

Crosswalk: How To Live As Followers Of Jesus Christ

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
(Romans 12:1 ESV)

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
(Ephesians 4:1-3 ESV)

Forgive

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Matthew 18:21-38

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Matthew 18:21-38; that's on page 823 in your pew Bible. According to James the brother of Jesus, reading the Bible is like looking into a mirror. In James 1:23-25 he says:

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:23-25 ESV)

So according to James, there is a good way and a bad way of looking into the Bible. Some people read a story or a verse and they shrug their shoulders and move on entirely unaffected. They don't make changes. That's bad – that's a foolish way of reading the Bible, James says. But the wise person looks into the word and immediately begins to move things and shift things IN RESPONSE TO WHAT HE HAS SEEN.

That is exactly what we are trying to do in this series.

We spent 18 months looking into the Gospel of Mark. We saw stuff about who God is, who we are and how God has saved us through the life and death of Christ – and now we are asking the

question: WHAT SHOULD WE DO IN RESPONSE?

What should we move?

What should we adjust?

What should we change in terms of the way we are relating to God and other people?

That is the focus and concern of this series. The passage we are looking at this morning is talking about forgiveness. Jesus says that when we truly see how much we have been forgiven by God it is then appropriate for us to turn and extend forgiveness and mercy to those who have wronged us.

He says that forgiveness is an obvious and even axiomatic response to the Gospel.

That's what he says in this parable. We'll read it, we'll wrestle with it and then we'll try and talk about how we could actually put that into practice. Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 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. 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. 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, 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." (Matthew 18:21–35 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

The last line in that passage is one of the scariest lines in all the bible – did you catch it?

So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”
(Matthew 18:35 ESV)

Wow!

Are you hearing that? According to Jesus God the Father will condemn you to eternal torment if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

That’s what Jesus just said!

He said at the start of the parable:

Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. (v. 23)

Jesus says that the actual universe with God over it all can be compared to a king who wishes to settle accounts with his servants.

That right there is worth a lifetime of thought and contemplation.

God is like a KING!

This universe is like his KINGDOM.

We are like his SERVANTS.

And God wishes to settle accounts with us.

Wow!

That is not how we generally speak of God in the evangelical church.

And yet here it is in your Red Letter Bible – how about that?

So this parable is telling us true things about the Kingdom of God and the last true thing is by far

the scariest. According to Jesus – who ought to know how things go in the Kingdom of God – if you don't forgive your brother from your heart God will condemn you to eternal torment. Look at the last line of the actual parable. Verse 34:

And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. (Matthew 18:34 ESV)

The ESV kind of wimps out here; the word translated as “jailers” is the Greek word *bas-an-is-tace* and it means “torturer” or “tormentor”¹. The NASB renders that literally:

And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. (Matthew 18:34 NAS95)

Most versions don't because it just seems too severe – it does not align with what we have come to believe about God but what business do we have coming to ideas about God that are at odds with the things said and taught by Jesus Christ? D.A. Carson says here:

“Jesus sees no incongruity in the actions of a heavenly Father who forgives so bountifully and punishes so ruthlessly, and neither should we.”²

So get your head around that! God is capable of incredible mercy AND ruthless punishment – that's good to know – you need to see that – and seeing that you need to respond appropriately and that means forgiving others God in Christ has forgiven us.

That's the fairly obvious point of this incredibly powerful parable.

People who get the cross give grace and mercy to other people.

However, understanding it and doing it are not exactly the same thing.

Right?

We want to take this road.

¹ Greek Strong's Dictionary 930: “**basanisth/β** **basanistes**, *bas-an-is-tace*’; from 928; a torturer: — tormentor.”

² D.A. Carson, *Matthew 13-28* in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1995), 407.

We know we should take this road.

We see the cross and we see the road and we're making the connection – it's obvious; it's appropriate but it's not easy.

The entrance to the road is STREWN with barriers and obstacles and difficulties so we need to start there. We need to begin today by dealing with these barriers. We need to clear the road and deal with these misunderstandings when it comes to the matter of forgiveness. We need to talk about what forgiveness is and what it isn't.

