:35, has no synoptic parallel since the episode of the unforgiving servant is absent in both Mark and Luke. The other pertinent texts on mercy in Matthew 18 are also only partially reflected in Mark (triple tradition) and Luke ("Q"). Notably, the portion on brotherly correction (18:15-18), the Lord's presence with the gathered community (18:19-20), the injunction on unlimited forgiveness (18:21-22), and the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (18:23-35) are mostly special Matthean material.⁸

While one may wonder about why this statement on forgiveness in Matt 18:35 is completely absent from Luke, given the Lucan focus on mercy and forgiveness, it suffices to note that Luke does reflect the injunction on unlimited forgiveness differently in Luke 17:4. In addition, he may not have had access to some of the special Matthean material in the community discourse. Such material would have been right in Luke's alley because of the focus of his gospel on mercy and forgiveness. Also, Luke does have more than enough material in his gospel for one to conclude that the push on mercy and forgiveness may have been just as strong in that community as it was in the Matthean Church. At least, we know that Jesus set the example for this teaching to his disciples in his own proclamation of forgiveness from the cross in Luke 23:34.

A Wider Biblical Context

It has been observed that Prayer for forgiveness has been part of Jewish practice (cf. Psalm 51). Daniel Harrington also notes that, "the theme of a close relation between our willingness to forgive others and God's willingness to forgive us appears in Sir 28:1-2."⁹ So also is the expectation of the association of divine forgiveness with human forgiveness. What is strange and at the same time peculiar here is that there is usually no case where human practice is taken into "a central prayer text" in the way it is represented in Matthew 6. It, however, underscores the Matthean emphasis on human action and the realization that "prayer and human action are not mutually exclusive."¹⁰ Underscoring the distinctive nature of the Lord's Prayer in the context of Jewish or Aramaic prayer

⁶ See note on Mark 11:25 & 26 regarding the manuscript tradition in *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (ed. Kurk Aland; 10th Ed., Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1993), 57. Mark 11:25 reads: "And when you stand in prayer, forgive whatever you have against anybody, so that your Father in heaven may forgive your failings" (NJB). The supposed text and representation of Mark 11:26 may be the result of cross influence from Matthew's gospel and a later addition. It is absent from the oldest manuscripts.

⁷ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary* (Hermeneia: A Critical and History Commentary on the Bible; ed. Helmut Koester; trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 309-10.

⁸ See Ulrich Luz's note that "the text contains throughout a high percentage of Matthew's favorite terms" (*Matthew 8-20* [Hermeneia: A Critical and History Commentary on the Bible; ed. Helmut Koester; trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001], 469).

⁹ D. Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 96. Sir 28:1-5 reads: "Whoever exerts vengeance will experience the vengeance of the Lord, who keeps strict account of sin. Pardon your neighbour any wrongs done to you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven. If anyone nurses anger against another, can one then demand compassion from the Lord? Showing no pity for someone like oneself, can one then plead for one's own sins? Mere creature of flesh, yet cherishing resentment!-who will forgive one for sinning?"

¹⁰ Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 322.

traditions, Ulrich Luz emphatically notes that the “Lord’s prayer is a prayer of Jesus. It bears the imprint of Jesus, the man and messenger of God, and it does so both where it is characteristically Jewish as well as where it has distinctive features within Judaism.”¹¹

The community that prays the “Our Father” understands that even as Christians, “its members sin and need forgiveness.”¹² It must be noted, however, that while a relationship is established firmly between the divine forgiveness of the sinner in the community and the human forgiveness of others, it is firmly true that 6:14-15 and 18:35 do not just tie the effectiveness of “God’s forgiveness...to human action,” they also emphasize that divine forgiveness precedes human action as “prevenient grace.”¹³ The need for such reconciliatory process in communities is well laid out by D. Harrington in his short comparative discourse on the use of similar methods by both the Qumran and Matthean communities, for the purposes of internal cohesion, members’ responsibility for their wrong doing, and a strengthened communion with the larger community.¹⁴

Analysis of the Text

Matt 6:14-15

A good introduction to the analysis of the text is represented by Luz’s observation that “the *logion* has the form of a two-part *mashal* with excellent parallelism... In its present content it corresponds to the forgiveness petition in the Lord’s prayer and, like it, may well go back to Jesus.” The *logion* puts the petition on forgiveness in paraenetic form.¹⁵ Central to it is the fact that “both the conditional wording and the ‘negative’ v. 15, missing from Mark 11:25, make clear that human forgiveness is a condition for divine forgiveness.” It also emphasizes the part of the Lord’s Prayer, where “human activity is mostly directly involved.”¹⁶ The relationship established here between prayer and action follows the general Matthean focus on the relationship between word and action, faith and practice, in his community (cf. 12:50; 25:31-46), such that “the forgiveness commandment corresponds in substance to the heart” of Matthean ethics, “the love commandment.”¹⁷

Verse 14. *ean gar aphēte tois anthrōpois ta paraptōmata autōn, aphēsei kai humin ho pater humōn ho ouranois*: Verse 15. *ean de me aphete tois anthrōpois, oude ho pater humōn aphēsei ta paraptōmata humōn* (14 “Yes, if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours; 15 but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either”).

