

“Forgiveness”

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Matthew 18:21-35

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 103:1-5

A Benedictine nun was keeping vigil at her dying mother’s bedside. Seeking to comfort her mother, she said, “In heaven, everyone we love is there.” “No,” her mother responded, “in heaven I will love everyone who’s there.”

In describing this profound exchange between a daughter and her dying mother,¹ author Kathleen Norris gives us a glimpse of heaven, which is what Jesus gives us in telling about a rather ordinary exchange between a king and his slave.

Both these ways of looking at the kingdom of heaven have more to do with earth and the here-and-now than with heaven and the afterlife. Jesus is teaching about forgiveness, something the dying mother has come to fully understand. She says, “In heaven, I will love everyone who’s there,” and in that, she acknowledges that this was something she struggled with in life. Acknowledging our struggle to forgive and love as we should is the first step in forgiving and loving as we should. That’s kind of weird, but it’s true.

All great journeys may start with a single step, but you’ll never reach your goal if you don’t know where you are now and where you could be with a little more effort. That’s what we’re going to look at today, where we are now and where we could be in the area of forgiveness. To show us how to walk more closely with Jesus in our relationships with each other, we have this parable of the king and his slave.

Jesus starts out by saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared” to a king who forgives his slave an insurmountable debt, a debt he could never pay back. Then he tells how the slave, after receiving the king’s forgiveness, fails to show that same forgiveness to a fellow slave who owes him money. Instead, he seizes him by the throat and says, “Pay what you owe,” and then has him thrown into prison until he pays up. The story ends with this commandment, (quote) that you “forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

That’s so hard for us. How many here can think of at least one person you’re holding a grudge against? All the honest people raise your hands. I’m kidding, but it’s true, we all hold grudges, harbor resent, struggle to forgive somebody for something.

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 367.

That's just human nature. I mean if you can't think of an example in your life right now, just wait, you'll get a chance to struggle with forgiving someone of something sometime today or later this week, because true forgiveness is not easy. And for those unwilling or unable to **work on forgiveness**, they will forever be a prisoner to that grudge or resentment or unforgiven person.

But just as Jesus says in John 8 (31-32), the truth shall set you free. And the truth of it is, we all owe insurmountable debt to God, our Lord and King, each and everyone of us.

The first step in coming to true forgiveness is getting in touch with and accepting and being ever mindful of just how much we owe to God, and how impossible it is to make things right with God, apart from God's grace.

The second step is to share God's grace, share the forgiveness of the Lord with others, just as freely as it is given by God to us – to you and to me. As hard as it is to acknowledge the gift of God's grace and mercy, it is even harder to show that same grace and mercy to others by forgiving them – and I mean really forgiving them, like God forgives us.

Bishop Desmond Tutu tells of a man with a particularly overwhelming sin, which he would confess and God would forgive. But no sooner had the man received God's forgiveness than he would trip up and sin again. One day when this happened, the man rushed back to God and said, "I'm sorry, I've done it again." And God said, "What have you done again?"²

That's how we are called to forgive, completely releasing the other person from the offense, the debt. And to do that, we need God's help. If you feel like a prisoner to the grudges and resentments you keep – to the pain in your heart caused by something you just can't bring yourself to forgive – you need God's help.

We all need God's help with this, everyday. We all have things we hold onto and refuse to forgive; we all have trouble forgiving others. Forgiveness is never going to be easy. And that's where God steps in, if we open our hearts as instruments of true forgiveness.

And as hard as this is for us, it's worth it. Jesus says it's like heaven on earth to forgive as God forgives us. And he shows us what it takes for us to do that. He tells us that the slave was to be sold (quote) "together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made" that way. The slave has nothing else to lose. That's what it takes to forgive others as God forgives us – seeing that we have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. The slave with nothing to lose, says Jesus, "fell on his knees before (the king), saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'" And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt." Unless we stay in touch with how much we owe to God, we can never experience the greatness of God's grace and mercy, which according to Jesus, is like experiencing heaven on earth.

² Desmond Tutu, *An African Prayer Book* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 38.

Isn't the chance of experiencing heaven on earth worth it?!? Isn't it worth making that phone call, having that conversation, sending that note or email of forgiveness? And not just saying the words, but actually getting to the place of truly forgiving the other person, "from your heart." Jesus says in Matthew, "forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

I know this is not easy. But with God's help, it is possible. With God's help, entering into the heavenly realm of love and forgiveness is more than possible; it's ours for the taking, freely given to you and to me by a God who loves us so much, and accepts us just the way you are.

If God loves you so much and accepts you just the way you are, shouldn't we love others enough to accept them as they are, love them enough to forgive them whatever it is they've done that's bothering us?

I encourage you to spend some time today praying about forgiving that grudge or resentment you're holding onto. And if you need help getting started, come to me, or come to someone else in your life who you can trust to guide you through this.

For instance, I ran across this bit of wisdom while preparing today's sermon: Forgiveness is not saying the offense never happened. It did. Forgiveness is not saying that everything's okay. It isn't. Forgiveness is not saying we no longer feel the pain of the offense. We do.

What forgiveness is is saying, "I still feel the pain, but I am willing to let go of your involvement in my pain." Forgiveness is saying, "I'm okay, and I am willing to let God deal with whether you are okay – I am willing to let go of my need to be the instrument of correction and rebuke in your life." That was taken from a book by J.P. Gallagher, describing the wisdom of Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty.³

Another good place to turn in learning how to forgive is the Lord's Prayer. Jesus taught us to say when we pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Matthew 6:12). "Forgive us our debts" – that's what we ask of God.

"As we have forgiven our debtors" – that's what we offer one another, with God's help. When you come right down to it, it's that simple, and that hard, and that worth it. It's worth it to keep working at true forgiveness. It's worth it to experience something like heaven right here on earth. What a gift! What a responsibility! Amen.

³ J. P. Gallagher, *The Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican* (New York: Coward-McCann Inc., 1967).

Pastoral Prayer

God of grace, we offer our thanks:

for all those who have given us the gift of new life, of encouragement and hope;

for those who have let us trust their faith when ours was full of doubts;

for those who have come to our aid when our lives were spinning out of control;

for those who have shown us a light when we were surrounded in darkness;

for all those whose names we think of now who have sowed the seeds of kindness and love in our lives. People like

In these moments of quietness, we ask that you would help us to be a blessing in the lives of others.

As you have showered your love upon us, O God, let it be that our lives might reflect your love and light in this world.

This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, who came that we might know what a life of love and light looks like, and who taught us to say when we pray...

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**