

Forgiveness From the Heart

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] And you're to turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 18, which is on page 18 of the New Testament section of the Blue Pew Bible.

Chapter 18 of Matthew, page 18 of the New Testament section. If you notice, chapter 18 begins with, at that time, the disciples came to Jesus, saying, who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? So it is a meeting between Jesus, not with his opponents, but with his disciples. It's a very famous chapter in the whole of the New Testament because it contains what only one or two other verses in the whole of the New Testament contain, and that's the word church.

And if you're distracted by the sermon, you can look for it. So that it's reckoned to be a kind of teaching by Jesus to the church.

And here we are in this year of our Lord, 1987, on this height of land in Vancouver, called together and assembled because we believe ourselves to be, in some ways, the disciples of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 40] And to be the church. Not the ultimate expression of it, but one, as someone describes it, one freckle on the body of Christ.

That we are, we're part of it. Now, it has some very important things to say to us. I am the minister of a church, and I suspect that I can serve effectively in the ministry of that church until I build around me so much bitterness, so much misunderstanding, so much jealousy, so much hatred, so much fear, so much of the residual effect of broken relationships, that I, as the minister, am no longer tolerable to the congregation, and the congregation is no longer tolerable to me.

And so we part company. And that's, I see that happen over and over again in churches. It doesn't happen just between the church and the minister, the congregation and the minister.

It often happens between any individual in the congregation. That hatred builds up, misunderstanding builds up, bitterness, jealousy, rivalry, hurt, offense.

All those things build up, whereby it becomes impossible for you to any longer continue in the fellowship of a given church. That kind of failure is particularly noticeable in the church simply because it shouldn't happen there.

[3 : 23] That it happens in our businesses, that it happens in our communities, that it happens in the clubs we belong to, and things like that. That can be accepted, but that it should happen in the church, I hope, by God's grace, still somewhat offends our sensibilities.

That it should happen in the church. So, the difficulty is that your circle of those who tolerate you any longer becomes smaller and smaller, and there's nothing you can do about it.

You're caught. That's the way the world works. That it's not to be the way the church works, because we're told in this passage that if your brother sins against you, you're to go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.

And if he listens to you, you have gained your brother. So that instead of the gradual breakdown of relationships, this passage suggests that there might be the gradual building up of relationships. And that building up would happen when, instead of suffering the erosion of relationships, we took it upon ourselves as a clear command of Christ to his disciples to go to one another and tell one another the fault.

[4 : 54] And in that process to find forgiveness, and in that way to have gained a brother, rather than to have suffered the consequences of the erosion of what the New Testament with a rather too clear expression just calls sin.

So, Jesus describes how the church is supposed to work, how this is supposed to happen, and he uses it.

He builds the case, I think, throughout this chapter, and so I need to tell you about the whole chapter to tell you the one thing that I want you to go home with, and that is the text for the sermon,

and the text for the sermon I take to be the last verse of chapter 18, which says, You are to forgive your brother from your heart.

That that's to be the basis of our relationship, forgiveness to one another from the heart. That's the only peculiar commodity which the Christian church has, and that's the ability to forgive one another from the heart.

And anything else is highly corrosive and highly destructive and inevitably breaks down relationships all the time, simply because we don't have the grace to confront one another and to find forgiveness from one another.

[6 : 47] I hate even to suggest to you that that is a solution, because it's so contrary to us.

As a congregation, as a Christian people, the usual pattern is to ask that it be recognized that we don't forgive because we don't associate with people who need to be forgiven, and we don't expect to be forgiven because we haven't done anything that merits that kind of radical treatment.

And so we get along without doing either, either forgiving or being forgiven. We are a collection and an assembly of nice people where that's not usually necessary.

And if it is necessary, well, perhaps you should go and talk to the minister about it. But it isn't the kind of radical reality of what's happening between us.

Now, the way Jesus deals with it is, I think, to take a child and set in the midst and say, except you become as little children, because when you get old, this takes too much energy, I think.

[8 : 06] And the sincerity and simplicity of children is to be a model for us in knowing how to relate. Children can have a difference, can resolve it, and can carry on with their relationship without carrying in their gut the burden of continuing resentment and anger, which we so often do.

So, Jesus says, you have to become as little children. Then he speaks of their sincerity in the most appalling terms. He says, if you offend the innocence of a little child, it would be far better for you that a millstone were tied around your neck and you were dropped in the depths of the sea.

Jesus takes the offending of another person very seriously indeed and suggests an alternative which is more radical than we are even prepared to contemplate.

But consider it in terms of how important it makes the business of not offending another person.

And he goes on from there and he tells you that in the world in which you and I live, this is in verse 7, that sin is going to be a perpetual reality.

It's always going to be there. You're going to wake up in the morning to it. It's there with your morning coffee. And he describes it in a very interesting way.

[9 : 42] He says, it works like this. You have two hands. One of them is determined to... I'm left-handed. All for your benefit. One of them is determined to do good and the other has a tendency to wander off to do something evil.

And you decide which hand you're going to work with that day. You have two feet. One of them is prepared to walk in the path of Christian discipleship and the other is prepared to stumble a little bit off the way and lead you off into another direction.

You have two eyes. One is set on the single goal which you have set or has been set for your life in Christ. And the other eye wanders and contemplates other possibilities.

