

The Church's Grace

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Preacher: Rev. Jeremy Graham

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. So good to be with you all. Our text this morning is Matthew 18, 21 to 35, if you have that open in front of you.

This is the passage that concludes Jesus' radical teaching on relationships within the church. His theme in verses 21 to 35 is forgiveness.

Forgiveness. Forgiving our brother or sister when they sin against us. So the trial of Amber Geiger received a lot of media attention.

Amber Geiger was a former Dallas police officer who entered 26-year-old Botham Jean's apartment and fatally shot him. Botham Jean was an innocent African-American man.

And the Jean family was given the opportunity to make a victim impact statement. So Brant Jean, the victim's 18-year-old younger brother, used his time to directly address the officer who killed his brother.

[1 : 08] He said, If you truly are sorry, I know I can speak for myself. I forgive you. Brant told Geiger that his brother would have wanted her to give her life to Christ.

He asked to give his brother's killer a hug, offering her a long embrace. And in the video, you can hear Geiger's loud sobs.

This story, of course, is an amazing example of Christian forgiveness. All the more amazing because of just how rare it is. Listen to what C.S. Lewis says.

We say a great many things in church without thinking of what we're saying. For instance, we say in the Apostles' Creed, and actually also in the Nicene Creed, I believe in the forgiveness of sins.

At first sight, it seems hardly worth putting in. If one is a Christian, I thought, of course one believes in the forgiveness of sins. It goes without saying. But the people who compiled the creed apparently thought this was a part of our belief which we needed to be reminded of every time we went to church.

[2 : 17] And I have begun to see that, as far as I'm concerned, they were right. To believe in the forgiveness of sins is not so easy as I thought. End quote. What is it that makes forgiveness so difficult?

Well, where do I even begin? The size of the crime, the size of the wrong done against us can make it very difficult to forgive. Or what about the size of the hurt that still remains, even now, makes it difficult?

The lingering bitterness or resentment we feel. A lack of repentance from the person who hurt us. A fear of injustice, that by forgiving someone, we're letting them off the hook for the wrong they've done.

Or what about the longing for revenge? So yes, we did say together this morning, I believe in the forgiveness of sins, but God help me, it's difficult.

We struggle to forgive. And that's why Simon Peter must have been feeling pretty good about himself when he chimed in with his question about forgiveness in verse 21.

[3 : 26] Have a look with me at that verse. And then Peter came up and said to him, Lord, how often will my brother or sister sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jews in Jesus' day were taught the law commanded you to forgive three times.

The fourth time, forgiveness was no longer required. So Peter's been listening carefully to Jesus these last 20 verses. He thinks he's got Jesus figured out. I see how this guy works. We're supposed to forgive three times, but I know Jesus is an exacting teacher, so I'm going to double it. I'm going to add one more just for good measure. That ought to impress him. And how does Jesus respond in verse 22? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but 70 times seven.

Now even more likely, the original Greek was actually 77 times, not 70 times seven, which is 490. But that's not really the point here. The point is that Peter brings a calculator to this conversation about forgiveness.

He thinks forgiveness is a math problem. But Jesus responds by flipping the script on his disciples. And 77 times, or 70 times seven, is likely meant to echo Genesis 4 verse 24.

[4 : 50] And there we meet Lamech, who is a descendant of Cain, who killed his brother Abel. And this Lamech, he's a nasty piece of business. He brags that he's even worse than Cain.

This is what he says. Listen to what I say. I've killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, Lamech's is 77 fold.

77 times, 77 times, it's like saying continuous or unending revenge. And revenge is really the opposite of forgiveness.

Whether it's Achilles in the Iliad, or pretty much every Liam Neeson movie made in the last 10 years, revenge can seem so delicious to our sinful hearts. Revenge is also, it's also a mathematical approach to sin and to justice.

It's multiplication though. And the history of Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, or of Jews and Palestinians in Israel, in the Middle East, well they both demonstrate that revenge will never bring justice or satisfaction.

[6 : 01] So Jesus flips the script. He announces that the Christian life ought to be a pattern of continual forgiveness. Just put that calculator away.

He tells Peter, we don't use math to count forgiveness. We use our heart. So look at the last verse of our passage, verse 35.

So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. From your heart. The heart, throughout Jesus' teaching, it's the source of all of our inner life.

