

The Love That Forgives
Matthew 18:21-35
East Liverpool First Nazarene
August 3, 2008

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Forgiving someone who's wronged us is one of the most difficult things a human being will ever do. In fact, it's so difficult that some will never do it. But let me assure you; while it may be difficult, it's not impossible. In fact, it's very possible, if you're willing. And that's the main problem. Too many are not willing. They'd rather hold on to their unforgiveness their whole life long, and drag it with them right into eternity. The tragedy though is that it weighs so much that it will drag them down, away from the beauty and blessing and joy of heaven.

Jesus doesn't want the last word to be confrontation but forgiveness. What is God's purpose for church discipline? He wants people to repent and be restored, forgiven and forgiving.

We saw last week that the phrase "against you" does not appear in the best New Testament manuscripts, that is, the earliest ones. It was apparently added later. A scribe has been known to write something in the margin which later is inadvertently placed in the text itself. It was not intended but it happened. Something like that happened with the phrase "against you" in v. 15.

But that phrase does appear here in verse 21, spoken by Peter, as "against me." **Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? (v. 21).** Here Peter does what people often do, look for the floor and make it the ceiling. They look for the minimum and make it the maximum. Peter seems more interested in discovering how few times he has to forgive someone who's wronged him.

Peter's so proud of himself. Up to seven times? The rabbis had discussed it and concluded that three would probably be enough. But Peter gives himself some wiggle room. Surely seven times is way more than is really necessary. That's more times than my colleagues would even think about forgiving. Seven times! Boy, am I good or what?

Jesus' answer surely surprised him. **I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times (v. 22).** Did you know the gospel has so much math in it? The Scriptures often pay attention to numbers. There's the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus fed them with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. Actually there were probably more than 10,000 since only the men were counted. That's what you call multiplication! Then the disciples picked up 12 basketfuls of leftovers. Sometime later with 7 loaves of bread and an unspecified number of fish, Jesus provided lunch for 4,000. The people ate all they wanted and still there were 7 basketfuls leftover.

In Mark 8 Jesus is very much interested in all these numbers. He questions the disciples about them, trying to get them to understand their spiritual significance.

Seven is an important number in Scripture, the number of perfection. Here in Matthew 18 a form of it is used four times. But here the numbers are not really that important. Actually any number would do. Five, eight, 12, 27. Peter could have used the number 9. How many times must I forgive, Lord, up to nine times? And Jesus could have answered not nine but 99 times.

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The point is there is no limit on the number of times forgiveness should be given. Forgiveness should be given as often as forgiveness is needed.

Peter's question shows that he's learned something from Jesus. Peter wants to be a person who forgives often. He's at least learned that from Jesus. But his question also shows that he still had a lot to learn. His question indicates that you can take a good thing too far. Even forgiveness, as good as it is, has its limits. We should forgive often but not forever. After all, isn't God's forgiveness limited? Isn't that the reason for Judgment Day? Hasn't Jesus, by his instruction in church discipline, shown the need for judgment?

Yes, but when someone repents God is always ready to forgive. And we should be no less generous with our forgiveness toward those who sin against us.

Here Jesus gives a two-sentence sermon and a 17-sentence illustration. The sermon is in verses 22 and 35 and the illustration in verses 23-34. The illustration shows why Jesus expects our forgiveness to be unlimited.

A man owed the king ten thousand bags of gold (v. 24). Exactly how much gold is that? The Greek text says ten thousand **talents**. How much was a talent? A single talent was worth about 20 years of a day laborer's wages. This man owed his king ten thousand talents. In today's terms it would be several million dollars, an impossible amount.

This is the first of several impossibly huge elements in this story. Another is the king's willingness to forgive that huge debt without condition. Another is the heartless attitude of the debtor who'd just been forgiven. And finally there's the horrible punishment. This is not the only time that Jesus uses **hyperbole**, great exaggeration in order to prove a point.

As Jesus sees it every single human being has amassed a huge debt before God that they can never pay. Are we that bad, Pastor? According to Jesus, we're bad to the bone. Most would never admit it or paint humanity in such dark tones. But the gospel tells us the truth about ourselves.

