

## Give the Gift of Forgiveness

*Matthew 18:21-35*

A couple of weeks ago as part of my responsibilities as the chairman of one of our district boards of ministerial standing I joined with three other men to help intervene in a conflict between two men ordained in the Free Church. These are both men who love the Lord and are serving him, but who found themselves in a situation where there had been real hurt between them. Each of them had pursued what he thought was the right course of action in a particular ministry situation. Both of them, however, were hurt by the other's actions. And so there was hurt; there was anger in the heart of each.

Our job that day was to try to discern if either of them had been wrong biblically in what they had done. Ultimately, we did conclude that one of these men really had failed to follow a biblical pattern of dealing with the conflict and our encouragement was for him to acknowledge that not only to the other man, but to the other people who had been affected by his actions. Ultimately, both of these men acknowledge ways that they had hurt the other and asked for forgiveness and both extended forgiveness.

Without a doubt forgiveness made a fresh start possible. Forgiveness meant that a good work in a church did not have to be hindered. Forgiveness meant that a break in a relationship could start to mend. The forgiveness extended that day was a gift.

Before we leave this season of gift giving, I have a question for you . . . is there anyone in your life to whom you need to give one last gift - the gift of forgiveness? Wouldn't forgiveness be a great gift to give to them this Christmas season? Wouldn't the freedom that you would experience by having extended forgiveness be a great way to start a new year?

Over the past four Sundays of Advent, we have been looking at the topic of humility. Today's sermon could easily be the fifth in that series, because our willingness to forgive is one more thing that really flows out of humility. If we are full of pride, we will be less willing to do the work of forgiveness, but if we are humble people then the gift of forgiveness will be something that we will be willing to work towards.

Today, we are going to look at Matthew 18:21-35 to see what Jesus has to say about forgiveness. It all begins with a questions. Look at verse 21:

*<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.*

Peter understood that Jesus had taught the necessity of forgiving a brother (Matt. 6:12), but he wonders how often he is to forgive a brother who sins against him. Some rabbis taught that forgiveness should be extended three times for the same offense, but that there was no forgiveness with the fourth offense. And so, when Peter offers the number seven he is probably thinking that he is being extremely generous.

But Jesus comes back and says *I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven*. The Greek term used here can be taken to mean either *seventy times seven* or “seventy-seven.” In actuality there is no interpretive difference. Jesus is saying that forgiveness should be unlimited.

Then to illustrate the point, Jesus tells a parable. Verse 23:

*<sup>23</sup> "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> "And when he had begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup> "But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. <sup>26</sup> "The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.*

The kingdom of heaven is to be compared to this situation in which a king is settling his accounts with his slaves. One is brought to him who owes him *ten thousand talents*. This was a huge sum of money. Some commentators suggest that the amount would be billions in today's monetary figures.

The point that Jesus is making is that this man owed an amount of money that he could not possibly hope to repay. The text says in verse 25 *he did not have the means to repay*. And because of that the King ordered the man and his family to be sold into slavery and his possessions liquidated. Think about the spot that this man is in. He owes an amount of money that he has no hope of repaying, yet payment is being demanded. An order has been issued that will tear his family apart and everything he owns is going to be sold. He is in a hopeless situation.

And so he falls before his Lord and says, *Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything*. The kind of mercy this man is looking for is an extension of time so that he can repay *everything*. He wants to try to work it out on his own somehow. But the kind of mercy he gets is forgiveness of everything owed. It says his Lord *felt compassion and released him and forgave him his debt*.

What would it be like if tomorrow afternoon you get a knock on your front door and there is a representative there who confirms that you have been released from the responsibility to pay what you owe on your mortgage or on your student loans or on a car loan or on your credit card debt? One moment, you owed a lot of money; now you own your house or your car free and clear. You don't owe any more money on your student loans. Your credit card statement is zeroed out. How would you feel? I know how I'd feel; I'd feel great!

