

“THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT.”

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June 30, 2013, 10:30AM

Scripture Texts: Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction.

There are many subjects and topics in Scripture that are profoundly personal and practical, some that get to the deepest places in our hearts. The subject before us is one of them, the forgiveness of personal injuries and offenses and sins against us.

We live in a world full of sinners and sin. We sin and we are sinned against. It's impossible to live in this world of ours and escape from being hurt, wounded, offended, insulted, slighted, ill-treated or just plain sinned against.

I have said many times to engaged and married couples that it's impossible to maintain a significant relationship without forgiveness. In every significant human relationship there will be sin. Relationships can't survive without dealing with the sin that comes along.

Not one of us in this room is so perfectly well behaved all the time that we never need to give and receive forgiveness. So to know how to deal with personal hurts and injuries and offenses is a great blessing and benefit to our own souls and to our relationships with those around us.

Our text is about personal offenses and wrongs done against us which are in our power to forgive. This text isn't about crimes, people who break the law must face justice and the consequences.

Let's begin with a simple *definition*. Forgiveness simply means not holding a person's sin against him. It means let it go. Because Christ has forgiven me, I will forgive him.

Matthew 18:21-22.

Thank God for a disciple like Peter who was always asking questions. Even when his questions were off base, they were the catalyst to some of Jesus' greatest teaching.

“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

Give Peter credit that he knows he's supposed to forgive and for thinking seven times is a good number. But notice the natural tendency not to want to overdo this forgiveness thing. After all what happens if someone takes advantage of our kindness?

Jesus' answer is of course shocking to the unprepared ear, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

Jesus says there's no limit to kindness and compassion and forgiveness. In other words, never give up seeking to be reconciled and desiring to clean up interpersonal messes.

How often do you want God to forgive you? What number would you put to that? That's the number to use in forgiving others.

This is not license get away with 77 murders or 77 thefts. Where there are laws and rules they must be obeyed for the good order of society so we don't fall into tyranny or anarchy.

Nor is this license to keep score. If we are counting the number of sins against us, that's pretty clear evidence we haven't been forgiving in the first place.

Jesus is making a general appeal for grace and mercy in our attitudes and relationships. Rather than fall into strife or anger or bitterness, we are to forgive much, overlook much, put up with much, in other words, do unto others as we would want done to us.

The follower of Jesus is to lay aside holding on to our rights, lay aside revenge and retaliation, disputes and quarrels. How different would our world be if more people practiced this? If just all Christians practiced this?

We can by God's grace and the Spirit's power resolve not to return evil for evil, but to return good for evil. We can resolve not to return cursings for cursings, but to return blessings for cursings. We can resolve not to hate our enemies, but to love our enemies, and turn our enemies into friends.

Thomas Cranmer was the Archbishop of Canterbury in England from 1533-1555. He cultivated the grace of mercy that when someone wronged him he would do everything in his power to do good for that person. A saying grew up in England, "Do Cranmer an injury and he will be your friend as long as he lives" (quoted in Thomas Watson, *Beatitudes*, p. 151).

How many of us could do what **Stephen** did. While they were throwing rocks at him to kill him he called out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).

Matthew 18:23-27.

Because it's humanly difficult for us to accept this teaching and especially to practice it Jesus reinforces His teaching by telling a parable with three parts.

A King's incredible kindness, a servant's staggering unforgiveness and the King's just judgment.

A man owes an enormous sum of money, ten thousand talents. A talent was the largest unit of weight. Ten thousand talents weighed twelve tons. At today's gold price of \$1,280 an ounce this would be around half a billion dollars.

We also know from other sources that a denarii was about a day's wages and a talent was a monetary unit worth at least 20 years wages. Ten thousand talents would be over five billion dollars (and that's a conservative estimate).

Here's the point. Jesus doesn't want us to get bogged down in the details of the numbers or how a servant could possibly amass a debt that big. The point is simply that this man had an unfathomably huge debt without any hope of repayment. When the day of reckoning came as it does with all our debts he clearly could not pay.

He begs for patience and he got completely remission of debt. Who would have ever guessed that there would be a King who was so unbelievably compassionate and gracious?

Matthew 18:28-35.

We now turn to Act Two in this great drama. We often think that our forgiveness with God is the end of the story. Sort of like getting saved and then living as you want. But the truth is forgiveness brings responsibility. Forgiveness bears fruit.

This man's heart is exposed. He is blind to his greed and sin and hardheartedness. He obviously loves money more than his neighbor.

There might have been some hint of justification for his actions if he was on his way to debtors prison himself and desperately needed every nickel owed him. But he's debt free.

Our actions toward others are a mirror of what's in our own hearts. Out of the mouth the heart speaks. He doesn't even hear his own words in the mouth of his fellow servant. What are a few denarii compared to ten thousand talents?

Notice the master's response.

If God were to treat us as our sins deserved and as our unforgiveness deserved this is a picture of what it would look like.

Notice forgiveness is all or none. For the penitent the entire debt is forgiven, but when his heart is shown to be impenitent all the debt is his to pay.

For the repentant God forgives all our sins. The blood of Jesus makes complete satisfaction of all our debts. For the unrepentant they will make eternal payment for all their sins in hell.

To be unmerciful and unforgiving and uncompassionate is wickedness. Those who grant no relief will have no relief. They are unworthy of God's gift of forgiveness.

Notice the danger of not being forgiving, it's eternally dangerous to your soul. Don't be a person who says, "I will never forgive him" or "I could never forgive that."

