

The Parables of Jesus: The Unforgiving Servant

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Preacher: Kent Dixon

[0 : 0 0] Well, welcome here for Sunday. I can't believe how fast time is going. Sunday, August 29th. And as I said, it's so great to be back with you this morning. When I came in this morning and I have been greeting people and having conversations, I just feel such joy and I feel the presence of God in this place.

Well, we're picking up our sermon series on the parables of Jesus this morning. And if you're wondering, will it ever end? And next week will be our last sermon in this series.

So we are in the penultimate, if you like that word, sermon of this series. Throughout this sermon series, we've been revisiting familiar stories as we've explored the parables of Jesus.

Some are super familiar. Some are familiar to folks who aren't even church people, just because of culture and awareness of those things. And some of them may have been relatively new to you. And I've had those kinds of conversations with people too. But my prayer again, as we continue, is that may God grant us eyes to see and ears to hear the deep, deep truth that is hidden in these parables.

[1 : 1 2] And it's not hidden in a way that we can't find it, as we've learned over the series, I hope. So this morning we're continuing in this final category. I have talked about the categories or themes of parables that scholars have identified.

And this last category is known as the parables of judgment. And the parables of judgment tend to stress the theme of surprise at the process and outcome of God's judgment.

And they're intended to be a powerful influence on our thinking and our behavior. And as we've looked at parables over the course of this series, I believe we've recognized over and over that the expectations we bring to them get turned on their head, I think.

Generally speaking, if not always. So as we reflect on the fact this is reality, right, that Jesus will return one day. We're all going to face God's judgment.

We don't get a free pass in this building. So knowing that, recognizing that, we need to be appropriately humble now because ultimately many things that we think, many things that we may understand to be true might be shown to be incorrect.

[2 : 3 2] So we need to be open to learn, open to hear. Our parable this morning is found in Matthew 18, 21 to 45.

I was listening to another sermon or another pastor preach a sermon while I was on vacation. And I loved that he said, I need to hear pages turning. And he also said, so turn in your Bible, which should be sitting on your lap, which I thought was cute.

But anyway, so I recognize too that people have apps and you can also cheat and listen to me as I read the passage. So you may have heard it under the heading, Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving debtor.

That's a mouthful, right? That's not one that easily rolls off the tongue. Or the heading, the unmerciful servant. But it's commonly found under, and you may have this in your Bible, in your translation, the unforgiving servant.

So that's the title. Matthew 18, 21 to 45. If you want to turn in your Bibles, open your Bible on your phone, or you can listen as I read.

[3 : 4 2] 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? Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times.

Therefore, here comes the parable, the kingdom of heaven is like, and remember in the past, that's a metaphor, metaphor alert, right? The kingdom of heaven is like what Jesus is about to tell us.

A king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him 10,000 talents was brought to him.

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.

The servant fell on his knees before him. Be patient with me, he begged. And I will pay back everything. The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go.

[4 : 54] But, there's always a but. When the servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him.

Pay back what you owe me, he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, be patient with me and I will pay you back. But he refused.

Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called his servant in. You wicked servant, he said. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

Shouldn't you have shown mercy, had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had on you? In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all that he owed.

[6 : 05] And Jesus closes the parable with these words. This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

The word of the Lord. Thank you, Florence. So as we begin to unpack this parable together this morning, we can recognize something right off the bat, I think, that Jesus telling this parable is triggered by someone's attitude, someone's actions.

And that's something that we can recognize, I think we have recognized, with many of the parables that we've studied. So thanks a lot, Peter. Right?

It's Peter whose question prompts Jesus to tell this convicting parable, right? But his question is, I think it's reasonable enough, isn't it? He's just asking for expectations.

He's clarifying, isn't he? Hey, Jesus, I'm doing a good job if I forgive someone seven times, right?

That makes me a good person. That's what Peter is essentially saying.

[7 : 16] Well, Jesus' reaction to that seems pretty strong, doesn't it? I mean, Jesus pushes back against Peter's comment and suggests that he needs to forgive someone how many times?

77. So that seems like a lot of I'm sorry's even for a Canadian, right? That's a lot of I'm sorry's. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm still sorry. Three, 74 and a go.

But it's helpful to have some context here because the rabbis at the time taught that you should give someone who offended you, how many times do you know?

