### “Having Mercy” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 17, 2023

**Matthew 18:21–33**

21 Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times?” 22Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

28 “But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. 31When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?’”

Good morning and thank you for coming to First Church. All are welcome here, where we come to learn and to worship together. Today we will hear about the Father’s unceasing love, mercy, and forgiveness, and what we should do to follow that course.

This parable of Jesus is meant to teach an important but fairly simple spiritual truth: if you want to be forgiven, you’d better forgive others. There is a certain kind of karma, if you like, that will rebound upon you if you have been forgiven but you are strict and unforgiving toward others.

Forgiveness is central to our psalm in this week’s program. It says “The Lord is merciful and gracious . . . He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities” (103:8, 10). Next come some very emphatic the words about forgiveness: “as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us” (103:12). What a tremendous image! In summary, he says “As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him” (103:13).

Jesus would appreciate this father-imagery, and the emphasis on God’s forgiveness. God removes our transgressions as far as the east is from the west! The gospel story teaches us to extend that same generous forgiveness to our fellows. It stresses that we cannot rightly withhold forgiveness if we know we have been forgiven. In fact, the slave who does that seems quite despicable. He is being unfair and ungenerous. Further, he should know better. He knows about mercy, since he has been shown mercy. He should know better than to be strict and unyielding.

Jesus appeals to our sense of fairness. We can’t help but side with the other slaves who complain about the forgiven slave’s behavior. Jesus is implying that there is a legitimate place for the sense of justice. I think the sense of fair play is being highlighted in this parable. The parable is not just an instruction to pass on forgiveness, to “pay it forward,” so to speak, but it’s also a lesson about how the sense of justice will play a role in how we are treated.

Now forgiveness itself goes beyond justice and is something other than justice, but, if we act unjustly after receiving forgiveness, then we are going to be held accountable. Just because past infractions have been forgiven, does not mean there is a blank check for one to be hard-hearted.

Mercy for past misdeeds is not a cover to protect ungraciousness and cruelty in the present. So, as Paul says, God “will repay according to each one’s deeds” (Rom 2:6). Maybe this means one is held to account for every misdeed *after* one has been saved and has accepted forgiveness for prior misdeeds.

I don’t want to be rigid about that, but I do think that someone who knows what forgiveness is, having *been* forgiven, should know enough to be able to show mercy to others. Being cruel to others, then, is deliberate evildoing. The more we know, spiritually, the more we are expected to reflect spiritual character. The more that is given to us, the more that is expected from us.

I want to attain a clear understanding of the basic principles in our Scriptures: God has compassion on his children, the psalm says (103:13). God is merciful and forgiving, but God always expects us to be merciful and forgiving, and if we are *not*, the gospel says, then we will be called to account for our cruel and unjust behavior.

Forgiveness for past sins is not a kind of permission to continue behaving in an evil manner. One should know better than to presume upon the divine mercy, to take it as a license to keep sinning. We know better than that, and we will be held responsible for what we know.

These are the basic spiritual facts underlying this parable. There is mercy, but there is also justice. And there is what you might call spiritual common sense. As Jesus says in Luke, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). We can fill out the meaning of that saying by reading the next verse in Luke: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (6:37). And we see this right after the Lord’s prayer, too: “if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14–15). This sounds like a spiritual law, and something that should be practiced in daily life.

In 1981, Pope John Paul II was shot by a Turkish extremist, Mehmet Ali Agca, who called the Pope the “leader of the Crusades” ([Mehmet Ali Ağca - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mehmet_Ali_A%C4%9Fca)). The Pope forgave Agca even while he was in the ambulance on his way to the hospital. In 1983 the Pope visited Agca in prison. Apparently it was a life-changing experience for Agca, who later wrote a note wishing the Pope a speedy recovery from an illness in 2005. This is not entirely a rosy story. Agca completed prison terms in two countries and was released in 2010. He continues to have psycho-social problems, but he and his family are grateful to John Paul II and they grieved the Pope’s death in 2005. The Pope’s courageous act of forgiveness had a real effect on Agca and his family.

The person who is doing the forgiving is freed from the burden of resentment and even from mood disorders, writes Megan Bettencourt, author of *Triumph of the Heart* (greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/learning\_forgiveness\_in\_an\_ unforgiving\_world), but that doesn’t mean we should push people into forgiveness, “as if there were a tidy, scheduled way to grieve or a deadline,” she writes.

Sometimes forgiveness can heal communities as well as individuals. Forgiveness is a process. It requires courage, and it doesn’t always result in success. It is made much harder when there is no remorse from the perpetrator, which leaves one feeling unsafe. Still, Bettencourt recommends that we cultivate mindfulness and empathy. “‘The expression “Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself” is merely a starting point,’ writes Bettencourt. ‘When followed through to its fullest expression, forgiveness can be a gift that benefits everyone.’”

Especially if we recognize that *we* are the recipients of forgiveness, we should be empowered to fight the good fight of faith and learn to practice forgiveness, which takes real spiritual courage and a sense of principle. Emulate Jesus. Be a forgiver.