

Matthew 18:21-35 – “Forgiven Means Forgiving” – Apr. 14, 2024

1. *“Forgiven people are forgiving people”*
2. We’re in an extended passage in which Christ has been teaching about how to handle lost sheep
 - a. Last week we saw what true love for a lost sheep looks like
 - i. Private attempt at reconciliation
 - ii. Bringing in others to help
 - iii. Bringing it to the church to help
 1. Ultimately excommunication if there is no repentance
3. Last week’s passage left off with the charge that God will honour in heaven the binding and loosing that happens in the church, and that by His Spirit, He will guide the two or three that are involved in making these decisions
 - a. The *“two or three gathered in my name”* is not a general statement about God’s presence (as He is always present, even for one), but is a special promise of assistance that He gives to the officers of the church as they work through decisions of who to bring in and who to expel
 - b. Practically, this means that as a church, we need discernment in the binding process to make sure that correction and discipline only happens according to biblical instruction
 - c. We likewise need discernment in the loosing process to make sure that we let in and include into membership those who are truly saved, and to let back in those who have genuinely repented in response to the discipline process

4. This is the context for today's passage – what our response should be to a repentant person who is seeking to be forgiven by those he has wronged
5. VV.21, 22 – *“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.’”*
 - a. Jesus has just talked about the binding and loosing in the case of church discipline, and now Peter is asking a follow-up question
 - b. No doubt, he thought he was being very generous with offering forgiveness seven times
 - i. This was more than double of the practice of the rabbis who had a rule of pardoning up to the third time, but not the fourth
 - c. Peter offers seven times, and seven is the number of completion and perfection in the biblical conception
 - i. Units of ten (10s, 100s, 1000s) are numbers of fulness and symbolic amplification
 - d. Jesus does a number play here on Peter's question
 - i. Peter thinks that he is being extremely gracious by more than doubling the forgiveness of the Jewish rabbis
 - ii. Jesus says, do that times 10, and then that times 7
 1. This isn't 77 times
 2. but 70, 7 times (70x7), or 490 times
 - iii. On the one hand, we're clearly dealing with a symbolic number here that is meant to say “keep forgiving without end”

1. But when we hear “symbolism” in the Bible, we shouldn’t think “oh, so it’s not real”
 2. When we hear “symbolism”, we should think “oh, so real things have a deeper meaning”
 3. Symbolism should turn us into biblical maximalists instead of minimalists
- iv. What images would the apostles have cropping up in their minds when Jesus uses these numbers to show them how to forgive?
1. Genesis 4:23, 24 – Cain’s 3rd great-grandson who follows in Cain’s footsteps of wickedness
 - a. He actually intensifies the sin of his grandfathers and takes two wives, and vents his anger even more than Cain did
 - b. *“Lamech said to his wives: “Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. 24 If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.”*
 - c. So here, seventy-sevenfold is an indicator of the fall having ever-widening consequences
 2. Daniel 9:24ff – Daniel talks of seventy weeks
 - a. A week being 7 days, we have another group of 70-7s
 - b. These are weeks of years, so we have 490 years here
 - c. There is great complexity to the passage

- i. Some see the final week as being future
 - ii. I think a good case can be made that these 490 years ended either when the apostles left Jerusalem after Stephen's martyrdom, or when the Jerusalem temple got destroyed
 - d. Whenever these 490 years are, however, they represent the curse meeting a termination point and the kingdom going out in advance
- 3. Leviticus 25 – Year of Jubilee
 - a. every 7th day is a Sabbath, and after 7 weeks of Sabbaths, or 49 years, the Jews would celebrate Jubilee
 - b. this was a year of people being set free, land going back to its original owners
 - c. after the 49 was done, a time of refreshing was on the way
 - d. Jesus is amplifying this freedom by a factor of 10
- v. So when Jesus frames forgiveness in terms of 70-7s, or 490 times, He is using a number that the apostles would understand in terms of curse and redemption
 - 1. The custom of the Jewish leaders to limit forgiveness to 3 offenses is being directly challenged
 - 2. Jesus is using numbers of fulness, perfection, and amplification to show what it looks like for His people to practice genuine

forgiveness and to set each other free from the burden and the corruption of sin

e. Definition of forgiveness (Chris Brauns) – “*A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability, and to be reconciled to that person.*”