It's our thoughts and it's our emotions, it's our desires, it's our affections. It's right down deep in our guts. And Christian forgiveness comes from the heart. But it's still unnatural.

Forgiveness is not a natural human act. Prosecution seems natural. Revenge even seems natural. But not forgiveness.

[7 : 03] Forgiveness is a divine act. In as far as we can ever forgive at all, it is as participants in what God has done in Christ Jesus.

Forgiveness from the heart is a gift from God. And so Jesus teaches his disciples and his church about forgiveness by telling them this parable. And in this parable, he offers us two motivations for forgiving others.

Number one, the size of the debt that we owe God, which our Heavenly Father has completely forgiven. And number two, the eternal consequence for those who ignore God's grace and do not forgive others from the heart.

So let's take a closer look at the first motivation, the size of the debt which we have been forgiven. Begin in verse 23. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

And when he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him 10,000 talents. So Jesus introduces a king who is an accountant. The parable begins as a math problem just as Peter envisioned.

[8 : 18] A man who owes 10,000 talents. Just how much money is this? Well, a talent, it's the highest unit of currency in Jesus' day and 10,000 is the largest number that can be expressed in Greek.

So in first century Palestine, 10,000 talents would have been more money than the GDP of all of Israel. It would have been more money than all the currency that was in circulation at that time. It's Dr. Evil in Austin Powers kind of money. Zillions and zillions of dollars. It's hyperbolic. Verse 25. Since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold with his wife and children and all that he had in payment to be made.

So the servant fell on his knees imploring him, have patience with me. I will pay you everything. There is an intentional absurdity here. The sale of his family will not pay the debt.

More time will not pay the debt. 10,000 talents is equal to 60 billion days' wages for a first century servant.

[9 : 23] 60 billion days. Let that sink in. But then comes this surprising twist in the story. Verse 27.

Out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. Out of pity. It's a fantastic Greek word, splanknisthes, which is better translated moved with compassion. Moved with compassion. It's a response that comes from deep down, from the gut, from the heart. Moved with compassion. He forgave him. And Matthew uses this same word to describe Jesus several times in his traveling ministry.

Matthew 9, 36. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were distressed and dejected like sheep without a shepherd. Or Matthew 14.

When he came ashore, he saw a great crowd and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. So this is a divine compassion, the compassion of our triune God expressed by this master towards the hopelessly indebted servant.

[10:30] He releases him so that his family is no longer under the threat of enslavement and he forgives the debt. It's not an extension on the loan.

It's not a payment plan or debt consolidation. The king is no longer an accountant. He is no longer in the bookkeeping business. Though it is costly, he eats the loss.

The debt is gone. So meditate for a moment on the cost. Our salvation was purchased at the unthinkable cost of the Heavenly Father's own Son, Jesus Christ.

He paid the debt of death that we owed so that we might live. Romans 6.23, For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1 Corinthians 6.20, You were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God with your body. Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe.

[11:39] Sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow. Our first motivation for forgiving others is to recognize the size of our debt and the cost which was paid for our forgiveness.

I came across a story recently in Christianity Today. A young man in Arkansas, although I think it's actually pronounced Arkansas, I'm pretty sure. A young man in Arkansas was high on drugs and he broke into the local Baptist church and he rampaged through the building doing over \$100,000 in damage.

Six months later, that young man stood in the baptismal tank of the same church preparing to be baptized by the congregation that he had so badly hurt. And that six-month journey of grace and repentance began when that congregation offered forgiveness to the man when he was caught and charged with the crime.

Instead of insisting on prison time, they offered him a spot in their addiction recovery program. And they disciplined him as he received physical and spiritual healing.

And though it was costly for them to forgive, they recognized the size of the forgiveness which they had received in Jesus. See, the debt we owe for our sin, it's not a mathematical sum that we can slowly pay off with a lifetime of hard work and good investment.

[13:12] Jesus says, stop saying, have patience with me and I will pay. And start saying, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. So what is the second motivation which Jesus teaches in this parable?

It's the eternal consequence for those who ignore God's grace and do not forgive others from their heart. So our newly forgiven servant, he heads out into his new life and Jesus deliberately places him in the exact same situation he just experienced, only now he is the one that's being owed.

Look at verse 28 with me. When the same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii and seized him. He began to choke him saying, pay me what you owe.

