

Matt. 18:21-35

18 Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” **22** Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. **24** When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; **25** and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. **26** So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ **27** And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. **28** But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ **29** Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ **30** But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. **31** When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. **32** Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33** Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ **34** And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. **35** So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

THE PROBLEM OF FORGIVENESS

What is forgiveness? Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian message. Each week we proclaim after the confession of sin, “In Jesus Christ We Are Forgiven.” So, what does that mean?

Exactly how does forgiveness change our lives in a practical way? What does it mean when we say in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

That's easy to say but hard to do. There are many misconceptions about forgiveness, and these misconceptions prevent us from hearing and accepting what the Bible has to say about forgiveness.

I ran across a sermon this week by the late Lewis Smedes. Lewis was the professor of pastoral care at Fuller Seminary and sort of specialized in the doctrine of forgiveness. His seminal book was entitled *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*.

There's a reason Lewis was so interested in forgiveness. He had trouble forgetting and forgiving something in his own life. His parents emigrated from the Netherlands, and when he was a small boy his father died.

His mother was left all alone with not much money, very few skills, and five children. Lewis said that practically the day after his father died that she had to scrub other people's floors and take in laundry to put bread on the table.

There were some neighbors that Lewis described as "tough religious people" who counseled his mother on what she should do in this difficult situation. They said that she should break up the family, give two of her five children away. She listened. And since Lewis was the youngest child he was one of the children that were given away.

Lewis resented what this did to him and to his mother. And he spent quite a few years hoping that those people who gave this advice would have bad things happen to them. He had a hard time forgiving this hurt, and it was this struggle that led Lewis to think deeply about the meaning and importance of forgiveness.

I took some time to tell this story because I know that many of you have similar stories. Some of you have been harmed terribly by family members or loved ones. Someone has betrayed you. You have a hard time with forgiveness.

And so when we have a Scripture lesson on forgiveness, especially a passage like the one, a passage that seems to suggest that the possibilities for forgiveness are well nigh limitless, you find it disturbing.

Like Lewis when you hear the message of forgiveness you see the face or faces of those that harmed you, and you don't want to forgive. You want to get even!

I think that many of us have trouble with forgiveness because you have a misunderstanding of what forgiveness really means. Let's look at two of those misunderstandings.

FORGIVENESS FREES US FROM OUR PAIN

Some people think that forgiveness is not fair. Forgiveness is letting someone “get away with murder.” An unbeliever said right before he died, “God will forgive me. He’s in the forgiving business.”

That statement is wrong on two counts. It doesn’t take sin seriously enough, and it doesn’t take God seriously enough. Yes, God is gracious, but the Bible also teaches us that God is just.

In fact quite often the Bible teaches us that we see the grace of God in His justice. God loves us too much to allow us to get away with murder.

I would remind you of last week’s lesson that provides the context for our lesson today. It was all about how we deal with sin by being honest and open about it. We do not hide our hurts. We talk about them with those who have hurt us, and in some cases we judge those who refuse to repent.

So, what do we do in an extreme case? What do we do when someone has committed a terrible wrong against us? How do we deal with it? What does forgiveness mean in that context?

Forgiveness means turning that person who has wronged us over to God. Forgiveness means turning the pain they have caused over to God.

If God wants to take vengeance on that person, that’s God’s prerogative. If God can change the heart of that person and change them into something different, praise God for that.

But, we don’t have to worry about it anymore. The act of forgiveness frees us. As Lewis Smedes put it, “Forgiving is the only way to be fair to yourself... The first person to get the benefits of forgiving is the person who does the forgiving.”

Friends if you want to get rid of that anger and pain in your life, give those hurts to God. Let go and let God might sound like a cliché, but in this case its true. That’s what it really means to forgive.

Trust God to sort out what’s fair in the end. Trust God to give you a new life that is free from the pain caused by the sin of others.

FROM BITTER TO BETTER

The second misconception about forgiveness is related to the first. Forgiving others does not mean that we become their doormats. Forgiving others can only be real if it is done in the context of establishing justice.

Let me give you an example. A four-year-old boy was run over by a drunk driver right in his own front yard. The mother was distraught. For two years she lived in the misery of a blind rage that she harbored against the one who took her child.

