

9-20-2020 SERMON CCI Matthew 18: 21- 35 When is Enough, Enough?

I had several responses from last Sunday's sermon on Jesus' way of dealing with conflict. One person said it's hard to do. They are right. Another recognized the challenge of being willing to forgive, because sometimes the pain is deep. They're right too. Another has known the betrayal of having people talk behind their back instead of coming to them. Let's face it, reconciliation and forgiveness is hard work.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive."¹ So what is forgiveness? The words for forgive in the Bible use images of sending something away so it is gone, releasing something, letting something go, or a debt that has been marked "paid in full" so nothing more is owed. In other words, when we forgive, we no longer hold the offense against the person. When God forgives us, God removes our sin as far as the east is from the west. It's gone. Kaput. Never to be brought up again. Real forgiveness really is a lovely idea. Until Jesus says to forgive others... And like Peter, we have questions, "But how many **times** do I have to forgive someone- seven?" We know we're supposed to forgive, we may even know that it is good for our own health and mental peace. But when is enough, enough?

Peter thought he was being generous saying we should forgive a person 7 times. The rabbis of his day said we are to forgive 3 times, so 7 is more than twice that. But Jesus said, "No, Peter, not seven times, but seventy-seven times!" It's unclear whether Jesus said 77 times or 7 X 70 which is 490 times. Either way, they're both outrageous! Are we supposed to mark in a book every time we forgive someone so we know when we're getting close to 77 or 490 and can quit? *Let's see, they've lied 22 times, they forgot my birthday, they promised to mow the lawn but didn't, Tuesday they were having a bad day and yelled at me for no reason, last week they pouted at dinner and ruined the meal, they made fun of the poem I wrote in front of my family, oh and they didn't even apologize later. How many is that? 28 and that's just the ones I can think of right now! I've already had it and I still have to forgive 49 more times?* Jesus' outrageous numbers tell us that asking how much forgiveness is enough is missing the point. Paul had it right in I Corinthians 13, when he said that love keeps no record of wrongs- love doesn't keep count, love forgives. If we're keeping count of sins, are we really forgiving? Love demands that we give up our record keeping and forgive.

And to clarify his point, Jesus told a scary parable of how forgiveness works in the kingdom of God.

A king decides to settle some loans he has made to his servants. One servant owes the king an astronomical sum of money = 10,000 talents. The talent was the largest piece of money of that day. To give us an idea of how much money this was, the historian Josephus wrote that only 600 talents in taxes were collected in all of Israel in 4 B.C. If this servant owes 10,000 talents, he would have to work 30-100 million days to pay it off! One writer said 10,000 talents was more money than was in circulation in Israel! The guy owes a lot and can never repay his debt!

¹ C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

So the king decides to sell the servant and his family into slavery to at least recoup something. If we were the servant today, we would quickly declare bankruptcy and gain some time and even reduce what we owe. But bankruptcy wasn't an option, so he throws himself on the mercy of the king. "Be patient with me and I will pay back everything." The king knows this is impossible, but is moved by compassion to cancel the entire debt. It's gone. It's forgiven. If the parable ended here, we could go home with a warm fuzzy feeling toward the king and the lucky forgiven servant.

But then comes the rest of the story. The newly forgiven servant, who should be on cloud nine, finds another servant who owes him a mere 100 denarii. A denarii was the average daily wage of a day laborer, so this second servant owed about 3 months' pay. That would be hard to repay, but doable with time and some help from his family and friends. Let's compare the debts these two men owe. We have to do a little math. One talent was equal to 6000 denarii, so 10,000 times 6000 means the first servant had owed the king **60 million denarii**. He's just been forgiven of 60 million and the second servant owes him a measly hundred. The second servant begs for time to pay his debt. What should the first servant do? What **did** he do? He demanded his 100 denarii, and threw the man into debtor's prison. Let his family and friends pool their resources to save his life. If we don't gasp at the unfairness, we aren't listening.

But the story isn't done. The other servants see all this and are so angry, they run and tell the king how unfair the first man was being. And the king is livid. He had forgiven the first servant of his huge debt, and he won't forgive the measly debt? So the king throws the first man in prison. He did to the first servant what the man had done to the second servant. And everyone listening nodded and said, "That's only fair."

What is Jesus trying to teach us about forgiveness? First, God's forgiveness of our sin has no limits; there is no sin that is so big or terrible that it can't be forgiven, and there is no amount of times we commit the same sin that God does not forgive us when we fall on his mercy. God does not keep count the way Peter and we want to. When we sincerely repent and ask forgiveness, God forgives and our sins are gone. Our debt is paid. Some of us who can't forgive ourselves of something we've done may particularly need to hear this truth.

Second: Jesus is calling us to forgive others with the same compassion and mercy we have received from God. Forgive without limits because God forgives us without limits. No keeping score of sins and offenses, no counting, no deciding some sins are just unforgivable. No holding grudges and refusing to reconcile. There may be times when we have to let go of a relationship that is dangerous or toxic, but that doesn't release us from the heart work of forgiving them. And there may be times when the person who harmed us will face a criminal penalty for their actions, but that doesn't release us from the heart work of forgiving them. There is no Get Out of Forgiving Free card when we're following Jesus.

And if that is not tough enough, Jesus ends with a scary warning: "*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*" There is a connection between our forgiving other people and our **being** forgiven by God. Forgiveness is about grace- receiving what we do not deserve. None of us deserve

forgiveness. When we choose to hold a grudge, we've said no to grace and chosen fairness instead. So God gives us what we wanted and forgives us in the same way we forgive others.

We prayed the beautiful Lord's Prayer earlier, and we asked God to forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Did we hear how dangerous this lovely prayer is? We asked God to forgive us the same way and to the same extent that we forgive others! I need God's forgiveness because I screw up everyday. Today's scripture and the Lord's Prayer remind me that as much as I might want to just write off someone who wrongs me, or as much as I prefer to hold on tight to an offense, when I do, I've turned my back on God's forgiveness. Remember that old adage, "You can't have your cake and eat it too?" Well, we can't have our grudge and God's forgiveness too.

So I invite us to a few quiet moments of personal reflection. To look honestly inside our own hearts to see if we are choosing not to forgive. And to ask God's help to forgive what feels unforgiveable. And let it go.