

Sermon Brief

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January 15, 2023

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Title: “The Unmerciful Servant”

Subject: God’s forgiveness is unlimited.

Complement: Our forgiveness is to be unlimited as well.

Textual Idea: Our forgiveness is to be unlimited because God’s is.

Sermon Idea: Forgiveness received is the basis for forgiveness given.

Interrogative: How much justice do I require?

Key word/Transitional sentence: The currency of the Kingdom is mercy. Will we opt out to seek self-determination of stay all in with God’s kingdom?

Key Points:

1. Forgiveness in the kingdom is unlimited.
2. We are to forgive as we’ve been forgiven.
3. The cost of unforgiveness is torment.

What do I want people to know? I want people to know that the mercy of God is endless for the repentant sinner and that the true believer will give it out just as generously.

What do I want people to do? I want people to (1) actively deal with obstacles to forgiveness, (2) forgive those who have harmed them and (3) re-preach the gospel to themselves continually.

What need am I addressing? I am addressing the need to forgive as we’ve been forgiven.

“The Unmerciful Servant”

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Matthew 18:21-35

We’re fourteen days into the **(LCD) 21 Days of Prayer** and I hope you are praying dangerous prayers. The one for Day 8 caught my attention this week, **(LCD) “See if there be any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.”** Any “grievous” way. Hmmm...makes me think of how we can grieve the Holy Spirit. In my prayer day this week, the Lord reminded me of the saying, “Don’t lose the dove.” Don’t grieve the Spirit, He’s very sensitive. Without a doubt, pride grieves the Holy Spirit. So we’ve been focusing on humility. Today, I’d like to continue on this theme but in a different direction. One of the most subtle forms of pride that grieves the Holy Spirit is bitterness and/or unforgiveness. Anyone struggle with that? To that end, I sensed the Spirit leading me to re-preach a sermon from 7 years ago. As I preach it, I challenge all of us to be praying this dangerous prayer, “See if there be any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.”

I want to begin by sharing a true story from a blog by a guy named Clint Archer: *“In the early hours of Friday, January 1, 1982 the seventeen-year-old Kevin Tunell made the biggest mistake of his life. At a New Year’s party near Washington DC, he got very drunk; his friends urged him not to drive but he insisted, “Nothing will ever happen to me.” On the road, he lost control of the wheel, and smashed into another car, instantly killing eighteen-year-old Susan Herzog. After pleading guilty to involuntary manslaughter and drunk driving, Tunell was sentenced to three years of probation and one year of community service. But Susan’s parents, understandably, didn’t feel that this was sufficient punishment. They sued him in civil court for emotional distress, for \$1,500,000.*

Then quite unexpectedly, after meeting Kevin, Susan’s parents offered to settle out of court. The terms of the ruling included an amount of \$936, with one bizarre condition: The settlement required that Kevin pay the \$936 by sending them a check for \$1 made out to the deceased Susan Herzog, every Friday for the next eighteen years—one for every year Susan had been alive.

The penalty seemed like he had been let off easy, but soon the burden of guilt proved too much for Kevin to bear. He tried to present the Herzogs with two boxes of pre-written checks, dated each week through 2001, a year longer than required. The couple refused to accept them.

After seven years of the weekly purgatorial ritual, Kevin began to miss a few payments. The Herzogs promptly dragged him back into court. Giving an account before Judge Jack Stevens, a teary Tunell admitted that the agonizing guilt he felt each time he filled in Susan’s name had become unbearable. “You get to a point where you kind of snap—and you say, it hurts too much... I used to, like, lie in bed, and if I heard ... noises, I used to think Susan was going to come to visit me.” He was sentenced to 30 days in jail.”

In his book, “In the Grip of Grace,” Max Lucado comments on this story, “Few would question the anger of the family. Only the naïve would think it fair to leave the guilty unpunished. But I do have one concern. Is 936 payments enough? Not for Tunell to send,

mind you, but for the family to demand? When they receive the final payment, will they be at peace? Is eighteen years' restitution sufficient? Will 196 months' worth of remorse be adequate? (LCD) How much is enough? Were you in the family and were Tunell your target, how many payments would you require? Better stated, how many payments do you require?" That's our question this morning, "How much justice do I require?"

