

## **The World's Greatest Prayer – Forgive – The Unmerciful Servant**

**Pastor Jonathan Swenson, St. Mark Lutheran Church, 24 Feb 2008**

**(Note:** *Special thanks to John Ortberg, Nancy Beach and Lewis Smedes for much of the material upon which this message is based. Please see the list of recommended books at the end of this manuscript.*)

*Key Text: Matthew 18:21-35 (The Unmerciful Servant.)*

Well this morning we continue our series by looking at the 5<sup>th</sup> Petition of the Lord's Prayer: "*Forgive us our Trespases/Sins as we Forgive Those Who Trespass/Sin Against Us.*" Now... if I asked you to tell me, in one word, what this petition is about, what one word would you use? (FORGIVENESS). Yeah, forgiveness - that is what I thought you would say. And of course that's true. But I would like to suggest to you that it is also about FREEDOM. As **Galatians 5:1** puts it, "*It IS for FREEDOM that Christ has set you free.*" FORGIVENESS AND FREEDOM... that's what we are going to delve into this morning.

So, to begin with, I'd like to invite you to open up your Bibles to Matthew, chapter 18. If you didn't bring a Bible with you today, the ushers will be coming down to hand one to you, if you'd like. If you are using one of the church Bibles you can find this passage on page 590. **Matthew 18, verses 21-35.** This is one of Jesus' more famous stories, and it's *often called the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.*

We begin with **verse 23**... Jesus said, "*For this reason, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with his servants who had borrowed money from him. 24 In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. 25 The servant couldn't pay, so the king ordered that the servant, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt. 26 But the servant fell down before the King and begged him, 'Oh, sir, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' 27 Then the King was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.*"

Now, at this point we need to interrupt the parable. You've probably figured out that the King in this story stands for God. And, the other main character in the story, the servant, *who's that?* Anybody want to guess? Well, it's you. and it's me. Jesus says that you and I have accumulated a moral debt before a just and holy God and we've been adding to it for years. That's your condition and mine, too.

THINK ABOUT IT FOR A MOMENT. Every time that you and I were less than honest, every time we fudged an expense account or tax return, every time we were unloving to a five-year old, every time we gossiped, every selfish act, every sexually impure thought or deed, every time we took a little grudge and nursed it and nursed it, every time... we were adding to *our* mountain of moral debt. All human beings are in the same boat. All of us have done this.

We've all done things on that list, or things that were just as bad or worse... because we are all fallen people who have sinned. And in so doing, the Bible says, we've piled up a moral debt before a just and holy God. And what makes matters even worse, is that we, like the servant in this parable...we don't have the resources to pay it back!

So, just like the servant in the story we have no alternative but to throw ourselves at the mercy of the King. *And when we do that, what does the king do? ...* He forgives the servant this ENORMOUS sum of money that the servant could have NEVER, NEVER paid back. And this means, of course, that the KING will have to pay the debt himself. *It doesn't just go away.* Somehow it has to be accounted for. So the king not only forgives the servant, *he also pays back* this enormous, almost insurmountable debt *himself*.

And why does the King do this? Because his heart was filled with compassion. And *as that king looked with compassion on his servant, so the Bible says that God looks on you, looks at me.* And then God sends his Son to die on a cross to die the death that by all rights you and I should have died because of our sinfulness. The death that we deserved to die, HE died on the cross... *so that we could be set utterly free.*

And this is absolutely essential to the story and it sets up the ultimate theme of the Christian faith: that God has forgiven you through the cross of Christ. That is the good news of Christianity. And we call it GRACE. (**Ephesians 2** says, "*it is by GRACE you have been saved, by faith, not by any works of your own.*") That's what this first part of this parable is all about.

But the story doesn't end there. This story is a "two-parter." So now, in part two... the servant is off the hook. He owes his life, his freedom, his family, his possessions, everything to the grace of the King. He doesn't have to repay a cent. But what happens next?

