

"What Do We Owe?"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV)

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."

CLASSIC PEANUTS

In a classic Peanuts cartoon Lucy goes from person to person saying, "Sign this. It absolves me from all blame." Snoopy the dog is too smart to sign a document like this, but as always Lucy manages to snooker the rest of the crew.

Little Linus signs because he doesn't know any better. And finally Lucy gets around to Charlie Brown. She says, "Sign this. It absolves me from all blame." And Charlie Brown replies, "I don't understand." And Lucy growls, "Just sign it Charlie Brown."

So Charlie signs and Lucy gloats, "No matter what happens any place or any time in the world this absolves me from all blame." To which Charlie replies, "That must be a nice document to have."

Some people interpret today's passage in this way. Forgiveness is unlimited. It's like getting

people to sign a document that says, "I absolve you of all blame." It's like saying, "God will forgive us. He's in the forgiving business."

That might be a good document to have. But, it's not that simple.

DANGEROUS PREACHING

Preaching is a dangerous business. Sometimes it's dangerous because God's word is not the word we want to hear but the word we need to hear. The Bible is filled with examples of people who suffered because they dared to preach God's word, and even today the preacher that dares to preach an unpopular word might be in trouble.

But, that's not the only reason preaching is dangerous. Preaching can be dangerous because we often misinterpret and oversimplify what God is trying to tell us. Today's passage is a case in point. It has often been misinterpreted and oversimplified.

Jesus tells us to forgive 77 times or 7 times 70. That's a lot of forgiveness. And let me be honest about this. In some cases that can be 77 times too much. This past week we remembered the horrific act of terrorism that occurred on September 11, 2001. Is unlimited forgiveness an effective or even appropriate response to a despicable act like this?

ACCOUNTABILITY AND FORGIVENESS

If I were on the board that develops the lectionary readings I would pair last week's text with today's text. Now I know why they didn't do it. That would make the Scripture reading too long. But, it is irresponsible to preach today's lesson about unlimited forgiveness and make no mention of the passage which precedes it.

Do you remember last week's sermon? (If you don't remember let me refresh your memory.) That lesson was all about accountability. When someone sins it is not ignored or forgotten. The sin is named and discussed. In some cases it may be appropriate for the two aggrieved parties to work it out on their own. But, in some cases this is not appropriate at all. Sometimes it's appropriate to get the whole community involved.

Guess what I'm going to do if I hear of a case of possible child abuse? I'm going straight to the police. Guess what I'm going to do if a woman tells me her husband is abusing her? I'm going to tell her to leave, I'm going to help her find a safe place to stay and I'm going to help her find a lawyer so that she can take out a restraining order.

Forgiveness is important in the Christian community, but accountability is also important.

What the Bible has said about forgiveness has often been used to justify the worst of crimes. That's why judges often "light up like a Christmas tree" when a defendant claims to have found Jesus. They know from experience that people often use religion in an attempt to obtain a get out of jail free pass.

But, this is not what Jesus is saying in his comment about forgiving 77 times.

We cannot talk about peace without also talking about justice. We cannot talk about

salvation without also talking about judgment. Forgiveness begins with truth telling. Forgiveness begins with accountability. As a person rightly pointed out at our Bible study, the Old and New Testaments are filled with instances in which a person is judged (sometimes rather harshly) for breaking the laws of God. Accountability has always been a part of the biblical story.

Now, of course once again we see what a delicate balancing act preaching can be. If we over emphasize those passages of judgment we tend to become judgmental and self-righteous. And we conveniently forget passages like the one we read today that seems to suggest that the forgiveness of God is well nigh inexhaustible.

So what's a preacher to do? The answer is not either/or. The answer is both/and. The gospel is about accountability and forgiveness. The gospel is about peace and justice. The gospel is about judgment and salvation. In God's kingdom these are two sides of the same coin. As one of my professors used to put it, "In God's judgment, God loves. In God's love, God is just."

FORGIVE AND NEVER FORGET

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 especially remember 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.

HOW MUCH DO WE OWE?

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?

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.

But, the story is still not over.

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." I told you preaching can be dangerous. And listening to preaching can be dangerous as well.

THE MIRACLE OF FORGIVENESS

Now we may be able to do what faith requires. We might be able with great effort to forgive certain sins. But, it is a much more difficult task to forgive from the heart.

My heart is often not in it when the time comes to forgive and forget. I might say that I forgive because I know that it is required. I might say that I forgive because I know what this passage teaches.

But, can I ever really forgive from my heart? That would take a miracle. Fortunately, God is in the miracle business, and the greatest miracle the world has ever seen is this miracle of forgiveness, a miracle that was first seen on the cross of Calvary when he man prayed for the people who were crucifying him, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

And the miracle continues. Let me give you a couple of examples of how forgiveness can change things.

When the Civil War ended a group gathered at the White House. President Lincoln came out to say a few words to the crowd. It was a time of great celebration. The people were exuberant that the long war was finally over. Lincoln talked about how important it was to forgive, to get back together and heal the nation's wounds. He said, "In a few moments I want the band to play, and I am going to tell them what to play."

The crowd thought that they knew what was coming. The Battle Hymn of the Republic had become their righteous theme song in this long conflict, and they shouted for that song to

be played.

But, Lincoln said, "I wonder if we, in winning the war, have the right to play the music again ... if maybe that's not appropriate." He turned to the band and said, "Now this is what I want you to play. I want you to play Dixie."

The band almost dropped their instruments. They were in total shock and for a while looked at one another in disbelief. They didn't know how to play Dixie. So, after a long pause they band finally found the music and played Dixie. There was not a dry eye in the place.

Forgiveness is like learning to play music we never thought we could play and sing songs we thought we could never sing.

That first example of forgiveness came from the time of the Civil War and the second example comes from the time when people struggled for civil rights.

In the 1950s a little African American girl by the name of Ruby was the first to integrate the public schools in Biloxi, Mississippi. It was a very difficult situation, and a child psychiatrist by the name of Robert Coles went down to Mississippi to help this little girl deal with this traumatic situation.

Every day Ruby would walk to school with Federal Marshals who would escort her through an angry mob of protestors. Dr. Coles was quite concerned about what effect this would have on little Ruby. He knew as a psychiatrist that she would probably have trouble eating, sleeping and carrying out her normal routine.

But, every time he would interview her and ask, "Are you having trouble sleeping?" She would reply, "I'm sleeping just fine." Coles was not convinced he was getting the whole truth so he continued, "I bet you aren't eating too well are you?" And little Ruby would answer, "Oh, I'm eating just fine."

Finally one day Dr. Coles learned the secret of Ruby's seemingly strong mental state. A teacher said that one day she noticed that Ruby seemed to be talking to herself when she walked through the angry mob every morning. Dr. Coles asked her what she was saying as she walked through that line of angry people.

She told him, "I say, Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

What does the Bible say? A little child shall lead them? Not everyone can sing, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." Not everyone can say, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

But, as followers of Jesus Christ we are called to sing that song and say those words. We are called to believe in our hearts that such a miracle is possible. We don't trust in our power to forgive. We believe in the miracle of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ and the power of His Spirit to change our lives even today.

PRODIGAL CARTOON

There was a cartoon that came out years ago concerning the prodigal son. And 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?

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."

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 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.

Amen.

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