

17<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pent.  
October 9, 2011

Forgive Each Other

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Matthew 18:21-35

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“I can never forgive you for what you’ve done!”

Who says these words and why? Is it a wife speaking to her husband just after she found out he has been cheating on her? Is it a man addressing the drunk driver who killed his child in an accident? Or might the circumstances be less dramatic? A person discovers her “friend” has been blabbing secrets that had been shared in confidence.

Can you think of circumstances in your life when you have said those words... or at least felt like saying them?

In our sermon this morning we want to consider what God tells us about forgiving others. We will answer the questions, “Is there a time when I don’t have to forgive someone? How many times must we forgive? What if someone intentionally does something bad to me? Do I still have to forgive him?”

The answers to these questions are found in **Matthew 18:21-35**.

**Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. “Then the master 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?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”**

Jesus had just told his disciples prior to this, what one should do if his brother sins against him. That was last week’s sermon. Confront... in love. Peter now asks a follow up question about this topic of forgiveness. He asks, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Undoubtedly, Peter thought he was being very generous by suggesting a person should forgive another **seven** times. The religious leaders of his time said that you only had to forgive a person three times.

Jesus quickly shows Peter that forgiveness is not something with limitations. He says, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Now Jesus of course didn’t mean we should keep a record of the number of times we forgive someone, and when we reach 77 we should stop forgiving. Jesus’ point was to show that we should forgive without end.

In fact, forgiveness is a state of heart and an attitude, just like love. It is not something with limitations. No one would ask, “How many times, or how long should I love my children?” We should **always** have an attitude of love toward our children. The same is true of forgiveness. There is no limit to our forgiveness. Jesus directs us to always have a forgiving attitude toward others.

To illustrate what he was saying, Jesus told a parable. Jesus tells of a king who was settling accounts. A man who owed 10,000 talents was brought to the king. How much is 10,000 talents? One source states that ONE talent is the equivalent of 26 years wages for a common laborer. This man owed 10,000 talents! This was an unbelievably huge debt that he could not have paid back in a hundred lifetimes.

The King rendered a verdict. The man was guilty and without excuse. The judgment was severe. All the man owned would be sold, and he and his family would be sold into slavery.

But the man pleaded with the king, “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” The man didn’t try to explain his actions, or make excuses. In desperation he pleaded that the king be patient, and he promised something he could never possibly do. . . pay back the king.

And how did the king react? “The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.” The king’s emotions were moved and he had compassion. Certainly the foolish servant had done nothing to warrant this compassion. It was the king’s own undeserved kindness which moved him to forgive this servant’s massive debt. The king simply let the man go. There was no plan formulated for partial repayment of the debt, no obligations, and no conditions. The gracious king simply forgave the entire debt.

We can imagine how we might feel to have such an incredible debt relieved. But here the story takes an unexpected turn. “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.”

Far from rejoicing in the king’s compassion, this man goes out and finds a fellow servant who owed him money. A denarius is about a day’s wages, so this wasn’t an insignificant debt. But it certainly was manageable and something that could be repaid within a year.

And how does he treat him? “He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.” **First** he goes and grabs him and chokes him. **Then** he asks the man for full payment. Note that he doesn’t approach the man and kindly ask if he could repay. He violently and without mercy demands immediate and full repayment.

The fellow servant responded with words we’ve heard before. “Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.” Surely this plea must have reminded the man how he had pleaded with the King just a short time earlier.

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.” Because of the size of the debt, the servant could not be sold into slavery. Instead he would be thrown in prison until the debt was paid. The man who had experienced the gracious mercy of the king, showed no mercy for his fellow servant.

“When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.” The king’s servants couldn’t stand to see the

king's generosity and kindness taken for granted. They felt the Master needed to know of this man's cruel insensitivity and indifference toward the king's gift.

"Then the master 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?'" The King reminded the servant of his mercy. In essence he asked, "Isn't it your lasting obligation out of gratitude to forgive the debts of others as I forgave you?" The wicked servant could offer no defense.

"In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed." The master repeals his earlier sentence of forgiveness. He sentences the man to a punishment reserved for only the cruelest of criminals . . . torture. For how long? "Until he should pay back all he owed." As we said earlier, this man's debt was so great he could never pay it back.