Well, we read in verse 28, that the first servant, the forgiven one, comes upon another guy...the "other" employee in the corporation who owes HIM something. But this time, it's a just a very small debt. It's like a few hundred dollars...a day's worth of his wages...which is like pocket change to the first guy. But this other guy, the third character in the story, hasn't got the money because he's a desperately poor man. So he says to the 1<sup>st</sup> servant the exact same words that the first servant had said to the king: "*Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.*"

And so, now everybody hearing Jesus tell this story is on the edge of their seats, waiting to hear how it turns out. ... "*How is the FIRST servant, the one who had just had his debt forgiven by the King...how is he going to respond?!*" And the answer, Jesus says, is NOT VERY WELL. The first servant, the one who had JUST been forgiven himself, takes this poor man and grabs him by the throat and begins to choke him and has him thrown into prison where, of course, he cannot possibly **hope** to repay the debt.

**And what happens as a result?** Well, it turns out that this story really has THREE parts to it. And in this last section, verses 32-35, there are some very somber words. When the king finds out this first servant, whom he had forgiven so much, when the King finds out this recipient of His grace could not forgive his fellow servant, Jesus says, in verse **32**... "*... the King called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You wicked servant. I cancelled all the 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?'*" And

then the KING turns and addresses his soldiers and says, **verse 34...** "Take him away. Throw him into prison. Leave him there until he shall pay back the unpayable debt."

And then, Jesus says these very sobering words in verse **35**, -- "And this is how my Heavenly Father will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." **UNLESS YOU FORGIVE THEM FROM YOUR HEART.**

Now...**let's be honest.** We're fine with this parable as long as we haven't been too deeply wounded or hurt ourselves. I mean, it is kind of easy to get on the side of the King here...and say, of course he should punish the servant for not releasing the poor man of his debt. But if you read this story after being deeply, deeply wounded by someone you read it differently. Suddenly that closing line doesn't seem so comforting. In fact, it sounds quite haunting.... "This is how my Heavenly Father will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." **UNLESS YOU FORGIVE THEM FROM YOUR HEART.**

These are some pretty strong words from Jesus here: *forgiving someone who has hurt you deeply...and forgiving them from your heart?* And we might want to say, "Now, come on, Lord that's a pretty tall order, isn't it?...I mean, come on...after all they've done to me...I'm supposed to FORGIVE them? I mean, come on God, that hurts!"

And God says, yes, it does. Yes it does. But here's the truth about forgiveness: *true* forgiveness... **AUTHENTIC** forgiveness **COSTS SOMETHING.** It costs God his Son. And authentic forgiveness between two human beings is **NEVER CHEAP** either. In fact, it hurts. It hurts quite a bit. And let me explain why...

Lewis Smedes was a wonderful Christian man who wrote several books on the topic of forgiveness – some of the best material you will ever read on this subject. You can see several of his books listed in your bulletin and I would **REALLY** encourage you to read one or two of these, especially if you are dealing with some of these issues right now.

Smedes gives incredibly practical advice and direction in dealing with forgiveness issues, and he says that we go through three very common phases on the path to forgiveness. Three phases...and *the first one is this whole experience we've just identified...the phase of **HURT.***

And this first one is sort of a double-whammy because not only do we experience hurt when someone wounds us, but then we're told by God that we have to FORGIVE them... and **THAT really** hurts!

*When you get hurt, and the hurt is deep, and the hurt is unfair, the last thing you want to do is forgive the other person!* Instead, when you've been hurt deeply, you want the other party to know just how much pain that they've inflicted on you! I know what that feels like and you do too -- especially those of you who have been hurt in an unjust, deeply unfair way. We just want the other person to pay. It's human nature.

THE LA TIMES had a story a while ago written by a guy named Dave Hackler who knows what it is like to want the other person to pay. Hackler is, among other things, a part-time umpire in a recreational league. This is what Hackler writes, "I was driving too fast in the snow in Boulder, Colorado, going too fast, and a policeman pulled over and gave me a speeding ticket. So, I tried to talk him out of it. I told him how worried I was about insurance. Told him I'm normally a very safe driver, but explained why I was in a hurry and so on. He said that if I didn't like the ticket, then I could go to court...Fast forward to the first game of the baseball season, the next summer. I'm umpiring behind home plate. Guess who is the very first batter up? It's the same guy...the policeman! I recognize him. He recognizes me and sheepishly asks me, 'So, how did the thing with the ticket go?' And I just smile and tell him, "You better swing at everything."