Finally she woke up and realized that the drunk who killed her son was also killing her soul, and she was helping him do it. She went to her priest. He listened to her story and told her what she already knew. The only way out of her pain was the journey of forgiveness.

But, the priest had her do something else first. They started a chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers in their town. They made it known that if you forgive a drunk driver it does not mean you must tolerate drunk driving. Sins may be forgiven, but sins also have consequences.

We may forgive those who wrong us in terrible ways, but that does not mean we say that they should escape justice. And it certainly doesn't mean that we will ever forget the pain that the sinner has caused us.

But, we can use that pain to do something positive.

We don't remember the events of September 11 to stoke our anger toward the terrorists. We don't use those events to stoke our anger toward a particular religion or people. We don't remember the events of September 11 to fill our lives with fear about what may happen in the future.

In short, we don't use those events to become bitter about the past. Instead, we use those events to become better in the future.

We remember those events to celebrate the heroes who fought to save lives and those who later lost their lives to protect us. We take a long hard look at those terrible days as a way to remember what is really important in life and how all life is short and precious. We use those events as a way to pull our nation together in a common cause.

One of the great strengths of our country has been the ability over time to forgive, to turn enemies into friends.

I think that this may be the greatest lesson of 911. We will not forget but we will learn to forgive. We will let God take away the pain of our past and establish a new relationship with those who would be our enemies.

It will not be easy. There will be many twists and turns in that journey. But, it is a task that we cannot shirk.

Forgiveness and justice are the hallmarks of a great country, and forgiveness and justice are absolutely essential for those who would be disciples of Jesus.

BALANCING MERCY AND JUSTICE

The hard question is this: How do we balance those two essentials? How do we forgive and yet not forget the victim? How do we balance mercy and justice?

There is no hard and fast rule for doing this.

A phrase we often use is to "forgive and forget." In some cases that may be appropriate.

But, in other cases perhaps the phrase should be to forgive and never forget. When someone tries to kill a whole group of people as was done during the Holocaust, to forgive and forget just doesn't seem appropriate or just. When 3,000 people are killed by some religious nut cases in a misguided holy war, to forgive and forget just doesn't seem appropriate or just.

We must remember especially those occasions when religion was used as a pretext for violence. We must have the courage to confront those who perpetuate that violence and bring them to justice.

But, we must do more. We must challenge their theological assumptions and make sure that we do not unwittingly become what we despise.

You see this problem of balancing forgiveness and accountability is not only a problem for the preacher. It's a problem for each one of you in your daily lives. It's a problem for our current president and our next president. It's a problem for our court system. It's a problem in our schools. It's a problem in our homes.

And if we don't get this balancing act right, we run the risk of either cowardly going along with injustice; or we run the risk of becoming judgmental bigots who can see the speck in our neighbor's eye but cannot see the log in our own eye.

Neither option is acceptable.

I would suggest that there is no hard and fast rule when it comes to the balance between accountability and forgiveness. But, when we are required by circumstances to make a judgment about someone else's sin, to call someone to account for their behavior, it should always be done in the context of God's forgiveness, God's grace toward us.

Before we make a judgment about others we should always ask ourselves, "What am I really like? How much do I owe God? How have I failed God? In what ways has God forgiven me?"

It's been my experience that most of us don't really spend much time really thinking about those questions. Oh, we know the right answers. We might even tell whoever will listen that we save by grace through faith and have no hope except for the salvation of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

But, do we really understand that on a gut level? Do we really understand our own sinfulness? Is grace really amazing for us? Does grace really guide our actions toward others?

THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

Jesus told a parable that helps us answer that question honestly.

It seems that a king decided to conduct his annual audit. One servant had invested in a hedge fund that contained a lot of subprime mortgages, and he lost a lot of money.

In fact he had lost so much money that it really could be characterized as a king's ransom. One commentator suggested that one talent was the equivalent of 15 years of wages. Therefore, 10,000 talents was the equivalent of 150,000 years of wages.

Now when Jesus told this parable it was before the days of golden parachutes. Executives didn't get to walk away from their mistakes with a multi-million dollar retirement back then.