So since the man cannot pay what he owes the king, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt (v. 25). The first undeniable truth about us is that we are deeply indebted to God. The second is that we cannot possibly pay off the debt.

Faced with such an overwhelming debt **the man fell on his knees before his master. Be patient with me, he begged and I will pay back everything (v. 26).** Now how was he ever going to do that? It would take him several lifetimes and all he had was only what was left of one.

The king is moved by his servants' response. It's a three-fold response, he falls to his knees, reveres his master and begs for mercy. The man's master himself responds in a three-fold manner. **He takes pity on the man, he cancels the debt and he releases him from prison (v. 27).** But the man's three and the master's three are nowhere near equal. The master's three are worth infinitely more than the man's. The debtor asked only for patience and the chance to repay the loan. What did he get in return? Amnesty and his debt were completely cancelled.

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We owe God an impossibly huge debt, so huge that we can't possibly pay it off. But much to our surprise God forgives us completely.

So here Act 1 in the drama of mercy is at an end. People sometimes have the idea that when the first act is finished the whole drama is over. When we've received God's gracious forgiveness, then the drama is finished. Not according to Matthew and not according to Jesus. Forgiveness is no doubt the beginning, but not the ending. This gospel teaches that the forgiven have a responsibility and what it is.

So the man in impossibly huge debt to the king is forgiven his entire debt and set free. But. . . and what a contrast follows. It's unimaginable. That very servant, that very forgiven servant, that very forgiven and released servant turns right around, finds a debtor of his own and does the unthinkable. He treats him just the opposite of what he'd been treated.

The forgiven debtor's servant owes him 100 denarii. How much is that? A denarius, recall, was the daily wage of a day laborer. In today's terms this man owed his master only a few dollars. Compared to his creditor's debt, what this man owes is an insignificant amount. It's negligible.

Well, since the first was forgiven so much, it's going to be easy for him to forgive so little. He received such great mercy; he'll show great mercy. Surely. But no. He grabs his servant and begins to choke him. **Pay back what you owe me! he demanded (v. 28).**

He knows what to do. It was done to him, for him. He knows to forgive his servant's debt. But he refuses to forgive him. Instead he has him thrown into prison until he can pay back the debt. Did he learn nothing from his own experience? On another occasion Jesus says that **whoever has been forgiven little loves little (Luke 7:47)**. But hasn't this man been forgiven much? Yes, but he appreciates it little.

Then as he himself had done, his servant falls to his knees and begs him, **Be patient with me and I will pay you back (v. 29)**. These words should sound familiar to the debtor-turned-creditor; in desperation he'd spoken them himself to his creditor. I guess he'd too soon forgotten his own desperate condition and plea for mercy. **But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt (v. 30)**. Unbelievable! How can someone forget so quickly? How could anyone who'd been treated so graciously act so unmercifully? He fails to appreciate the king's forgiveness in the past. He also fails to fear the king's judgment in the future.

Well, all this doesn't go unnoticed by the king's other servants. They go to him and report what they saw happen. Why? Because they were mad? No, they were sad, distressed. This can't help but remind us of the disciplinary process we saw outlined last week. Disciples are not angered but saddened when one of their own is sinned against. So they go before their Lord in the church.

Were not these servants judging their fellow-servants? Call it what you will; flagrant violations of God's commandments must be addressed. Failure to bring this to the king's attention by staying neutral or looking the other way, would have been a violation of love, both

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to the sinned-against and to the sinning one. The Christian congregation that fails to discipline fails to love.

How then did the master respond to the news brought to him? **He called the servant in. “You wicked servant,” he said, “I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” (vv. 32-33).** He didn’t require of him some impossible task. He didn’t ask him to do something beyond his ability to do. All he asked was for his servant to **give** what he himself had **received**. And all God asks from us is that we pass on the forgiveness we’ve received from him.

We can withhold forgiveness, but there’s a consequence. **In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed (v. 34).** Pay back all he owed? Could he ever do that, pay back all he owed? Never, not in a million years. What we see here is not purgatory but hell.

