



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

About Forgiveness

Sermon by Pastor John Strommen

on Matthew 18:15-35

Sunday, March 10, 2019

Often times, the preferred God of our culture is depicted as a “no-fault” God, giving unconditional pardons to everyone for all that we do. No questions asked. This is natural for a culture like ours that abhors God making any kind of judgment about human behaviors and coming down on us, guiltting us. For many generations, it may be true, people have often experienced a church – and a God – who was too punitive, while they longed for a more good-natured God who was not hung up on holding our sins over our heads.

But as my friend Pat Keifert says, “what would you rather have: a no-fault God or a forgiving God?” They are not the same thing and that is what our text takes up today.

But here is the key question: Does a no-fault God take sin and the effects of sin seriously? A no-fault God basically says, “Hey, everyone gets a free pass. Let’s move on, shall we? We’re good.” Furthermore, a no-fault God is less concerned with whether people change, because the gravity of sin is not really addressed, just glossed over. So, instead of “Oh my gosh, what a gift,” we’re left with, “Cool. I get forgiven no matter what I do.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this “cheap grace.” In a no-fault scheme, sin isn’t such a big problem, really. God just looks the other way, and so do you!

A forgiving God says, “let’s not kid ourselves, sin *is a problem*, it has a cost. Therefore, grace and is not cheap. There is a price to be paid for sin and that price is fractured relationships where people get hurt – or worse. What if the goal is not simply to give everyone a free pass but work towards a world where relationships get restored and the power of sin is diminished? What if the goal of forgiveness is to change people’s lives and relationships?” The Greek word for forgiveness in our text today is “to let go,” but *letting go* should never be “letting the same things continue to keep going on.” Forgiveness should not be an accomplice for destructive behavior continuing. So, accountability is essential. How can there be a release from the cost of sin that allows for a new future and not the perpetuation of bad behavior?

God in Jesus Christ says to us, “because the cost of your sins will crush you, I will pay the price of your sins, bear its weight, absorb its destructiveness into myself and not retaliate in kind. That is to say, I will forgive you, so that you will have your life back and be free to change; so that you can love your neighbor and so that you will *forgive* your neighbor, as I have forgiven you.” In other words, God is interested in results!

On to the examples Matthew gives us today! If someone in our church sins against you, what do you do? Just let it go? “Well, God forgives him and so should I. Time to move on.” Matthew says, “Not so fast.” You go to your brother or sister with your grievance. And if he does not listen to you, you then bring one or two others with you. If he still refuses, you bring it before the church. How many think this sounds kind of harsh?

Now, at its most basic level, this sort of approach is just healthy conflict resolution for any work or social environment, how to avoid triangulation and passive aggressiveness! Because what do we usually do when someone angers us or wrongs us? We tell others about it, we hang onto it. We often don’t go to that person. None of this healthy, I don’t have to tell you!

Matthews’ instructions, far from needlessly guiltning someone, recognize the importance of accountability, telling the truth in love, and creating space for repentance as a prelude to forgiveness. One can then be hopeful that the behavior changes next time.

In fact, these verses are actually filled with hope - hope that when there are fractures in human relationships, we can find reconciliation with each other. Many times, in this world, we will say to one another, “So and so is such a jerk, but he’ll never change. People never change. There’s no point in confronting him or sharing how I feel.” That is what you call cynical, accepting too readily that people never change. It’s all too easy to neglect our belief that Jesus is the God of *reconciliation*. That’s why God came to this world, to reconcile people to Godself and to one another. So, taking a beef we have with someone directly to them *is hopeful* and it allows for forgiveness to actually work as God intended it.

So, the forgiver doesn’t just look the other way. The forgiver chooses to bear part of the weight of the other’s sin, and let it die right there. And if the one who is forgiven does the same with others, you have a movement of forgiveness, of love, of new life. And in this movement - we learn from verses 21-22 – the one who forgives does not ask, “how many times do I forgive?” or keep a ledger. As Jesus tells Peter, be prepared to forgive your brother or sister seven times seventy! In other words, without limit. That is how God approaches things with us. There is no limit

to his forgiveness - not only to save us, but *so that we will forgive others* and learn a new way to live.

This brings us to the parable of the king and his slave. In the parable, the slave referenced is probably more of a high-ranking servant, an official who is subject to the king. Well, it seems that this servant is in debt to the king to the tune of 10,000 talents. So, how much is this? Well, in this culture, one talent is worth 15 years of wages for skilled labor. So, do the math: 10,000 talents is equal to 150,000 years of pay. This is an absurd amount, of course, and the point is: the slave will never be able to pay this back, so the king informs the man that he, his family and all his possessions will be sold. The man begs the king to have mercy on him. The king is moved by his repentance and does have mercy, and he forgives him his extraordinary debt.

In the next scene, the same servant who was forgiven, is faced with a fellow servant who is in debt to him to the tune of 100 denarii - a very, very small fraction of 10,000 talents. The servant who had been forgiven his debt then seizes this man by the throat and tells him to pay up! The man pleads with him for more time to pay his debts. But the servant – the forgiven one – is unmoved and tells the man he will be put in prison until he can pay back his debt of 100 denarii. How do you pay it back when you're in prison, by the way?

Well, eventually, the king finds out how his servant treated a fellow servant who owed him money. And the king was furious! He calls for the servant and asks him why he didn't have mercy on that man, just as he – the king – had had mercy on him. And then the king reverses his decision to forgive the man his debts, declaring instead that he will torture the man until he is able to repay the debt - a debt that *cannot* be repaid.

And then Matthew tells the reader that the king is like God. Neither will God continue to forgive you if fail to forgive your brother or sister as God has forgiven you. Whoaaa!

So, there you have a story that turns really sour. And it makes you wonder, might God withdraw the forgiveness of my sins, too?!?

Well, let's step back and take a look at this text. These verses have drawn attention on the one hand, to the magnitude of God's gift: forgive seven times seventy. Forgive 10,000 talents – that which no person can pay. These details establish the compassion and lavish nature of God's grace.

But these verses have also called attention to *the relationship between God forgiving us and we forgiving our fellow human being*. Yes, God's forgiveness is unconditional *always*. But...these verses in Matthew remind us to never take it for

granted, because the forgiveness you receive is supposed to be the way you live your life with others! And if forgiveness is not both received and given by us, then, in a very real sense, forgiveness is null and void. We have treated it as something it is not, and the forgiveness we were counting on - forgiveness as warrant to do whatever we want without consequence – well, that forgiveness is not forgiveness at all, but is counterfeit.

You may remember that we also read this in the Lord's Prayer: *forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

And so, we are right back where we started. Forgiveness is never just a free pass, but is intended to make a difference, in your life and in your neighbor's. If received, it must be given. Amen.