

THE PARABLE OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT
MATTHEW 18:21-35

I.

Chantal grew up in a Tutsi family in Rwanda in Africa. (RWANDA) When she celebrated her first communion, a Hutu neighbor in their village named John hosted the party. John was ten years older than Chantal's father Nambaje. Yet Nambaje was wealthier and had more education. John was a bit jealous of him, but they were friends.

A few years later Chantal got married and proceeded to have a baby boy. In that same year, 1992, there was an outbreak of racial violence in Rwanda. Some Hutus in a nearby town got worked up and went looking for more prominent Tutsis in the area. Chantal's dad Nambaje was pulled from his house and beaten. John joined in with the beating, which resulted in the death of Chantal's father.

Things calmed down a bit. Chantal and her husband Placide came and buried her father. Then in 1994 violence broke out in a big way. The Hutus proceeded to massacre the minority Tutsis who historically had been better educated and wealthier than the Hutus. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed. The violence came one night to Chantal's village. As a crowd drew near, husband Placide told Chantal to make a run for it with their two year old baby after he confronted the crowd. Chantal escaped with her baby as she saw her husband being beaten. She was chased, but she and the baby made it to a refugee camp in the neighboring country of Burundi.

Severely injured, Placide made it to the refugee camp and was reunited with Chantal. Unfortunately the baby died soon after that. When violence in Rwanda subsided, the couple returned to Rwanda. Placide was able to start a bit of a farm and to provide two more children for the family. But he died of his injuries that came from the beating at the hands of the Hutus. Meanwhile Chantal's old neighbor John had been sent to prison along with thousands of other Hutus. In 2005 John was released from prison. He passed along word through intermediaries that he wanted Chantal to forgive him for being involved in the killing of his father. How does one deal with something like that?
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Last week we dealt with a story that Jesus told where He described Himself as the Good Shepherd. Commentators sometimes call that story a parable, although it does not fit the exact same category of stories that Jesus tells in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The story which we are examining today comes along much further into the public ministry of Jesus.

Jesus was about to become a victim of terrible evil. Just before his last trip to Jerusalem He was talking to his disciples about sin. In Matthew #18 He talked about the responsibility of a congregation toward one of its members who falls into sin. Later on in

the chapter He described the responsibility that individuals have toward other individuals who sin against them. It is that personal response to sin and evil done to us that is our focus this morning.

I.

Thus we come to Roman numeral I in our outline, THE PARABLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE PARABLE) Having just described the responsibility that a congregation has to an individual sinner, Jesus in v. 21 of #18 fields a question from Peter about the responsibility of one believer toward a fellow believer, or perhaps toward a fellow Jew, who sins against him: **“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”**

The religious teachers, especially the Pharisees, taught that righteousness requires a good Jew to forgive his neighbor twice. If that Jew wants to be generous, he could forgive him a third time. For the fourth offense, however, there should be no forgiveness. So when Peter suggested the possibility of forgiving his brother seven times, he thought that he was being especially generous.

But Jesus responds in v. 22, **“Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.’”** Some translations have **“seventy times.”** The early manuscripts have different readings. Some commentators think that Jesus is making a reference to Genesis #4 v. 24, which speaks about Lamech being avenged seventy-seven times. Jesus’ basic point is that one’s forgiveness is to be unlimited.

To illustrate His point Jesus tells a parable. He says in vv. 23 & 24, **“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.”** These people are not simply household slaves. They are government officials. Perhaps the king had auditors come in and check the books, and it quickly became evident that there was a lot of money missing which had been under the control of one particular government minister. Probably Jesus is describing a tax official who was responsible for collecting taxes. This individual had either been ineffective in doing his job or corrupt.

The amount of money in question is 10,000 talents. It is difficult to compare that in terms of a modern equivalent. A talent was a weight. But the weight of a talent varied from time to time and country to country. In this part of the world at this time in history it seemed to vary between 60 and 120 pounds. But then the value also depended upon the substance being weighed. Gold and silver were the most common substances used. Gold, of course, was considerably more valuable than silver.

Probably Jesus had in mind a Roman silver talent. Josephus, the first century historian, makes reference in his writings to a tax imposed upon Judea by the Romans after the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. He writes, **“[Cassius] laid great taxes upon those cities; and he chiefly oppressed Judea, and exacted of it 700 talents...”** (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Bk. 14, Chapter 11, Para. 2) Seven hundred talents is regarded as a large

amount. Here Jesus is talking about 10,000 talents. So the implication in this parable is that it is such a large amount that it is doubtful that this government official could ever repay it.

Notice that money plays a role in this parable. Many of the parables include a reference to the handling of money. Jesus seems to regard the manner in which people handle money as revealing a lot about their character, about the state of their soul.