Clearing The Road

Let's begin with what it isn't. I think a lot of us think that forgiveness means something that it doesn't so let's start there. The first thing we need to say is this:

1. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we can't confront those who sin against us

People think that. I'll tell someone they need to forgive a brother or sister and they'll say: "Pastor, are you saying I should be a doormat? That I should just lie back and take it?"

No. I'm not saying that and forgiveness doesn't mean and I know that because Jesus never said that. In fact he said:

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him (Luke 17:3 ESV)

Bingo bango. There it is! This is not rocket science. Forgiveness clearly does not mean that you cannot rebuke those who sin against you. You can and according to Jesus, you should.

In fact this parable comes right after Jesus explains the process of handling personal disputes within the church. Look back at Matthew 18. We read verses 21-35. Look at verses 15-20 – what's he talking about there? He's talking about what to do if a brother in the church sins against you. What does he say?

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault” (Matthew 18:15 ESV)

You go and tell him. You rebuke him. Then he says if he doesn't repent then you take a couple of other people with you. And if he doesn't repent you take it to the elders and if he doesn't repent you kick him out of the church.

All this right before a parable about forgiveness. So unless Jesus is schizophrenic then clearly forgiving and rebuking can go hand in hand. The one doesn't necessarily exclude the other.

That leads me to my second point —

2. Forgiveness doesn't mean ignoring abuse or injustice

Sometimes people get confused about that. They think that forgiveness means giving a free pass to abusers in the church.

No it does not.

If a person abuses another person in the church they should be prosecuted for that abuse because that abuse has public implications. It is illegal. The Bible says that it is the job of the STATE to restrain evil and illegality. Romans 13:4 says that the king does not bear the sword in vain:

For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:4 ESV)

Are you hearing that? Our job is to extend mercy but the government's job is to punish the wrongdoer. And both jobs can be done at the same time.

So to put feet on this if you abuse someone in this church we will call the police. They have authority from God to punish the wrong doer and that's a good thing. That's how God has set up the universe. If you repent we will forgive you. We will show you mercy. But you will still have a criminal record and we will need to respect that and act accordingly.

Forgiveness does not mean that we ignore abuse.

Thirdly:

3. Forgiveness does not mean forgetfulness

Sometimes we put those words together in a way that isn't helpful. We say that we need to forgive and forget – and that's sort of true but it's sort of not true. For example, as I said above if you abuse someone in this church we will call the police and you will have a criminal record. If you repent we will forgive you and love you and be merciful to you but we will not put you back in a position where you could abuse another person.

We won't forget in that sense.

I think it would be better to say that we will remember your sin in a different way.

We will remember the injury that this sin did to you and to others – we will mourn that – but we will also celebrate the grace that allowed you to overcome that sin – to truly repent of it – and we will celebrate the person you are becoming even while we protect you from the bruises and scars that sin has left on your soul.

Forgiving means remembering in a different way. Remembering with grace and mercy and kindness and wisdom.

Fourthly, I think it is important to say that:

4. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean a restored relationship

I deal with this confusion all the time. People will say: “How can I forgive this person? They don't even really understand what they've done and I wouldn't feel safe entrusting myself to them – I see no evidence of repentance so how can I forgive?”

I get that question all the time and its hard to answer because the question itself isn't entirely

rational – the question confuses forgiveness and reconciliation.

Forgiveness can be granted to someone who doesn't understand the evil that they're doing. We know that because of the example of Jesus. He offered forgiveness to the people who were nailing him to the cross. He said:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34 ESV)

They don't even know what they are doing and Jesus is already offering forgiveness. So forgiveness does not imply that every issue has been properly sorted out. That's reconciliation and you can't always achieve that with people who aren't willing to leave their sins behind. That's why the Apostle Paul says:

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:18 ESV)

Sometimes it doesn't depend on you. You've left the door open but they haven't turned from their sin and walked back through the door.