Last week, we studied Luke 18. This week, we're in Matthew 18. Go ahead and turn there now. In this section of Matthew, the disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus tells them that those who are as humble as children are the greatest. He then says you better not cause them to stumble and that leads to how we are to confront those who sin against us – the classic Matthew 18 steps. Peter then asks the logical follow-up, well then okay, how many times should we confront and forgive them. In other words, what if they keep sinning against us? Matthew 18, verse 21, *"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.'*

Peter suggests seven times which is pretty good based on Jewish cultural norms. Take a look at this note, (LCD) ***"Judaism recognized that repeat offenders might not be repenting at all and drew the line at how many times a person could seek restoration and forgiveness: 'If a man commits a transgression, the first, second and third time he is forgiven, the fourth time he is not.' (Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86,87)"*** So Peter's offer of seven times is more than double what was expected. Peter has rightly figured out that the kingdom of heaven goes way beyond the norms of earthly wisdom - but notice something. Look at Peter's question again. *"How many times..."* He's looking for a formula. He's looking for a rule that he can carry out and, upon doing so, be declared right. Jesus points him in a totally different and completely unexpected direction, *"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."* Now some of your translations say, "Seventy times seven times." We're not sure which is right to be honest but regardless. Jesus is making the point that asking "HOW MANY TIMES" is the wrong question. Forgiveness in the kingdom is not about following a formula. It is about the heart. Jesus is going to tell us that we don't forgive out of obligation but out of a heart filled with gratitude. Our forgiveness should continue far beyond the point where we would lose count. So our first point this morning is, (LCD) **Forgiveness in the kingdom is unlimited.**

Now this reference to 'seventy-seven times' would have reminded Jesus' hearers of the story of Lamech in Genesis. (LCD) **"Lamech said to his wives, 'Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times.'**" Someone wounded me and I gave him what he deserved. I got justice. So if someone tries to get revenge by killing me then my vengeance will be sought after unlimitedly! Lamech, out of his woundedness, justified his vengeful action. And we do too. How much justice did Lamech require? Seventy-seven times which is a Hebraic say of saying endless. Our question this morning, (LCD) **"How much justice do I require?"** Is there anyone that we're holding out forgiveness from?

To answer Peter's question about forgiveness in the kingdom, Jesus tells a parable. There are three distinct parts of the parable so let's look at them one at a time. Verse 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.”

So this king decides he wants to settle accounts. He begins with a guy who owes ten thousand bags of gold as my translation puts it or talents as many of yours put it. I actually like the bags of gold. Can you **(LCD) picture TEN THOUSAND** bags of gold!? Now Craig Blomberg gives us an important cultural note here, **(LCD) “The “talent” was the highest known denomination of currency in the ancient Roman Empire, and ten thousand was the highest number for which the Greek language had a particular word.”** In other words, Jesus created the biggest number His language allowed Him to. If He were telling the story today, He’d probably say something like, “A gazillion, bazillion dollars!” The Jewish historian Josephus reported that the entire region of Galilee paid 200 talents a year in taxes to Herod – 200 and we’re talking 10,000! This amount is crazy!

So the king orders that all the man owns be liquidated, including his wife and children. Selling people to repay debt was common practice in the ancient world. This wouldn’t put a dent in what’s owed as even the most expensive slave was worth about one talent. His situation is hopeless! So, verse 26, the servant fell on his knees before him and begged him to be patient. In the Greek, it says that he fell down and then prostrated himself before the king. The word for prostrate is **(LCD) proskuneo and when used of human beings, as it is here, “...they are to be recognized as belonging to a superhuman realm.”** In other words, there is some serious brown-nosing going on here!