i. There are several important aspects here

1. The offended party is committed to pardon the offender from moral liability

a. This means it can't come up again

b. We commit to freeing the offender

2. The offender is repentant

a. This is a great misunderstanding in our culture

b. Many well-meaning Christians even speak of forgiveness as though it's a unilateral decision with no conditions

c. But Scripture says we need to forgive as God forgives

i. God does not unilaterally or unconditionally forgive sinners

ii. If He did, then everyone is saved and heaven-bound

iii. God forgives all repentant people

d. So for actual forgiveness to happen, the offending party must be repentant

i. What we can and must do on our own is to set aside bitterness

- e. The reason that we can't forgive on our own is that the goal of forgiveness is reconciliation
 - i. Reconciliation cannot happen without both parties being involved
- f. Forgiveness must always be offered so that we honour the principle of being at peace with everyone as far as it depends on us
 - i. But for forgiveness to be completed, both parties must come together to be reconciled
 - ii. Forgiveness is a gift that the offended must offer, and that the offender must open
- g. Forgiveness also doesn't mean that there are no leftover consequences
 - i. A person may be forgiven by God for their crime, but the temporal penalty remains
 - ii. There may be good reason even in the church for certain safeguards to remain
 - 1. An abuser can be truly forgiven by God, but this doesn't mean it is wise to trust him with children or vulnerable people
 - iii. This doesn't mean they're not forgiven; it means we're careful to not provoke or invite old sinful patterns

- f. Jesus proceeds to tell a parable to help us understand what forgiveness is like in the kingdom of heaven
6. VV.23-27 – *“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. 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.”*
- a. The size of this debt is way outside the scale of any individual
 - b. Some attempts at trying to adjust into today’s dollars puts it well into the billions of dollars
 - c. One way to try to get a handle on this
 - i. Total tax revenue of 4 provinces (Judea, Galilee, Samaria, Idumea) was 900 talents
 - 1. This this is 11 years worth of total tax revenue from all four Roman provinces in this region
 - ii. Total tax revenue of 4 western provinces is \$201B
 - 1. 11 years worth of total tax revenue in the west is \$2.2T
 - iii. It could be well beyond this, because as we’ve seen already, the full numbers of 10s, 100s, and 1000s are symbolic numbers, and the actual wording here is “myriad talents” which makes this an indefinite number
 - iv. Billions and trillions can easily be moved into an infinite number

- d. But now it is time for the king to settle this servant's debt, and the debt is something that can't ever be repaid – for all intents and purposes, it is infinite debt
- e. In biblical law, a person could pay off debt with indentured servitude
 - i. In some eastern cultures, it was permissible for a father to transfer his debt onto his family members and sell them into slavery as well (no provision like this in Bible)
- f. But given the size of the debt, no matter how long this man sells himself into slavery, and no matter how many children he has to sell into slavery, there is no getting out from this debt
- g. It is not hard to see where this parable is going – the debt here is the debt of sin that we owe to God
 - i. When man sins against an infinite God, an infinite debt is created
 - ii. How could any person ever repay their guilt against God in a satisfactory way?
 1. Even 80 years of sinless living after conversion would get nowhere close to satisfying God's perfectly pure and holy demands for justice
 2. As creatures designed to bring glory to our creator, we actually *owe* complete and total and perfect obedience to God
 - a. How could we ever go beyond perfection and attempt to start paying an infinite debt on top of that?
 - b. For man to build credit or pay off debt with God is a thing so impossible that it can't even get started

c. John Gill – *“Christ only was able to pay this debt, and he has done it for his people; and without an interest in his blood, righteousness, and satisfaction, every debtor is liable to be cast, and will be cast into the prison of hell, there to lie till the uttermost farthing of the ten thousand talents is paid, which will be to all eternity. We see what a sad condition sin has brought men into; it has stripped them of their estates and possessions; it has reduced them to want and beggary; it exposes them to a prison; to the just resentments of their creditor; to the wrath of God, and the curses of the law; and what little reason there is to think, yea, how impossible it is, that a man should be able to merit anything at the hands of God, to whom he is so greatly indebted: he must first pay his debts, which is a thing impossible, before he can pretend to do anything deserving the notice of God.”*

d. *“Long my imprisoned spirit lay. Fast bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth and followed Thee.”*