That's not on you.

That's on them.

You just leave the door open, you leave the light on. You maintain a gracious stance.

You can't always do more than that – sometimes you shouldn't do more than that - but you must never do less than that.

You have to forgive but forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation.

So what is it?

Defining Our Terms:

We've talked about what it isn't – we've cleared away some common misunderstandings – now we need to say what it is. What exactly does it mean to forgive another person?

Well, the parable here is very useful. The parable is an illustration of forgiveness. Look at the question that precipitates the parable. Peter comes up to Jesus and asks:

“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I **forgive** him?” (Matthew 18:21 ESV)

Now look at the end of the parable. Jesus says in verse 35:

So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not **forgive** your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35 ESV)

Same Greek word in both cases. It's the Greek word *aphiemi* and the parable is intended to illustrate what that word means. If you look it up in a dictionary you will find that the word means:

“to send forth, in various applications (as follow): — cry, forgive, forsake, lay aside, leave, let (alone, be, go, have), omit, put (send) away, remit, suffer, yield up.”³

So the word has this sense of letting things go and yielding up or releasing debts. And that's what the story is about. The story is about a king who forgives or releases a debt. By the way in the actual words of the Lord's Prayer that comes out much more clearly than it does in the version of the Lord's Prayer we all learned in school. In the Bible version we are taught to pray:

forgive us our **debts**, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (Matthew 6:12 ESV)

Forgiveness in the Bible is compared to releasing a personal debt.

That means not holding something over someone's head.

That means not exacting your pound of flesh.

That means not collecting on everything you're due - personally speaking.

³ Greek Strong's Dictionary 863.

Again – the police don't get to forgive. It's their job NOT to forgive. It's their job to hold us to account for the things that we do - you let them do that. But for you and me – on a personal level – this means not making people pay for what they've done to us.

So in a marriage this means talking it out, working it through, extending grace instead of making your husband sleep on the couch for the next six months.

Some people use the withholding of sex to get even and to pay back. That's not forgiveness – that's the opposite of forgiveness. So just be aware that if you are doing that – according to Jesus – you are heading towards eternal torment and condemnation.

Just to put feet on this.

So in a church context this means working through grievances – even if that involves some kind of formal process - instead of just giving each other the cold shoulder and sitting on opposite sides of the sanctuary for 20 years.

Listen, brothers and sisters if there is someone in this church whose EYE you cannot meet or whose hand you will not shake because of some past offense then you are living in open violation of this parable which means that if you die today you will be handed over to your tormentors for all eternity.

That's what we're talking about here – that's what forgiveness means.

It means not making people pay for it.

Not holding it over them.

It means dealing with it – and then letting it go.

You have to do that.

You have to deal with it and then you have to let it go or it will sink your soul to hell.

That's what this parable is saying.

So let's talk now about taking some first steps. We've cleared away some misconceptions and we've clearly marked the trail now we're ready to get going. Really quickly; let me suggest 4 first steps.

Taking Some First Steps:

1. Keep your eye on the cross

The main message of the parable is that people who understand the reality of their own forgiveness will be merciful and gracious to other people.

That's the main point – and that's the main outrage of the narrative.

The unmerciful servant was forgiven a considerable debt. An unmeasurable debt – into the billions of dollars when adjusted for inflation. He could have been sold into slavery a thousand times and not even scratched the surface of what he owed. He has been given a new lease on life – literally – and that should have impacted how he treated other people.

But for some reason it didn't.

He went out and found a guy who owed him \$10,000 dollars in our terms – that's not nothing – but it doesn't warrant his reaction particularly in the aftermath of having been forgiven an enormous debt.

That's the central outrage of the story – all the other servants are flabbergasted that this hard hearted, cold blooded knuckleheaded servant could do this after having so recently received that.

He just doesn't seem to have been affected by the grace and the mercy he has received.

And that that's the point.

The point of the parable is that if you have properly understand the grace of God in Christ then you will be more inclined to show grace and mercy to other people.