Application and conclusion.

What drives our lack of forgiveness? One of the things is we all have a strong internal moral compass and there are things that happen in our world that are morally repugnant to us, things that are wrong and demand justice.

But one problem is our internal moral compass is marred by sin, none of us is perfectly pure or righteous. And second, none of us is the judge. To hold a grudge or to want to take revenge means we don't trust God to be the judge or we don't want Him to be the judge, we want to take matters into our own hands.

The way we can resolve the internal conflict between justice and forgiveness is for us to leave justice in God's hands. Forgiveness is an act of faith that God will act and make all things right.

Romans 12:19-21 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that when a great offense has committed against you, when a terrible outrage has been done to you? Maybe, you were unjustly treated or fired. You were lied about or slandered. You were abused and no one did anything.

Yes, it's bad. Yes, it's wrong. Yes, it should never have been done. Yes, it can be called wicked or evil. Yes, we can feel a measure of indignation. Yes, it really does deserve to be punished.

But, God says, no, you are not the person to do the punishment, and no, you can't even just mull over and over in your mind what you would like to do or how you would like to get even or balance the scales of justice.

Why? Because God is the only just judge on earth. And when God repays there is no way we could ever improve on His justice or His punishment.

How did Jesus handle the injustice done to Him? No one on this earth was sinned against more than Him? No one on earth suffered more undeserved anger, hatred and vile abuse. No one on earth had more of a right to be angry, bitter or vengeful. What did He do?

I Peter 2:22-23 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

Jesus conquered bitterness and hatred and anger and grudges and desire for vengeance by placing His complete trust and faith in God and in God's execution of righteous judgment in God's time. And He prayed for His enemy's repentance.

Luke 23:34 And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

This is why I said forgiveness is an act of faith. Trusting God as the just judge is how we can turn our attention to loving our enemies and forgiving the terrible offenses against us. We are set free to love and be gracious and kind.

Another think that drives our lack of forgiveness.

"He who has been forgiven little, loves little."

We do well to reflect on how great a debt we have been forgiven for this is good for our own souls, and as a motivation for forgiving others.

Sin is the worst debt in the world because it's against an infinite and holy God. Our sin is against the great King of the universe.

Sin is the worst debt because it's not just one debt but a multitude of debt. And every sin takes us deeper and deeper into debt. We cannot even begin to fathom how great it is. The Psalmist says his iniquities are more than the hairs of his head (Psalm 40:12).

Sin is the worst debt because we have absolutely no means of ever repaying it. We can't even make the minimum interest payments.

Sin is the worst debt because if unpaid it carries us away to the worst prison, eternal hell. The wages of sin is death, bondage in hell.

Do you know how great a debt has been paid? Do you have any clear sense of the magnitude of the forgiveness you have received? Do you think about it? Do you ever whisper a prayer of gratitude and thanks for God's extreme mercy and grace toward you?

Is what God has done for you unspeakably glorious to you? Is your forgiveness one of the greatest treasures you have in this life? Are you truly amazed by God's grace to you?

No grudge or bitterness can survive in a heart fully aware of the great grace of God toward us in the forgiveness of our debt of sin on the cross. If we are holding on to a grudge or a bitterness or a hurt then we have not yet fully tasted the fruit of our redemption and our forgiveness.

If you are feeling anger or hatred or bitterness or great hurt consider the possibility that God is bringing you to a place where you will see the greatness of your own sin more clearly so that you will be stunned by the greatness of His grace.

Once you truly taste and see how great is His love and grace for you, you will have the emotional and spiritual resources to extend a hand to one who has hurt you and forgive them.

This is a parable about grace, about a grace so great that it changes how we look at life and how we live life with others. God gives His grace so freely and fully. All we have is debt, all we bring to God is debt. It is completely up to God to do as He pleases and what pleases Him is to give us grace, grace so great it changes everything.

We have all been inundated with the news about the *George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin* murder trial in Florida. If I was Trayvon's father here's what I would hope I would say.

"We live in a country with about the best judicial system in the world. We live in a country where justice is decided in our courts of law. It's not perfect, it's human, carried out by human judges, human lawyers, and human jurors. Sometimes they get it wrong, this might be one of those times, maybe we can't know for sure.

"But I am sure of this, I would rather live in this country with our rule of law than in a country where justice is carried out by vigilantes on the street, where there is anarchy and tyranny and chaos and where violence rules the day.

"As for George Zimmerman, I say to him as Trayvon's father, that I commit him to God's hands and will let God sort out what is right and wrong. As for me and my house, we forgive George Zimmerman for any wrong or injustice he has done to our family. I do this in the name of Jesus Christ who has forgiven me of far greater offenses and crimes against the holiness of Almighty

God. And I call on all people everywhere to leave justice to our courts and to God, and in so far as it depends on them to live in peace with all people and to never return evil for evil.”

I started out saying that there are few subjects and topics in Scripture that are as profoundly practical and personal as forgiveness. As I have preached this morning if God is merciful to you, He has brought to your mind someone you need to forgive, someone you need to love by letting go of a grudge or an offense or some cause for bitterness.

I urge you today to forgive with all your heart. Show your love for Jesus, show your love for the Gospel. Let others see in you the true nature of your faith.

Don't let the *Lord's Prayer* ever be a curse to you, but let it be a blessing. He taught us to pray this every day to maintain our relationship with God and each other.

Let us close in prayer by praying at Jesus taught us to pray with all our hearts:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.