- h. In v.26, this servant recognizes the scale of his problems and he drops to his knees to beg for mercy
 - i. Yet even here, he begs not for mercy but for patience

ii. Spurgeon – *““I will pay thee all.” The promise was not worth the breath which spoke it. It is a very usual thing for men who can incur an enormous debt to make light of the payment and fancy that a bill at three months is as good as gold. They dream that time is money and that a promise is a payment. Many a poor sinner is very rich in resolutions. This servant-debtor thought he only needed patience, but indeed he needed forgiveness! It seems strange that he did not see this, since the debt was so great and he had nothing wherewith to pay, but was utterly bankrupt. Yet it is a well-known fact that men do not see their true condition before the Lord God, even when they perceive that in many things they come short.”*

iii. Sinners in their natural state may very well despair when they see the cost of their sin, but apart from the grace of God, they still remain too proud to repent

1. Spurgeon notices that this man asks for patience instead of pardon
2. He wants to stay in control
3. Isn't that just how we operate?
4. Even when we got caught in the most serious and obvious sin, our

pride deceives us

- a. Instead of crying out for forgiveness, we attempt to convince ourselves and others around us that we can manage our way out of this

i. But owing to nothing whatsoever to the debtor, the king, out of sheer mercy, goes well beyond the cry for patience and offers total forgiveness

- j. You would think that the servant left leaping and jumping and in a mood to bless everyone around him
- 7. VV. 28-35 – *“But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, 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, 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.”*
 - a. A very sad picture emerges
 - b. While the king who has authority to collect a debt from an inferior has graciously offered this servant pardon, the servant now completely misses the point
 - c. He meets not an inferior over which he has the authority to collect, but a “fellow servant”, an equal
 - d. The debt owed here, a hundred denarii, is not insignificant, but it also isn’t overwhelming
 - i. This is about 3 moths pay, so let’s say in our dollars \$10-15K
 - e. Of course, in one sense, if this was a real debt between these men, the borrower does have a kind of legitimate claim to be paid back

- i. The problem is that the servant is incredibly self-deceived
- ii. He has no sense of proportion and no self-awareness whatsoever
- iii. Instead of acting consistently with the grace he had just received, this man now demands instant justice from others
 - 1. Isn't this also a comment on our default state of mind?
 - a. *"Mercy for me, justice for everyone else"*
- iv. This second servant falls and pleads, using the exact words that the first servant had used with the king – *"Have patience with me, and I will pay you"*
 - 1. The words are a refrain of the first servant's own words before he received mercy
 - 2. But now they bounce off him without any sign of compassion
- v. In the first encounter, the one with genuine authority extends mercy, and now a mere equal is demanding justice
 - 1. In the first encounter, the lender had absolutely no path of repayment
 - 2. In the second encounter, the lender actually has a very straightforward path of repayment
 - a. If any of us were down to 3 months of salary left owing on our mortgage, we would probably feel like we were as good as debt free
- vi. The scales are so lopsided here that it takes a man without a sense of self-awareness to make this move

- f. But other servants pick up on the injustice of it all, and take word back to the king
 - i. Remember, this is a parable about church discipline and what it looks like to restore a church member who has become repentant in the discipline process
 - ii. So it makes sense that we have these other witnesses to the situation
- g. once the master gets wind of this situation, he calls this wicked servant in and judges the case
 - i. he reminds the wicked servant of his large debt that he pleaded over, and how the king offered forgiveness on that great debt, and he is furious that this man turned around and abused a fellow servant over a small debt
 - ii. the anger of the king is due to the fact that this wicked servant has sinned against the example that the king had set for his kingdom
 - 1. the king has led his kingdom by example
 - 2. and now the lesser man who benefitted from the king's kindness is violating this example by setting himself above everyone else
- h. this is exactly what happens when people profess Christ yet have unforgiveness in their heart
- i. we stand as beneficiaries of forgiveness of an infinite debt that we have no chance of even getting started on, and then if we keep score and demand justice of those who have harmed us, we demonstrate that we don't really understand the gospel or what happens when people come to God for mercy

