

**Matthew 18:21-35**  
**Second Baptist Church - Lincoln, NE**  
**October 11, 2009**

**Unforgiveness and the Christian Life (Slide 1)**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

<sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.

<sup>25</sup> Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

<sup>26</sup> "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'

<sup>27</sup> The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

<sup>28</sup> "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

<sup>29</sup> "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

<sup>30</sup> "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

<sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

<sup>32</sup> "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

<sup>33</sup> 'Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'

<sup>34</sup> In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

<sup>35</sup> "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

You may have heard me say a number of times recently, both in Bible Study and in my Sunday message, that such-an-such passage is a favorite passage of mine. It's fun to preach and teach on my favorite passages. I love discussing the early church in Acts and the words of Paul in Philippians. I love preaching on communion and the power of the cross. Today, however, I am instead looking at a text I don't care for very much. The whole theme of unforgiveness hits a little too close to home. Rectifying a broken and damaged human relationship is a painful experience. Sometimes it requires a little more humility than I like to have. Sometimes it requires that I admit my own failures and my own ugly "dark side", something I would prefer to keep hidden. Yet, just as distasteful as this act can be, it is also an act of terrific freedom and restoration. Coming face to face with our own weaknesses and foibles is painful yet restorative.

This parable today hits at the very core of that distasteful act of forgiveness. This morning, I want to lay out the process of forgiveness. To help the process along in your own minds, I'm going to ask you to think of someone in your life who you are unable or unwilling to forgive. Chances are, you immediately know who that person is and you won't have to think long.

It might be a person who cheated you. It might be a person who humiliated you. Perhaps it is a person who lied about you. Those hurts cut deep and when it happens, forgiveness is the furthest thing from our minds. When God created living things, whether animals or humans, he

gave them a certain response known as the *flight or fight*. For example, a feral cat (a wild untamed cat), will run from you if you approach it. However, if you startle the animal when it is cornered and it is unable to escape, chances are, you have a fight on your hands. This is called fight or flight. Humans have the same response but it is manifested differently in different people. If you have a conflict with some people, they are likely to respond in one of these two ways. They may react with the FLIGHT because like a cat, they have room to get away. If you get into a conflict with them, they might leave the church. They might walk down the other aisle if you happen to see them in the grocery store. They might stop calling. They stop showing up when they know you are going to be there. Perhaps they will give you the cold, silent treatment. They will stop speaking or interacting with you. This can turn into a *passive-aggressive* behavior which is, **THEY ARE SILENT TO YOU, BUT THEY TALK TO OTHERS ABOUT YOU AND THE TERRIBLE THING YOU DID**. Sometimes, even after apologies are made, they continue to be distant in their behavior and the friendship is still cool.

The second reaction is the FIGHT. Those kinds of people become quickly angry and aggressive. When they are hurt, they will let you know. They will fight back by rallying support from others. They will be openly vengeful and vindictive. There will be NO question whether they are mad at you or not. We can all think of situations where these kinds of conflicts have risen and perhaps they happened years ago, but are still in play. We can think of people who are not speaking to each other, family members estranged because of their perceived wounds and hurt.

In our text today, Jesus gives some sound advice on healing conflict. He knew that human nature would come into play in the church, an institution that hadn't even yet established. Earlier in the text, he gives a formula of addressing conflict. V. 15: "If your brother sins against you...." The first thing is to (1.) *go face to face to him*. Don't go behind his back and tell others what he has done. It says that if he listens to you, then you have won back your friend and brother. But we all know that there are times a face to face meeting does not resolve the conflict. So Jesus gives the second step in the process: (2.) *If he doesn't listen, take one or two other people with you so that there are witnesses to what is being said*. If he still refuses to listen, then you (3.) *take the matter before the whole church*. If he continues his refusal to listen, then you (4.) *treat him as a pagan or tax collector*. That means, GENTILE (Ethnikos: the common title for those who are consciously rebellious against God and God's people.) For many years, I misunderstood this text. I thought it meant shunning such a person. However, this doesn't mean to reject him and treat him badly. How did Jesus treat tax collectors and gentiles? What about the woman at the well or the woman caught in adultery?

The method for conflict management that Jesus describes here is forthright and honest. In most situations, it would squelch most conflicts and disagreements. It can foster and facilitate forgiveness. But instead, people will jump from the initial conflict to making the issue public, which embarrasses the offender and thus making them more resistant to reconciliation. Seeking forgiveness is not always the easiest path to take. We find it easier to go to someone else and

say, “I’m so mad at Charlie. Do you know what he did?”, then we give our side of the story. That is called *triangulating*. I’m mad at you so I go to someone else to voice my complaint. This technique is disastrous in that it is all based on gossip and flawed perspective. Usually if someone comes to us to talk about someone, we get only one side of the story and it is usually wrong. Wouldn’t it be better if we went to Charlie and confronted him rather than to a third party?

The parable that was read this morning is a great answer to the difficulty of forgiveness. **(Slide 8)** It has a way of pointing us toward GRACE and the whole message of the CROSS.

Peter asks the questions, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” The Old Testament eluded to the fact that three times was enough to show a forgiving spirit. The rabbinical writings says this: “If a man commits a transgression, the first second and third time, he is forgiven, the third time he is not.” (Yoma 86b, 87a)

To answer Peter, Jesus illustrates the importance of forgiveness by telling a parable. A king wanted to settle his accounts so he called a servant to him who owed him money. The man wasn’t able to pay so the king was going to sell both the man and his family into slavery until the debt was paid. The man cried out for mercy and the king took pity and had mercy on his servant and cancelled his debt. That same servant who was forgiven his debt was also owed some money by a fellow servant. The same thing happened when his fellow servant couldn’t pay. BUT, he refused to have mercy on him. He had the man thrown into prison until the debt could be paid. He showed no mercy, even though mercy had been shown to him.

There is a powerful message here. It is not so much about HOW many times we should forgive others, but the fact that others are always worthy of our forgiveness. That’s part of the reason that this is not one of my favorite scripture texts because I’m afraid it hits a little too close to home for me. This parable illustrates that **every single one of us is a sinner**. We have violated God’s laws and we were separated from God for all of eternity. Like the servant, we were destined to be eternally imprisoned.

But **Jesus stepped in the gap**. He took upon himself the sin that I committed and he declared me innocent. HE forgave me. He reconciled me with his heavenly father. In other words, he stood before his heavenly father and said, “Steve is alright. His sin has been paid for. He’s forgiven. So I am that servant of the king who was forgiven. And now every day as I live my life, there are people who do me wrong. The guy who cuts me off in traffic or the family member who offends me. Or there is that one person in our lives we just can’t seem to forgive. And like the Servant in our text, I’ve been forgiven by the king, but I’m unwilling to forgive someone who has offended me.

The sad thing is that we as Christians know better but we continue to harbor resentments and hurts. And Christ is reminding us here that forgiveness is completely and readily available if we are **willing to extend a hand**. Humble ourselves. I have to remind myself of the image of the cross. Christ was spat upon, tortured, nailed spread-eagle to a cross. It was humiliation,

agony and death all in a few hour period so that my guilt would be erased. Am I willing to repair relationships around me so that forgiveness and reconciliation takes place? Are you willing? Is the hurt someone else caused so big that Christ's death can't cover it? Some of these hurts have been harbored for years. Festering like a painful sore. Neither side willing to forgive and it goes on and on.

But I believe Jesus is capable and willing to help us find forgiveness toward others. He forgave us, and he wants to see us bring forgiveness into our relationships. Bring your hurts and pain to Jesus. Bring your unforgiveness to him and ask him to set you free.