

“Forgive, if You Would Be Forgiven”
(Matthew 18:21-35)

In Matthew 18, Jesus has been telling us how He wants us to treat each other as His children, because of His love and care for us. First He said that we must be careful not to do anything that would lead our brother or sister into sin. It would be better for us to have a heavy stone hung around our neck and be drowned in the depths of the ocean than to cause even one of our brethren to fall into sin. He also said we should be careful not to stumble ourselves. Whatever sins we might be guilty of practicing, even though they may be as dear to us as our own arms, legs, hands or eyes, they must be cut off, or we will not enter into heaven at all, but be cast into hell. Jesus further said that if any one of our brothers or sisters stray, we should do all we can to bring them to repentance. His children are so precious to Him, that He doesn't want even one of them to perish. Now if Christ loves them so much, how much should we also love them and do what we can to bring them back into the fold when they have gone astray? But how are we to do this? Jesus told us last week. First we must go to them. We are not to allow them to continue in sin. If they do, they will eventually perish. But we must go to them privately. If the sin they are involved in is private, it must stay private to protect their name. If they don't listen to us, then we are to go with one or two more. Maybe they will listen to two or three. This will also provide the necessary number of witnesses to establish the truth. But if they don't listen to them, then we are to bring it to the elders and to the members of the church. They are to go to them and try to bring them to repentance. But if they don't listen even to the church, they are to be put out of the fellowship and treated as unbelievers, until they repent. They are to be handed over to the devil by the government of the church for the destruction of their flesh, so that their souls might be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 5).

Now this is what should happen if a member of the church doesn't repent. But what if he does? What if when you confront him, he says, “I was wrong. I sinned against you. Please forgive me?” What should you do then? Jesus tells us that we must be willing to forgive him.

This morning, I want us to see two things: First, how often Jesus says we are to forgive, and second, what He says His Father will do to us if we refuse to forgive. First, let's consider how often we are to forgive.

After Jesus talked about the steps in the discipline process, Peter asked Him this question, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” “Jesus, you've told us what to do if he doesn't repent, and I know that if he repents I should forgive him, but how many times should I forgive him? Is there a limit? Is seven times enough?” Some think that Peter chose seven because he was trying to show Jesus how merciful he could be. Others think that Peter chose that number because it is the number of completeness. But was it complete? Was it enough? No. “Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’” I don't believe that Jesus was merely raising the number a bit higher -- from seven to four hundred and ninety, as though there is a ceiling somewhere, a point where enough is enough, and you don't need to forgive anymore. Rather, Jesus was saying that if someone sins against you, but then comes to you humbly and sincerely seeking your forgiveness, that there should be no limit to your forgiveness. You should always forgive. Remember what Jesus said in our Scripture reading this morning, “Be on your guard! If your

brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him" (Luke 17:3-4). It is so important that we don't harbor bitterness in our hearts. Bitterness breeds division. But love brings unity. It brings unity because it is willing to forgive. The Lord wants us to be unified, perfectly joined together in His love, the love He gives us by His Spirit. If someone offends us, if we are able to cover over that sin in love, we should do it. But if we can't, we should go to them and try to be reconciled to them. If we have offended someone else, then we must go to them and seek their forgiveness. But under no circumstances are we to allow ourselves to continue to harbor grudges against one another. If we do, we are in sin. If you are offended at someone, you must either forgive them in your heart, if you can, or go to them if you can't. If you have offended someone, you need to go to them and ask for their forgiveness. Maybe they've already forgiven you in their heart. If they have, that's great. But if they haven't, then perhaps they will, if you go to them. If they refuse to after you've gone, then they're in sin, and need to be dealt with according to what Jesus told us in verses 15-20.

This brings us to the second point. What does the Lord say He will do to us if we refuse to forgive?

Jesus now illustrates this point by telling a parable, a parable that is to teach us the answer to this question. Obviously, it is also meant to give us an added incentive to forgive. It is to instill in our hearts the fear of the Lord. In this parable a king called for his slaves and wished to settle accounts with them. A slave was brought who owed him a great deal of money (10,000 talents, which was worth about \$10,000,000 in silver, but more in buying power). When he wasn't able to repay his debt, the king ordered the man to be sold, along with his wife and children, and repayment to be made. This was in keeping with the Old Testament law regarding debts. If a man couldn't pay what he owed, not only would he have to liquidate all his assets in an attempt to repay it, he would also have to liquidate himself and his family (Lev. 25:39; 2 Kings 4:1; Neh. 5:8). Of course for this slave, all of this put together would be nowhere near what he owed, but still it would be better for the king to recover something of what he lost, rather than nothing.

But notice what the slave did. When he realized that he couldn't pay the debt, he bowed down to the king, showing him honor. He didn't try to deny the debt, but admitted that the king had a just claim. And he didn't ask for the debt to be forgiven, but only that he might have more time so that he could pay it back little by little, and that, even though he didn't have a chance in the world of paying it off. When he did this, his lord was moved with compassion, so much so that he not only gave the slave what he asked for -- which was to be released from prison so that he would be able to work to pay back the debt --, but also what he didn't ask for -- he forgave the debt so that he wouldn't have to pay it back.

