**Order of Service: March 5th, 2023**

**Scripture:** Matthew 18:15-35

15“If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16But if he won’t listen, take one or two others with you, so that **by the testimony** **of two or three witnesses every fact may be established.** 17If he doesn’t pay attention to them, tell the church. If he doesn’t pay attention even to the church, let him be like a Gentile and a tax collector to you. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven. 19Again, truly I tell you, if two of you on earth agree about any matter that you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. 20For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.”

21Then Peter approached him and asked, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?”

22“I tell you, not as many as seven,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven.

23“For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24When he began to settle accounts, one who owed ten thousand talents was brought before him. 25Since he did not have the money to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.

26“At this, the servant fell facedown before him and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27Then the master of that servant had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.

28“That servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, ‘Pay what you owe!’

29“At this, his fellow servant fell down and began begging him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ 30But he wasn’t willing. Instead, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed. 31When the other servants saw what had taken place, they were deeply distressed and went and reported to their master everything that had happened. 32Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. 33Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ 34And because he was angry, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed. 35So also my heavenly Father will do to you unless every one of you forgives his brother or sister from your heart.”

**Meditating on the Scriptures**

**Message:** “How many times must I forgive?”

A couple years ago I was driving along and there was a large truck tailgating me. I increased my speed as much as I was willing to, but still they sat right behind me. There was a passing lane, but they didn’t go for it, I kept waiting for the truck to pull out and pass, but it wouldn’t. Then, suddenly, just as the passing lane ended, the truck pulled out ahead, and cut me off, with another car heading the opposite direction. I was forced to slam on the brakes to avoiding hitting the truck that had pulled ahead. and I honked the horn to express my anger. Unfortunately for me, the car is a little Prius with the least intimidating horn in the world, I’m pretty sure a bike bell would be just as effective.

My first instinct was to yell some words that are better left unsaid in church, and try to get back at the driver somehow, but my wife (who is much wiser) tried to calm me down. “BUT he deserves it!” I exclaimed. “He could have killed us!” “I know,” she said, “but that won’t help.”

When someone wrongs us, or even when we feel like they have, our first instinct is to get back at them. We think of that satisfying saying, “don’t get mad, get even.” Every fibre in our bodies cries out, “I *deserve* this. I *deserve* to get even or cut that person out of my life. We know that we’re owed a debt, and we want to collect.

 And yet, we are warned that as followers of Jesus we are called to get rid of this way of thinking. We can’t help but be changed by the way that Jesus loves us, and it isn’t always easy. Jesus calls us to stop thinking in terms of what we can get out of others, and focus more on how much we have been given. If we wonder how seriously Jesus takes unforgiveness, we only need to look to the parable we read earlier.

Our reading today includes two vital truths for us to take with us. One, is why we forgive, and the second, is how we go about forgiving. Jesus’ parable is a response to Peter’s question, and ours: “how many times must I forgive?” Peter, moved by Jesus’ words, is even willing to offer a generous suggestion: “how about seven times? Would that be enough?” Seven is an easy number to scoff at when we know what Jesus’ response will be, but if we’re honest, it’s quite challenging. Seven is quite a bit. It shows a willingness to forgive, but ultimately still wants to put a limit. After all, we think, if they continue to fail after that many times, can they really mean it when they apologise?

“How about seventy times seven!” Jesus responds. And I doubt that he is suggesting we keep at tally and when our brother or sister finally gets to the four hundred and ninetieth wrongdoing we can cut them off. It’s not about a number, it is about a change of heart. It isn’t even about the other person, and what they have done, it is about God, and what he has done.

To make this crystal clear, Jesus tells a hard-hitting parable. As we have noticed before, the parable is about the Kingdom of Heaven, and in this case, Jesus compares the Kingdom to a king with a servant that owes him a tremendous amount of money. Remember that a “talent” was worth about half a lifetime of wages. It was a lot of money. And in this parable, we see a servant who has somehow accumulated a debt of *ten thousand talents*! When he’s brought to his master, the consequences of his reckless spending have caught up with him. Consuming not only him, but his whole family as well. And so, he begs to be forgiven, and says that he will work it all off, but that’s clearly impossible. It would take five thousand lifetimes for this man to pay off the debt he owes, even if there was no interest on it! It’s a debt beyond comprehension, and there is no way the servant could hope to pay it.

But the king has compassion on his servant. He sees that the debt is beyond his ability to pay, and he has mercy on him. His heart goes out to the servant, and he doesn’t just give him more time, he forgives this impossibly large debt entirely.

This generosity of the king points out two very important things: first, that we have a debt that we have racked up over a lifetime of wrongs against both God, and our brothers and sisters. It’s not something that we just need a bit of help, or a bit more time with, it’s a crushing, choking, killing kind of debt. It’s a debt that all of our good intentions and work could never hope to pay down. But the second, even more important truth that Jesus shares with us is that we have a King who forgives us. Not because we promise to work it off, or so that he can get something out of us, but because he sees us in our need, and in our hopelessness, and he pays the debt himself. Not because of our goodness, but because of his goodness.

And when we feel the weight and burden that have been lifted not only from that servant, but from you and from me as well, it makes the next twist in the story feel hard to believe. That very same servant who has just been forgiven for five thousand lifetimes of debt, goes out of his way to find another servant who owes him some money. And he grabs him by the neck, and says, “pay me what you owe!” Although it’s not much compared to his own debt, this other servant does owe him about four months wages.

