

This summer I have been preaching through a sermon series that I have entitled Masterclass: Storyteller, in which I am looking at the parables of Jesus, the stories that He told, and what we can learn from them about what it means to know and follow God. If you're unfamiliar with the term parable, the best definition I have found comes from Pastor John MacArthur: **A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.** Jesus often taught in parables, using word pictures like "God's kingdom is like a seed" or "God is like a Father welcoming home a wayward Son." By using everyday language that was familiar to his audience, he ensured that the stories would stay with them long after he left. But he also used parables because the way they were told would cause the self-righteous and sophisticated to reject his teaching as basic, completely missing the deeper spiritual truth hidden in the story, while those with childlike faith would respond to Jesus and want to know Him better.

This morning, we are going to be in Matthew 18:21-35, looking at a parable that Jesus taught about forgiveness. When people hurt us, we instinctively feel a desire for vengeance, and choosing to let go of the offense does not come naturally. We are all faced with the choice of whether or not to forgive in our lives – sometimes because another person has caused serious harm to us – abuse, betrayal, humiliation. Other times it is finding a healthy way to deal with the daily disappointments and offenses done to us by someone we love. Whatever we are facing, this parable has a lot to teach us about what forgiveness is, why it is so important to forgive those who hurt us, and where we find the power to forgive.

1) **What forgiveness is:**

Beginning in v. 21:

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?"²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

In Jesus' day, there was a popular belief that three was the limit that you had to forgive someone, and so Peter probably thinks he's being generous here by offering to forgive seven times. But Jesus tells him to forgive seventy-seven times. It's Jesus' way of saying "keep on forgiving and don't keep counting." And then, to illustrate his point, Jesus tells this parable:

²³ *"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.* ²⁴ *As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand*

talents was brought to him. ²⁵ 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.

Jesus tells them a parable about a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. The money belongs to the king, and one of his servants, who is probably one of his tax collectors, owes him ten thousand talents. Now, in those days, a day's wage was called a denarius. 6000 denarii make up one talent. Ten thousand talents means 60 million days of work. At \$20/hour, or \$160/day, that would be 9.6 billion dollars. Jesus' point is obviously that this servant owes an enormous debt that can never be repaid.

Continuing:

²⁶ "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

The servant says, "I'll pay it back!" Really? That's ridiculous. This servant is not only foolish, he's stupid. Nevertheless, the king takes pity on him – he feels compassion for him. He cancels the debt. And he lets him go.

Now, it's important to note that just because the king cancels his debt doesn't mean that the debt goes away. After all, this is the king's money that has been lost or embezzled. **Someone needs to bear the cost.** But in this parable, the king chooses to bear the cost. **Jesus is telling a story in which a king pays the price, bears the cost himself, cancelling the man's debt and letting him go free.**

I think that Jesus' parable is genius in how he uses the metaphor of money and debts. **When someone hurts you, there is a debt that is created.** When you are wronged, there is a debt, and somebody has to pay. The natural response is to make the one who offended you pay. When we decide to get revenge, we are saying "I'm not paying for this one. You will pay for this one." We make them pay through gossip, slander, the cold shoulder, abuse, withdrawing friendship, or ruining their reputation, among other things. **And maybe that works – over time, the debt goes down and you no longer feel the need for revenge. But in the process, making them pay for what they have done has a way of twisting you into a bitter, spiteful person.** Or, as often happens, revenge becomes a back and forth cycle. They hurt you, so you hurt them back, and then they hurt you back again.

Where there is conflict and hurt, there is a debt that is created, and someone has to pay it down. Either you will make them pay, or, you will pay it down yourself. Essentially, that is what forgiveness is: **Choosing to pay down the debt yourself.**

Forgiveness is choosing to bear the cost yourself and to not punish your offender, but rather to treat them with love and to leave the judgment to God

Ken Sande, in his book *The Peacemaker*, shares what he calls “The four promises of forgiveness”:

“I will not dwell on this incident” – don’t rehash the past and keep focusing on what someone did to you.

“I will not bring up this incident and use it against you” - *1 Corinthians 13:5* - *Love keeps no record of wrongs.*

“I will not talk to others about this incident” – You don’t malign their reputation to others

“I will not let this incident stand between us or hinder our personal relationship” – you treat the other person with kindness. You pray for them

When you forgive someone by choosing to pay the debt down yourself, it feels like death. But in the end, it leads to resurrection and rebirth. Forgiveness is choosing to pay the debt down yourself.

