

Faithful Forgiveness

Today's message is about forgiveness. Or, actually, a lack of forgiveness for others. Forgiveness is a tough thing to preach on. It's one of those particularly "religious" topics that the church has the market cornered on—or at least that's how they act. It's talked about so often in the church, but if I'm honest, this text revealed to me just how little I understood about this topic. What exactly it is, how it works, where it comes from, and how to resolve our lack of it. Before really digging into this text, I can't say I had a good grasp on it. By the way, go ahead and flip to Matthew 18. We're going to be in Jesus' popular "Parable of the Unforgiving Servant."

The problem we encounter in the church is that most every sin has some outward component, you know? Yes, we in the church "know" that all sin stems from the heart but we almost talk of sin as something along the lines of "all those bad sins you do ... oh! And remember those sins come from your heart." Do you know what I mean? It's almost like the heart component is an afterthought meant to only add *more* weight to the already bad outward part. If you need any more proof, just look at our *primary* counsel to those struggling with sin – our first go-to ideas against it. They always seem to be the same *outward behaviors*: Read your Bible more, pray more, get some more accountability, read your Bible more, read this book, read that book, talk to this counselor, read your Bible more, listen to this pastor's sermons, oh, and read your Bible more. We say sin is at the heart, but we *fight it* at the will. No this isn't wrong, I just don't know if this is the fullness of counsel we could give them. But I digress....

Forgiveness shatters that entire idea we just talked about. It has very few—if any outward components. It can go years without being noticed nor addressed. Maybe that's why we don't understand it well. We're very good at addressing sins that are very outward. We are naturally good "sin mangers"—able to control and contain our sin so that it doesn't affect our lives in the ways we don't want it to. There's not too much to "manage" with forgiveness. As long as we just stay calm around someone that's wronged us and don't talk about them to their face, then we can fool ourselves into thinking we know a little about forgiveness. That's why I think Jesus makes such a big deal about forgiveness in this text. It resides deeper in the human soul. It seems to be more telling of our real spiritual state. That's what's so scary about this. Ultimately, this text isn't *really* about forgiveness at all—it's about security in your salvation. Jesus calls all of us to examine ourselves and see where our greatest affections really reside. Let's pray . . .

Okay, here's the context of our parable. This entire chapter is separated into two main parts. This first part, making up about two thirds of the chapter, talks about relationships in the Kingdom. In a way, it's the practical and spiritual outworking of what he ends up talking about in the parable. He lays out these principles and it's only when the disciples show that they still don't get it that he goes into this parable. The parable provides the principles necessary for one to properly live in the first part. Now, this first part is very rich, but seeing as it is the practical outworking of what's talked about in the parable, we'll get back to it later as we talk about how to apply this parable to our lives. We'll do that later, but for now let's just get the scene in our heads.

We see the disciples come to Jesus and ask him “Who will be the greatest in the Kingdom?” The first thing I want to point out: they have some very key doctrines correct in their approach of Jesus. They know that he is the one that not only know the answer to this question but also has the power to both exalt and bring low. They know he is the arbiter of the reality of the Kingdom – so, they approach him on these grounds with these assumptions. But still, they have some misconceptions, so Jesus has to correct these. Also, as the rest of the chapter shows, Jesus knew that their hearts were not in the right place when asking this question. They weren’t asking out of a heart to outdo one another in pleasing their Lord, but rather they were wanting to distinguish themselves from one another. It’s an issue of pride. That’s when he calls a child to his side.

Something very important is happening here. Jesus uses this child to illustrate several relational dynamics in the Kingdom of God. To begin he brings up is the disciples’ false idea that there is some sort of hierarchy in the Kingdom of God. Now, we know from other parts of Scripture that there does seem to be some sort way that God deals with us now and eternally that it based in some measure on our works as saints. But, I don’t think that’s what the disciples are asking about here. Jesus knows their hearts and sees that this question isn’t coming from a place of humble desire to outdo one another in good works, but rather a prideful sense of accomplishment and reward. So Jesus says two things about this. He says that not only do you have to be like the child to be in the Kingdom in the first place, but also those who are like the child are the greatest in the Kingdom. So, in essence, he says answers their question by saying “Who’s the greatest? Anyone who is in the Kingdom. And who’s in the Kingdom? People that aren’t acting like all of you right now.” And then he lays out what life looks like practically and spiritually for those in the kingdom.