And Jesus says, quite simply, there's a radical solution to that. If your hand offends you, cut it off. If your foot wants to wander, cut it off.

If your eye distracts you from what you're supposed to be doing, pluck it out. Because the alternative is the Gehenna of fire, the hell of fire, or life.

[11 : 08] And if you allow this wayward hand and wayward foot and wayward eye to dominate you, and all of us have that, and we're particularly susceptible to that ambivalence in our lives, you're better to go into life with no hand, one foot, and one eye gone.

You may think you stumble that way, but you'll get where you're going, Jesus says. That's how serious it is. He then goes on from there to tell us that you're not to despise the significance of another person, that the Father you have in heaven would regard one person as being more important than 99 persons as we regard them, and tells the story of the one lost sheep, and how one person has tremendous significance, and that we have to see that significance in one another, and relate to one another, knowing that each individual has that kind of significance in the sight of God.

Well, you may think that we're taking things a little too far, but it gets worse. The one commodity that we have is the basis of forgiveness, and can we carry forgiveness that far?

And Peter says, well, as an honorable and religious and well-intentioned boy scoak, I want to forgive because I think it's my duty as a citizen. And Jesus says, it's not your duty as a citizen. It's required of you, not seven times, but an infinite number of times. Seventy times seven, over and over and over again.

[13:28] And the business that we have being here this morning is that for all that circle of people with whom each of us is surrounded, where there is misunderstanding, where there is resentment, where there is irritability, where there is the inability to communicate, all those things, as well as in our own relationship, we are to seek forgiveness over and over again.

I don't want to live. This is what I tell you, frankly, I hate about the job I have, and that is that people want to think well of me for always doing good.

And I don't want to be thought well of. I want to be forgiven in people's minds. Being thought well of is too hard and too high a goal.

I would far rather know the reality of forgiveness in my relationship to people than that business of being thought well of by people because they've never caught you making a mistake.

You've always been kind and thoughtful and there. And I hate that because I can't maintain it. I need to be forgiven and you need to be forgiven.

[14:58] And your relationships are not dependent on you managing to balance on one foot on a high wire and always be thought well of. You need to know the reality of forgiveness.

forgiveness. So the picture goes on and Jesus paints a powerful, powerful picture as to who you are and who I am.

And you are a person who has been forgiven an enormous debt, a debt way beyond anything you have the capacity to pay.

And the one to whom you owe that has decided not to demand of you payment but to offer to you forgiveness.

And because you are a scallywag and I am a scallywag, we do what this person did in the story. Having been forgiven a huge debt, we turn to someone who owes us a trifle and we demand payment now.

[16:09] And it's to that that Jesus says that our Father will deliver us up to the jailers.

He's through with us. Because the only basis on which he can relate to us is that having been forgiven, we forgive our brother from our heart.

And that's why we come to the text which was read as the gospel this morning which says if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault.

Now I consider this to be an utterly impossible thing to do. First, because I'm not righteous enough to go and tell my brother that he's offended me and that's a lot of pious nonsense but it's what I think so much of the time.

And I know that lots of people are prepared to forgive and even though you have lots of people who are prepared to forgive, it's very hard to find someone who is prepared to be forgiven.

[17:21] All of us would like to go around with largesse like a kind of benevolent multimillionaire giving out large checks here and there and everywhere but he doesn't do the people any good that he treats that way because somehow they have to be able to receive something even greater and that is the reality of forgiveness.

And so Jesus says quite plainly that in our relationship to one another there is to be forgiveness forgiveness of your brother from the heart.

We have to work that out and that's very hard work I think for us because of our inability to accept forgiveness.

The source of forgiveness is of course God's forgiveness of us through Jesus Christ on the cross and in this communion we celebrate that forgiveness.

We are reminded in the most forcible terms as we partake of bread and wine that we are forgiven. But then because of the huge indebtedness that we are forgiven we have to go to our brother if he has sinned against us we have to say my brother I have come here to offer you forgiveness.

[18:52] and if he can't hear you then you take two or three friends and you say to them we want you to accept this forgiveness and if he still can't acknowledge the gift of forgiveness then you get the whole church behind you and they stand him up and scream at him so to speak you're forgiven and if he can't accept that there's nothing more you can do there's nothing more the church can do he no longer can be part because he hasn't accepted the only thing that he can be offered and that

is forgiveness deep profound God-centered Christ-mediated brother-transmitted forgiveness if he can't accept that there's nothing left for us because forgiveness is the only commodity in which we deal forgiveness is the practical reality of the fact of love as the basis of our relationship to one another that we forgive one another and as this chapter ends you forgive one another from the heart there's a strange part of that verse if your brother sins against you go and tell him his fault between you and him alone if he listens to you you have gained your brother he is in effect twice your brother now the fact is that we as we are gathered together this morning are brothers in Christ but the reality of a deeper understanding is before us as we can seek opportunity to share with one another the forgiveness of

Christ's love in our hearts and from our hearts then we become twice a brother a brother because we are in Christ a brother because we have found opportunity to forgive one another and that makes a much much deeper relationship between us and it's that deeper relationship into which we in the in the boldness of faith must be willing to enter with one another not to be in a place where we can lord it over one another but in a place where we can accept forgiveness from one another that you forgive your brother or your sister from the heart amen so annoy over one another with one another that that is we can go to the side me