According to v. 25 the king ordered this government official and his family to be sold into slavery and that all of his possessions be sold. Even then it was doubtful that a very large part of the debt would be covered.

In v. 26 the servant comes to the king and pleads for patience and for more time in which to pay back the debt. Realistically it is not feasible that any length of time will be adequate to pay back such a large debt. But desperate people will act in desperate ways. Certainly the king is not going to be inclined to let this guy handle much of his money. He has either been corrupt or very ineffective in collecting taxes. His reputation elsewhere may be lousy. But the king is a compassionate man. He has pity for the guy and his family, and he cancels the debt.

But the official has little appreciation for the huge debt that has been forgiven him and the mercy that the king has shown. For he goes out and grabs a fellow servant by the throat and yells at him to pay back the 100 denarii that he owes him. A common laborer in the time of Jesus was paid one denarius a day. So the amount involved here was about 100 days' pay for a common laborer.

This fellow servant has a cash flow problem, and he can't come up with the necessary money immediately. So the first guy has him thrown into the slammer until he pays up, though the poor victim here uses almost the same words to plead for patience that the first servant used with the king.

The other servants of the king see what is happening, and they are irate. The king's servants are a fairly small community, and they talk among themselves. They know how the first servant was let off the hook by the king, and now they find out how he in turn has treated his fellow servant. Their sense of justice is offended. So they go and tell the king what happened. The text of v. 31 says that they **"went and reported to their master all that had taken place."**

When the king hears the story, he hits the roof. He calls in the first official and lays into him. According to vv. 32 & 33 he says, **"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?"** Verse 34 adds, **"And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt."**

Torturers would be used in that time to extract information from a wealthy debtor like this to find out all about where his personal assets might be hidden. Does he have a

hidden Swiss bank account? Does he have money stashed away on one of the Caribbean islands? Is he a silent partner in some other kind of business arrangement? Meanwhile family and friends might be motivated to raise money to secure the debtor's release, although in this case the debt is so large that they would probably have difficulty coming up with enough money.

In v. 35 Jesus makes one statement of application: **“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”** That sounds pretty harsh. One commentator comes up with six possible interpretations of this statement by Jesus. (Cf. Thomas Constable) Does Jesus mean that if we are not forgiving toward someone, God is going to send us to hell? That is one possible interpretation.

The Bible, however, teaches us that eternal salvation is a gift of grace that is received solely on the basis of faith. (EPHESIANS 2:8-9) Ephesians # 2 vv. 8 & 9 tell us, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** Eternal life, Paul declares, is dependent upon God's grace and our reception of Jesus by faith. It is not dependent upon our maintenance of a certain level of behavior.

Some are inclined to interpret Jesus' statement in the sense that anyone who has truly understood and received the grace of God that has forgiven his or her sins will necessarily be gracious and forgiving toward others who sin against him or her. A true believer just will not treat other sinners in this way. (PROJECTOR OFF)

My experience, however, and other statements in Scripture seem to suggest that Christians can be unforgiving. We can forget the significance of our own sin and forgiveness, and we can treat other sinners wrongly.

Another possible interpretation, which I suspect may be closer to the mark, is that the judgment that Jesus is describing refers not to eternal damnation but rather to earthly discipline. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 CORINTHIANS 5:5) In 1 Corinthians #5 v. 5 the Apostle Paul says that he is going to deal with a Christian who is persisting in serious sin by delivering him **“to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”** It seems that Paul is giving this resistant sinner over to the devil that sickness or physical harm of some type may come upon him and knock some sense into him.

The sin of unforgiveness has its own unique problems that come with it. It tends to produce anger and stress and broken relationships and sleeplessness and physical problems. It also opens us up to more sin and makes us more vulnerable to the attacks and temptations of the evil one. Some of these things are the natural consequences of unforgiveness. In some cases the Lord may sovereignly work out our circumstances so that we experience added suffering as the result of our persistent unforgiveness.

II.A.

(II. THE LESSONS) We come then to THE LESSONS that we should learn from this parable. I find two basic things that we should learn from this story of Jesus. The first is that WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE THAT OUR FORGIVENESS IS OFTEN INCOMPLETE. (II. THE LESSONS A. WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE THAT...) Peter originally offered to forgive a sinning brother up to seven times. He thought that he was being generous in doing that. In actuality he had a wrong understanding of the forgiveness that God desires. He was assuming that a man who forgave was giving up a right that he might still exercise in some situations. He was assuming that there were limits and conditions on forgiveness. Peter's forgiveness was incomplete.

Jesus had been teaching that discipleship means giving up one's rights. (MARK 8:34) Jesus said, **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."** Peter, in choosing to follow Jesus Christ, gave up his right not to forgive.

