

“The Unforgiving Servant”

Matthew 18:21-35

If I were to ask you to name the person, or people, or group who have hurt you the most in your lifetime, it probably wouldn't take you long to name him/her/them. In fact, most of us probably thought of someone immediately. Sometimes it's even the people closest to us.

Our minds hang on to hurts. We can remember things that happened to us years ago. I remember my very first girl friend – Donna Graves. Second grade. She was perky and cute. I thought she was great! In fact, our class picture, taken out on the front steps of the school building during the first week of second grade, shows little Donna Graves standing in the front row. And standing right next to her, in his brown corduroys, is a smiling happy little guy – Deral!

One day I worked up the courage and asked her to share my lunch. She said, “Yes!” My mom had cut my bologna sandwich in halves – corner to corner – so I gave Donna half of my sandwich. We ate lunch together in the cafeteria. Then we went out on the playground and rode the teeter-totter together. We were having a wonderful time. Life was good!

Then Greg Black came along and offered her some of his Milk Duds. Donna left me. I was high – and she let me down – *fast!* Since that time, I've learned a lot – mainly never trust a person who's full of bologna!

Seriously, when we invest ourselves in any relationship we open ourselves to being hurt. And hurts get remembered. A friend betrays; a parent abuses; a spouse refuses our caring, or betrays the vows; a sibling accuses; an unfair comparison is made; a slanderous comment is said; a cruel remark gets uttered; a debt goes unpaid; a friend takes advantage, expecting generosity from you but never thinking of returning the kindness ... Deep hurts we never deserved from our past can still cause great pain in

our present. If our future is to be whole and healthy the hurts have to be dealt with.

C.S. Lewis said, “Forgiveness is a beautiful word – until you have something to forgive.” Lewis Smedes says that forgiveness is “God’s invention for coming to terms with a world in which people are, at times, unfair to each other and hurt each other deeply.” God began by forgiving us. And He extends the invitation to us to forgive.

Forgiveness is “love’s toughest work, and love’s biggest risk.” (Smedes) It’s not part of the world’s behaving. Instead, our culture gives us phrases like, “I don’t get mad, I just *get even*.” Forgiveness almost seems unnatural. In fact, John Patton has written a book entitled, Is Human Forgiveness Possible?. He says that forgiving those closest to us who have hurt us is one of the most difficult things we’re ever called to do. The apostle Peter found that out one day –

A Question Is Asked and Answered: *Matthew 18:21-22

Our God is a forgiving God, and lavishes forgiveness continuously. Yet, with all of our thanks for His forgiveness and praise of it, it’s one of the most difficult acts for us to practice. That’s why Peter, puffed up with pride, didn’t impress Jesus with his benevolent offer that day. The Jewish rabbis only called for 3 times. So Peter doubled it and added one for perfection! Jesus’ response was piercing. Then He followed it with a story –

Forgiving Mercy Illustrated:

This parable is not about money or things – it’s about relationships. Jesus’ course on forgiveness is one of His most advanced. In fact, it cost the Teacher His Life! Forgiveness is not a casual thing!

• **A Mountain of Debt *Matthew 18:23-25**

In the story we find a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. In doing that, the king discovered that one man owed him a simply astronomical amount – 10,000 talents.

The total yearly tax bill levied by the Romans for ALL of Palestine was only 800 talents!

The Greek word translated “10,000” was the highest named numeral. It’s the word from which we get our word “myriad”. And the talent was the highest denomination of currency. *Today’s New International Version* captures the enormity of the sum by reading “billions of dollars”. A single talent was what all an ordinary laboring man could earn in 15 years! So this man’s debt was 150 thousand years of work! He couldn’t possibly begin to pay it off.

Yet, the servant said, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you all I owe.” You can almost hear the laughter in the crowd when Jesus came to that part of the story. But the laughter stopped when they realized the servant simply didn’t understand the magnitude of his debt.

Jesus is saying we can never pay back God. We may try to imagine what it cost Him to forgive us, but we can’t. Even when we can do what Jesus’ listeners that day could *not* do – look at the Cross – we still can’t comprehend the enormity of the price paid. If we gave every minute of every day of every week of every year for the rest of our lives in some service, we could not make atonement with God. Jesus’ story goes on –

- A Merciful Monarch *Matthew 18:26-27

This is nothing but pure mercy. Yet the servant missed it. I think the reason so many Christians don’t feel forgiven is this: we talk about being saved by grace through faith, and yet in the back of our minds we’re still trying to earn God’s approval. If I feel that somehow I have to pay for my sins, and yet know I can’t afford the price – then I move through life missing the peace of knowing that forgiveness, cleansing, and pardon by what God has done in sending Jesus.

The author of the great old hymn, “Rock of Ages”, catches the truth:
Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save and Thou alone.

Given so much, we’re called to give in return. But there must have been an audible gasp of unbelief as Jesus continued His story:

- A **Miserly Spirit** ***Matthew 18:28-30**

Amazing! This same man, having been forgiven it *all*, goes out and seizes a fellow servant by the throat – a vicious action – demanding that this fellow pay up on what he owes – 100 denarii – about \$20. It wasn’t an inconsiderable debt, for it was about all a laboring person could earn in 100 days. But it was miniscule compared to the debt this man himself had so recently been forgiven! It was a piece of change in comparison. But he had the fellow hauled off and thrown into prison.

He had a short memory and shallow gratitude; and he failed to be transformed by the great mercy he’d been shown. Feasting on his master’s forgiveness, he failed to share it. So we come to –

- A **Mandate to Be Merciful** ***Matthew 18:31-35**

When all of this is reported back to the King, he had no choice but to revoke the forgiveness of the debt, and inflict terrible punishment. The servant sealed his own destiny.

