

GO AND BE RECONCILED

Peacemaker series, part 4
Stonebrook Church - 4/29/18 - Matt Heerema

Good morning! Please turn to Matthew, chapter 18 with me.

Today we are going to talk about forgiveness. Probably one of the most central concepts to the entire Christian faith. The very core of the message of Christianity is a restored relationship between the creator God and the capstone of his creation: mankind. The key to that restored relationship, restored fellowship, is the act of divine forgiveness of our sin and rebellion. That forgiveness was costly.

God, the Father, gave his only son Jesus to pay that cost. It is right to say that God gave *himself* up for us. Our sin had incurred a cost. He paid that cost because we could not.

And he tells us to imitate him, to emulate him, to have this same charitable and merciful, self-sacrificial attitude toward one another.

I wonder this morning, how many of us in here are harboring resentment, withhold forgiveness from someone who has asked for it? Why is this hard for us?

If you tend to find the topic of forgiveness to be tricky, if you find it maybe even a little offensive, if you look for loopholes and boundaries on forgiveness, if you focus on fairness and reparation, you're not alone. Peter had a hard time with this teaching as well.

Matthew 18:21-35 (ESV)

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-seven times.

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."**

Wow. That was a pretty stern warning to Peter's question on the limitations to forgiveness.

- "Seven times" seems to have been an extravagant guess to Peter. Jesus *multiplied it*. Jesus tells Peter that the way of the kingdom of heaven is much, much more than this.
- The servant owed the king 200,000 years wages! A virtual eternity of debt. The king took pity, had mercy, and released the servant from the debt.
- Immediately after this, the ungrateful servant (who represents the part in Peter's heart that wants to limit forgiveness) threatens to kill his fellow servant over 100 days wages. Unbelievable to us!
- The merciful king finds out about this and hands the wicked servant over to the torturer until he could pay off his debt. (I've wondered how someone might work off their debt while in jail being tortured...)
- Jesus says that this is an illustration of our fate if we withhold forgiveness from someone who asks for it.

Jesus's illustration shows us some things about the kind of forgiveness he offers and wants us to extend., and we'll get there in a minute, but I wanted to zoom out and make another observation as we get in to this.

ON THE COMMANDS OF GOD

We are commanded by God to forgive. And if we do not, we will not be forgiven. What is going on with that? Wouldn't that realization tend to lead to a mechanical, and fear-based, duty-bound forgiveness out of compulsion and desire to escape punishment? And he says "forgive them from the heart" which would exclude this mechanical obedience as invalid.

This is important because it gets right to the heart of understanding the gospel.

I've often wrestled with the nature of our obedience to God and our relationship to God.

- On the one hand you have **legalism**: which says: "I obey in order to earn God's love and favor."
- On the other hand you have a cavalier attitude called **antinomianism** ("anti-law-ism"...but you don't have to remember that) which says: "I'm already forgiven. God loves me and nothing can change that. So I can do whatever I want. Obedience is irrelevant."
- I know both of these attitudes to be wrong. So what is the right posture toward obedience?
- I've heard the trite phrase: It's not 'have to obey' it's 'get to obey', but this has never really helped me. It's closer to right but doesn't go deep enough.

If we take a look at the first command ever issued to man, we find the key.

Genesis 1:28 (ESV)

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

The first command is a blessing. The first blessing is a command. What is the command? "BE A KING! RULE THE EARTH. BE LIKE ME."

Well gee, Lord, do I have to?

What a blessing!

This is the nature of all God's commands. God's command = God's blessing because God is instructing us to be like himself.

All God's commands to us are instructions in how to be like him and so how to be must fully human because we are made in his image.

THE TEMPTATION TO DISOBEY

And isn't it interesting then, that Satan's first lie, first temptation, was right here? "Disobey God, so that you can be like him."

Adam's reply should have been: "I already am like him!"

This is still the temptation today, isn't it?

And this is how the command to forgive works: Be like God.