So the first way in which our forgiveness is often incomplete is that we put limits on our forgiveness. (PROJECTOR OFF) Minor sins may not be that hard to forgive. The bigger sins, the situations where evil has really been directed toward us, are harder to forgive. When we have been unjustly fired, when we have been slandered, when we have been robbed, when a teacher has made fun of us, when the same sin has repeatedly been committed against us, then there is a temptation to set limits to our forgiveness. We are tempted to rationalize our unforgiveness: "I would forgive so-and-so, but he won't admit that he has done anything wrong." "I would forgive so-and-so, but she keeps mistreating me like this." "I would forgive so-and-so, but what he has done is just so bad." Our Lord asked for forgiveness for those who crucified Him. We should not put limits on our forgiveness.

A second way in which our forgiveness often falls short of what God desires is that it is sometimes superficial. We utter words of forgiveness, but we do not really mean it. We say the right thing, but it is not really genuine. Jesus said in v. 35 that each of us ought to forgive his brother from his heart. People too often say that they forgive someone, and yet they hold a grudge against that person. They treat that person coldly. They continue to speak against him or her. They give that person the silent treatment. There is no forgiveness from the heart. They may have said the right words, but the forgiveness is incomplete

Our forgiveness is to be unconditional. It is to be from the heart. That doesn't mean that we have to act stupidly. If I run into the neighborhood bully each day as I walk home from school, and he always punches me out, I ought to ask God to help me to forgive him. But I also ought to be smart and figure out a different route home. If somebody keeps lying to me, I need to forgive that person. Matthew #18 also says that I might need to confront that person.

But even if that individual does not admit wrongdoing, I need to forgive him or her. That doesn't mean that I have to go on depending on that individual. If that person is an

employee, I may need to fire that person. I can personally forgive him or her, but that doesn't mean that the company can continue to trust this individual. If a mate is unfaithful, he or she needs to be forgiven. But separation might be needed so that person gets his or her act together.

B.

We need to recognize that our forgiveness is often incomplete. We shouldn't set limits on our forgiveness, and we need to forgive people from the heart. The second lesson is that WE MUST MAKE SURE THAT WE DO IN FACT FORGIVE. (II. A. B. WE MUST MAKE SURE THAT...) That is true for two reasons.

First, God has forgiven us. We need to realize the enormity of our debt and our own inability to pay it off. If God was only just and righteous and not also merciful, we would all be in a heap of trouble. For He tells us in His Word that we are sinners. The Apostle Paul describes who we are in God's eyes apart from His grace in Romans #3. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 3:10-12) Beginning in v. 10 he quotes a number of passages from the OT, saying, **“None is righteous, no, not one;/ 11 no one understands;/ no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;/ no one does good,/ not even one.”** (ROMANS 3:13-15) **‘Their throat is an open grave;/ they use their tongues to deceive.’/ ‘The venom of asps is under their lips.’/ 14 ‘Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.’/ 15 ‘Their feet are swift to shed blood;,/ (ROMANS 3:16-18) in their paths are ruin and misery,/ 17 and the way of peace they have not known.’ 18 ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’”**

Three chapters later in Romans 6:23 the Bible says that the penalty for our sinfulness is death, or eternal separation from God. But God has paid our debt for us. He did it through Jesus Christ. (COLOSSIANS 2:13-14) Listen to Colossians #2 vv. 13 & 14: **“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”** The one responsibility that we do have to benefit from this sacrifice that was made for us is to trust in Jesus as our Savior. We must admit that we are sinners in need of a Savior, and we must believe that Jesus died for our sins. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus in this parable is telling us that the debt of sin that each of us has is great. God has forgiven us this debt which we are incapable of ever repaying. So we ought to regard the sins that are committed against us in this light. The Bible teacher Arno Gaebelein writes, **“If the heart has really apprehended the grace of God and realizes what God has done for us in His wonderful grace, it will ever be gracious and forgive.”**

We need to forgive others because God has forgiven us much and, secondly, because we will experience torment if we don't forgive. The king in this parable gave the wicked servant over to torturers in jail until his debt was repaid because the servant failed to

show mercy toward his fellow servant. Jesus says in v. 35 that He will do the same to us if we do not forgive our brothers.

In recent years psychologists and medical researchers have been learning that unforgiveness takes a toll on the human body. So some of the negative effects of unforgiveness are the natural consequences of not doing what is right. But beyond this the sovereign God and perfect heavenly Father so orders circumstances to get his erring children back on track. Those circumstances may include more vulnerability to sin and anger and to more preoccupation with the one whom we fail to forgive.

When we fail to forgive and are controlled by anger, we sometimes think that we are getting back at the other person. By holding a grudge we are paying that person back. But we are not. That other person is still controlling us. He is dominating our thought life. He or she is controlling our emotional life. We are allowing that person to continue to hurt us. The only escape is forgiveness.

