

“Unlimited True Heart of Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:21-35

Before I read the text, I want to give you some background and perspective on the choosing of this text and my purpose here this morning with you. In my personal pastoral ministry, I have yet to know of anyone who has not had difficulty at some time in their life forgiving someone who has sinned against them. That includes myself as well, and I believe and imagine that most of you out there would relate to this confession that is very difficult. In fact in a number of places in the scripture we find Jesus discussing this whole issue of forgiveness that is so important in His teaching ministry with His disciples. In the parable of the unmerciful servant, Jesus is speaking to this subject of forgiveness, which is a very relevant subject for all of us to seriously contemplate and respond to this morning. Throughout our lives we have, or will be, sinned against by our parents, our spouse, our children, a relative, a friend, a co-worker, an employer, a stranger, a neighbor, or even a brother and sister in Christ. Since being sinned against is so prevalent in our life's experience, each of us needs to be reminded of Christ's imperative command to forgive those who have sinned against us. You know it's not an easy thing to do. As I've already mentioned and in conversations and years of counseling I know the reality of that truth. The apostle Peter struggled with the application of this command, so Jesus shared this parable with him and the other disciples. They needed to hear again and more fully understand how this principle was to be applied by the followers of Jesus. I believe that this morning, particularly, this reminder from Jesus is very relevant as we not only participated earlier in confessing our sins, but also we will be celebrating together our Communion together as the community of God's people at the Lord's table.

In these moments together we are so vividly reminded that we ourselves have marvelously experienced the reality of unlimited true heart forgiveness from God Almighty Himself. Because of the powerful truth of God's Word through the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, we must then consistently demonstrate that same unlimited true heart forgiveness to all who have sinned against us. That's why I chose this text to look at and talk about with you this morning.

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. ²³ “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” (ESV)

This morning I want to just give an overview of this parable of the unmerciful servant as it would have been received in the apostle's time – in the disciple's day. Then, we'll examine carefully the significance of forgiveness underscoring the necessity of forgiving those who have sinned against us. Finally, we'll look at the spiritual blessings that come to us if we do forgive others as well as the serious spiritual implications if we refuse to forgive those who have sinned against us. This parable that Jesus told that day is most intriguing. He's just shared with the disciples, as you know in studying scripture just earlier, the process to follow when a brother sins against another brother. Well then, brusque and impetuous Peter jumped right in and egotistically and boldly declared how gracious he was because he would magnanimously forgive a person seven times! “Jesus, not just

one.” Oh, my! How much we can all relate to Peter at that moment! It was at that point Jesus told them the parable.

Now, a parable is a short, simple story, an analogy usually of a familiar occurrence to the people being spoken to from which they can draw a moral or religious lesson from a teacher. To make His point, Jesus requires in this parable His hearers to really stretch their imaginations to the fullest extreme. First of all, the disciples knew that forgiveness was unknown to the pagans of their day. The king in mind was likely an ancient Egyptian ruler. To their ears, the ten thousand talents was an outrageously large sum of money. According to research that scholars have done, that today could be equal to billions of dollars when they heard it. The amount owed the unmerciful servant was only one hundred denarii, probably only a few dollars in our own money, for maybe a week’s work. It wasn’t much at all. The unmerciful servant begged for forgiveness and promised to repay. So the pagan king canceled the humongous debt and thus fully forgave him. But the unmerciful servant, on the other hand, was so unrepentant that he had no mercy on the servant who had pleaded for forgiveness as he had earlier for that very small debt. The unmerciful servant refused to forgive him and had him cast into the debtor’s prison. I hope it’s quite clear to us as we see this who Jesus had in mind as the king and unmerciful servant, and who they represented in the minds of the disciples. The king represents God who cancels all of our debts and all of our sins through the shed blood of Jesus Christ our Savior on the cross of Calvary. The unmerciful servant represents those of His children, like us, possibly you and me who have been forgiven by God but fail to forgive those who have sinned against us. The significance of this parable increases when one realizes that forgiveness was not a pagan virtue especially within the Roman culture of Israel at that time. Forgiveness just didn’t happen. Remarkably as well, and interestingly the rabbis did not emphasize consistently the forgiveness of enemies.