Seizing and choking, there's a violence that's quite shocking. So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, have patience with me and I will pay you. And these are the very same words that he had said to the master.

But verse 30, he refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. What a shocking ending. His fellow servant owed him one hundred denarii. It's not a small sum.

[14:26] It's a hundred days wages. But consider this. One hundred denarii is one six hundred thousandth of the debt that he has just been forgiven.

One six hundred thousandth. His actions, really, they seem unthinkable, almost cruel. Verse 31 tells us that his fellow servants were so greatly distressed that they went and reported to their master what had happened.

And reported, reported is actually a very strong word in the original. They explained in detail what had happened because it was such a great injustice. And now the first servant is again summoned

before his master.

You wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me and should not you have forgiven, had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you? And in anger, his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debts.

And again, this word jailers is really too soft. The Greek word is torturers. Torturers. It's not meant, though, to depict how God operates in the real world, but rather in this parable to give a very vivid picture of how seriously the father responds to sin.

[15:48] Recall chapter 18, verse 6. Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea. Or verses 8 and 9, cut off your hand if it causes you to sin.

Pluck out your eye. That kind of strength of language. The seriousness of sin. Listen, though, to how D.A. Carson explains this verse. Jesus sees no incongruity in the actions of a heavenly father who forgives so bountifully and punishes so ruthlessly.

It is precisely because he is a God of such compassion and mercy that he cannot possibly accept as his those devoid of compassion and mercy.

So Jesus explains the implication of his parable in verse 35. So also my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Right now, perhaps you're thinking, wait a minute. Jeremy, the servant was forgiven his debt. I'm forgiven by grace. You're just sneaking in some sort of works through the back door here, making my forgiveness conditional.

[17:01] Well, first of all, as far as that's true, let's be clear, these are Jesus' words and not mine. But let's take a closer look at Jesus' other similar teaching in Matthew. Matthew 5, verse 7.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Notice the order there. The Lord's prayer in Matthew 6. Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And the less remembered verse that follows immediately. after the Lord's prayer. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses.

So this is Jesus' consistent teaching about forgiveness. It's this, that the evidence of a transformed and truly forgiven life is shown when we offer the same forgiveness to others that we have first received.

or to put it another way, if we refuse to die to the bookkeeping business, and we continue to keep accounts and ledgers against those who sin against us, our Lord will let us walk that path to its tragic end, which is that we too will necessarily be judged by the bookkeeper and found guilty for our sins with eternal consequence.

[18:30] And there's just one more question that needs to be answered before we close. What about forgiving someone who's not sorry? Is my forgiveness conditional on repentance?

This is a very delicate matter, I know. There are crimes that seem unforgivable. Child abuse, genocide, just to name two. But I think there's a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Reconciliation or a restoration of a relationship, it requires two parties. It requires repentance and it requires forgiveness. 2 Corinthians 7 addresses this topic.

However, there can be forgiveness without reconciliation. Our Heavenly Father's desire is that anger and bitterness and all types of sin that come from unforgiveness in our hearts, that they are put to death in us.

And so I believe that somehow with the Holy Spirit's help, we must seek to forgive even when we receive no signs of repentance. Because ultimately, when we don't forgive, we are just putting ourselves in the place of God as judge over the guilty party.

[19:57] Putting ourselves in the place of God as judge. And it's so natural that we want to be the judge, but there is only one judge. Well, there may be someone that you've been thinking about during this sermon.

Someone who's very difficult to forgive. You can hardly imagine it. In fact, I think it can even be more difficult to forgive repeated small sins against us over and over again than it can to forgive a single great injury.

Forgiveness may be the most unnatural thing in the entire world. But Jesus knows this. And he did not come to help us do natural things.

He came to accomplish a supernatural reconciliation between us and God. He came to pay the uncountable debt that we owe to our Creator because of sin. And through his death and resurrection, we are united with Christ in a supernatural union that makes Christian forgiveness possible.

Jesus knows our weakness. He knows this is difficult. So let us remember these two great motivators which Jesus gives us in his parable. Remember the size of the debt that has been forgiven and the cost which our Father paid to redeem us from sin and death.

[21 : 32] And remember the eternal consequence if we ignore God's forgiveness and refuse to forgive others from the heart. Amen.