A *Time* magazine writer showed amazing insight into this when he wrote, **“The psychological case for forgiveness is overwhelmingly persuasive. Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past by old grievances that do not permit life to proceed with new business. Not to forgive is to yield oneself to another’s control. If one does not forgive, then one is controlled by the other’s initiatives and is locked into a sequence of act and response... The present is endlessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Forgiveness frees the forgiver. It extracts the forgiver from someone else’s nightmare.”** We need to forgive.

As recently as the early 1980s Dr. Mack Harnden went to the University of Kansas library and looked up the word “forgiveness” in *Psychological Abstracts*. He couldn’t find a single reference. In fact there was not one study on the subject of person-to-person forgiveness that had been published in the social sciences.

A guy by the name of Robert Enright from the University of Wisconsin set out to change that. He describes himself as an evangelical Catholic. For years he struggled to get the social sciences to recognize the need for study to be done in the area of forgiveness. By 1997 there were 58 empirical studies recorded in the science journals. Since then there have been over 1400 scientific studies that have been done on forgiveness. (Institute for Spirituality and Wellness, Chicago Theological Seminary, 2012) No surprise to us, they are finding all kinds of benefits that come from personal forgiveness. Dr. Harndon from the University of Kansas summarizes the discovered benefits of forgiveness: **“It not only heightens the potential for reconciliation but also releases the offender from prolonged anger, rage, and stress that have been linked to physical problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, hypertension, cancer, and other psychosomatic illnesses.”**

Lewis Smedes, in his book *Forgive and Forget*, says that forgiveness of significant wrongdoing takes time. It is like the grief process. There are certain stages through which one must progress before genuine forgiveness from the heart is accomplished. First, there is a stage of hurt, where the enormity of evil strikes home to us. Then there

is a second stage of emotional response to this wrongdoing. We experience anger. Thirdly, if we proceed in a godly way, we will experience healing. We begin to see the other person, or persons, in a new light. We begin to forget the evil. Then, fourthly, if the offender is willing, there can be a reconciliation. This last step is always dependent on the willingness of the offender to be reconciled. We can always forgive, but we may not always be reconciled.

During the years in which the Hutu perpetrators of violence were imprisoned in Rwanda, Christian pastors came preaching the gospel. Many Hutu prisoners were converted to Christ. John was one of them. He recognized his Christian responsibility to seek forgiveness from Chantal. He needed help in doing that after he was released from prison.

Pascal was another Tutsi victim of violence. His bride was eight months pregnant when she and the infant inside of her were killed. Pascal lost nearly every member of his extended family. He barely escaped with his life. Initially he was motivated by revenge. But he was exposed to the Christian gospel, and he became a believer. He learned of the need to forgive. Over time he felt a responsibility from God to serve as a mediator between perpetrators and victims.

Pascal was from the same village as Chantal and John. When John was released from prison, Pascal sought him out. He had several conversations with him where John seemed to show a genuine repentance about his actions. Pascal then began to visit Chantal. Over a period of several months he listened to Chantal and shared stories of survival and loss. He pointed her toward God for healing. He also encouraged her to consider meeting with John.

A year after his first visit, in August of 2006, Chantal agreed to see John. That first visit was rough. John said to Chantal, **“Chantal, thank you for this moment, I sinned against you terribly by killing your father, a man I lived beside and even shared drinks with. I even prepared the feast when you received the sacrament of confirmation in the church... I am falling before you begging for mercy for the sin I committed.”** Chantal was angry. She could not forgive.

But afterward Chantal was tormented by nightmares. She was haunted by memories of the past. On the Sunday after she met with John, she went to church for the first time since the genocide. She found herself thinking, **“Maybe if God forgives, he can help me also to forgive.”**

Pascal also continued to visit. One day Chantal told Pascal that she had begun to pray again. After that visit she prayed, **“God, I have no strength in me to forgive John. But you, O Lord, have the power to forgive. Give me the power to forgive him.”**

A bit after that Chantal began to work with a group that Pascal had organized to help rebuild homes. Hutus and Tutsis were brought together in that group and were paid a small salary. John was also part of that group.

One day Chantal finally invited John and several neighbors to have refreshments together. With the neighbors in a circle, Chantal announced, “**John, from now, I have forgiven you.**” John clapped his hands, and lifted his eyes toward heaven. With tears in his eyes, he proclaimed, “**God be praised.**” For the first time in many years Chantal said that her heart was at peace. (Catherine Claire Larson, *As We Forgive*)

Perhaps you need to experience the healing power of forgiveness. As we close this part of our time together, I would ask that we bow our heads for a few moments. If there are people that you need to forgive from the heart, why don't you acknowledge that to the Lord? Forgiveness that deals with the deepest hurts in life involves a process. Ask the Lord to help you to begin that process and to carry it out. Let's pray.