

## Forgiving From the Heart

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

June 10, 2018 – AM Sermon

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Matthew 18:21-35

What's your impression of the size of the debt owed to the unforgiving servant? You've probably heard this parable a few times, so in your mind when the unforgiving servant tries to strangle the man he meets in the street, did that man owe him a lot of money, a little, a medium sized debt? I've always imagined it as a small debt. I've always imagined it as an insignificant sum. Maybe that's because of the way people told me the story; maybe that's because of the footnote in my Bible. In our old pew Bible, there was a footnote under this parable. That footnote said that the debt owed by the man who the servant bumped into on the street amounted to a few dollars. So for years many of us read that footnote and got the impression that the unforgiving servant choked his neighbor over a few bucks, over lunch money. Which makes him seem like a cartoon bad guy.

That footnote has been changed. In the new pew Bible you are reminded that one denarius is a fair days pay for a laborer. So in modern terms a denarius is around a hundred dollars. And the man wasn't owed one denarius, he was owed hundred. So that's a debt of ten thousand dollars. That's not nothing. If you were poor and penniless ten thousand dollars would not be an easy debt to forgive. All of a sudden the man's anger seems more understandable. All of a sudden the call to forgive your neighbor just got higher. You see, it's not just the easy things that we are called to forgive 77 times. It's not just the unpaid lunch money. It's the not someone cutting you off in traffic. Because of what God did for us in Jesus, we are called to forgive the person who lied about us at work and got us fired, and that person whose middle school mocking left a lasting scar. It's a deep, strong, painful kind of forgiveness that Jesus calls us to practice here.

And that raises some potential complications. Let me give you a hypothetical situation, one that is based on multiple real life situations that I've seen in my ministry. A man sins against his wife. He's been caught sending weird texts to a female colleague at work. Multiple times his wife has caught him texting things that seem overly intimate and overly flirtatious. She confronts him and he claims it's all innocent. "We're just friends!" he says. He even gets angry at her for not trusting him. But then she finds some secret emails and some hidden hotel receipts and she realizes that it's all a lie. He's been unfaithful for more than a year. Distraught she leaves him and goes to live with her mother. He calls her every day and says, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please take me back!" On the fourth night of pleading he becomes insistent. He throws this parable at her. "Aren't you a Christian!? Don't you remember what Jesus said!? God forgives our sin and washes it away. You have to forgive me and let me back into your life! The Bible says!" How do you feel about that husband's use of this parable? Do you think that this parable tells the wife to take her man back, forgive him, and pretend like this never happened? I'm not so sure.

Matthew 18 is a really interesting chapter. On the one hand, it has some of the strongest calls to grace in the Bible. You have the king forgiving a man a 5.2 billion dollar debt. You have Jesus telling Peter that he must forgive 77 times. You have Matthew's version of the parable of the good shepherd where the shepherd leaves the 99 behind to go after his one lost sheep, because, the Lord is not willing that one little one should be lost! Amazing grace! Strong Mercy! But on the other hand, Matthew 18 has some of the sharpest warnings against sin in the whole

Bible. Woe to you if you cause even one little one to sin, it would be better for you to have a great millstone tied around your neck and be cast into the depths of the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. Better that than to have two eyes and get thrown into hell. If your brother refuses to repent after being confronted by the church, you should treat him like a pagan and a tax collector. We tend to celebrate moderation in all things, but Jesus does not practice moderation in Matthew 18. His call to forgive has a shocking level of grace and mercy and his refusal to tolerate sin has a shocking level of seriousness. Jesus gives amazing, immeasurable grace, and he gives it so that our sins will be utterly destroyed, so that we will be born again, so that we will become completely new people.

So back to that husband who wants to have his wife take him right back and pretend nothing has happened. There are two things he needs to understand. First, forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. His wife may forgive him. She may let go of her anger toward him and learn to look at him with compassion instead of loathing. She may pray for his healing, but before their relationship can become what it was before, he will need to regain her trust, and that trust can only be earned, little by little, over a long period of time. The husband must show not only that he is sorry, he must show that he has repented. And repentance is something you prove over time by living your life in a new direction. To put it in terms of the parable, the king forgives the servant the massive 5.2 billion debt he has built up, he shows the man amazing grace. But if this man strolled into the courtroom the next day and asked for a ten thousand dollar loan, what do you think the king would say? I'm guessing no. The servant would have to demonstrate some trustworthiness before the relationship between them can get back to that place of trust where things can be as they were before. To put it in technical terms, forgiveness is a start, but the offender must show repentance and do their best to make restitution before reconciliation is possible.