This man was released from a far greater debt than any of that. At one moment, he owed an impossible amount and his family was going to be torn apart. The next moment he owes nothing. He was shown mercy. His debt is forgiven.

Now, remember, Jesus is answering the question of how often one must forgive his brother. And so the parable continues. This slave who is released from his debt also has some accounts to settle. Verse 28:

<sup>28</sup> *"But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' <sup>29</sup> "So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' <sup>30</sup> "He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.*

A denarius was a Roman coin that was roughly equivalent of the daily wage of a general laborer (Matt. 20:1-2). The text says that this slave owed him *a hundred denarii*, which is roughly one third of a laborer's yearly wage. So, it's not a small amount, but compared to 10,000 talents it was nothing.

Clearly the expectation is that in light of the mercy shown to him, this slave should show mercy to those who owe him money. But he doesn't. Instead it says that *he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe'* (v. 28).

His fellow slave, then, makes an appeal – *Have patience with me and I will repay you* (v. 29). The first slave would have been reminded of his own appeal to the king, but it says he was *unwilling* to show mercy (v. 30) and he throws the man into prison until he pays back what was owed.

Verse 31:

<sup>31</sup> *"So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. <sup>32</sup> "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. <sup>33</sup> 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?'*

The king says, "I forgave you 10,000 talents. I showed you mercy. Should you not have forgiven a hundred denarii in light of the mercy you received?" He calls him a *wicked slave* because of his unwillingness to forgive. And then in verse 34 it says:

<sup>34</sup> *"And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.*

At this point the parable ends and Jesus says:

<sup>35</sup> *"So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."*

This is a challenging teaching, right? But we are not miss-hearing Jesus. He said the same thing back in Matthew 6:14-15:

<sup>14</sup> "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup> "But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

What is Jesus saying in these teachings? Some have taken this to mean that our forgiveness from God is earned by our forgiveness of others, but that totally contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture that salvation is by grace not through any merit of our own works. So what does this mean? Blomberg says it this way:

If we have truly experienced God's loving pardon, we will not be able to avoid responding to others in kind (298).

Jesus' point is that if you have truly experienced God's forgiveness, you will be a person who forgives. This is one of the marks of a person living in the kingdom of heaven. But those who find that they are unable to forgive reveal that they have never experienced the forgiveness of God.

Peter's question was, "How often do I need to forgive a brother who sins against me? What's the limit? What's the expectation?" But Jesus' answer is that forgiveness is the character of one who has truly been forgiven. Forgiveness is a state of the heart. As Hendrickson has said, to ask, "How often must I forgive a brother?" is like asking, "How often must I love my wife, my husband, my children?"

So, in response to Peter's question here's the principle that Jesus teaches: We must forgive as we have been forgiven. God is the king. We are the servant who owed 10,000 talents. If you have trusted Christ then God has forgiven you a debt of sin that you could never pay. And God says to us that we must show mercy in the way He has shown mercy to us. We must forgive as we have been forgiven.

In verse 35, Jesus makes it clear what kind of forgiveness he means. He says that it is *from the heart*. In other words, it is real; it is sincere. It's not just words. That is the kind of forgiveness that a genuine believer offers to others because we forgive as we have been forgiven.

Are you a person who forgives? Is there anyone you need to forgive? Now, you might be thinking in your heart, "Brian, if you only knew what this person did to me, you would understand why I can't forgive them." The question I have for you is, is it really an issue of "I can't" or is it an issue of "I won't"?

If you CAN'T forgive - in other words, if you are saying it is just not possible - then don't fool yourself and say things to yourself like: "I go to church. I read my Bible. I serve in this ministry or that. I know God." Jesus warns us in this passage that if you CAN'T forgive you do not know the forgiveness of God. You haven't experienced it. If you can't forgive then you need to throw yourself on the mercy of God and ask Him to forgive you for your sin on the basis of Christ's death on the cross. You need to experience His forgiveness.