Yet when this fellow servant goes to his knees and begs to have more time, with exactly the same words used by the first servant, the answer is no. Instead, it’s off to jail with the man until he can pay back every penny. Now, the first servant hasn’t done anything legally wrong. He has a debt that’s owed to him, and he is following his legal rights to be paid back. He isn’t going to let it go. We also often find it difficult to forgive because we also have legitimate complaints against others. Things that are not small, and we want to get what we deserve.

But when the other servants see the response of this man, they go to the king and are deeply distressed. This first servant clearly hasn’t truly understood what the king has done for him. And it’s with the same distress and anguish that we should also respond when we see unforgiveness. Because it is important to the king, and it’s important to our God. When the king hears what has happened, he calls the servant back in. The king wastes no time getting to the point: “Wicked servant! Shouldn’t you have had mercy on him, just as I had mercy on you?” In other words, if you’ve experienced the joy and power of mercy on God’s scale, how can we not show that same mercy to others?

The servant makes the same mistake that we are prone to. He thinks that forgiving isn’t required if we have a good reason. But forgiving someone is not the same thing as saying that what they did is okay. It is not the same thing as saying it doesn’t matter, and they can continue to do it. If it was not wrong, it would not need to be forgiven. The very act of forgiveness shows just how wrong it was. Forgiving means recognising that what has been done to us is very wrong, but that we are not going to let it continue to control us, or others.

Corrie Ten Boom was a woman whose family helped during the Second World Ward to hide Jews in their home. When her family was caught, they were sent to a concentration camp where she was stripped of her dignity, and saw her father and her sister (Betsie) die, and suffered more at the hands of other people than we could possibly imagine. This is a story that she shared:

“It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower door in the processing center at Ravensbruck.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. “Miss Ten Boom, I am glad to see you. I have found the Lord Jesus, and I am so grateful for your message, Fraulein.” He said. ‘To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!’ I have asked God for the opportunity to ask one of my victims for forgiveness.”

*There suddenly stands a man before me, co-responsible for the slow horrible death of my dear Betsie and he dares to ask me for forgiveness*, his hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who preached so often to the people of the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

*All those beautiful sermons about forgiveness but now I have to forgive myself. And I can’t.”*

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. *I suddenly feel a warm wave through my body. From my shoulder, through my arm, to our hands. I have to cry, “I forgive you brother, with all my heart.” There we stood. The camp guard and the prisoner. For a long time we held hands. And never before have I experienced the love of God so deeply.”*

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on his. When he tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”

 The power of forgiveness has the ability to not only change the lives of others, but to change our lives as well. It is not simply a nice thing that Christians do, it is a command of Jesus with a serious warning: if we refuse to forgive then God will withhold his forgiveness. Jesus does not forgive us because we have earned it by forgiving others, but he does expect that his forgiveness will change us and free us from the need to hold onto unforgiveness.

Jesus knows that this will be hard. When we have a difficulty with a brother or sister, how are we supposed to answer? We are told in today’s reading from Matthew that if someone sins against us, we are to go to them, and only them. We are not to go back to our family or friends, or the people we work with and complain about the way we have been mistreated.

This avoids so many conflicts. We are so caught up in our own worlds that we often don’t notice that we have hurt others. If only someone would come and tell us that we have wronged them, we would be more than willing to apologise and repair the relationship, but we simply didn’t know.

It takes humility on both sides for this to work. Going to someone to gently and fairly tell them how you have been hurt is a difficult thing to do. It is a vulnerable place to be. On the flip side, admitting that we are wrong is also a humbling experience. Our default position is to think that we are right, and that others are wrong.

Often, this solves our problems. I have often been surprised by how willing others are to admit their shortcomings, or to forgive me for mine. Even better, is when we can recognise our faults and go to the other person to ask forgiveness before they address it.

Sometimes even though we bring our hurt or problems to someone, they won’t respond. This is where the church or trusted friends and family come in. We are told at this point not to cut off and slander the person, but to find another person or two that can help to mediate. Usually this means not just bringing along our best friends or the people who will always back us up, but someone who is impartial and mutually respected. This way the person doesn’t just feel more attacked but has a chance to think about it again.

It’s also a good exercise for us. In asking someone we trust; we can make sure that we are justified in going to the person and not making a mountain out of a molehill. We may recognise that we need to change our approach and be more understanding. Making sure that our second opinion is someone that we trust and is willing to be honest with us is so important. The best friends are not the ones who always agree with us- but the ones that stay with us when they disagree and challenge us when we need it.

The final part of Jesus’ teaching is something that most churches are hesitant to do. That is, to bring issues to the church to deal with them. There will be times when even bringing an extra person or two will not resolve a situation. Sometimes, this means that we as a church are to come together. Not taking sides and pointing fingers but evaluating honestly and doing our best to speak truthfully and lovingly. If we were willing to do this, there would be less division and disunity in many churches. Too often everyone knows what has happened, but won’t address the issue as it steadily grows worse.

Sometimes, however, even this won’t work. There will be times when we or other people will not be willing to listen, no matter what anyone says. At this point, a person cannot continue to be a part of a church. The decision to remove someone must be made with humility and sorrow, and a heart that is fully open to welcoming them back with open arms as soon as they are willing to rejoin.

It is important to recognise that Jesus does not call for the innocent to stand by and be hurt in the name of forgiveness. It is cowardice on our part when we do not stand up for the abused and neglected, and that is why we as a church are meant to be a safe place to mediate and give support, not somewhere that excuses abuse.

It’s why the King responds so angrily to the first servant. He will not change. He is not truly interested in the power of forgiveness, only his own advantage. But God calls us to be different. To be people who recognise his unimaginable mercy to us, and cannot help but share that same mercy with others.

Thanks be to God.

Let’s pray.