

Radical Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

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Good morning! Two weeks ago we looked at what to do when someone sins against you, and how we respond when they are not repentant. We addressed that there needs to be love and a sincere heart towards that person. That in fact, holding them accountable is not about getting vengeance, but rather should be an attitude of rescuing your brother or sister. Today as we look at the rest of Matthew 18, we see the disciples continue the line of thought as they naturally ask the question 'what about someone who repents and seeks forgiveness? And what happens if they sin against you multiple times? How much should we forgive them? And every single one of us has had to forgive someone at some point. We forgive our parents, our friends, our children, our spouse, our neighbors and co-workers; Teachers and relatives. Forgiveness is so pertinent to all of us. **In the passage we are going to see that in the church, we must offer forgiveness generously and without reservation.**

Let's dive right in. Matthew Chapter 18, verse 21-25. (Follow along) We will read two verses to start:

21 Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Brother Randy shared with me this past week that in the Jewish writings in the Talmud, Jewish people were instructed to forgive up to three times. Then if they sin against you again, you were free to distance yourselves from them; So, when Peter says should we forgive them seven times, he is actually expressing grace compared to the tradition. And Jesus responds with 'not seven times, but seventy seven times, or in some translations, seventy times seven'. He's not saying that we need to start keeping a record and logging the offenses until we reach 490, he's exaggerating to say there is no limit and we don't keep score. 1 Cor 13 says 'Love keeps no record of wrongs'. Let's read on.

23 "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

(a denari was a day's wage, and a talent was about 16 years of wages, so ten thousand Talents was about 160,000 years of wages. That would be billions of dollars to us.)

25 And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (that would be about 3-4 months wages), and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded

with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, [k] until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Let's explore this a bit. This passage stirs up some important and serious questions about forgiveness, as well as makes a fairly obvious point.

The main point of the parable is to answer the question "why should we forgive? And why do we need to keep on forgiving when someone sins against us? And the answer is simply that we have no grounds to withhold forgiveness because we, through Christ, have been forgiven a massive debt, so how can we begin to be hypocrites and withhold forgiveness over a tiny debt of someone's earthly sin against us? The passage before about what to do when someone sins against you and the process of confronting them in love, is the precursor to this charge that we need to forgive a repentant person every single time because we have been forgiven much through Christ, and failure to do so is grievous.

But there are questions. When I was preparing, I wrote down all the questions that I could think of about forgiveness that came out of this passage. Then I tried to narrow them down and condense them, and I think there are three big questions that arise from this passage. Other questions fit into these bigger questions. The first is: **If the person repeats their offense, are they not truly repentant?** The second is: **If the person is hurting us repeatedly, then why would we forgive and forget, only to be burned again?** And the last question is: **If we fail to forgive, or don't forgive well, will we not go to heaven because of what verse 34 and 35 says?**

Let's talk about these one at a time. First: **If the person repeats their offense, are they not truly repentant?** If repentance means to turn away from the sin, and this person keeps on sinning after, did we make a mistake in forgiving them? This passage doesn't necessarily say that the person is repeating the same sin over and over, just that they are repeatedly offending. And, look at this parable. The king did not withhold forgiveness until after the person proved their worthiness. He didn't make a mistake forgiving this person, he forgave him generously and without reservation. He didn't question his tone, his body language, the sincerity of his words, he just had mercy, and forgave the debt. // Now we may try to read the heart of the person, and there are probably clues we might pick up on, and we might be able to form an educated guess that they are not sincere in their apology. But to withhold forgiveness, even if we justify it to ourselves, puts us in a very dangerous spot. You might say but if they turn around and do it again and again, doesn't that show they are not sincere? Well let me ask you this: Have you ever sinned the same sin, more than once? Have you ever repeated a mistake? Have you ever shed tears of confession to God and made promises, only to turn around and break those promises as you fall back into your sin? Have you ever gotten angry with your spouse or parent or kids, and mistreated them, then after repenting sometime later fall into the same pattern? Make the same mistakes? Have you struggled with lust or envy repeatedly? Have you promised the Lord that you would spend time in his word, and pray daily, only to make a liar of yourself repeatedly? We all need unmitigated heaps of grace! We need that forgiveness and we need to give it too. Our heart needs to be sincere when we ask for forgiveness, and we need to have hearts toward others so we can forgive them.