And Jesus concludes with terrifying words: “This is how My Heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart.” (v. 35)

Now the end of this parable is not about a ‘works’ salvation –

implying that if we forgive others (a work) then we will be forgiven. Jesus doesn't mean that we're saved by forgiving others, or that true salvation, once acquired, can be lost.

What Jesus is teaching is that we're to forgive because we've received it, and are confident that we'll continue to receive it.

This is not about a vindictive God. As I've already pointed out, this story is about relationships. John Patton writes, "Forgiveness is a discovery that I'm more *like* those who have hurt me than *different* from them." Forgiving means giving the other person credit for being every bit as human as I am! Receiving forgiveness doesn't free me from responsibility; it creates a calling to live it out. Mercy toward others comes as a result of God's mercy toward me! So -

In this mandate to be merciful – there's something we long for *God* to remember, AND there's something for everyone of US to remember.

- **The Source of Mercy is God**

Do I hold past mistakes over people's heads? It's easier to criticize than empathize; easier to point a finger than open a forgiving heart. These days we're all living through so much discord and anger; with deep wounds because of cutting words and hurtful attitudes – toward other races, political parties, the camps of liberal or conservative, this party or that – all the criticism and incivility.

Have you ever noticed that we tend to judge others by their worst faults and we tend to judge ourselves by our best intentions?

***Psalm 25:6-7**

Remember ME Lord, but please don't remember my sin! "According to *Your love*, remember me."

But Scripture reminds us, too, of what *we're* to remember.

***Colossians 3:13**

Jesus' parable is a warning about nourishing hatred; cherishing animosity; living in settled malice. One writer says:

“Whoever tries to separate [human] forgiveness from God's, will no longer be able to count on God's mercy. In so doing he not merely forfeits it, like the servant in the parable. Rather he shows that he never had a part in it. God's mercy is not something cut and dried that is only received once. It is a persistent power that pervades all of life. If it does not become manifest as such a power, then it was never received at all.”

So in obedience to the One Who has forgiven us so much we say, “May the power of Your Word create a desire in me to be obedient. Help me to live beyond the resentment, the bitterness, the lack of forgiveness.” Returning love for hate; returning forgiveness for neglect; breaking the cycle of retaliation and recrimination.

“But I don't feel like it!” Jesus isn't talking about feelings; He's talking about a decision; an act of the will. The phrase translated “shouldn't you” in verse 33, is quite literally, “wasn't it necessary?”

This means that forgiveness is a choice made because of the will of God. But it's also a possibility available because of the power of God within us! So what we see in all this, is that forgiveness is the great evidence that we have become new creatures in Christ, and that the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ is alive within us! Mercy experienced will produce mercy demonstrated.

And yet, we might be saying, “But, Lord! That's not fair! That person/those people, hurt me so badly! He/she has hurt me for so long! They don't deserve to be forgiven! They deserve to be punished!”

You just may be right. In fact, all of us do! But we're not only *saved* by grace; we're called to *live* by grace.

Some people refuse to live at peace. Not every broken relationship can be reconciled. And we certainly don't place

ourselves back into an abusive situation. But so far as it depends on us, we can still forgive. And *then*, we depend on God!

We're not talking about willpower here. We're realizing our need for the Lord's Holy Spirit working in us to help us do *His* will. Reach out to God. Ask Him to come into your heart, and give you strength and power.

Forgiveness is both an act and a process. We choose to forgive, and when the bitterness or resentment returns, we forgive again.

Lewis Smedes really helps us grasp the depth and richness of forgiveness and mercy. Here are a few lines from his book, The Art Of Forgiving:

Forgiving someone who did us wrong does not mean that we tolerate the wrong he or she did.

Forgiving does not mean that we want to forget what happened. ... Forgiving can still be sincere even if we remember. We may remember without nursing a grudge, and rehearsing the pain.

Forgiving does not mean that we take the edge off the evil of what was done to us. ... We may forgive, but still refuse to tolerate the wrong that was done. ...

Forgiving does not mean that we invite someone who hurt us once, to hurt us again. ... The surest way to convince some people not to forgive is to tell them that if they forgive, they must go back to the person who wounded [or abused] them. [But]

Forgiving is something good we do for ourselves ... even if the other person never says he or she is sorry.

Our Lord is the original master forgiver! Every time we move our way through the miracle of mercy – of forgiving another, we are imitating Him – mimicking His mercy and forgiveness.

- **The Secret of Mercy is Grace**

So here's the key to forgiveness! We stop focusing on what others have done TO us, and instead we focus on what Jesus has done FOR us!

Jesus' parable clearly indicates that we need to understand the extent of our debt before a totally righteous and holy God. Like the servant, we're faced with a burden that's beyond our capacity, a mountain of sin that we can't remove. And then we read this:

***Colossians 2:13-14**

Every mistake, sin, failure, foul-up, error, and willful decision that you and I have ever made, or will ever commit, has been covered at the Cross! The charge list is wiped out!

Because of Jesus and the Cross, we realize that God remembers us in love, and actually forgets our forgiven sin!

So we come this morning remembering Jesus and His sacrifice. Recall what your sin did to the Son of God and what it cost Him to declare you forgiven. And remember your responsibility to let go of the wrongs done to you.

You and I are fully, freely, and finally forgiven through the death of Jesus, our Savior. We cannot, and do not, deserve it. But we certainly do come today, joyously receiving it, and, in that mercy, humbly sharing it – through His grace. ***Hebrews 4:16**

Lord Jesus, keep us mindful of the fact that no more than the servant could raise ten millions of dollars to pay the king; all we can do is simply, thankfully receive your mercy and forgiveness at Your throne of grace. May mercy experienced produce mercy demonstrated. May the forgiveness we've received, be the forgiveness we give. Amen