Structurally, it is easy to deduce from the table below how the evangelist created an antithetical parallelism from the saying in Matt 6:14-15, around the use of the verb *aphiemi*, with an added chiasmic element “in the use of ‘trespasses’ in 14a and 15b.”¹⁸

¹¹ Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 324.

¹² Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 322.

¹³ Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 322.

¹⁴ D. Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 271.

¹⁵ Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 327.

¹⁶ Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 322.

¹⁷ Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 327.

¹⁸ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical Commentary and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew: Introduction and Commentary on Matthew I-VII* (Eds. J. A. Emerton et al.; The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 615. See also, D. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 96.

Verse 14	Verse 15
<i>ean gar aphēte tois anthrōpois ta paraptōmata autōn</i> (for if you forgive human beings their transgression [trespasses])	<i>ean de mē aphēte tois anthrōpois</i> (but if you do not forgive human beings)
<i>aphēsei kai humin ho pater humōn ho ouranois</i> (your heavenly Father will forgive you yours)	<i>oude ho patēr humōn aphēsei ta paraptōmata humōn</i> (your heavenly Father will not forgive your transgressions [trespasses])

W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison have noted that the vocabulary of the text here is largely Matthean and that the statistics of word occurrence show that almost every word here occurs more in Matthew than in Mark and Luke, albeit, the entire passage is the redactional reworking of Mark 11:25, that Matthew has transposed here, having omitted it in his parallel to Mark 11:20-25 (Matt 21:20-22). The observation regarding the reason Matthew placed this here in the gospel is worth reproduction here: “The right of the eschatological community to utter the Lord’s Prayer depends, as does the efficacy of the prayer, upon communal reconciliation. Hence the Lord’s Prayer must be prayed by a church whose members have forgiven one another...” since the *opheiletai* (debtors) “in the Lord’s Prayer are thought of primarily as members of the Christian community.”¹⁹ Note also that apart from the use of the verb *aphiēmi* here, the noun translated as trespasses (transgressions) uses a different word here (*paraptōmata* [vv. 14b & 15b]), instead of *opheilēmata* in 6:12.

Matt 18:35

Preceding our focus text, Matt 18:35, is the parable of the unmerciful servant, a peculiar Matthean episode. The parable is widely recognized as an authentic parable of Jesus. The parable is a drama of three scenes: mercy (vv. 22-27), cruelty (vv. 28-30), justice (vv. 31-34), with an epilogue (v. 35). Here the parable represents the kingdom in terms of the justice of mercy, thus underlining the fact that pardon was an indispensable virtue for the Matthean community. It has been rightly noted that the parable presumes “Jewish concepts about God’s justice and mercy. God is willing to show mercy to sinners, but they must be prepared to show mercy to other people. To those who refuse to be merciful, God will show strict justice.”²⁰ Jesus defines and recaps such strict justice in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (5:7 “Blessed are the merciful; they shall have mercy shown them,” and 7:1-5 “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; because the judgments you give are the judgments you will get, and the standard you use will be the standard used for you...”). It looks like a restructured tit-for-tat, one that has God at one end of it, judging from the divine passives used in these verses, namely, *eleēthēsontai* in v. 5:7, *krithēte* in 7:1, *krithēsethe* and *metrēthēsetai* in 7:2: As you have done, so will be done unto you.

Matt 18:35 spells out the implication and meaning as well as the justice import of the parable preceding it. As the epilogue, verse 35 sounds a threatening note but it plainly identifies the Father, as the key model, whose first characteristic is limitless mercy (vv. 23-27). The Father lays down

¹⁹ Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 1:616-17.

²⁰ D. Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 271.

two firm conditions. The first condition is that humans ask for forgiveness and the second is that they exercise it themselves. Here Jesus makes a categorical and absolute statement on refusal to forgive. It states the fate of the unforgiving person before God.²¹

It is important to cast our glance back at the anterior and posterior contexts of this verse. It is within both that the full meaning and weight of the statement, “And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart,” can be grasped. Note that the heart, in biblical tradition, is the seat and source of well thought-through decisions, as well as the functions of both intellect and affectivity in such decisions, here, stressing the sincerity in the act of forgiveness.

