

September 30, 2018

Parables

A Judgement Parable

The Unforgiving Servant

Matthew 18:21-33

Opening words: There came a time in Jesus's earthly ministry when he was no longer welcomed in the synagogues. The Master was forced to teach in the open air and to change his teaching method. For the first time, he used fictional stories to teach divine truth. We call those stories "parables". Webster defines a *parable* as, a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. A parable is not an allegory or a fable. They are different. A parable stands on its own. Three of the four Gospels contain the parables. The Gospel of Luke contains twenty-four parables. The Gospel of Matthew contains twenty-three parables. The Gospel of Mark contains eight parables. The Gospel of John contains no parables.

James Montgomery Boice in his book, *The Parables of Jesus*, says all the parables of Jesus can be broken down into five categories. In this five-part sermon series, *Parables*, I am looking at one parable from each category. We began this sermon series three weeks ago. The first parable we looked at was a wisdom parable, The Rich Fool. Two weeks ago, we looked at a salvation parable, The Publican and the Pharisee. Last week, we looked at a Christian life parable, The Good Samaritan. Next week, we will finish with a kingdom parable. Today, we are going to look at a judgement parable, The Unforgiving Servant.

Our Gospel reading for today comes from the Gospel of Matthew. Do you remember the background? The early church agreed that the author of this Gospel was Matthew himself, the former tax collector. It was written in Palestine or Syria, about the year 50 AD. The original recipients of this Gospel were Greek-speaking Jews. Of the four Gospels, Matthew quotes the most Old Testament scripture. It was clearly written to a Jewish audience. It was penned for one reason, to prove to the world that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Our parable for today is only found in Matthew. Our reading for today is Matthew 18:21-33. Let me call this message, *The Unforgiving Servant*.

Matthew 18:21-35 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants."²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Corrie ten Boom (1892-1983) was a Dutch watchmaker and Christian, who along with her father and other family members, helped many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust during World War II. She, herself, suffered in a concentration camp. In her book, *The Hiding Place*, she recounts those dark days. After the war, she traveled extensively, speaking of God's grace during those horrible years. One night, in Munich after one of her speeches, a man came up to her. He looked familiar and it took a moment for her to recognize him. He never recognized her. He had been a guard at her concentration camp, Ravensbruck. He had been cruel to her and her sister. A mountain of emotional memories hit her. In her eyes, he was the devil incarnate. When the war ended, he had become a Christian, but that didn't change her feelings. It was hard for her to stand there, but then it got worse. He extended his hand to her and said, "I am grateful for your message. As you said yourself, 'He washed my sins away.'" Corrie ten Boon would be the first one to admit it. It is one thing to speak about forgiveness. It is something quite different to forgive.

Indian activist, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) once said, "*The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.*" I am aware Gandhi was not a Christian, but that doesn't make him wrong. True forgiveness is extremely hard. True forgiveness is an attribute of the strong. How strong are you? If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew. This would be the last time Jesus would be in Galilee. This entire chapter is about life in the Kingdom of God. One of the characteristics of kingdom life is forgiveness. Peter understood that point when he asked Jesus the question, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Jesus never has a chance to answer the question, because Peter

answers it himself: Up to seven times? Peter is obviously trying to impress Jesus, because Rabbinic teaching required a person to forgive up to three times. Peter had doubled that requirement and added one for good measure. He must have been waiting for Jesus's approval, but it never comes. Jesus says seven times is not enough; we are supposed to forgive up to seventy-seven times. Jesus is not asking us to keep track of our forgiving acts; Jesus is asking us to make forgiving a constant characteristic in our lives. To underscore that point, Jesus tells them this parable. I like this parable because Jesus exaggerates, and I have been known to do the same 😊.

The story is really a one-act play with three scenes. In the first scene, a king wanted to settle his accounts with his servants. One of the servants is brought before the king. It is not a good day for him because he owes the king 10,000 talents. That is a significant sum. At that time, you could buy a servant for one talent. The entire tax base to this area was only 800 talents. This man owes the king 10,000 talents. To make it easy on us, let's just say the man owed the king ten million dollars. Unable to pay the king back, the king considers selling the man's wife and children. The servant begs the king not to sell his family and begs the king for more time. The king has mercy on the servant and cancels his entire debt. Suddenly, it was a good day for the servant. In the second scene, the shoe is on the other foot. The debt-free servant exits and goes after another servant who owes him money. The amount is very small, only a hundred denarii. If he owed the king ten million dollars, then this man owed him only \$20. The second servant begs for more time, but no extension is given. He is beaten and thrown into prison. In the third scene, our story goes full circle. The king is told what happened and he summons the first servant. Because he did not show mercy, then he will not be shown mercy. He is turned over to the jailors to be tortured, until his debt is repaid. Jesus wanted to make sure they didn't miss the point. He clears up any confusion in verse thirty-five, *"This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."* If you are not surprised you are to forgive, say, **"Amen!"** This is the problem: We know we are supposed to forgive. The problem is, we are not good at forgiving, especially within the life of the church. Historically, we are hard on ourselves. How many examples do you need?

