

Sermon: forgive each other

Matthew 18:21-35

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The last few weeks we thought about our need to repent and about God's eagerness to forgive our sins. Today it is important to see what happens if we, in spite of God's great example of forgiveness, do not act likewise.

And who can deny it - we all, every now and then, just cannot forgive. We harbor resentment in our heart. But this is dangerous. We hurt ourselves badly with an unforgiving attitude.

It can even have physical results and it certainly carries spiritual consequences. It strangles our relationship with God.

1 The forgiving king

Peter asked Jesus , 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother who does something bad against me? Seven times?

Peter must have thought that he was generous. The Jewish rabbi's in those days were not so generous.

Rabbi Jose ben Jehuda, for instance, said, 'If a man commits an offense once, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a second time they forgive him; if he commits an offense a third time they forgive him; the fourth time they do not forgive.'

Our Lord Jesus tells Peter that he is totally wrong. The issue is not numerical. Forgiveness is not in the first place an action, something you can count. It should be 70 times 7 times. Limitless. Beyond measure. It must be continuous and forever.

By the way, the Greek words for 70 times 7, could also mean 77. And the words used here, are the exact words that are also used in Genesis 4:24, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that most Jews in the times of Jesus were using.

In Genesis Lamech is bragging that he killed someone for wounding him. He was a murderer. And he then said that his revenge would always be 77, or 70 times 7, times.

Jesus refers straight back to this ancient story, to say: be as generous in your forgiveness as Lamech was vengeful in his anger. Do not become a murderer, be someone who always forgives. What a contrast! Be people of forgiveness and mercy, not of anger and revenge.

In the parable of Jesus, the king summoned a servant who owed him 10.000 talents. The king showed him the record of debt that stood against him, with its legal demands. '10.000 talents, sir, That is what you owe me according to the records.'

One talent was the salary for a laborer for 20 years of labor. 10.000 talents would be 200.000 years of labor. This figure is obviously a wild exaggeration for emphasis.

The parable accentuates the king's mercy in forgiving an awful debt that was impossible for the man to ever repay.

The fact that the man asks for some more time to repay seems to throw some doubt on his seriousness, but when he begins to cry and beg when he and his family are to be sold in slavery, the king has pity on him. His debts are forgiven and he is released.

But when the same man then comes across one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denarii, he had him put in prison in order to get his money back. For 100 lousy denarii, about three months of work. A few thousand dollars.

Repayment would be very possible, but the man had no patience, no mercy, and his behavior shows he was filled with resentment. He grasped him by the throat.

The King hears about it, and he summons the man to come to his palace.

'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' In anger the king then delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.

Well, given the size of his debt, he would never be released. His punishment was forever.

Then comes the punchline, the response to Peter's question how often we must forgive a brother who sinned against us: 'So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.'

And this hurts. God's expectation of his children is not to forgive a bit here and there, but all the time. And from the heart. And if we don't, then God will not forgive us.

2 What does it mean - God will not forgive us?

Friends, this promises to not be a sweet, nice, encouraging sermon. But let us first underline the good news: God is a forgiving God! Amazing really. We, pitiful sinners, deserved nothing, but out of love God himself came down from heaven, He lived among us, and He was even crucified by us and for us.

In Colossians 2:14, Paul writes: 'God [has] forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.'

But this, God's forgiveness, is related to how we forgive other people. It is conditional and this comes from the mouth of our Lord Jesus himself.

'Blessed are the merciful', said Jesus in the sermon on the mount, 'for they shall obtain mercy'. (Matthew 5:7). And in the same sermon on the mount he taught people to pray, '...and forgive us our trespasses, as we also have forgiven those who trespass against us'.

After Jesus taught his disciples this prayer, he explained, 'For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

Oh how nice it is to immediately run to our most popular bible verses that show that our salvation is by faith alone. That feels so much more pleasant. But I think we can't deny that Jesus, in the parable we read and in the Lord's prayer, makes the forgiveness we desire from God, contingent on how we forgive other people.

To release us from this tough demand of Jesus, I went straight to the most Calvinistic, salvation by faith alone bible commentary that I have.