In all these episodes, the point is that injury/offence affects brotherly unity, but forgiveness restores and strengthens it. That is, “without such forgiveness all relationships fail.” Perhaps Matthew sought to buttress this truth by narrating the parable of the unforgiving servant. Already the atmosphere has been created for this parable. Verse 35 appears to define the entire parable by its interpretative and warning tone. This statement of Jesus (Matthew?) indicates a striking and perhaps intentional similarity with Matt 6:12 and 15. “It takes up its language and substance.” In 6:12, the petitioner appeals for forgiveness in comparative terms (...forgive us “as” we forgive those...) with that which he/she gives to others. And Matt 6:14-15 modifies that comparison by a condition. It stipulates giving forgiveness as the condition for receiving forgiveness from the Father (God). It was categorical and absolute. That is, at least, the tone of the expected sense of *aphēkamen* in 6:12; literally translated in the aorist tense as “we have forgiven,” with a proviso that it is sometimes seen as representing a Semitic perfect “which in certain circumstances may have present sense.”²² This Semitic sense informs the liturgical and the predominant translations of the Lord’s Prayer.

The emphasis on forgiveness from the heart underscores the unconditional nature of the demand made on the disciples and the community. Such forgiveness from the heart, according to Davis and Allison, “excludes all casuistry and legalism,” and is also the “antithesis of hatred from the heart (cf. Lev 19.17; Prov 26.24).”²³

Eschatological Overtones of Matt 18:35

The mention of my heavenly Father and the use of the future verb *poiēsei* (he will do/make) strike the eschatological note in the verse. The final “judgment is in view here.”²⁴ However, Matt 18:35 also gives us an insight into Matthew’s understanding of judgment; that is, judgment will be universal and will come on all people, preceded by strange cosmic signs, then the Son of Man will appear with his angels, and world history will end with people ending up either in “eternal life” or “unquenchable fire.” Human behaviour is tied to these eschatological consequences as determinant elements. Good deeds (Matt 5:19; 10:45; and 25:35) will be rewarded with eternal life, while evil deeds and negligence (Matt 7:13; 18:30; 24:49; 25:3) will lead to eternal hell fire. The notion of

²¹ D. Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 270.

²² Max Zerwick, S.J. and Mary Grosvenor, *A grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Unabridged, 4th Revised Ed.; Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993), 16.

²³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical Commentary and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew: Introduction and Commentary on Matthew VIII-XVIII* (eds. J. A. Emerton et al.; The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 803.

²⁴ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:803.

divine justice is in view here, since this also envisages the resolution of the coexistence of both good and evil in the church and in the larger society (see Matt 13:24-30; 36-43; 47-50).

Pastoral Application and the Year of Mercy

In Matthew's view, we face the real danger of losing God's forgiveness "through human unkindness so that one's earlier guilt returns." Judgment "still remains a threat ... that hangs over the heads of disciples," who live without gratitude to God for his mercies by being merciful themselves.²⁵ Read in context, our text roots the goodness of the disciple in the realization that each member belongs to a community where members must renounce power, rank, wealth and self-promotion; one where members must be conscious of their own weaknesses and failures and be quick to welcome all who reach out to them for the good of the entire community.

The Church is thus presented as a community where there are "boundaries of church membership that are marked out by sinful deeds, especially by causing Church members to stumble (vv. 6-9) and by refusing to forgive (vv. 31-35) but not by false doctrine...The expulsion from the Church which Matthew's community knows serves to remind the members of these boundaries, not to minimize or to eliminate sin but to recognize and name it ..." even as "the church ... time and again bursts the boundaries that it is compelled to draw." That is because "seeking the lost (vv.12-14) ... and unending and unlimited forgiveness (vv. 21-22)" are more important than eliminating scandal and closer to the "perfection that the Father desires is 'brotherly admonition rather than expulsion from the church. What is closer to God's own behaviour which is the fundamental model of perfection is only searching, not eliminating—only forgiving, not earthly binding.'"²⁶ And these obligations are both ecclesial (communal) and individual (personal). The parable in Matthew 18 creates the solid link or bridge from the vertical dimension to the horizontal dimension of forgiveness. The one is not independent of the other.