That's human nature, isn't it? Wouldn't you love to be able to do that sometimes? It's like a dream scenario. We get hurt; we'd love to see that guy coming back into our world with us as the umpire over their lives. We'd be able to say, "You better swing at everything." See how you like it. See how it feels to be the victim of injustice.

Some of you are here today... and you have been deeply hurt... maybe even by someone in your own family. Some of you have been cheated, or betrayed or even abused. Some of you have been in a situation where you have been the victim of vicious gossip... at work, or at school in your circle of friends. Some of you have been in a relationship where you gave your trust to somebody and they broke it...they betrayed you.

You've been hurt. And the hurt is deep and it's personal and it's unfair. Someone has run up a "moral-debt" with you and you know it to the penny. And what happens next in that scenario, Lewis Smedes says, is that those intense feelings of HURT turn to feelings of intense **HATE**. That's the second, and very natural phase.

And this is a word (and a feeling) that we as Christians don't want to admit. We don't even want to use the word, but the truth is that this is what we often feel after someone has hurt us. First we feel a boatload of hurt. And then we move to a phase of hate. And unfortunately, if we don't do any other work...this is where we will stay – trapped somewhere in these two phases...hurt...and hate. And no one wants to be there.

And we might even instinctively know that we need to move out of that phase, but we get trapped *because the very next thought that occurs to us is this: "If I forgive that other person or those people... I know what that means.... It means that I am going to have to swallow the debt. I'll have to pay the cost. And the COST IS TO NOT MAKE THEM FEEL THE PAIN AS WELL. Not getting even. Letting it go. Not getting my name back or proving I was right... that's what it's going to cost me."*

And you know what? That's exactly right. If you forgive someone, you do pay a high cost. In fact, there's only one thing in the world that I know of that costs more than forgiving someone. You know what it is? **NOT FORGIVING SOMEONE**. *Because non-forgiveness costs you your heart and in some cases, your very soul.*

That's why the Bible says we *need* to forgive. In order to be freed! Freed from the burden and the bitterness and the baggage that we carry around with us from the hurts of our past. Freed to love openly... without fear, or shame or hesitation, or guilt. Freed to love and to receive love as God intends for us.

And that's why Lewis Smedes and so many others have urged us move from the phase of HATE, to the third phase on the path to forgiveness... the phase of **HEALING** and in most cases, the phase of RECONCILIATION. HEALING AND RECONCILIATION.

Now, hear me say, very clearly, that this doesn't mean you just run out and find the person who has hurt you and immediately forgive them. It might work that way occasionally, by God's grace...and especially if the wounds that have occurred are not especially deep. But if you have been wounded in a profound way, you need to realize that this phase of HEALING usually doesn't begin by focusing on the other person. *It usually begins by first doing the internal work of letting God heal our own soul, before we even begin to think about our relationship with the other person.*

And this isn't natural to us. When we've been hurt, we keep wanting to direct our energy and thoughts toward the person who has wounded us... but God says, okay... *"just stop with that for a minute and first, let me do some work inside of you."*

And *this is what is so important, and so helpful for us to understand..... You can ask God to do this work of healing regardless of what the other person does, or doesn't do! ... Regardless of whether or not they ever say "I'm sorry" you can still ask God to do this healing work in you. You can ask God to help you heal -- for the sake of your own joy and vitality.*

Now...important sub-point here: ... this does NOT mean that you condone what someone did that was wrong. *Forgiveness is not the same thing as excusing inappropriate behavior.* It doesn't mean that you just look the other way and decide that you will tolerate injustice. Injustice needs to be dealt with. And in some cases a penalty will need to be paid.