Now, let me clarify what forgiveness is by saying six things forgiveness is not:

1) **Forgiveness is not condoning what someone has done.** It’s not saying it’s okay. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, “Forgiveness means pardoning the unpardonable or it is not forgiveness at all.”

2) **Forgiveness is not forgetting.** Sometimes you need to remember so that you do not allow it to happen again.

3) **Forgiveness does not mean you don’t confront sin** – Matthew 18:15 - *“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.* However – and a big however – **if you have not already chosen to forgive them in your heart, you will not be able to confront well.** Confrontation has as its end the restoration of the person

who hurt you. It comes from a desire to see them grow in righteousness so that others will not suffer the way you have. It does not come from a desire for vengeance. If you have not forgiven, you will likely come at it with a desire to have them realize just how badly they have hurt you, and often with a desire to see them hurt as much as you hurt. And chances are that you will overreach, and only make things worse.

4) **Forgiveness does not mean there are no consequences** – there may be consequences, even with forgiveness. Brandt Jean forgiving Amber Guyger for the murder of his brother Botham Jean.

5) **Forgiveness is not reconciliation** – forgiving someone doesn't mean you need to get back together or that you will start another business together. I doubt the king hired the servant back. Trust takes time to rebuild.

6) **Forgiveness is a process** – it doesn't happen all at once, typically. Maybe today all you can do is decide that you won't kill the person who hurt you. That's a step in the right direction.

The story continues in v. 28:

²⁸ *"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. ²⁹ 'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' ³⁰ 'But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.*

The servant has just been forgiven a few billion dollars of debt. And now he goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii, which would have been about 3 months wages. The other servant says the same thing – be patient with me and I will pay you back. But the first servant refuses and has the second servant thrown into debtor's prison.

³¹ *When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² 'Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back **all he owed.** ³⁵ 'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.'*

When the king hears about what his servant has done, he has the servant thrown into prison. And look how Jesus ends – this is how God will treat you if you do not forgive others. I would encourage you not to read this as a comment on your eternal status before God, but on your present experience of freedom. If you insist on holding people accountable for what they have done and making them pay for what they have done to you, then you will continue to live in a prison of bitterness and anger.

So what does this parable teach us about why we should forgive?

1) Because of the debt we have been forgiven.

Certainly the main point of this passage is that we forgive because we recognize how much we've been forgiven. If we are struggling to forgive someone, the power to do it comes from being reminded of the depth of our sin and how much God has forgiven us. As you are humbled, you find it easier to forgive.

Romans 5:6-10 - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

This is the gospel – God, in Christ, paid the debt that we owed, and we have gone free. The more you understand this, the more you will be able to show the same kind of grace to others.

2) Because unforgiveness can twist you into a bitter, vengeful person.

This man would not receive or grant forgiveness. When we are wronged and choose not to forgive, we become motivated by a desire to hurt others, responding to our pain instead of God. As the recovery saying goes, “Holding on to resentment is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.”

3) Because you are not the all-knowing judge.

When we will not forgive, we are servants thinking we are the king. You don't know who is truly to blame or how punishment and justice should be handed out.

4) Because it's one of the best ways to show God to others.

There's a great verse from Genesis 33:10, the story of Jacob & Esau, where Jacob is reconciled with his brother and says "*For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably.*" To forgive someone else is like showing them the face of God, who sees sin for what it is but pays the debt himself. Think of the Amish in 2006 when a gunman shot 10 children. Within hours, members of the Amish community had visited the killer's parents and expressed sympathy for their loss and support for the hard days ahead. And half the people attending the funeral of the gunman were Amish.

Luke 6:32-36 - "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them."³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that."³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners,' expecting to be repaid in full."³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked."³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

If you have been wounded, you have an opportunity to showcase the gospel in a way that few others do. It doesn't mean God caused your suffering to happen, but it does mean that He can use it for good, to save many lives.

Christians are marked by their love for their enemies. We are a people who have been shown grace – undeserved favor – and so we are eager to do the same to those around us.

How do I forgive?