Ulrich Luz points out a pertinent pastoral import of the discourse when he notes:

Essential to Matthew's understanding of community is that, in the perspective of Matthew 18, it is not possible to distinguish between a sin against a sister or a brother, that is, a sin against the community, and a sin against God. Thus human relationships also cannot be of less value than is one's relationship to God. Just as in Matt 5:21-48, it is in living that perfection is revealed, in Matthew 18 it is precisely despising the little ones and refusing to forgive one's fellow members that evokes God's judgment.²⁷

Consequently, just as it was with the Matthean community, Jesus, the lord and teacher of mercy, reminds all disciples of their experience of God's forgiving love and the corresponding obligation to reorient their "lives fundamentally toward the little ones, the community and forgiveness." He continues to stand in the midst of his church and accompany her today in constant reminder for all to imitate his sacrifice that has unbound all from the shackles of sin by unbinding and loosing others.²⁸

²⁵ Luz, *Matthew*, 2:478. See Matt 18:31-34.

²⁶ Luz, *Matthew*, 2:478-79.

²⁷ Luz, *Matthew*, 2:475.

²⁸ See Luz, *Matthew*, 2:279.

Borrowing the Supreme Pontiff, Pope Francis' words, in *Misericordia Vultus*, "Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love."²⁹ This underscores mercy as the primary task of the Church, and following Pope Francis again in the same document, "the Church is commissioned to announce the mercy of God."³⁰

Situating this compassionate love of God in present day context, the Church is called to exude the flavour of God's mercy toward those who "are in most need of His mercy." The Holy Father, Pope Francis, remarks that, "during this Jubilee, the Church will be called even more" to attend to those living on the outmost fringes of society; to heal their "wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care."³¹

Conclusion: So What and Where Do We Go From Here?

The implications of Matt 6:14-15 and 18:15-35 for "life within the Church today are great." Taken together, both texts outline "a clear procedure designed to help the sinner recognize the sin and return to the community." They root "reconciliation and forgiveness of sins in God's mercy," and thus reveal the "foolishness of those who try to set limits on their willingness to forgive others."³² Luz notes that, "judgment is pronounced on the church when it does not practice forgiveness among its members."³³

As this paper comes to its terminus, some important issues continue to beg for the attention of the Church that is the incarnation of God's mercy and love. The following will be of a great consequence for our reflection and in the context of our discussion when viewed in the light of *Misericordia Vultus* that states clearly that:

The Church feels the urgent need to proclaim God's mercy. Her life is authentic and credible only when she becomes a convincing herald of mercy. She knows that her primary task, especially at a moment full of great hopes and signs of contradiction, is to introduce everyone to the great mystery of God's mercy by contemplating the face of Christ. The Church is called above all to be a credible witness to mercy, professing it and living it as the core of the revelation of Jesus Christ. From the heart of the Trinity, from the depths of the mystery of God, the great river of mercy wells up and overflows unceasingly. It is a spring that will never run dry, no matter how many people approach it. Every time someone is in need, he or she can approach it, because the mercy of God never ends.³⁴

This call must be taken even more seriously in the context of the uproar regarding some aspects of Pope Francis' propositions for action in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*.³⁵

²⁹ Francis, *Bull of the Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy Misericordiae Vultus* (11 April, 2015) n. 10

³⁰ Francis, *Misericordia Vultus*, n. 12

³¹ Francis, *Misericordia Vultus*, n. 15

³² D. Harrington, *Gospel of Matthew*, 272.

³³ Luz, *Matthew*, 2:475.

³⁴ Francis, *Misericordia Vultus*, n. 25

³⁵ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, A Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (19 March, 2016).

Some areas that need attention and action in the church include the following:

1. The emphasis on human activity in the reception of divine forgiveness must be given pastoral and homiletic expression in our local churches and communities at all levels.
2. Working with Pope Francis: the exercise of mercy, especially by using the Key of St. Peter to open doors and to unbind those under bondage from extreme legalism and stale traditions.
3. Emphasis on the need for greater cohesion among members of Christian communities, so that they become true sacraments of God's redeeming grace in the world — salt of the earth and light of the world as it were (Matt 5:13-14).
4. The influence of the Church on the civil authorities: the exercise of justice and mercy in order to permeate all aspects of society with the gospel of mercy, a basis for a case for the elimination of the death penalty provisions in state laws may be part of the focus here.
5. The role of the Church in the emergence of NGOs and their roles should be reviewed.
6. Collaborative ministry as an act of justice and mercy should also be a point of focus
7. Another look at the attitude of individuals and the Church towards fallen or failed members and clergy would also be necessary.
8. Sometimes, it seems that there is room only for sanctions and none for mercy, or even justice. This does not reflect the spirit of the gospel of mercy.
9. What is the role of the Church with regards to the matters of justice and mercy- the judicial systems and our prison systems and situations? Active involvement needs to evolve.
10. What about the situation with the prevailing injustice, sanctions and systemic injustice? Now is the time for positive action. That is where mercy lies and the church's prophetic and healing impact must be felt by both individuals and communities in that regard.