Second, forgiveness does not mean forgetting. At the end of history there may well be a great act of forgetting on the part of the Lord where He will forget our sins and the sins committed against us. At the end of history there may well be a blessed moment when the Lord will remember our sins no more, but in the meantime, while we forgive the sins of people who've hurt us, and while we remember their sins differently, without anger and bitterness, we should not forget them. Again, look at the passage. Does the king forget the servant's debt? No. He absolutely remembers it. It's because he remembers it that he is so furious at the unforgiving servant! He remembers because the forgiveness he gave was meant to produce a new kind of life, and when there was no fruit of new life, when it appeared that the servant was using the king's mercy as a kind of personal advantage, the king is furious. On the cross Jesus has given us amazing forgiveness. That grace is the foundation of our lives. The worst sinner can find hope in the arms of Jesus, but that grace was not given to minimize sin; that grace was given to destroy sin. God's grace is not given as a kind of hangover medicine: you sin all night, wake up with a headache, and take the medicine, and poof, headache gone! It was given so that we could be new creations. That grace comes around us every day and lifts us so that every day we can learn the new habits of life. That grace comes around us and lifts us every day so that we can walk the long slow road of sanctification.

Not only should we not forget our sins, I think this parable teaches us that remembering our sin is key to being strong in our will to forgive each other, and strong in our fight against sin. Why does the ungrateful servant go wrong? Why is he so ungrateful? May I suggest to you that the problem is memory loss. Somehow between the moment he left the King's palace and the moment he saw his debtor, the servant forgets what the king did for him. Somehow when he

hears his debtor say, “Be patient with me and I will pay back everything,” he forgets that just a few hours ago the same words came out of his mouth. Somehow the amazing grace of the king hasn’t transformed his mind, it hasn’t changed his heart. Growing as a Christian, growing in mercy and righteousness depends on memory. What ought to have happened in the story of the unmerciful servant? If we were to rewrite it with a happy ending this time, how would it go? Well, this time the servant would leave the court of the king and he would run into the man who owed him ten thousand dollars, and he would feel his anger rising. “There’s the guy who hurt me and my family!” But then in his mind he would go back and he would remember. He would remember both his own sin and the mercy he received. He’d remember the king’s mercy and that would fill him with gratitude and sympathy. Instead of trying to strangle the man, he would want to help him. That doesn’t mean he would completely forget the sin. He might still approach the debtor, and say “Hey friend, you know that money you owe me, I really need it, things are kind of tight right now. Let me work out a payment plan with you. Maybe you could pay back half.” Or he might forgive the debt entirely but say something like, “Hey. I’ve had a little debt trouble myself. It was awful. Do you know there’s a money management seminar over at my church? Do you want to come with me next week? I had such terrible habits and it made me miserable. I got a second chance and I’m learning a new way of living. Why don’t you come with me?”

Real freedom from the weight of sin depends on honest remembering of our forgiven sins and that memory increases our gratitude for the mercy that is ours in Jesus. It increases our desire to share his mercy with others, and it increases our determination to fight the sin that crushes people in this world. Walt Wangerin has a grace producing memory from a time in his youth. When he was about nine years old, his dad was president of Concordia Junior College in Edmonton, Alberta. On the campus of Concordia there was a field where Walt and his friends liked to play football in the summers. The field was perfect for their football games except for one thing – there were lots of loose stones on it. Wangerin and his friends solved this problem in simple fashion: every time they ran across a stone they would take it and throw it off the field. Little Walter however had his own unique way of throwing these stones off the field. He would take them and throw them at the tall floodlights that lit the field at night. He never hit one, but he would try. One day his dad caught him throwing a rock at these lights and said, “Son!! Don’t do that! Those are expensive 6000 watt light bulbs, the college can’t afford to replace those because of little boys throwing stones.” “OK Dad” he said. But in his mind he figured he’s just keep on doing it because he’s never hit one anyway. Well as you can probably guess, a little while later one of the stones he threw flew straight and true and destroyed one of these expensive bulbs. For a while little Walter didn’t tell his dad about what had happened. He went around feeling sullen and guilty. He was crushed by the weight of his sin and guilt. So finally, he went to his dad’s office and confessed what he’d done: “Dad, you know how you told me not to throw stones at the lights. Well I did it anyway and I broke one. He was prepared for a lecture, he was prepared for a spanking, an angry blast. But instead his father knelt down beside him and hugged him. “I do not think I would have cried if my father spanked me, but when he hugged me I began to cry and I couldn’t stop crying. I hadn’t expected the most undeserved thing, to be forgiven. That fire of my father’s love melted me.”

Do you see how the memory of this sin and his father’s forgiveness of that sin is key to Walter’s sanctification? The memory of his sin makes him hate his own sin and makes him want to be a better person. And the memory of his father’s forgiveness reminds him that there was an unconditional love at the bottom of his life. And that makes him want to practice the same kind

of sin-destroying mercy. I pray that you and I may always remember our sins, the foolishness of them, the shame of them, the way they hurt others. I pray that we might remember how those sins have been met by the embrace of the man who died on the cross to pay every cent of our debt. And I pray that in that memory our hearts will be flooded with a joyful determination to live as His children.

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