Three times. So Peter is adding four, right? So here comes Peter figuring he's being super generous.

Okay, the rule, the law is three. Well, I'm gonna add four. So that's seven, Jesus. Seven is good, right? Really good. So maybe you'd recognize also that that number seven has significance.

[8 : 21] And I'm gonna look at that a little bit. So how many wonders of the world are there? Seven. How many days was the world created?

It's a trick question. Yeah, somebody said six. So it is six, but it's seven, right? Because the day of rest counts. So there's seven again. Some scholars suggest that seven represents the unity of the Trinity with the concept of the four corners of the earth.

Four plus three. I'm bad at math. That's why I'm an English major. Seven. The book of Revelation talks about seven churches and angels and seals and trumpets and stars.

Seven every time. A Harvard University study in the 50s suggested that the human short-term memory can effectively hold how many items of information?

Any guesses? It happens to be seven. It's like I researched. So did you also know that if you ask someone to pick a number between one and 10, what are they most likely to pick?

[9 : 36] Seven. Believe it or not. Give it a try. So Peter seemed to have been on to something here, right? Well, but judging from Jesus' reaction, obviously not.

Jesus doesn't go, you nailed it, Peter. Seven is great. Seven is four more than you need to. So before you begin to make 77 apologies to anybody who wrongs you, Jesus was not being literal here.

He was making a point. Okay? So if you take nothing else away from this morning, don't tune out after this statement.

Remember this key message. Seek to be as generous with the forgiveness you extend to others as God has extended in forgiving you.

So I promise you won't tune out. I'm going to be watching for closed eyes. So as you listened or read this parable with me this morning or as you've understood it in the past, have you had a positive or a negative reaction to the behavior of the king in this story?

[10:51] Do you react strongly to how the king moves immediately to sell the servant, sell every member of his family and everything they owe to pay the debt?

Do you think that's too much? Well, I believe some context is helpful here again because in Bible times, there were serious consequences to owing someone a debt and not being able to pay it back.

Serious consequences. The lender could seize, essentially enslave the borrower or their family, seize them to make them pay off the debt that was owed.

So it's not like you miss a mortgage payment and they add a percentage or point or whatever, go to jail. The debtor could also be, as I'm saying, thrown into prison.

Then their family members could be sold into slavery. So whatever the lender got back from the sale of those people into slavery would be counted against the debt.

[12:01] And if the debtor wasn't able to pay off the debt by any means, then they could be imprisoned for life. You can't pay it back ever? Okay.

See ya. That was the system. And that was how everyone understood the system to be. Not a surprise to anyone.

So what about the servant? How do you react to how he behaves in the story? And this can be audience participation.

If you want to share a word, a thought, what are some of the words that you would maybe use to describe the actions of the servant? Especially as they relate to the king.

Initially humble. The one who's forgiven the debt initially and then wanders away and acts differently.

[13:02] So initially humble. Thankful. Repentant. How about panicky? I might even suggest groveling perhaps.

Right? So we can see the heart that is conveyed by those initial actions. I'm sorry, I'll pay it back. And yet the true heart is revealed later, right?

So the words that we could use to describe the actions of the servant towards his fellow servant. What about that? Any thoughts on that front? Severe?

Exactly. Yeah. Much smaller debt should have been easier to forgive. And yet the king forgave his huge debt with no conditions. No initial conditions.

Harsh. Unmerciful. Even vengeful. Right? There's revenge and anger in his behavior. And that's a pretty huge discrepancy, isn't it?

[14:18] The servant begs for mercy from the king. He begs for a very specific kind of forgiveness, we read there. For a specific kind of justice.

For the king's justice and judgment to be what's best for him. Do you see that? Do you recognize that there? I want justice, but I'm going to set it up for my best interest a little bit.

But then when it comes to extending mercy to someone else, he's clearly not very interested in that, is he? It's about what he wants.

He's completely forgotten the kind of justice and mercy he deserved versus what he received. He's not going to be able to do it. He's going to be able to do it. He's going to be able to do it. He's going to be able to do it. And instead seeks retribution and revenge against someone else.

What a contradiction there. Friends, does that perspective seem familiar to you at all when it comes to being on the receiving end of punishment or justice or judgment?