Towards the end of it, Jesus gives one of the few clear and laid out formulae and systems on how to do something in the Bible. Sometimes, we get frustrated that the Bible doesn't give us the clear 1-2-3 up front, but here we begin to see why. If you look in your Bibles at verse 21 of Matthew 18, you'll see this. Even in the midst of such a clear articulation of how all of this looks, good ol' Peter decides to see where the line is and in effect say "Jesus, this is great! So . . . how often do we have to do this?" Jesus responds by saying, in essence, "as many times as it takes". Then he tells our parable. Let's read . . . [Matthew 18:21-35]

So what do we see in this? Well, first, we see that there is a king with good news! He wants to settle accounts with his servants. Now notice what the text *did not* say. It didn't say "there was a king who wish to receive the money owed him," nor did it even say simply "there was a king who wished to settle accounts." No. It says that there was a king "who wished to settle accounts *with his servants*." His desire is not primarily for the money but for a restored standing with his people. The problem is not that he wants his money back; it's that he wants his servant back, but this valid debt gets in the way of this. So, the King delivers this "good news" to his servant.

But, to create a proper response to the good news, the king puts the weight of debt and punishment on the servant. To have the relationship the King would desire to have with the servant, the King must show the servant just how indebted he is, how unworthy he is, and how deserving he is of the proper punishment. So he declares the decree of punishment that rests above this servant. It hangs above his head. It has been decreed, it has been declared: this is the proper response to the debt!

Now this is where things get interesting and a bit tricky. In the past, growing up as a Dallas, Texas Southern Baptist—and I mean *Southern* Baptist—all the sermons and Sunday school lessons I heard on this text went as follows: this parable is the story of a man who became a Christian (because he was forgiven), and then didn't forgive someone else. This made God sad as evidenced by what happened to the servant. Now, you don't want to make God sad, do you? I didn't think so. So, forgive other people and God will be happy with you (with "forgive" being defined as not really being angry at someone *even though they totally deserve it!*).

If my sarcasm didn't make it clear, I don't quite think that's the way this parable plays out. I don't think this first servant represents a Christian. The most obvious sign of this is where he ends up, but we see signs of it at this point in the parable as well. Yes, forgiveness is freely extended to him, but he does not receive it nor apply it. There's no sort of "repenting" that goes on here. The servant gives every indication he still thinks he can repay the debt he owes the King. He never says otherwise. Other than just being in the presence of the King when forgiveness is offered to him, this servant never does anything in the parable that indicates him actually receiving (much less living out) the forgiveness. Out of pity, the King lets him go and continue living life among the other servants.

It's at this point this man reveals he has not received this forgiveness. Though it's not explicitly in the story, I sort of think (though you're free to disagree) that this altercation with the other servant is actually the first servant's attempt at getting the money needed to pay back the King. He uses the people around him to start making him feel like he is recovering that debt he owes. But either way, the King, hears about this and

delivers this servant into the hands of the jailers—or, “torturers” as it says in the Greek, and then he is cast into a prison until all his debt is paid.

So what do we do this? Well, Jesus’ point, as he says in verse 35 is that how we act in this area is a *very strong* indication of where we are spiritually. This parable is more about warning disciples of the path they’re currently on than it is just about forgiveness. So how do we find ourselves in this parable? What does it look like for us to act like the wicked, unforgiving servant?

Well, let’s go back to the first part. After Jesus makes that stunning statement about how the disciples aren’t acting in accordance with the Kingdom, he doesn’t leave the disciples with this comment. He lays out four different relational dynamics that exist within the Kingdom between God, us, and others. First, using the child as an example, Jesus talks of a dynamic on his part that provides us a sense of *security*. He promises, in line with his covenant, to curse those who curse us—to hate and posture himself against all things that would come against us. We see this as he cries out judgments against anyone who would make this child fall into sin. Our reaction to this security forms the second relational dynamic of the Kingdom. We respond by *fighting sin*. Jesus talks of this when he talks of casting our hand into the fire rather than sinning. The third dynamic is one of *intimacy*. It’s where Jesus pursues and draws near to the believer whom he has covenanted with and who is fighting sin. This is shown through Christ’s parable of the lost sheep. And finally, we see the final dynamic that is the focus of this passage. *The believer who knows both the security and intimacy of Christ in their fight with their sin will ultimately respond by being willing to forgive others in light of their sin.* This is because they know both the initiation and nearness of a holy God who did not have to extend forgiveness to them.

Jesus says to his disciples, “I have chosen you and called you as my own. I have tried to stir some sort of fight in all of you against doubt, faithlessness, fear, and pride. I have drawn near to you in this fight, and you’re *still* trying to find a way out of forgiving your brother? Have you not even received my forgiveness? Well, let me tell you a story about another King of another kingdom, who extended this same forgiveness to his servant who likewise did not extend that forgiveness to others. That King handed threw that servant into the eternal fire into the hands of torturers! Peter.”

