

July 1, 2018

## Lesson 5: Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Scripture: Matthew 18: 21-35

### **Context:**

The next unit of this lesson focuses on the importance Jesus's ministry and his focus on justice and mercy. One of the main focal points of Jesus's teaching was justice in daily life. Today's focus is on the importance of forgiveness and how we are to practice forgiveness. We have all been forgiven and thus we should forgive others.

The parable known as the master and the wicked servant is a prime example of forgiveness. As Jesus is questioned by his disciple Peter about how many times one should forgive others, Jesus takes it as a moment to explain both the human practice of forgiveness and the nature of God. His response is to forgive as many as seventy-seven times. The allusion to seventy-seven times probably comes from an allusion to Genesis 4:24 in which Lamech proudly boasts to his wives that he will avenge himself seventy-sevenfold on anyone who dares to attack him.<sup>1</sup> Thus, followers of Jesus are to be Lamech's foil forgiving people instead of taking the route of revenge.

Jesus then moves on to take the issue from a human standpoint to that of a divine nature. He talks about how the kingdom of heaven is like a king who settles accounts with his servants. In the illustration, the king orders that a servant who cannot pay his debts be sold into slavery to adjust for the payment. The servant pleads for his life and is spared mercifully and the loan is forgiven.

Yet there is a twist as the servant goes out even after the loan is forgiven and demands that others pay him back. Unlike his king though, the servant does not practice forgiveness of unpaid debts and throws the servant into prison. The other servants of the king see what happens and approach the king about the injustice they have seen.

The servant is brought forward and the king confronts him, handing him over to a prison guard so that he pays his whole debt. He does not throw him into slavery and he does not put his family into slavery. Instead, he is forced to pay back the loan.

Jesus closes the parable and explanation by stating that the people are to forgive their brother and sister just as God forgives humanity. Those are kingdom rules and not the rules of the world. It does not mean that God is like the king in all ways and will go around punishing those who do not forgive, even though they have chosen that path. The intent of the parable warns us that we must pray for strength to resist the temptation to get even with those who hurt us and for the grace to reflect the generosity of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>2</sup> The point of the parable is for us to remember that we should extend forgiveness to others as we have been humbled and graced with God's forgiving love.

### **Application:**

A friend once told me the quote by Patty Griffin : "It's hard to give, it hard to get,

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1993), 216.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

everybody needs a little forgiveness.” What an appropriate quote for understanding forgiveness. There’s no doubt about the fact that forgiveness is hard and can be considered work. I think if it were easy, Jesus would not have had a question about it or a parable to go along with it.

Yet that is what Jesus has called us to do because God has forgiven us over and over again. I am thankful that God is gracious enough to not be like the king who discovers the servant who has not forgiven his debtors and thus begins a reinstatement of loans. We would all be in trouble if that was the case with how we practice forgiveness!

Forgiveness is to be part of our walk with Christ and how we respond to others in daily life. My experience has often been that forgiveness occurs either when we have not slowed down to listen to each other or we take it upon ourselves to be the judges in situations where we do not know all the details. Even social media and texting one another can be a slippery slope where we do not think about how we are hurting others. Pretty soon, irrevocable damage can be done and we hurt each other sometimes intentionally and other times unintentionally.

When reflecting about a time where I had to forgive someone and they had to forgive me, I was reminded by a friend to “go to the balcony,” and see the situation and all the different perspectives going on. It was good for me to remember that in holding the grudge I would mess up a potential friendship for a lapse of judgment on both of our parts. Sometimes people are stressed and when they do, they regress and can become haughty. Sometimes people are manipulated and misled by others who use them and they forget who their friend is in the midst of that situation. There are always different motivating factors for why people do what they do, right or wrong.

I am grateful to say that in my situation, the friendship was restored. But I know that there will come other times where I need to give forgiveness and where I need to receive forgiveness. My hope is that when those times come, I can remember this passage and apply it to my life. It does not mean I forget the transgression or simply forgive and not put boundaries in place. It means though that I move to a place of peace by doing what I know is right and letting God sort out the rest. Just as God has forgiven me for all that I do, I am to give and receive forgiveness with others as part of my journey.

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh  
Associate Pastor  
First United Methodist Church  
1380 W. Main St.  
Dothan, AL 36301  
Office (334) 793-3555 ext. 240  
E-mail: [hunter@fumcdothan.org](mailto:hunter@fumcdothan.org)