So go regularly to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Behold the price that was paid.

Behold the love and mercy of God.

See also the scale and significance of your own sin.

You are a rebel and you spit on the face of your benevolent king.

You committed treason and you should have died – and yet there lies the Christ upon the tree.

Are you seeing that?

Because seeing that will change how you look at other people.

So go often to the foot of the cross. Keep your eye constantly on the grace you have been given.

2. Give other people the benefit of the doubt

Some people walk around absorbing injury and offense. They see it everywhere. They have a highly tuned spidey sense for insult and disrespect. They are meticulous in guarding their own worth and dignity.

Now, usually they'll call it discernment or perception or even women's intuition – but all of that is just fancy talk for sin. What they really have is a sinful inclination towards offence.

Stop it.

As Christians we are supposed to believe the best about each other. Paul says that in 1 Corinthians 13. He says:

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
(1 Corinthians 13:7 ESV)

Love is optimistic and patient and so should we be. Christians give people the benefit of the doubt.

Now here is why this matters: if you are eager to collect offense then you will always be behind in your forgiveness. You are always going to have things to process and issues that require closure. But the Bible says:

Why not rather suffer wrong? (1 Corinthians 6:7 ESV)

It would be better to be wronged a couple times than to process every imagined slight and insult.

Ugh!

Who wants to live like that?

Now of course, if there is a real injury, by all means process it. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. But don't assume sin where there is likely only weakness or confusion or clumsiness or just plain old misunderstanding.

Give people the benefit of the doubt and give people time to grow and mature.

3. Keep short accounts

Now at first glance you might think this a contradiction with my second piece of advice but it's not. What I'm saying is this, if someone does something to you that you don't like or that doesn't feel right the first question you ask is this: can I just let this go? Is this wickedness or just weakness? Was this a crime or just a brother being clumsy? If it's weakness or clumsiness or just

a misunderstanding – let it go. Let it go. Why not rather be wronged?

But if it's a real thing – if its an actual sin and therefore a threat to the peace of the community – then process it immediately. Don't stew on it for a month or a year or a decade and don't get "advice" from people in the church lobby – just deal with it.

If your brother sins against you – rebuke him. If he repents forgive him.

Notice that there is no category there for stewing. Or for gossiping – which is what "getting advice from people in the lobby" really is.

There is just sin, rebuke, repent, forgive. Right? There is no stew, no "advice gathering" – just sin, rebuke, repent, forgive, move on. That's what I mean by keep short accounts. If it's a thing deal with it quickly and don't let it become a root of bitterness.

Then fourthly and lastly:

4. Leave room for the wrath of God

Paul says that in Romans 12:19:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." (Romans 12:19–20 ESV)

This bit of advice from Paul here has two rationales embedded within it. First of all Paul says that we don't have to get "closure" on everything. We don't have to keep processing with people until they agree with our version of events – because everyone will stand before the Judgment Seat of God. He'll get to the bottom of things. Everyone will give an account for every single word they've ever uttered – so he will sort it out. So you can chill out and get on with the business of loving and caring for other people. The second thing he says is that actually loving people who've been mean to you is the best way to spur them to repentance. You love on people who've been mean to you and you will heap burning coals upon their head. It's the best way to get through to unrepentant people.

So – leave room for the wrath of God.

Let him do his thing and let's us do our thing.

Our thing is mercy, kindness, charity and love. That's the road we're supposed to be walking on the other side of the cross.

So let's get on it.

The obstacles have been cleared. The way has been defined and some steps and have been suggested. Now let's go and do what we have seen.

Will you pray with me? Let's pray together.

(Jody, I will leave here and head to RCC but I'd like you to further press the application. Before you do the benediction or between the verses of the closing song I'd like you to encourage them to take out their bulletin insert and to put a STAR (*) beside one or two of the application steps identifying the ones that most speak to their own journey with forgiveness. As if to say: "This is what I really need to focus on this week". Thanks!)