It also does NOT mean that full reconciliation with the other person is always possible. The apostle Paul says in **Romans 12:8**, *"as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."* And so, we usually do need to go to the other person and try to work it out...but sometimes the other person is no longer living, or sometimes they're unwilling, sometimes they are just angry and will not talk, and sometimes they are just not safe to get back in contact with. So sometimes, full reconciliation *with the other person or party* is not fully possible.

*But if that is the case for you, know this: YOU CAN STILL ASK GOD TO DO THE INNER WORK, TO BRING HEALING TO YOUR HEART AND TO YOUR SPIRIT AND SOUL...so that you get to the place where you can say to the one who has wounded you, "I am letting you go. I am not going to let this hurt me anymore. I'm not going to let it rob me of my joy and vitality...I'll try to work it out, but if you won't, I'm still going to do the work of healing."*

So...all this being said...this is what I would like you to do right now: I'd like you to take out the luggage tag that you were given when you first came in today, and I'd like you to think right now of a person who you may be in the process of forgiving...or *need* to be in the process of forgiving. Who is that for you? *What name comes to mind?*

For some of you it may be your spouse or a parent or son or daughter...or a friend or coworker...whoever that is for you...maybe it's more than one person...whoever it is for you, or whatever the situation is for you. I'd like you to jot down that name or situation on your luggage tag.

If you didn't get one of those tags...or if you need something to write with...the ushers are going to be coming down the aisles to help you with that...so just raise your hand if you need one of these tags, or a pen and they'll help you out. And this is only for you – you're the only one who will see this...and we're just going to invite you to hold onto this tag...and to keep it in your Bible or to hang it somewhere where you will see it frequently, so that it can be a reminder to you to be praying about that relationship, and to be seeing forgiveness and reconciliation.

And know this too, that we're not asking you to fully forgive that person right now... because we know that in many situations that is going to take some time and effort to do so in a healthy and lasting way. But I *am* asking this morning: *Are you willing to do the work?* Are you willing to engage *in the process of forgiving* the other person or group of people?

Now, some of you...when I asked you think of a name...you honestly can't think of a name. There's no name that has come to your mind of a person that you need to forgive, or that you have resentment towards. If that's true for you...celebrate that! That's great! You're free! You've done the relational work... that's a wonderful place to be.

But I bet the majority of us...have at least one person, one name that comes to mind, where we say either I need to start the work or I need to continue it...maybe you're already in the thick of it...and you're trying to do the work yourself...maybe you're even reconciling. *And if you can think of that name, I want to urge you to write it down... write down the name...* (and if it's someone you are sitting next to, then use your hand and cover it up a little bit... :o) ... but write down the name. :o)

You know...we won't ever be fully free, and fully connected with God, until we have done the hard work of forgiving others in our lives. And what God wants for you...is the freedom of forgiveness...the freedom of letting that person go...no matter how badly they hurt you. God so desperately wants you to be freed from the hurts and wounds of the past...so that you can live with FREEDOM and JOY in the present...and on into the future.

*And as a way of symbolically representing this, we've asked Jessy/the Celebration Team to come up and sing this next song...and as he/they do...you're going to see some people come forward, and they are going to be carrying a variety of bags and suitcases and luggage...and these are people I've asked to help give us get a picture...*

a physical representation of what God is inviting all of us to do this morning...to symbolize for all of us, that commitment to doing the work...to engage in the work of forgiveness -- of bringing our wounds, our hurts, our hate... *ALL THAT BAGGAGE* and leaving them at the foot of the cross...and at the altar of God's Grace.

So, as you fill out those luggage tags, and as you watch this scene unfold, I would encourage you to be in pray *about the person or situation you've written down on that card*...and to ask God to pour out His Holy Spirit within you, to give you an overwhelming sense of the *FREEDOM* that comes when you choose to FORGIVE...

*(Into Song and Luggage Tags, People Coming Forward, etc.)*

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**Recommended Reading:**

Books by Lewis B. Smedes

    "The Art of Forgiving"

    "Forgive and Forget – Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve"

    "Shame and Grace – Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve"

"As For Me and My House" by Walter Wangerin, Jr. *(Recommended for Married Couples working on forgiveness within their marriage.)*