“Begged” is in the imperfect tense so this guy just flops down and begs over and over, “Be patient with me! Be patient with me!” He wants more time in order to, as he puts it, “pay back everything.” Did you catch that? Can he pay back this debt? Of course not! He owes more than he’ll ever make in his entire life! But he’s willing to say anything to get off the hook. He begs for patience and amazingly, in verse 27, the king is moved with pity, compassion and actually cancels the debt. He doesn’t shrink it or cut it in half – he completely cancels it. The word for ‘cancel’ is the same word as ‘forgive,’ **(LCD) aphimi, and it means “to release from legal or moral obligation or consequence; cancel, remit, pardon.”** Can you imagine the relief this guy feels? Imagine having your mortgage completely canceled. That STILL doesn’t capture this guys’ relief. I mean he and his family were about to be enslaved for the rest of their lives! Wow!

That reminds me of another debt cancellation that brought relief. Anyone recognize **(LCD) this sewer manhole?** It’s in our front yard! Why do we have a sewer manhole in our front yard? Over 50 years ago when the church was brand new and small, the MDC decided to install a sewer line down Maple Avenue. Because we had so much road frontage, the fee would have put the church out of business. But instead, the MDC offered to cancel the debt if they could put the sewer line on our property instead of breaking up the road. That saved our church! Thank God!

So back to our debtor...how does he show his gratitude? Verse 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." What?! What's up with this guy? Notice that he went out and 'found' his fellow servant. He goes out of his way to track down a guy who owed him a hundred silver coins or denarii. A denarii was a day's wage so this is about four months of wages that the guy owes. A lot to be sure, but not unpayable and certainly not 10,000 bags of gold! Just to give you an idea. **(LCD) One talent was worth six thousand denarii which means that the guy owed the king sixty million denarii, 200,000 years of wages, while this guy owed him a hundred denarii, four months of wages.** This guy has been forgiven an unreasonable amount and yet he's choking this guy who owes him a reasonable amount. A visual similarity would be comparing **(LCD) 1 million to 1 billion.** It's just not close!

The guy pleads just like the man did before the king, "Be patient with me! I'll pay you back." But he refused and had him thrown into jail instead. This is a picture of complete ingratitude. He has no concept of how much he's been forgiven. When we struggle to forgive others it is often because we've failed to remember or even be aware of just how much we've been forgiven. It reminds me of a scene in **(LCD) "It's a Wonderful Life"** when there is a run on the bank and this old guy insists on taking out his entire deposit. George Bailey pleads with him to not panic and to only take what he needs but the guy doesn't do it. He greedily focuses on his own interest and ignores the interests of others. There is a lack of mercy that is fueled by fear. He is self-focused and demands what is his. How about us? **(LCD) How much justice do I require?** Can I be merciful or do I demand what I believe is mind regardless of the impact it has on you?

Verse 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." He calls him a wicked servant and rebukes him for not having shown the same mercy on his fellow servant that he had shown to him. In his anger, the master gives the man what he insisted on, justice, and rescinds the previous act of mercy. He hands the man over to the jailers to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed which is...never. This is an eternal sentence. He is going to be tortured until he dies. The second point this morning is **(LCD) We are to forgive as we've been forgiven.**

But this is so hard for us, isn't it? In his book "Created for Work," author Bob Schultz shares this, "Suppose you see the local bully riding his bike toward you. As you step off the sidewalk to give him room, he rides by, reaches out his hand, and knocks the notebook from your arms. Laughing, he looks over his shoulder at your papers flying in the breeze. He fails to notice the low bus-stop sign hanging over the walkway. Looking back at you with a smirk on his face, he runs the side of his head into that sign. Smack! The bike keeps going until it runs into a trash can. The bully is face down, wondering what happened. Did you feel a faint smile coming on as I told that story? A cruel person will think it's funny and that the bully had it coming. On the other hand, a merciful person's first thought is concern for his head. Which are you?"

Finally, Jesus summarizes the parable in verse 35, *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”* Really? Will the Heavenly Father, big, nice, white bearded softie really treat those who don’t forgive from the heart with torment? This shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus had said the same thing at the end of the Lord’s Prayer earlier, **(LCD) “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”** Ouch! Does this mean I can lose my salvation?

