

Sinners Saved by Grace

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Matthew 18:21-35

21 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.”

FORGIVENESS IN THE CHURCH

“If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” How would you answer that question? You probably would want to know more details.

You might ask, “What has that person done to you? Did you do anything to provoke that reaction? Have you prayed about it? Have you talked to the

pastor about this? Here, let me give you his number. Talk with him about this. I'm sure he would like to hear all about it."

We talk a lot about forgiveness in the church, but we like to talk about it in general terms. On the other hand, when we get specific about forgiveness, when we ask, "Should I forgive this particular person?" then the conversation becomes uncomfortable.

Peter's question was not about forgiveness in general. Peter's question was about forgiveness in the church, the community of faith. How many times are we required to forgive that church member who has sinned against me?

Peter's question is not theoretical. Peter's question is personal. Peter is not worried about forgiveness in general. Peter is worried about a particular person who has sinned against him.

Maybe Peter has even forgiven someone seven times for a wrong, and he thinks that is enough. So, he comes to Jesus seeking his approval.

There are limits to forgiveness, even in the community of faith. At least that's what Peter thinks, and he hopes Jesus will agree.

So Peter asks Jesus, "If a church member sins against you, how many times do you have to forgive him? Isn't seven times enough when it comes to forgiveness?"

In all fairness forgiving someone seven times for a sin does seem like a lot. But, Jesus once again surprises Peter (and us) with his answer. Jesus says that Peter should not forgive seven times but seventy seven times! In other words there is no limit to forgiveness in the church.

Our passage for today is not about forgiving some horrible dictator or a mass murderer. Today's lesson is about forgiving the person we know.

Lord, how many times do I have to forgive that woman who sits in the back pew next to me? Lord, how many times do I have to forgive that man who is in my Sunday school class? You know what he's like. You know what he's done. How many times do I have to forgive him?

Lord, how many times do I have to forgive my husband, my wife, my mother, my father, my son, or my daughter? Today the challenge of forgiveness hits home.

The church is not filled with perfect or even near perfect people. The church is filled with sinners.

Yes, we are sinners saved by grace but we are indeed sinners. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, the things that we should do we don't do. And the things that we shouldn't do, those are the very things we end up doing.

So, if you are in a church full of sinners, it is highly likely that you are going to be sinned against. Someone is going to hurt your feelings. Someone is going to ignore your needs. Someone is going to be judgmental.

What do we do when that happens? How are we going to deal with sin in the church? We deal with sin by the practical application of amazing grace. We call it forgiveness. And this amazing grace is not limited.

#### LIMITED FORGIVENESS?

Peter knew that forgiveness was important. He just wasn't so sure about the unlimited aspect. Maybe I can forgive someone seven times. But, after that maybe it would be better to just give up.

Peter wanted to put "reasonable" limits on grace and forgiveness. I understand. Sometimes I feel the same way. There comes a time when we just have to just cut our losses and move on.

On the other hand, if we put limits on forgiveness, maybe we are limiting our own opportunity to be forgiven.

Isn't it ironic that Peter wanted to limit forgiveness, and yet he would be the one who would need more forgiveness than most? All his life Peter tended to say the wrong thing and do the wrong thing. When the chips were down, Peter denied his Lord.

And yet Jesus said that Simon would be known as Peter, the rock. Peter was to be the rock on which the church would be built.

What was Jesus talking about?

Peter did say that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. That statement is certainly the foundation on which the church was built.

Peter was the one who preached that first sermon in the book of Acts. And we can see from those accounts of the early church that he was certainly a leader. He boldly preached the gospel and by the power of the Spirit many came to believe.

But, a few weeks ago we talked about another way that Peter was the rock, the foundation on which the church was built. Peter represented the rock of forgiveness. It was forgiveness that enabled Peter to serve God and preach the gospel. If the risen Christ had not forgiven Peter, he would have been a broken man for the rest of his life.

And that's why Jesus rebukes Peter so forcefully in his attempt to put limits on forgiveness. If try to put a limit on forgiveness, we inadvertently put ourselves under judgment.

We need to be forgiven more than seven times or even seventy seven times. We need (as the hymn puts it) "grace that is greater than all our sins." And that's a whole lot of grace.

## THE PARABLE

In order to give Peter a sense of his great need for forgiveness Jesus told a parable.

There was a slave who owed a king more than he could ever pay, 10,000 talents. We don't know how this slave got into so much debt. We just know that when it came time to settle accounts the slave didn't have the money.

So, the king passed judgment on this slave. He and his family would be sold, and all of his assets would be liquidated to pay his bill. It wouldn't come close to paying the debt, but the king needed to set an example.

At this point the slave is understandably desperate. So, he gets down on his knees and begs for mercy. He says, "Put me on the payment plan. Garnish my wages. Trust me. I'm good for it."

Of course he wasn't. He didn't have that kind of money, and the king knew it. So, the king did something that was out of character for kings in those days (or kings these days for that matter).

The king forgave the debt. That huge debt was cancelled. The slave was no free to live his life again.

But, unfortunately, that didn't last long.

This slave who had been forgiven so much runs into a fellow slave who owed him a hundred denarii. That wasn't all that much money. But, the forgiven slave demanded his money. The debtor pleaded, but the forgiven slave would not listen. Instead, he threw the poor man into prison.

Now some of the other slaves were watching this. They were dismayed that the one who had been forgiven so much would act in such a harsh manner toward someone who owed him such a small amount. So, these other slaves go to the king and tell him what happened.

The king is furious. He said, "If I showed mercy toward you and forgave what amounted to a king's ransom, why couldn't you show the same kind of mercy toward a fellow slave who owed you just a little money?"

And the king judged him most harshly.

## CONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

And here's the hard part of the parable. Jesus says, "My heavenly Father will judge you in the same way if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart."

There's a condition on forgiveness. What do we say each week? "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

In order to pray the Lord's Prayer with integrity we must first recognize that we are debtors, that we are sinners without hope except for the grace of God.

We are not good people who need just a little bit of help. To use a theological term, we are totally depraved. To put it in common language, we are so messed up only God can save us.

And God does. God forgives us. On the cross our sins are forgiven. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. And we have not been forgiven just a little bit. We have been forgiven a king's ransom.

That's the hard truth about all of us. Every week we confess our sins at the beginning of the service because each week we need to be reminded. We have sinned this past week. The things we should have done we didn't do. The things we shouldn't have done are the very things that we have done.

Please don't think that the confession of sin is a meaningless liturgical exercise. Each week that prayer of confession is a harsh reminder of the truth. We owe a debt that we cannot pay.

But, right after that confession we remember something else. "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

And it is that forgiveness that allows us to continue with the rest of the worship service and the rest of our lives. In other words it is more than just the order of worship, it is the order of our lives.

Forgiveness allows us to move forward and frees us to forgive and serve others in the name of Christ.

## DIFFICULT FORGIVENESS

But, forgiveness is difficult. The passage that precedes our lesson for today talks about how forgiveness in the church often requires a biblical brand of conflict management. (Matthew 18:15-20)

Jesus said that if a member of the church sins against you, you need to go to that person and point out the fault. If the person is willing to make amends then that's the end of it. If there's still a problem take two or three people with you and try to work things out. And if the problem is still not worked out you take it to the whole church.

In other words forgiveness is not sweeping things under the rug. Forgiveness is bringing things out into the open. Forgiveness, forgiving the debts of others is always possible because God has forgiven us, but don't think that it will ever be easy...not for the one who forgives or for the one who is forgiven.

The cross represents the high price of sin and forgiveness, and there is also a high cost when we choose to take the way of forgiveness in our life together as the community of faith.

Have you ever asked a child to apologize, to admit what he or she had done wrong? From a very early age we want to hold on to the idea that we are right, that we have not sinned.

It is painful to be corrected. We are reminded that we have failed. We are reminded that we have let down the ones we love. But, if we do not have the courage to truly confess our sins and forgive those who sin against us, we go down a path that is even more painful and dangerous.

### FOOTBALL, SIN, AND THE CHURCH

I listened to a football player “apologize” for abusing his fiancée and letting down his fans.

But, even while he was apologizing he couldn’t name the sin. He referred to the incident as the unfortunate “situation.” And then his former fiancée (now his wife) used the same words, talking about the unfortunate “situation” and her role in causing this “situation.”

This is a textbook case on how *not* to forgive sins. Sins must be named.

This was domestic violence. This was wrong, and in no way was this abuse the victim’s fault. True forgiveness requires that we take responsibility for what we have done wrong.

It’s not a “situation”. It’s a sin.

On the other hand the sanctimonious newscasters who reported the story got it wrong as well. They leave no room for grace. They suggest that not only should this football player be banned for life; the football commissioner should be fired as well for not taking strong enough action.

It’s strange. Some people only believe in sin when it’s someone else’s sin. And that leads to unbridled condemnation. But, the roots of sin go deeper than this one incident, and we’re all involved.

We live in a culture of violence. Football is a very violent game, and it sometimes encourages callous and violent actions off the field as well as on the field.

Most of us (myself included) love football and that makes football a financial success. When big money is involved, leaders (and fans) will look the other way to keep the entertainment coming.

In other words there is a bigger problem than just the actions of one football player. This incident is just the tip of the iceberg. It's much worse than we think.

In the church we believe that all have sinned. Sin is pervasive. It is not only a part of our lives; it is also part of our society. We will never get away from sin completely.

But, we are not helpless when it comes to sin. Christians also believe that there is a way to deal with sin and that process is called forgiveness.

#### FORGIVENESS AS A WAY OF LIFE

The only way to be free of sin is to: 1. Name the sin. 2. Take responsibility for the sin (preferably in the presence of the one you have harmed), and 3. Receive God's forgiveness.

We do it in that order. Receiving the forgiveness of God is not a get out of jail free pass. Judges are rightly skeptical of criminals who all of a sudden "get religion" when the sentence is about to be passed. Taking responsibility for our sin means accepting the consequences of our sin.

But, confession and forgiveness is not just for criminals. Giving and receiving forgiveness is a difficult life long process in which all of us need to participate.

We in the community of faith think the struggle is worth it. We think that giving and receiving forgiveness allows us to let go of bitterness and anger.

Forgiveness is like love. It cannot be commanded and it cannot be forced. But, we can pray for it.

We can pray for the strength to forgive those living and dead who have hurt us. Sometimes for good reason we have distanced ourselves from others in order not to be harmed by them. But, even at a distance we can pray for them and for us.

We can pray that we can forgive ourselves for wrongs done even as God has forgiven us. And we can pray that we can accept the forgiveness of others when it is offered.

Forgiveness is an incredibly powerful force. But, it is also an incredibly difficult to put into practice. In a way, every act of confession and forgiveness is like a miracle. It goes against our natural tendency to blame others and cling to the myth of our own innocence.

But, once we understand our need for forgiveness we will not want forgiveness to be limited in any way, not to seven times or even seventy seven times ... because *we* need it every day of our lives.

We will want confession and forgiveness to become a part of our daily routine. We will learn to love forgiveness. It will bring us closer to each other, and it will bring us closer to God.

I leave you this morning with the words of Dr. Martin Luther King on forgiveness. He wrote,

“Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude.”

God give us a forgiving spirit.

Amen.