On the contrary, they had something called debtor's prison. The king might not be able to get his money back, but he would certainly extract his pound of flesh ... not only from the servant who owed his money but also from his family as well.

Doing business with the king was like doing business with the mob. He always made you an offer that you couldn't refuse. And mercy was always bad for business.

But, this servant with the insurmountable debt made his pitch for leniency anyway. He begged the king for mercy. He said,

"Look, I know it seems bad now, but I'll pay you back. I'll give you half of my salary and in 300,000 years we'll be even."

What a deal. Those who first heard this story probably thought, "This king is going to kill everyone on the spot."

But, then the first surprise of the parable comes. The king forgives the debt. What the servant could not do for himself the king does for him. I wonder if this might be the first recorded government bailout. Everyone is amazed at the story.

But, the story continues.

The servant leaves the presence of the king and runs into a fellow servant, a subordinate who owes him money. The amount of the debt according to the Scripture is 100 denarii. 100 denarii are equal to about 100 day's wages.

So let's get the comparison straight. This servant owed about a hundred days worth of wages, and the servant who had just had his debt forgiven by the king owed about 150,000 days of wages. That's about 1/500,000 of what the other guy owed.

But, the servant who had been forgiven the king's ransom didn't make the connection. He didn't see how the mercy the king had shown him should be related to how he treated this subordinate who owed him money.

For him business was business, and he did what the law allowed him to do. He threw this guy into debtor's prison.

Fellow servants are watching what this unmerciful servant does. They tell the king. The king is furious and calls the unmerciful servant back into his office and tells him, "You're fired. And not only that you're going to pay back everything you owe."

Of course the unmerciful servant couldn't do that so he spent the rest of his days in the big house. Not exactly a happy ending is it?

But, wait, it gets worse! Jesus turns toward his audience and says, "You will end up like that unmerciful servant if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart."

SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

What is the parable teaching us? It is teaching us that the debt we owe God is much greater than any debt owed us by any human being. Why is the unforgiving servant condemned so harshly? Was his lack of forgiveness the unpardonable sin?

No, his actions show that he has no faith. He does not believe in grace.

And that's the one thing that can separate us from God. That's the one thing that can keep us from knowing the joy of forgiveness. If we do not have faith in the grace of God as revealed in Jesus we choose by our own actions to separate ourselves from the source of hope and salvation.

There was a cartoon that came out years ago concerning the prodigal son. An exasperated father was going down the road to meet his boy and the caption read,

"I'll be glad when this boy grows up; this is the sixth fatted calf I've had to kill this month!"

Peter would have understood that cartoon. He understood the frustration that many of us have with what Jesus seems to be saying about forgiveness. We want to know, "When do we finally say enough is enough?"

Peter wanted some kind of guideline.

And we want the same thing. How much forgiveness is enough? When can we finally wash our hands of someone and just give up?

Can we say three strikes and you're out? Can we be generous like Peter and say that we should forgive people up to seven times?

When Jesus tells Peter that we are to forgive seventy times seven times you can almost see Peter taking out his calculator and saying, "Wow, that means we should forgive somebody 490 times. Who can do that? It's hard to keep score that long."

And then I imagine Jesus saying, "Simon, put up your calculator. This isn't a math problem. This isn't about keeping score. Forgiveness is an attitude. Forgiveness is a way of life. It's a matter of the heart."

Journalist Sydney Harris once wrote, "There's no point in burying the hatchet if you're going to put up a marker on the site."

There are many people who do that. They put up markers to commemorate the wrongs that have been done to them. They are continuously counting up how much everyone owes them.

But, in so doing they are blinded to their own sinfulness, and they separate themselves from the source of grace and forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a journey. Forgiveness is a struggle that began on the cross of Calvary and will not end until the kingdom comes in glory.

But, today God bids us to embark on that journey, to join that struggle and spread the good news.

God is love and if we confess our sins He is faithful and just and will forgive us of all unrighteousness.

Let us learn to live and pray, as we ought. Jesus taught us long ago to how to live and pray. He taught us to say, "Father, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Amen.