No. That is not what Jesus is saying. What He is saying is that those who know Him will forgive others as they have been forgiven. But those who don’t know Him refuse to forgive. Notice what I said. God will not forgive those who **(LCD) REFUSE to forgive**. We may still struggle to forgive but that is not what Jesus is condemning. He is condemning an absolute refusal to forgive. In light of the magnitude of our forgiveness in Christ, a true believer will always forgive even if it is hard and a struggle. To not forgive at all is a mark of one who has never known Christ. And for that person, the result is torment. Pastor Warren Wiersbe comments, **(LCD) “The world’s worst prison is the prison of an unforgiving heart. If we refuse to forgive others, then we are only imprisoning ourselves and causing our own torment.”**

He is right. At the end of the day it’s a heart issue. The heart was never built by God to house bitterness, it was built to house grace. Instead, from our wounded hearts, we house bitterness and live in perpetual torment demanding justice. It reminds me of a quote from **(LCD) “Choosing Forgiveness” by Nancy DeMoss, “One definition of unforgiveness: ‘Like drinking poison and hoping someone else would die.’”** Phew. So, as Max Lucado asked at the beginning, when is it enough? The answer...never. Don’t stay in this prison. Our last point this morning is **(LCD) The cost of unforgiveness is torment.**

So what’s the solution? Two things. First, we need to understand how to forgive. Take a look at this **(LCD) wonderful illustration of forgiveness**. Here we see someone offended someone else. The offense of another produces hurt to the offended. Simultaneously, guilt is laid by God upon the offender’s conscience, but the offended also lays guilt on the offender. **(LCD) The offended person is emotionally and spiritually BOUND** to the offender by unforgiveness. Such a grudge sustains the hurt the offended person feels. This bondage can never be broken (no matter how much distance is put between them) except by forgiveness. The offender should ask to be forgiven, but he may never do so. Consequently, the offended must initiate forgiveness. **(LCD) The offender’s guilt can only be removed by the offended, who TAKES THE HURT UPON HIMSELF** (whether it is requested or not) and gives up the right to blame the other person for what he/she did. This is forgiveness. **(LCD) The offended person then gives the offense, the hurt, the grudge and the offender to God.** Vengeance is left to God. This is what God did for us when we sinned against Him. Jesus took the hurt onto Himself. As Christ-followers, we’re called to do the same in the power of Holy Spirit living within us. Is there anyone you need to release?

There is so much more I could say on this topic. Earlier I mentioned the book **(LCD) “Choosing Forgiveness” by Nancy DeMoss**. That’s the book I always recommend on this topic. You might want to read it. Last week, Bryan Bywater told me about a book he’s reading by Tim Keller called “Forgiveness.” He quoted Keller saying, **(LCD)**

“Forgiveness then, is a form of voluntary suffering. In forgiving, rather than retaliating, you make a choice to bear the cost.” That’s the same point of the illustration and it is exactly what God did for each of us.

Most importantly, practice gratitude for your salvation. Be aware of how much you’ve been forgiven. We need to re-preach the gospel to ourselves every day. This will cultivate a heart of mercy. Let me close by reading a wonderful excerpt by Brother Lawrence from his book “The Practice of the Presence of God,” *“I regard myself as the most wretched of all men, stinking and covered with sores, and as one who has committed all sorts of crimes against his King. Overcome by remorse, I confess all my wickedness to Him, ask His pardon and abandon myself entirely to Him to do with as He will. But this King, filled with goodness and mercy, far from chastising me, lovingly embraces me, makes me eat at His table, serves me with His own hands, gives me the keys of His treasures and treats me as His favorite. He talks with me and is delighted with me in a thousand and one ways; He forgives me and relieves me of my principle bad habits without talking about them; I beg Him to make me according to His heart and always the more weak and despicable I see myself to be, the more beloved I am of God.”*

Forgiveness received is the basis for forgiveness given. Have you received mercy from God? Are you receiving mercy from God? You give what you get. Remember what Jesus said, **(LCD) “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”** That is the way of the kingdom of God and of all who know Jesus. Do you? If you do, then re-affirm your commitment to Him by standing and saying the kingdom prayer that Jesus gave us...the Lord’s Prayer.