This is really a picture of the forgiveness that the Lord gives to us in Christ Jesus. We are like the slave who owed his master 10,000 talents. Our debt to God's justice is far beyond anything we would ever be able to pay. Even if we could turn from our sins right now, and could do everything right, that wouldn't do anything towards satisfying God's justice for all the sins we have committed against Him. We owe Him perfect obedience anyway, by virtue of the fact that He made us. Even if we could give that to Him now, it would do nothing toward removing the mountains of sin that we have committed in our words, thoughts and deeds, either before coming to Christ, or since. If left to ourselves, we would be without hope. But the Lord had mercy on

us. While we were yet sinners, He sent His Son into the world to die for us. While we were yet His enemies, He sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts to change us, to make us able and willing to come to Him that we might receive His life. Our ten thousand talents of debt is forgiven, if we have savingly trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ this morning. If you haven't trusted in Him, then do so now. Take hold of Christ as He offers Himself to you now in the Gospel. Don't think that you can save yourself. You can't. You are as helpless as that slave was to repay his debt, and infinitely more. You must take hold of Christ, if you are ever to find life.

But now this wasn't all that happened in this parable. Jesus goes on to tell us that this slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him one hundred denarii, which was the amount of money a common worker made for one hundred days of labor, and demanded it back. The ratio of what this one owed him to what he owed his master was about 1 to 1 million. He grabbed him and started choking him, saying, "Pay back what you owe" (v. 28). Like this first slave, the second fell at his feet and asked for mercy, for more time to repay the debt. But unlike his master -- who not only did what the slave requested, but much more --, he was unwilling, but had his fellow slave thrown into debtor's prison until he should repay the very last cent. He not only refused to forgive the debt, he also refused to give him anymore time.

This part of the parable is a picture of someone who has supposedly had his mountains of sin covered by the blood of Christ, but who is unwilling to forgive one of his brothers his much smaller offenses against him. Even though the Lord mercifully removed a debt that he could never repay, he still refuses to show any mercy, but demands that justice be paid down to the last cent. This is what we are guilty of when our brother or sister sins against us, or even merely offends us in some way, and then asks for forgiveness, but we refuse to forgive. This is what we are guilty of when we hold onto our grudges and continue to nurse them, even after the one who offended us has come to us and tried to be reconciled to us. Jesus says that this is sin, and it needs to stop. Even if the person who sinned against never comes to us, we must not hate them, we must not ostracize them. The Lord expects us to forgive them, even as He forgave us, especially if they are brethren. Jesus died for your sins. He died to reconcile you to God. He took sins that weren't His upon Himself, to bring peace between you and His Father. Now what should you be willing to do for your brother or sister? Will you continue to hold their sins against them? Or will you forgive them? If you're worried that justice won't be satisfied if you forgive them, don't forget that Jesus died for their sins too. If you keep in mind that He already suffered for them, perhaps it will be easier for you not to want to make them suffer anymore. The Lord forgave us all of our sins, if we have trusted in Him this morning, and now He expects us to forgive others.

But seeing this is true, what will He do to us if we don't? This is what the Lord tells us in the rest of the parable. When his fellow slaves saw what he had done, they were grieved, probably because he had this poor slave thrown into prison. And so they went to the king to tell him. When the king heard, he called for the slave and said to him, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?" (vv. 32-33). Yes, he should have, but he didn't. And so what did his lord do to him? He handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. He handed him over to do hard labor in the prison, to have his back beaten and scarred, until he satisfied his debt, even though he would never satisfy it. The point is clear: if

you don't forgive, you won't be forgiven. And in case we didn't get the point of the story, Jesus says it as plainly as His can, "So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (v. 35). If your brother sins against you, and you refuse to forgive him, Jesus says your heavenly Father will not forgive you. He said the same thing after the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (vv. 6:14-15). Does Jesus mean that this is the one work we must do in order to be saved? No. We are not saved by our works, but by Christ's works. Then what does He mean? He means that if we are true Christians, if we are truly born again, we will forgive, just like the Lord has forgiven us. If we are truly born again, we will not hold grudges. This doesn't mean we'll never struggle with holding grudges. We will always have to fight against our sins. But it does mean that we will keep fighting until we win. We will strive to love all men, not only our brothers and sisters in Christ, but even our enemies. We will not allow ourselves to hate anyone.

And so examine your heart. Are you holding any grudges against anyone here this morning? Then you need to forgive them, whether they are believers or unbelievers. You either need simply to cover over their sins, or if you can't, to go to them and talk to them about it. The Lord doesn't give you the option to continue to hate anyone in secret. If you will not forgive them, God will not forgive you. He will hand you over to the torturers until you pay back your debt, if you will not forgive their debt, and that will take you the rest of eternity. But if you do forgive them, then you will show that God truly has done a work of grace in your heart. You will show that you really have been forgiven by His grace. Your mountains of sin really are washed away by the blood of Christ. May the Lord apply His Word to our hearts by His Spirit, as we need to hear it this morning, and may He give us the strength to forgive, as He has forgiven us in Christ. Amen.