Paul writes that **God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable** (Romans 11:29), in other words cannot be taken back. Some would say this means that once God calls someone into salvation he would never later abandon them. But this parable puts the lie to that belief. The servant was forgiven, but refused to forgive and is therefore judged unworthy of heaven.

With verse 35 Jesus finishes his sermon, **This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart.**

We Christians live between the cross and the throne, between the cross of Christ where we were forgiven and the throne of Christ where we will be judged. If we who have received forgiveness refuse to give it, it will not go well with us on Judgment Day.

We know the present consequences of withholding forgiveness. We know what happens to someone when they refuse to forgive. They suffer the effects in their bodies. Such anger eats a person up inside. It affects all of life. It hinders all of life’s relationships. It shrinks and shrivels the heart. But none of that is Jesus’ point in this parable. His point is that failing to give the forgiveness we’ve received leads inevitably to judgment and eventually eternal loss. Are you willing to deny forgiveness and lose your Master’s final approval?

Chrysostom, the early church father, asks a searching question: **When we refuse to forgive someone and persist in that unforgiveness, we thrust the sword into ourselves. What wrong has anyone who has grieved you inflicted on you, that can compare to the grief that you will bring on yourself by keeping your anger in mind and bringing down on yourself God’s sentence of condemnation?**

How deep must our forgiveness go? All the way to the bottom of the heart. Jesus forever does away with statements like: ***I will forgive, but I will never forget.*** Or ***I will love her but I don’t have to like her.*** More than one person has said to me, ***I do forgive them, but. . .*** And what comes after that “but” shows that they really haven’t forgiven them. You can always tell when forgiveness has really been given. The forgiver says simply, ***I forgive them.***

Someone else may be more honest and say, ***But, I just can’t forgive them.*** No, you can, if you will. What you’re really saying is ***I won’t forgive them.*** We have a choice. We’re free to choose forgiveness or unforgiveness.

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Lisa attended our church in Manhattan, Kansas and Jan was having a Bible study with her. But one week she called and said that wouldn't be able to attend the study that week; she'd gone home from work sick. She had a headache, upset stomach and a fever. The next Sunday she told Jan what caused her to be sick that day. It was because of something a co-worker had done to her. She'd treated her unjustly. Friday morning the lady went to Lisa and apologized. But Lisa was still very angry. Her immediate reaction, she said, was to withhold forgiveness. *After what she did to me, I'm not about to forgive her*, she thought. But immediately the Holy Spirit reminded her; Jesus had forgiven her all her sins even though she didn't deserve it. And that forgiveness demanded that Lisa pass it on to her co-worker. And in that moment she made a decision; she decided to forgive, from the bottom of her heart.

In 2004 Tim Nichols and Craig Wiseman wrote a song for country music singer, Tim McGraw. The song was voted the number one country song for 2004 and McGraw won a Grammy as Best Country Vocal Performance by a male. The song is called, *Live Like You Were Dyin'*. It's about a man in his early '40s who's diagnosed with a terminal illness. Since he knows he's dying, he decides to do some things he'd always wanted to do, but never got around to, maybe because he didn't want to take the risk. He also decides to improve relationships important to him, including his wife.

But the two most important things he does are to begin reading the Bible and to forgive people he's held grudges against. Or as he says, since he knew he was dying', he decided to give forgiveness he'd been denyin'. The chorus ends with a wish, *Someday I hope you get the chance to live like you were dyin'*. Let's watch and listen to that song.

(Show Video)

The truth is that each one of us is getting that chance. Each one of us is indeed dying. But are we living like it?

Is there someone you've been denying forgiveness to? Is there someone you need to forgive? When will you decide to give what you've been denyin'? Why not make that decision today?

Communion

We are able to forgive others for their offences against us because Christ has forgiven us for our offences against him. Our rebellion against God sent Jesus to the cross. Yet he is willing to forgive us without condition. The offences of others against us will never compare to our offences against him. Based on that we can forgive what others do to us.

As we receive the body and blood of Jesus this morning, we are thankful that he forgave us. As we receive these elements now, let's forgive those who've hurt us. Who do you need to forgive today? Then do it, as you receive the body and blood of your merciful Lord.