Now, forgiveness was infrequently mentioned in their teachings and in the scriptures. The Imprecatory Psalms were quoted by them with reference to Old Testament passages that recorded God ordering the Israelites to seek neither peace nor prosperity for their enemies. But eventually the rabbis limited opportunities for forgiveness; they gave in a little and said, “It’s okay if you forgive someone up to three times.” This is probably why Peter thought his offer of seven times was very generous. The human tendency from a measuring rod of three times or how many times being a limit of one’s forgiveness toward another person was denounced by Jesus because He said, “Peter, seventy times (unlimited). It goes on forever. There is no ending. That’s the standard. That’s the new standard in My kingdom.” But unfortunately even in our Christian culture today the tendency often is to place a limit on how many times we will forgive the one who has offended us, whether it be an enemy or even a friend.

Over the years I have observed in my own life and in the lives of others that we can easily voice once, “Oh, yes. I forgive you. I forgive you.” But we have difficulty continually to forgive beyond that one time. Often I have found the nature of the sin determines our willingness to even forgive once. Maybe lying, we’ll forgive a bit. Maybe taking the Lord’s name in vain, we’ll forgive a bit. Maybe a couple of things, but oh, cheating or sexual sin, maybe we’ll never forgive that. See, in my years ministering at the Seattle Gospel Mission, observing how the residents so graciously continued to forgive and forgive each other over and over as they fell off the wagon, as they got some more drugs and had to come back—binges, whatever—but they would come back and they would be forgiven. There were ramifications, but they were forgiven. That observation had a powerful impact on my understanding of the meaning and practice of this parable.

But my own experience is only secondary to the many incidents in the scriptures where Jesus and later the apostles made bold commands to forgive the sins of others. The most commonly known scriptures from the Lord’s Prayer are in Matthew 6:12. As you say often, “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.” That’s that progressive past tense type of thing where, “Yep. Forgive, keep forgiving, keep forgiving.” It just keeps going on and on. In Luke 17:4 Jesus says, “If your brother sins, rebuke him and if he repents forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day and seven times comes back to you and says, “I repent,” forgive him.” Forgive him. The apostle Paul in Colossians 3:13 writes, “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” See, the point is, and it’s hopefully quite clear, there’s no limit. There’s no limit to forgiveness. If you trust in Jesus you are continually

being forgiven time after time after time after time. Your little sins, all your medium sins, all of your big sins, your bodacious big sins God forgives. There may be some ramifications, and there should be sometimes for the sin, some disciplining by the Lord to teach you and conform you more and more to the perfect image of His Son, which nothing is lost for our Lord, even our sinning. He forgives us, but through the repenting process and the maturing process is powerful in our lives on this earth. At the same time you know that Jesus, in all of this, as you go through the fact that you're forgiving someone, that Jesus has paid the full price – has suffered the full punishment for your sin and guarantees that that sacrifice will always be acceptable to God. Always. That's marvelous grace! It's all encompassing love that flows down upon us from Christ and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Praise the Lord it's a rich blessing that we who are Christians experience. Therefore because of that fact of forgiving love by Jesus, Christians must also forgive those who sin against them. In fact, if a Christian does not forgive that person then the ramifications are extremely serious spiritually. Look at verses 32 to 35.

The master called that unmerciful servant back and he says, "You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have 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 he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

You need to remember, as I said earlier, that this is a very unique parable. Jesus is being very graphic to make a point. At the same time we do not want to minimize the reality and truth that God is not pleased with us if we act like the unmerciful servant toward those who sin against us. It's not just the saying of words, "Yes, I forgive you." Although those words do absolutely need to be verbalized. In some counseling sessions, I sit there with married couples or other people who are struggling with something and I'm waiting for them to say the words at this point so the other person can hear that they really are receiving their hurt, their pain for having sinned against them. But those words, instead of just being words, must come from a truly forgiving heart overflowing with grace.

Why, you may ask? Well, I looked up on Luther's "Table Talk" and I found this from Luther, "Because we deserve nothing by our forgiving, yet we must forgive that thereby (this is very interesting) we may prove and give testimony that we from God have received forgiveness for our sins." When you forgive someone sincerely from your heart, you are affirming that Jesus Christ in heaven is forgiving you. When you don't forgive, you are not proving that there is such a powerful work of God in the universe through His people and their ability to be receiving people who have sinned against them to say, "I forgive you." And not just from your lips. Of course the sinner, especially the Christian sinner, should be coming with a truly repentant heart or at least the sincere desire to be seeking to repent. I agree with that. The Bible agrees with that. But you know something? Irrespective of that heart attitude on the part of the sinner (for who of us can really know what is really in the heart of anyone), we who are the followers of Jesus must always truly forgive with heart-focused love, to internalize this wonderful principle of grace that we talk about all the time, God's grace. If we internalize that in us, does it flow out to that person who comes to us to ask for forgiveness? Do we internalize our forgiveness from deep within us because of our positive and faithful response to the Holy Spirit's movement in us? Jesus makes it clear in Luke 17:4 that that is our duty. Jesus said, "Tom, that's your duty, and no limit can be set to the extent that forgiveness is granted, and it must be granted without reserve." From Jesus' standpoint an unforgiving spirit is one of the most heinous of sins. Here again, I just want to read it again because it's so powerful.