William Hendriksen, a very Reformed scholar, writes this in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew:

Forgiveness is based on God's unmerited favor, that is, on divine grace (Eph 1:7), compassion (Mat 18:27) and mercy (Luke 8:13). Nevertheless, our own forgiving disposition is very important. In fact, without it we ourselves cannot be forgiven. For us it is the indispensable condition of receiving the forgiveness of sins.

[...] We are not saved on the basis of our faith, as if faith had earning power. We are saved by grace. (Eph 2:8) Yet faith must be present if we are to be saved. [...] Faith, and one of its manifestations, namely the disposition to forgive are conditions that must be met and exercised if salvation and its component, pardon, are to be received. We must believe. We must forgive.

And again William Hendriksen:

Only then can men be certain that their debts are cancelled if they themselves also cancel the debts of those who are indebted to them; only then can they experience the assurance of forgiveness if they are eager to forgive the sins that have been committed against them. [...]

The idea that God is willing to forgive us whatever we do, we hear it often and it sounds encouraging. But Jesus seems to disagree and we better take him seriously.

God's forgiveness is indeed inexhaustible but it can be received only by those who repent. And resentment has to be repented of. It utterly blocks us from receiving and enjoying the forgiveness we long for. [...] You must forgive or you will never be forgiven by God. You will exclude yourself from his presence now and from his heaven later if you do not repent of this attitude. How can God forgive you if you will not forgive?

These are, by the way, words of the Rev Michael Green, from his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew.

3 what must we do

So we have homework to do...

We are not perfect yet; there are bound to be failures and breakdowns between Christian brothers and sisters. But forgiveness is the way to handle them. The christian life is born in forgiveness and it must characterize us all the way through our relationships. This attitude of letting go of anger and learning to forgive is a job of a lifetime, but we must be in the process, is what Jesus tells us.

But how! Let me give you a few suggestions.

To begin with,

ONE: do not think too big about yourself

I think it helps if we realize that our problem to forgive is often based in a rather grandiose view of ourselves. As if we have any honor to defend. Our honor was gone on the day we admitted that our sins brought Jesus to the cross.

Why do we need to be the first in the line and fight for our rights? We often think we should be treated better and this often creates problems: Elbows begin to be used when we rival one another for the front position in a queue but all jealousy and competition ceases when we happily stand at the back of the queue.

TWO: Your anger really hurts yourself

You may be thinking, 'There is no way I am going to forgive the person who did that to me.' I understand that you may not be able to imagine how good it might feel, but can you take the leap of faith that it might feel great to let go of anger?

And this anger hurts you more than the person you are angry at.

Resentment is like you drinking poison – and expecting the other person to die. The only one who is made sick is you.

Remember: Your mind is like a magnifying glass. Whatever you focus on will expand. Do you want to focus on resentment, or on forgiveness? Which one, do you believe, will ultimately make you feel and live better?

THREE: Forgiveness is a choice to make

If we wait for the feeling to fill our hearts, inspiring us to forgive, we could spend our lives waiting. It is a decision – a conscious decision.

We don't have control over events that occurred in the past, but we have some say over what role those events play today. Maybe you do not immediately feel better after you decide to forgive, but as with many things in life, action often precedes the feeling.

As we determine not to hold grievances, gradually the heart catches up with the head and forgiveness repeatedly reiterated becomes part of us and enters deep into our wounded feelings. we are at last able to so, it is finished.

FOUR: Ask God for help

As God is the source of all love and forgiveness, ask Him for the motivation and the strength to follow his example. Ask him to take the poison of anger and feelings of revenge out of your mind and heart.

FINALLY: Remind yourself often of the grace of God for you

The Gospel of Matthew is opposed to cheap grace. it will not do to claim to be forgiven but then to prove by your actions that your own lives have not been changed. The pardon of God is dynamic; life-changing. We cannot go through heaven's narrow gate if our lives are bulging with resentments and our lives are unchanged.

God's forgiveness is the model for relationships between human beings. His love stretches out with open arms at all times to the sinner, longing for us to repent and receive his forgiveness. He never allows hatred or bitterness to sully his heart. And we should not allow that either.

God love is abundantly wide and deep and high. But it does not come cheap. Jesus had to die for the forgiveness of our sins, and he expects us to walk in his footsteps and let go of anger, in order to love and forgive others.

And you should ask yourself today, this week, what areas of anger in your life you should deal with. To let go is liberating and makes you experience the nearness of the forgiving God.

Amen.