The first funeral I did was for a man by the name of Randolph Scott. He lived in Lancaster, Kentucky. I was in his home several months before his sudden death. I sat in the living room with his wife, but he never came out to see me. He was watching a Cincinnati Reds baseball game. She apologized for her husband's rudeness and explained he was mad at the whole church. To be more exact, he was mad at a single church member. He said, the man cheated him out of \$50 in some business transaction. He said, if that man represented the kind of people at the church, then he didn't want to have anything to do with the church. He said, he would never forgive the man or the church. Randolph was a man of his word. He never did forgive the man or the church. However, the church prepared a bereavement lunch after his funeral. Randolph Scott knew he was supposed to forgive. The problem was, he refused to forgive. It doesn't just happen in Kentucky. It happens in Ohio too.

When I first came to this church, I went to the hospital to visit a member. She was a woman in her late eighties, who took great pride in her years of church service. As I sat on a chair next to her bed, she told me how she had saved the church several times. She told me about the massive fortune she had raised in the kitchen. People told me, she was good cook, but she had no people skills. She offended many kitchen helpers during her reign. One day, over twenty years prior to my hospital visit, a group in the church wrote her a letter to tell her she was being relieved of duty. She was no longer welcome in the kitchen. Obviously, her feelings were hurt, and she swore she would never forgive that group. She was a woman of her word. She never did forgive that group. On the day I visited her, she quoted that twenty-year-old letter to me word for word, and she recited the names of all the people who had signed that letter. And in colorful, ugly language she told me, they could all go to hell. She had spent decades in the church. She knew she was supposed to forgive. The problem is, she refused to forgive. Within the life of the church, we know we are supposed to forgive, but we refuse to forgive. Is there anyone in this church you refuse to forgive? If that question haunts you, say, "**Amen!**" This question haunts me:

Why do people refuse to forgive? There is a counselor by the name of Josh Emery who lives in Fort Collins, Colorado. He says his appointment calendar is filled with people who refuse to forgive. Every story is different, yet every story is the same. He says people don't forgive for three basic reasons. This is his list:

- 1. People don't forgive because they don't want to look like they condone the bad behavior.**
- 2. People don't forgive because the person doesn't deserve it.**
- 3. We don't forgive because the person can't be trusted.**

I don't have a problem with that list. I agree with each point. I am no different from you. I struggle with forgiveness too. I have good reasons not to forgive. The problem is, through the eyes of God, there is no good reason for not forgiving. God knows what we would like to ignore. When we refuse to forgive, we damage the relationship. The relationship between you and the unforgiven person stops evolving. That is true. For Randolph Scott, the relationship stopped evolving on the day he believed he was cheated out of \$50. For the woman in the hospital bed, the relationship stopped evolving on the day she got the letter. What relationships in your life have stopped evolving? That is not a good thing. God expects us to forgive. God expects our relationships to evolve. God expects our relationships to be strong. Within the life of the church, we know we are supposed to forgive, but we refuse to forgive. That is why stories of true forgiveness baffle us. Do you remember this story?

In the fall of 2006, the unthinkable happened when a one-room school full of Amish children was taken hostage by Charles Carl Roberts IV. After a few terrifying hours, Roberts bound, then shot 10 girls, killing 5 of them before turning the gun on himself. Within hours, the Amish families immediately began extending their forgiveness to the

gunman's family. They visited his wife and parents to offer them comfort—they even attended the killer's funeral. A grandfather of one of the murdered girls cautioned the family not to hate the killer and said, "we must not think evil of this man." While another father said, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul. And now he's standing before a just God. Christ calls us to forgive him." If you were in that community and lost a loved one, could you forgive Charles Carl Roberts IV? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" In the kingdom we forgive, in the world we don't. Let's go back to where we began.

Corrie ten Boom was in Munich, Germany. She had traveled there to speak about God's amazing grace. After her talk, a group of people came up to her to express their appreciation for her words. One of her admirers was a man who looked familiar. She remembered him from the darkest days of her life. He had been a guard at her concentration camp. He had been cruel to her and her sister, yet in the time that had passed, he had become a Christian. He stuck out his hand to shake her hand, but Corrie ten Boon had a hard time responding. She didn't want to shake his hand because she didn't want to forgive him, so she prayed to God for help. God did help her, and she did shake his hand. But, what is more important, God helped her forgive him. Can I ask you a question?

If there anyone here today who needs God's help to forgive? I am assuming there is, because each one of us has been hurt in some way. You know the truth. Life is hard and sometimes life can be cruel. Who do you need to forgive? Within the Christian faith, forgiveness is not optional, it is a requirement. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ, and you are supposed to be practicing today what you will be doing for eternity. How can we expect to be forgiven, if we can't forgive? Do you remember the words of Mahatma Gandhi? He once said, "*The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.*" How strong are you? And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"