"In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured that he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

I know those are very difficult words to hear. But they're necessary for all of us to digest and meditate over. Charles Spurgeon (this might help us through this process) has these words of advice for us at this time. He said, "Cultivate forbearance until your heart yields a fine crop of it. Pray for a short memory as to all unkindnesses." In other words, hopefully we're maturing as God's people that we would begin this process if we're not doing it like He has called us to. Frankly I don't think any of us do it as well as we could. But to have a short memory! How many times have I sat in counseling sessions over these years and one party will say, "Well, do you

remember when . . .?” And I would say, “When did that happen?” “Well, it happened during our engagement period.” “How long have you been married?” “Thirty-five years.” You see? The memory is there.

Corrie ten Boom says, “Forgiveness needs momentum.” In other words, as we begin to sincerely forgive others, while it may be hard at first, the more we are faithful in forgiving, that momentum picks up and before long it may become something we just do sincerely from our hearts because it becomes a good habit. We just are able to do it because we become trained by our obedience to God. Forgiveness is not something you feel, but something you do.

In conclusion, the point is that there are not to be limits set on our love. You find that in Ephesians 3:17-19. And we are not to keep records of wrongs as in I Corinthians 13:5. Our forgiveness of the sinner and reaffirmation of our love will keep that person from being overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Do we ever think of that? That’s found in II Corinthians 2:7-10. Then, when Paul said, “Okay, bring this man back” (who had been doing some very bad sexual stuff that was not to be done in the church at Corinth). Now he said, “Hey, Satan had him. He’s now repented. You forgive him.” The point here is, when a person comes to you to say, “I am so sorry for what I did. I really hurt our relationship.” If we do not forgive them, as hard as that hurt has been, you might think, “Well, he’s got to do a little more repenting than that,” but he walks out of that room and thinks, “Oh, my,, what am I going to do? My best friend wouldn’t forgive me. Will God even forgive me?” It’s powerful. Very powerful.

And now it applies to us. When we faithfully forgive, then we escape the attack of Satan in our own lives and he is unable to cause our hurt, which may have turned to anger and then fester up and result in deep bitterness and selfish sorrow in our own hearts, which in turn prevents us from forgiving others as Christ has forgiven us. If we don’t forgive those who come to us, Satan uses that and that hurt becomes anger, becomes bitterness and your walk with the Lord deteriorates. Many come and say, “Tom, this has gone on for so long, am I really a Christian? I don’t feel any forgiveness from God.” That’s the way it is apparently from what we see in the Word today.

I read the Bible a number of times and I’ve certainly read the Lord’s Prayer, but I never caught this before until I prepared this sermon, and I’m amazed. But it helps me understand what we’re talking about. If you look in Matthew chapter 6 starting with where we say, “Forgive our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.” That’s where we stop and say the other things. But, Jesus didn’t stop there. That’s the prayer. We say the prayer correctly, but look what He said to them afterwards. “For if you forgive men when they sin against you your heaven Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Wow. Now we have to put that into context of God’s forgiving us, but there’s this issue of that awareness as I talked about, that we have the forgiveness of God. It’s something to really ponder and it really causes us to think.

In fact, after saying all of that I want to just say to all of you, husbands and wives, forgive each other as Christ has forgiven you. Parents and children, forgive each other as Christ has forgiven you. Siblings, forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you. Brothers and sisters in Christ, forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you. Christians, forgive your friends, your neighbors, your employer, your employees in the sense of living out your Christian faith in their midst. And Christians, above all, and this is hard in our society, forgive your enemies as Christ has forgiven you. As we prepare to partake of the Lord’s Supper in a moment now, this Holy Communion of our people together before the Lord, I urge you to meditate on and contemplate in your own life the impact of Christ’s command today to us from His Word to forgive others with unlimited true heart forgiveness.