If we’re honest, I think many of us in this room would sit with the disciples with dumbfounded stares thinking, “Man, that sounds exhausting! How often do we have to do this?” Jesus in this text tells us, “As often as it takes. Here’s story.” So how do we actually do this? How doe we know? Notice that the servants’ true colors were not shown while in the presence of the King. They were shown after he had left the King’s chamber and began living life with others. It’s in relationship that who we are is most clearly shown. Any married couple knows that. Being unmarried, I can’t say precisely, but I hear that marriage only amplifies who you really are—both for good *and* bad. So it is in this relational arena that the battle takes place. Not on Sunday in the presence of the King when everyone’s all squeaky clean and problem-less. All debt (and therefore forgiveness) is a relational issue. This means that forgiveness (as evidenced by the King) isn’t just some sort of emotional calm in the presence of someone who has wronged you. I fall into this often. It’s restored relationship with that person. Forgiveness requires sacrifice. It’s not just “letting things go” or “letting them not bother you.” It’s active. It’s not passive. This means that every situation that requires a restoration of the relationship to happen is a situation that

requires the forgiveness and humility talked about in this parable. Forgiveness is when you hold the relationship as more primary than the debt.

This is what Jesus was talking about when he talks of murdering your brother when you harbor hatred in your heart for them. In those moments when you don't extend forgiveness to others, you are effectively murdering them in your heart. You are pouring out your wrath on them and judging their transgressions in the way you declare is appropriate. You no longer want that relationship with them. You want to be separated from them.

So how do we do this? This is all well and fine, but even Jesus says in our last verse that the issue is forgiving someone "from the heart". How does one do that? This is why I laid out those Kingdom relational dynamics earlier. Notice that when the servant was delivered into the hands of the torturers he was taken to a place where "he should pay all his debt." There are two places that God has ordained to be adequate places for this debt to be resolved. The first is Hell, where our wicked servant went. Hell is absolutely adequate to satisfy the debt of those in it. It is where the fullness of God's beautiful and pure wrath and justice is poured out on those who did not receive this forgiveness and mercy. And it is fully able to satisfy the righteous requirements God has for justice and pay back the debt incurred, even though it is an eternal debt.

The second place that is adequate enough to satisfy the debt is the cross. It's where the full wrath and justice of God that hung over the head of every Christian was poured out on the precious Son of God. That wrath that brought anxiety to God himself in a lonely garden. That wrath that Jesus himself knew intimately from eternity past, yet still brought him such grief and blood-sweat. He took that upon Himself that we might not ever taste it

or know it. And with those words “It is finished!” he accomplished all that was required to secure for us that security that begins this whole process of becoming forgiving and humble like a child. He has adequately resolved this debt and therefore we have that security and freedom. We now have the place and the ability to fight sin as we see our sin so clearly in the cross. As we remind ourselves that *that cross* is what it took to adequately respond to our sin. And in light of that we fight. We learn to hate our sin. And in that fight, God draws near. We not only see the distance we had from him, but we see the nearness we have now. And it’s out of this we then begin to love others in the way we’re being loved by God.

Our hearts are built to always act in accordance to what they believe about God. We are natural preachers. Everything we say, think, and love reveals what our hearts *really* believe about God – our “functional theology” if you will. When we don’t extend this forgiveness, we are believing like the wicked servant that we can still pay this debt. That what God has done on the cross was not sufficient to both save us and judge the sin that was perpetrated against us. We can trust that *all* sin will have the righteous wrath of God poured out against it. This isn’t *why* we forgive. It’s meant to hearken us back to our own corruption that has been dealt with in Christ. It’s suppose to remind of us of the debt that was paid and the security we now have. And if that’s the case, we don’t have to restore our own relationship with God, nor do we have to judge the sins of others. This means we can rest. We can love our God in the security and comfort he has purchased for us as we fight sin and he draws near. And then we can love others knowing that dealing with sin is God’s business, not our own.

So as it was in the parable, so it is even now. We have a king with good news! He longs to be reconciled to us, and he tells us what it looks like if we have been! He has

extended this forgiveness to us! Will we not take it, and rest from our burdens? Accept his forgiveness and live in a forgiving disposition toward your brothers and sisters. It is only through this that you will know, experience, and live out the security and intimacy Christ has purchased for you. Repent, and turn to your Savior— bloodied and broken for you.