- Yet the devil tempts us and lies to us and tell us that it will be too costly to obey "in this case..."
- He tells us "They can't get away with that! Justice must be done! Demand that they pay what they owe!"
- Or the more subtle: "You wouldn't want to enable bad behavior, would you? There must be consequences."

But Christ commands us to be like our heavenly father. He commands us to act like kings and queens. "Well gee, Lord, do I have to? I have to act like a king? I'd rather act like a slave and a prisoner..."

WHAT FORGIVENESS ISN'T.

I think it will help us to look at what forgiveness is and isn't. When we look at Matthew 18, and the other passages on forgiveness, we notice a few things. Among them:

1) Forgiveness is not excusing.

- "Excusing" has the connotation of "Oh, don't worry about it. It wasn't a big deal. It wasn't a problem. You didn't do anything wrong. You couldn't help it." This is not what we're saying. It's this association that the devil plays on to amp up our sense of injustice at the idea of forgiveness.
- But forgiveness is saying precisely the opposite of these things. It was a big deal. There was a debt incurred. It was your fault. It is not okay. I have been hurt.
- Forgiveness doesn't minimize the problem. It reveals it for what it is and is very honest about it. **The offer of forgiveness demands that both the offended and the offender face the reality of the hurt and the debt.** What a relief to bring the problem into the light.

2) Forgiveness is not forgetting.

- Forgetting is a passive process of memory fading away that happens over time.
- Forgiveness is a conscious and deliberate choice to consider that matter finished, dealt with, the debt cancelled, the offense reconciled. This conscious process often must be actively maintained and the commitment constantly renewed in the heart of the forgiver.

- This sounds tough, but fortunately as we exercise our will, our emotions usually follow and the pain begins to fade, replaced by the joy of the miracle God works in us to be able to forgive. This reminds of us what forgiveness is, ultimately:

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS

1) Imitation of God

As we remember what we have been forgiven we find power from God to offer that same sort of mercy. We get to act like our father, the heavenly king!

2) Releasing someone

Forgiveness is the active releasing of someone from the debt they have incurred against you.
[Illustration of the broken lamp.]

3) A costly commitment

Forgiveness is a costly and risky decision and commitment to 4 things:

1. I will not dwell on this incident. It is over.
2. Because it is over, I will not bring this up again to use it against you.
3. I will not talk to others about this incident, the offense is reconciled.
4. Because this incident is dealt with, I will not let it stand between us and our personal relationship.

The debt is cancelled. The charges are dropped. The situation is dealt with. It doesn't always mean we will immediately feel wonderful feelings toward that person, but an ongoing conscious commitment to restoration of relationship is in order.

Some caveats

This does bring up some points for clarity. Because we are imitating God here, this is going to lead us to costly and self-sacrificial action and commitment toward the reconciliation of a relationship after an offense, but wisdom needs to come into play. A few points:

- That first commitment is a personal choice and discipline and can be used in any circumstance. The next three require repentance on the part of the offender. (Matthew 18, Luke 17:3-4). Remember

that in Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus describes a process that either leads to repentance and forgiveness, or the cessation of a close relationship.

1. First, tell them their offense, if they repent, you've won your brother! You are to forgive.
 2. If they do not repent, go and get one or two others to confirm the offense and to urge them toward repentance. If they repent, forgive! Seventy times seven!
 3. If they still do not repent, step three is to bring it before the entire church. Probably at the membership or leadership level, depending on the issue and as guided by wisdom and the holy spirit. If they repent, forgive them!
 4. If they still do not repent, you are to treat them as an unbeliever, because they are acting like one. Your posture toward them becomes one of gospel preaching. Urging to repentance. Warning of God's wrath. Various kinds of partnerships become off limits such as serving together in ministry, a marriage, or other arrangements where spiritual agreement is crucial.
- We must deal honestly and realistically with a recurring pattern of sin. We DO bring it up again with them if they repeat the offense. We DO bring it up with others if there is a pattern that needs to be made known.
 - Even though personal relationships should be restored and unhindered by forgiven offenses, restoration of trust is a process that takes time, and this is a whole other sermon. Business relationships are not required to be reestablished, for example.
 - Finally, where the state and federal law does not contradict God's law, such as in anti-proselytization laws, or laws outlawing the practice of our faith, we ought to report crimes and threats to the proper authorities.