Then Jesus drops the bomb: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Now let's take a moment and apply this parable more directly to our lives. Just as that servant had a gigantic debt which he owed the King, each of us have a tremendous debt which we owe the heavenly Father. Of course, we don't owe him money, we owe him for our sins. Each of us daily sins against our heavenly Father. And yet I think we often fail to appreciate the immensity of our debt to God. We fail to recognize the greatness of our sin.

The Bible tells us that just **one** sin is enough to make us guilty before God in James 2:10, "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point, is guilty of breaking all of it." And yet each of us must confess to breaking God's laws countless times. In fact when we simply consider how we have failed to forgive as we should, we must recognize the tremendous debt our sins have accrued.

There will come a time when we must stand before our righteous Creator, and give an accounting for our life. God will open a scroll with your name on it. On this scroll all of your sins are recorded. What will you say as that scroll is unrolled and there are so many sins recorded that the scroll is several miles long?

How can we repay God for our huge debt of sin? Frankly speaking, we can't. We can't begin to make up for all of our sins against God. And like the servant before the king, we have nothing we can say in our defense. We stand before the Perfect Creator of the Universe with empty hands, no means with which to make up for our debt of sin, and no excuse.

Like the servant before the king, we have only one option. We fall at his knees and we plead for mercy. Standing before God the perfect judge, we must confess with the Psalmist, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? (Ps. 130:3)"

The payment for sin is not cheap. Paul says, "The wages of sin is death." But this is where the story takes an unexpected turn. Yes, God is just and must confront sin. But he is equally compassionate and full of grace -- ready to forgive sins. Instead of giving us what we deserve, God our merciful Father forgives us our entire debt of sin. He doesn't forgive the greater part and expect us to pay off the rest. He doesn't forgive as long as we meet certain conditions and requirements. He simply forgives us. He sets us free from the guilt of our sin.

How can God forgive us and still be just? He forgives us because the wages of sin **have** been paid for. . . not by us, but by God's own Son, Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross, he died an innocent man. He was sinless. Yet he died for a reason. For on himself Jesus was carrying the sins of the world. When he died, he paid the wages of all sin through his death.

So imagine once again that you are standing before God. Imagine that big long scroll with your name at the top with all your sins enumerated. As you watch you see God take a big stamp and at the bottom of your list he stamps in red: "PAID IN FULL BY THE BLOOD OF JESUS." God then rolls up your scroll and burns it, never to be looked at again. God smiles at you and says, "Welcome to heaven my child!"

This is the incredible debt of sin that has been forgiven us. Fully realizing what God has forgiven us, how can we now **not** forgive others? Compared with our sins against God, our sins against each other are mere trifles.

We saw what the wicked servant did when he left the throne room of the king. What will we do as we leave the throne room where this amazing act of forgiveness has just taken place? Will we find the man who has sinned against us, grab him and choke him, and demand full payment for the wrong he has done us? May this never be!

At the beginning of this sermon, I told you we'd answer several important questions. (1) "Is there a time when I don't have to forgive someone? Jesus tells us, "no." We are always to forgive. (2) How many times must we forgive? Jesus says **always** forgive without limitations, just as God has forgiven us. And (3) what if someone intentionally does something bad to us. Or worse yet, what if they deliberately sin against us and don't want our forgiveness? Again, regardless of circumstances, we are to have an *attitude* of forgiveness. The child of God holds no grudges and keeps no record of wrongs. God will deal with an unrepentant person.

Now this doesn't simply mean that you utter with your mouth, "you're forgiven" even though you really don't mean it. When I was a child, my sister and I often fought with each other. My Mom would stop us and say. "Give each other a hug and say you're sorry." In essence she was telling us to become friends and forgive each other. So with an angry look on our faces, we would give each other a hug which lasted about half of a second, and mumble without the slightest hint of sincerity, "I'm sorry." Is that the kind of forgiveness Jesus wants us to offer? Of course not. At the end of the parable, Jesus said, "forgive your brother from the heart!"

Now you're thinking, "But that's so difficult!" Maybe you can even think of a specific example in your own life of a person you just can't forgive. If this is the case, take a moment, and reflect on your own sins. Be honest as you think of your countless offenses before God. Have you realized just how undeserving you are of God's forgiveness? Now smile and rejoice as you remember the full and unconditional forgiveness he has given you through Jesus Christ. Is it still hard to forgive that person? I don't think it will be.

Knowing how God has forgiven us, may we never say or even think the words, "I will never forgive you for what you you've done." Instead may we always do what the apostle Paul said in our second lesson today: (Ephesians 4:32.) "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you." Amen.