The second question is **If the person is hurting us repeatedly, then why would we forgive and forget, only to be burned again?** Although this is incredibly difficult, many of these relationships are unavoidable: Kids and parents, brothers and sisters, marriages. But in these relationships, we have a heart for the other people. We love them, and that's a big part of our ability to forbear their mistakes and sin against us, and repeatedly work towards forgiveness. Our love for them and our heart towards them motivates us to attempt to reconcile and build trust again, even though more sin isn't far behind. In the church, pastors and ministry co-ordinators have a heart towards the group they are serving, and often times, people they are relying on break promises, don't show up, aren't prepared, or even gossip about the leader. But that co-ordinator or pastor loves them and is more prone to be compelled to seek to forgive and rebuild trust again.

The other important thing is that we don't forget. Now God says that he blots out our transgressions and remembers them no more. He's an omniscient being, he knows everything, and is not forgetful. However, he can choose to hold any of our sins against us. He can choose to treat us as though they never existed. However, just because our sin won't keep us out of heaven once it has been forgiven, there are still consequences from our actions. Between earthly relationships, when someone hurts us we don't forget, but we are not to hold their sin over their head after we have forgiven them for it. But we approach the relationship with a caution that wasn't there before.

Tom briefly spoke a few weeks about forgiveness and he made a great clarification. Forgiveness is different than reconciliation, and it's different than trust, and it's sometimes helpful to separate them in our heads. So after someone hurts another person and then they repent, we are commanded to forgive them. But their actions have damaged the relationship and broken trust. Reconciliation is the mutual act of working to restore the relationship. This doesn't mean that we forget or ignore that it ever happened, sweeping it under the carpet, but we rebuild in light of this new reality. And like a broken bone that has healed, the relationship can be stronger than it was before. And once you are working towards reconciliation, trust is built over time as each person acts faithfully to that new relationship. The problems come when people try to tie reconciliation into trust, or tying trust and reconciliation into forgiveness. When you think about the wife who has been beaten by her husband, he says he's sorry, and she thinks that forgiving him means forgetting and automatically trusting him again. Or the parent of the teenager who sneaks their parents car out for a joy ride, or they break curfew. After they get busted and ask for forgiveness, the parents aren't necessarily going to just hand over the car keys again, let them stay out as late the next time. They forgive, they work on a plan to reconcile and then they work at trusting as that person displays a faithfulness to their repentance over time. Sometimes people try to reconcile without forgiving first. The outcome is a relationship that is just constantly getting worse. This happens a lot in marriages. One spouse sins, then in anger, the other person lashes out hurtfully, in frustration that these things keep happening, or out of pride they choose to not talk about it because 'it should be the other person to bring it up' or whatever. Then after there are some cooler heads, they just move on with life, ignoring the offence, and offering trust again, only to find a growing bitterness and resentment towards the other person. Which just keeps building and building under pressure.

When people mix these element together, they can feel like in order to forgive someone, that person needs to be trustworthy before they can be forgiven. Or the offer of forgiveness comes with all sorts of terms attached to it. "If you can show me that you can do blank, then I'll forgive you." or "if you look

sincere enough or remorseful enough, then I'll forgive you" or "if you promise to never do it again, then I will forgive you." Just because you justify in your head and heart, why you should withhold forgiveness, does not mean that's acceptable to the Lord. And our own anger towards someone, can even still be present when we forgive them. We don't have to wait until we feel good about the situation. We aren't even expected to like them or want to spend time with them after we forgive them. As a more extreme example, that wife who was abused, can offer her husband complete forgiveness, but still not want to be around him or put him in a place where he can hurt her again. That's completely acceptable. It's normal to forgive someone while you are still hurting because of what they have done to you. After my parents got a divorce and my Dad married another woman, there was a lot of forgiveness that I had to work on. And it still hurts. Even after we have reconciled and trust built, and we have moved way past that and I have new family that I love dearly. There is pain that is still part of that. It is not fair to withhold forgiveness from a repentant person, while you wait for certain conditions to be met. Look at verse 27: *"27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt."* Is there any sign of conditions in order to earn the king's forgiveness? No. And we need to be careful of withholding forgiveness because we make it hard or even impossible for that person to earn our forgiveness. And it sounds like there is a lot at stake.