DEALING WITH UNFORGIVENESS

If you are finding yourself having a hard time forgiving someone, a few things to consider:

1. **Confirm repentance.**
Perhaps the apology was vague, or attitudes and actions remain unchanged. You may need to re-approach and be more specific in your rebuke. You may be dealing with someone who simply told you what you wanted to hear, and it may be time to move into the second step of the Matthew 18 process. Or perhaps they didn't understand fully the impact of their actions, and they simply need to be told more specifically.
2. **Examine your own heart.**
Make sure you've gotten the log out of your own eye and have examined your contribution to the

problem and have sought forgiveness for that part. Also, beware unbiblical or unrealistic expectations. It is repentance, not penance, that is required for forgiveness. If you withhold forgiveness until someone proves their sorrow through performance, you aren't forgiving, you are exacting payment.

3. **Remember your own forgiveness.**

It is this piece that Jesus drives home in his illustration. We are to love as we have been loved (John 13) and forgive as we have been forgiven (Colossians 3). A full recognition of the depth of our sin is in order. Remember that when Jesus told the story, we are the servant who has been forgiven 200,000 years wages worth of debt, and our brother's sin against us was worth 100 days wage... I don't know if Jesus was expecting us to do the math, but that's a 1 to 730,000 ratio of magnitude. This is not to minimize the offense against you, but it does put it in perspective.

4. **Remember God's Promises.**

1. **God is working all things together for our good.** This does not excuse the sin, or make wrong things less wrong. But it does help us to have hope, knowing there is a bigger and unseen story unfolding.
2. **Justice will be done.** - There is a right cry in our soul for justice. When wrong is done to us, or to the ones we love, the desire for vengeance rears its head. This is well and good, as long as we remember that vengeance belongs to God, who *will* repay. (Romans 12:19)

CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, we are to be peacemakers. This is at the heart of this year's ministry theme of "renewal". I hope this series has been helpful to you. The book by Ken Sande has been a helpful guide to the scripture's teaching for us. I commend it to you again.

Ultimately we are asking this question:

How can I show God's forgiveness and help find a reasonable solution to this conflict?

It requires us to be pro-active and do the scary thing of speaking up when we see a brother or sister caught in sin. When we are sinned against, we are told to go confront. When we know someone has something against us, we are told to go make it right. Forgiveness and reconciliation is the way of the kingdom.

Faith in the Gospel leads us to forgive. It reminds us of what we have been forgiven, and to start with that in mind when we have been wronged.

When we must confront an issue, we get to be evangelists! We should ask: "What does the gospel tell us about this situation?"

When someone is unrepentant, we have an opportunity to preach the gospel of repentance to them for the salvation of their soul!

When someone does repent, we have an opportunity to be a king or queen, acting like our father the heavenly king and showing the same mercy he showed us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consider:

Jesus gives us three "modes" of reconciliation, depending on the nature of the issue:

- a. If you have something against someone: drop it. (Mark 11:24)
- b. If someone has sinned against you: go and tell them and get it worked out. (Matthew 18)
- c. If you know someone has something against you, go make it right. (Matthew 5:24)

All of these scenarios have the sense of immediacy and require confrontation, if we are unable to simply let the issue go.

Discuss:

1. Most of us highly dislike confrontation. How can we encourage one another here?
2. How can we get the support and strength we need to confront an offender, or forgive someone, while avoiding gossip?

Pray:

Let's keep short accounts with our brothers and sisters. Pray for the strength to confront issues that need to be confronted, in order to restore unity and peace. Pray for wisdom in how to confront in a way that will bring about restoration.