[15:28] Are we quick to advocate for ourselves instead of saying, yeah, I do deserve this? Do you get pulled over for a ticket and say, I wasn't speeding?

Prove it. Well, they can, for one thing. But are we quick to advocate for ourselves, to justify our actions? To some extent, that could be considered self-preservation, right?

We've got to protect ourselves. We've got to watch out for ourselves. But more than that, it suggests selfishness. It suggests entitlement. And had it ended at this point in the story, the parable

would leave us with a very clear sense of the wrong behavior of that servant. Being personally forgiven beyond measure and yet denying forgiveness to someone else to such a strong degree. They're completely opposite in the extent of their intensity. But the story, thankfully, does not end there. We read that, as so often happens, the word of the servant's actions get back to the master.

[16:44] Have you ever done that? Said something, and she comes back around and bites you? It happens. So those words, that action, gets back to the master.

And he immediately, not surprisingly, he immediately recognizes this gross imbalance of grace and mercy and justice that have been reflected here.

And he's mad. The king's response is swift. And that customary penalty, which we talked about, is restored immediately.

So in case Peter, or anyone who hears it, including us, doesn't get the message, Jesus is abundantly clear when he says in verse 35, this is how my heavenly father will treat you unless you forgive your brother, how?

From your heart. The message of forgiveness is a central theme in the book of Matthew. It's a central theme, not surprisingly, and for obvious reasons, in all of Jesus' ministry.

[18:04] He saved you. He saved me. But as I reflected on this concept, I felt compelled to, wait for it, steal from another sermon.

No. Because I remembered hearing a sermon on this topic of forgiveness. But it's okay. Normally you can get fired as a pastor for plagiarizing someone, as you should.

But it was one of mine, so I can steal it without any guilt. So you may remember that we unpacked the words of the Lord's Prayer together. It was about a year ago, a little over.

And so, I forgive you if you don't remember. That's once. What perspective do you have as you consider your own forgiveness?

forgiveness? And then, from there, in light of how you seem to be called to forgive others. Matthew 6, verses 14 and 15, spell it out pretty clearly for us.

[19:11] For, if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. Wait for it. But, if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Did you catch that? It's not unconditional. It's unconditional love. It's unconditional forgiveness freely given. But there are expectations that your behavior should reflect what you have received.

As one commentator says, Jesus gives us a startling warning about forgiveness. If we refuse to forgive others, God will also refuse to forgive us.

Why? Because when we don't forgive others, my friends, we are denying our common ground.

We're setting ourselves up on a different level the playing field is not even.

We're ignoring the fact that we also are sinners in need of God's forgiveness. As forgiven ones, we need to be forgivers.

[20:33] So let me be clear here. I'm not saying, again, I'm not saying that God's forgiveness of our sin is simply the direct result of forgiving others.

Oh, you forgave them, then I'm going to forgive you. It doesn't work that way. But it is based on our realizing that God's forgiveness, what God's forgiveness to us means.

As the Bible says in Ephesians 4, verse 32, be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.

the message is that having freely received God's forgiveness ourselves, we are called to model and reflect that in our lives.

We're called to model that by freely forgiving other people who have hurt us or sinned against us. I want you to shine a light inside for a moment.

[21:40] Do you recognize a relationship or a situation where you are carrying around bitterness? You're carrying around anger or resentment because you haven't forgiven someone who hurt you.

Friends, I've said it before, that is letting someone rent space in your head and your heart for free. And it's not what we're called to do.

You don't recognize the weight that you're carrying by carrying that with you, but just as our body will compensate when we're sick, will compensate when we have an illness, we may not recognize the drain that that is causing on us.

Similarly, when we carry around unrepentant sin, when we carry around a lack of forgiveness for other people, it is draining you like you can't even believe.

So be free of that by forgiving. Just like we saw with the unforgiving servant, when we don't forgive others, we're setting ourselves outside and above the same judgment and mercy that has been given to us by our King.

[23 : 06] Because God has forgiven all our sins, we should not withhold forgiveness from others. Realizing how completely Christ has forgiven us should produce a free and generous attitude of forgiveness towards others.

My friends, as you have freely received God's mercy and forgiveness, recognize and reflect that same mercy and forgiveness to everyone you meet.

Amen.