- j. people may say they believe the gospel; they may even believe themselves when they say they believe the gospel; but if God sees a person who is unwilling to forgive, He sees a person whose heart has not believed the gospel
 - i. *the king is angry at this servant not because of how he managed the king's money, but because of how he managed the king's mercy*
- k. in his righteous anger, the king hands the wicked servant over to the *torturers* (jailers)
 - i. this isn't the kind of sanitary position you might envision in a modern prison
 - ii. more like an inquisitor who is actively bringing about a punishment until justice has been served
 - iii. the parable keeps painting the picture until it is very obvious
 - iv. the wicked servant had an infinite debt that he will not be able to make a start on, so he is in the hand of the torturer for eternity
 - 1. this is a very blunt description of hell
 - 2. this is the death that never dies; the fire that never finishes consuming its fuel; this is an eternal drowning that is never done; this is a payment of debt that never starts to touch the principle; this is ultimate futility
 - 3. and it is the outcome that unforgiving people are headed towards
- l. we should not learn from this that a justified person can lose their justification; that the king would reverse a pardon that has been transacted

- i. rather, we have a picture of a good-faith offer that was made to a person who disqualified himself by refusing to be repentant
- ii. the offer made the servant proud rather than humble, demonstrating the fact that actual forgiveness and reconciliation was never transacted
- iii. *forgiven people are forgiving people*
 - 1. the wicked servant demonstrated by his actions that he never opened the gift of forgiveness or reconciliation
 - 2. the fact that he wanted to play judge after the true judge exercised mercy shows that the gift of pardon was offered, but it was not received

8. APPLICATION

- a. So we go back to the previous language of binding and loosing to make application here
- b. The people of God are the people of God because they have been forgiven by God
 - i. They have repented of their sin and have enjoyed genuine reconciliation with God
 - ii. As a result, they walk in forgiveness with each other
- c. In vv.15-20 we saw that if there is sin in the church, we need to start applying the steps of corrective discipline, starting with one-on-one correction and moving all the way to excommunication if necessary
 - i. The goal at each step is reconciliation – to bring the offending party to repentance so that reconciliation and restoration can happen

- d. In this parable, Jesus says that we need to accept that repentance and stand willing to forgive this person and take them back in just as openly as what God has done for us
- e. When we think of how much patience God exercises with us, and how many times we need to keep going back to Him to be forgiven of the same sins over and over and over again, how could we be so foolish as to not forgive our fellow Christian when they ask forgiveness of us
 - i. The parable Jesus tells illustrates the point that our unwillingness to forgive a repentant person stems from the fact that we have rejected the gospel ourselves. Where the Spirit of God is, there is forgiveness.
 - 1. If there is no forgiveness, there is no Spirit of God present
 - 2. This is a hard teaching. Simple, but difficult.
- f. But there is another way to see this as well.
 - i. Christ teaches us that when we pray, we ought to ask God to *“and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”*
 - 1. *“Please Lord, look at the way that I forgive other people, and then forgive me in the exact same manner”*
 - ii. Seen positively, growing in the grace of forgiveness can help us grow in the assurance of our own salvation
 - 1. What better way to gain confidence in our standing with God than by putting away bitterness, standing ready to forgive, and then being quick to be reconciled when an offender comes to make things right with us!

- g. So this is what must mark our friendships, our marriages, our families, and our churches
- h. We must always put away bitterness, always hold out the offer of forgiveness, and if the offender takes hold of that offer, we must be eager to be reconciled to them
 - i. In those instances where this is difficult, we need to remember that when someone sins against us, it is just one servant creating a small debt with another servant and we are servants who have been forgiven for an infinite and impossible debt against a great King; the infinite God who created us out of the dust for the sole purpose of glorifying Him
 - ii. Real opportunity to show the way forward in a culture that is obsessed with grievances, treating trauma and victimhood as the most cherished identity to be nursed or even created
 - 1. The spirit of our age demands never-ending apologies but has no gospel and no forgiveness
 - 2. The gospel reminds us that no reconciliation is available in heaven or on earth apart from the blood soaked redemption of Jesus Christ

9. CHARGE

- a. *Forgiveness is “A commitment by the offended to pardon graciously the repentant from moral liability, and to be reconciled to that person.” When we are reminded of the overwhelming, impossible, and infinite debt that God has pardoned for us, the only fitting response is for us to stand ready to forgive others and be reconciled to them when they repent of their sins against us. Even if they don’t come, and reconciliation isn’t possible, we must still put aside all bitterness.*

Hanging on to bitterness, demanding justice for others after we have been shown mercy, and refusing to take back a returning sinner shows a rottenness in our hearts. Hanging on to unforgiveness closes the gates of God's forgiveness on ourselves. May our hearts be as ready to forgive as they are to beat. Forgiven people are forgiving people.

10. BENEDICTION

- a. 2 Corinthians 13:11 – *“Finally, brothers, I rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”*