I'm guessing that for most of us the issue is not really, "I can't," but "I won't" or at least "I don't want to." We have the ability to forgive, but we choose not to. Sometimes in these situations we do what some call "injustice collecting," which is a kind of mental collection of all the mistakes and wrongs of another. When that list gets long enough, we feel we have a right to feel angry. We feel that our own hostility and malice towards a brother or sister in Christ is justified because of what they have done. And as we stare at the mental list we say, "Why should I forgive her? Look at what she has done." And we chose not to forgive. Not because we can't, but because we won't.

As hard as it might be, Jesus says that we must forgive as we have been forgiven. This is a choice you can make. Of course it will not be easy. There have been real hurts; real offenses. The second slave here did owe a hundred denarii. There was a real debt. But you have been forgiven the 10,000 talents and because of the height, and depth, and breadth and width of God's forgiveness of you, you can forgive. You must forgive as you have been forgiven.

At this point it might be good to ask the question, what is forgiveness? Forgiveness on the human level is similar to Divine forgiveness though obviously never as perfect on a human level. Verse 27 gives us some insight:

*<sup>27</sup> "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt."*

First, forgiveness is about releasing someone from an offense. It's not that you act like nothing happened. No, you acknowledge that a real offense did happen, but you choose to release the other person from his offense. You make a commitment to never use the sin or hurt against the offender again. When you forgive you choose to stop playing the offense over and over in your mind. You stop using the offense to justify your anger or bitterness at them. You let it go.

Second, forgiveness is often more of a process than an event. Sometimes it is something that has to be fought for by faith. You might feel like you have forgiven a person for a wrong and yet at a later time the issue reappears in your mind and you are confronted with the hurt again. At that point there is the need to continue to choose to forgive. In other words, the battle to forgive might not be fully won on one occasion. It may take time. It's a process.

Third, forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean that you will forget the offense. Sometimes it is not wise to forget the offense. If an employee stole money from you, you can forgive him, but you might not let him have the same access to money without a different accountability system. But often as we forgive the memory of an offense, it fades with time.

So forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean we forget, but on the other hand forgetting doesn't necessarily mean we have forgiven either. Sometimes we have been sinned against and we don't chose to forgive them. Over time, however, the offense is no longer on the front pages of our mind. It is sort of forgotten. But when that person of-

fends us again that first offense is right there in our minds again because we never forgave them.

A number of years ago, there was a friend of mine who offended me. It was a situation in which I felt betrayed by him and hurt in a lot of ways. I'm not going to go into the details of what happened, but essentially our relationship was broken. Initially, we worked to try and mend the relationship and at some level that was very helpful. But the reality is that because I no longer saw him regularly; in fact I hardly ever saw him, the hurt of the offense sort of faded with time. Out of sight, out of mind. But from time to time, I will run into him or his wife or even just see him across a store and I realize that there is something deep still going on in my heart. I have forgotten more than forgiven. I need to keep pressing towards forgiveness in this situation.

We need to be careful that we do not think we have forgiven something just because we have forgotten it. That does not fulfill God's expectations of forgiveness.

Finally, forgiveness is something that usually starts with a choice of faith not a feeling. So, don't wait until you feel like it to begin the work of forgiving. If you have been hurt, it is not likely that you are going to feel like forgiving them. It is something that you will need to do by faith. We choose to forgive. And often in doing so, the feelings of forgiveness follow along.

Yesterday we celebrated the amazing truth that God became man; He entered our world through the birth of Jesus Christ. We give gifts to celebrate God's gift of this Child. This Child grew up and as a man, he fulfilled the purpose for which he came to earth - he died on a cross for our sin. He made our forgiveness possible. The Apostle Paul writes this about our forgiveness in Col. 2:13

*And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, (In other words, when you owed a debt that you could never repay) He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions,*

Lord, how often do I need to forgive my brother who sins against me? Forgive as you have been forgiven. Is there anyone that you need to forgive? Will you? Give the gift of forgiveness. There is no gift that would honor more the birth of Christ than the gift of forgiveness.