Verses 32-35 says: *32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers,[k] until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

So this leads to the other question: **If we fail to forgive, or don't forgive well, will we not go to heaven?** Well in short, the answer is yes....and no. This is not the only time where this sort of thing is talked about. *Matthew 6: 14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* There are lots warnings like this throughout scripture about all sorts of things. And they are not false. They are not just exaggerations trying to scare people, they are statements of truth. If we do not forgive, we will not be forgiven. - But – We are also told that we are save by grace, through faith, not by works (Eph 2:8-9) Which means that we are not responsible to earn our salvation. We can't work or do things to earn it, and we can't do things to lose it. However, the sincerity of our faith will be tested. 1 Peter 1:4 says our salvation is *"imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."* But before you rest your laurels on this promise of secured salvation through faith, if you read the next verses we learn that the sincerity of our faith will be tested. *"6 In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* Our faith will be tested to see if it is genuine. God tested Abraham, God tested Moses, God tested Peter, and God will test us. Our willingness to forgive is one of those tests. If we truly have come to know the gravity of our sin, we are more than just little white liars, and in fact are guilty of sinning against our creator, guilty of a sort of cosmic treason against our king, and in order for good, proper, justice to be served, we cannot pay the incredibly massive debt we have incurred. And yet when we stand before him and we repent of our sin,

asking forgiveness, he looks at us and has mercy on us. And he forgives our massive debt. By paying the price himself through his Son Jesus on the cross where we should have been. **If we understand that, then we have no grounds to not forgive someone comes to us in repentance.** We have no grounds to hold a grudge against someone. If we do hold a grudge and withhold forgiveness, then we are hypocrites in the worst way, and it reveals to the Lord that we don't have the slightest clue about the debt we have been forgiven. And just like this parable, the Lord will then not forgive us.

After I last preached on confronting your brother or sister about their sin, Dieter came up to me and "you said this was a hard thing to do, but it's not hard, it's impossible". Impossible without the Holy Spirit. Oh man, it is so true. We cannot do this on our own. **WE NEED THE SPIRIT'S HELP** as we struggle to forgive. Our struggle to forgive, is not what destroys us. We will absolutely struggle – we are broken! We will even make lots of mistakes as we try to forgive. We will even sin as we are trying to do it. But what destroys us is our settled position on it. "that person has gone too far this time" or "their apologies will never be enough to undo the damage done". That settled position of bitterness is what reveals you.

You have people (or you will have people) in your life, that you need to forgive. Maybe you still need to confront them and give an opportunity to repent. Perhaps, you are holding onto bitterness and a grudge, and haven't even considered forgiveness a possibility. Maybe you have never relied on the Lord to be your strength in that, and you haven't tried. Maybe you feel that the relationship is disposable – it's just someone that you don't know very well. Maybe it's your marriage. Maybe you are frustrated because you aren't clearing things up. And you are frustrated because of the bottled up anger and growing bitterness. You're tired of your spouse messing up over and over, and you are tired of bringing it up again and again. Well you need the Lord! You need the Spirit to empower you and encourage you to talk to each other, forgive each other, **generously and without reservation**. Once you have forgiven them with your heart, then – and only then- can you effectively rebuild a stronger marriage. And when they sin again, you confront again. When they repent, you forgive. And we strive to not escalate the situations with our own sin. This is hard. After I pray, the worship team has chosen song for us to listen to. It speaks about how we need the Lord to do the impossible. To love and forgive. As it plays I want you to consider and pray about people in your life that need your forgiveness. Or maybe you need to go ask for forgiveness, and maybe you need to seriously consider why you have been holding onto that grudge for so long, and reflect on the astronomical grace and forgiveness offered to us through our saviour Jesus Christ. Let's Pray

Benediction:

8 Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, 9 obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.