- 1) **Decide you want to forgive** – it's a process, but it begins by deciding that you want to be free.
- 2) **Understand the debt you've been forgiven** – reflect on this reality; understand the depth of your sin and the depth of His love for you

- 3) **Take pity on your offender** – the king took pity on the servant. To be moved with compassion for another person's misery. When we are offended, we often create a caricature. You know what a caricature is? What happens when you are offended? You blow the person's faults out of proportion. He is insensitive. She is a betrayer. He is a liar. She is disrespectful. I'm complex, a mixture of good and bad. But they are just jerks. Taking pity is to be moved with compassion, to recognize that they are human as well, that they were sinned against and sin against you. Think of **the wife who cheated on us** – instead of her becoming the unfaithful cheater, she is a woman who is capable of great love and has good qualities who is also capable of making really bad decisions and letting her emotions get the better of her. The **boss who fired us** isn't just evil and out to get us, but a man with some very good skills and some not so good skills, who has to make hard decisions that don't always please other people. Even the man who abused you is someone made in the image of God, loved by God, but capable of making some really bad choices. To take pity on someone is to not caricaturize them. Instead of magnifying their bad qualities – they're a betrayer or a liar – you recognize that they are complex like you. Just like you, they can be weak, they can act out of fear, they can make bad decisions, and they can hurt people without meaning to.

*Luke 23:32-34 - Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals-- one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**"*

In his moment of greatest hurt and wrong, he is interested in forgiveness. He was moved with concern for their misery instead of focusing on his own hurt.

- 4) **Trust that God is a wise, sovereign judge** – it is not wrong to want justice, punishment, and accountability. But you are not God. You are not the judge. You want to take God's seat because he is not punishing them in the manner or timing in which you think they should be. They are getting away with it, so you must take revenge. Unforgiveness reveals that at some level, you do not trust that God is good or just, and so you need to do the job for Him.

Romans 12:17-21 - Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at

peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

God's wrath is his justice – he looks at rape, abuse, betrayal, and he gets angry, and he will bring justice. That is not your job. Your job is to love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Overcome evil with good.

1 Peter 2:20-24 - But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹ To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, **he made no threats**. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

Jesus entrusted himself to him who judges justly. When we are wronged, we need to entrust the person to God, who judges justly. This person belongs to YOU, not to me. You can deal with them, care for them, judge justly. Lord, YOU are the judge, and I trust you to judge wisely. You alone have the proper perspective, and the right to judge.

- 5) **Express your forgiveness to them** – tell them you forgive them
- 6) **Pay down the debt yourself** – choose not to dwell on the incident or use it against them.

One of the great stories of forgiveness is shared by a woman named Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch woman who passed away 30 years ago and is best known for her book *The Hiding Place*, which was made into a movie. Corrie Ten Boom and her family had sheltered Jews from their Nazi oppressors until they were caught and sent to the concentration camp at Ravensbruck. Her father eventually died in another camp, and at Ravensbruck she was not only humiliated and degraded, but she watched the life of her sister Betsie ebb away until she also died. Yet God's grace was real in the midst of all the suffering, and after the war she went to Germany to preach God's forgiveness.

Following one service, a man came forward whom she recognized immediately. One of the worst experiences in camp had been the delousing showers, where the women were ogled and taunted by leering guards. This man was one of those S.S. guards, a man who had been one of the cruelest, especially to her sister. In Corrie Ten Boom's own words:

“It was some time ago that I was in Berlin, and there came a man to me saying ‘Ah Miss ten boom I am glad to see you. Don't you know me?’ Suddenly I saw that man, that was one of the cruelest overseers, guards in the concentration camp. ‘I am now a Christian, I have found the Lord Jesus, I read my Bible, and I know that there is forgiveness for all the sins of the whole world. Also for my sins. I have forgiveness for the cruelties I have done. But then I have asked God's grace for an opportunity that I could ask one of my very victim's forgiveness. And Fraulein ten Boom, once and you're forgiven – will you forgive me.’ And I could not. I remembered the suffering of my dying sister through him. But when I saw that I could not forgive, suddenly I knew, I myself, have no forgiveness. Do you know that Jesus has said that? When you do not forgive those who have sinned against, you, my Heavenly father will not forgive you your sins. And I knew, I am not ready for Jesus to come quick for I have no forgiveness for my sins. And I was not able. I could not I could only hate him. And then, I took one of these beautiful texts, one of these boundless resources, Romans 5:5- the love of God is shed abroad into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who is given to us. And I said thank you Jesus that you have brought into my heart, God's love through the Holy Spirit who is given to me. And thank you father that your love is stronger than my hatred and unforgiveness. That same moment I was free, and I could say, Brother, give my your hand and I shook hands with him. And it was as if I felt God's love stream through my arms. You've never touched so the ocean of Gods' love as that you forgive your enemies. Can you forgive? No! I can't either. But He can.” And as she prayed, she felt not only forgiven but set free. The glacier of hate melted within and her hand unfroze. As she reached out her hand and spoke her forgiveness, she felt another burden of the past fall away.

Forgive as God as forgiven you in Christ.