

Jesus is Forgiving

Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction

September 11, 2001. It is one of those days in our nation's history that only has to be known by the date. No other description required. To borrow a line from President Roosevelt, that is a day that will live in infamy.

This week, with the 25th anniversary of that attack all over the news and internet, we have had the opportunity to read once again the stories of people who were there and hear about the memories of the people who died in those attacks.

Dr. Jerry Smith was a professor at Huntington University where Karen and I did our undergraduate work. In fact, Dr. Smith was one of the professors in Karen's major. His son worked in the south tower and rode the train from New Jersey to work every day.

- A few minutes before 9 a.m. on September 11, Dr. Smith was teaching a freshman level chemistry class when his phone dinged. It was a message from his son, saying simply "I'm OK. I will talk to you tonight."
- Dr. Smith's testimony about this was awe-inspiring. I heard him say that "sometimes God answers your prayers before you even have a chance to pray them."

A story I just learned this week involves this Bible (show picture).

In March of 2002, six months after the attack, a firefighter found this Bible under the Tully Road, which was a temporary truck route that covered the last remnants of the south tower. He called out to a photographer, who happened to be nearby and who was documenting the aftermath of the attack.

Because of the heat, the Bible had been fused into a chunk of steel as the World Trade Center collapsed. Of all the chapters in the Bible, of all the verses in those chapters, this Bible was forever open to these words from the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42)

The photographer, Joel Meyerowitz, writes "This shredded, burned and rubble-covered Bible came to me from the loving hands of a fireman who knew that I was the record keeper of ground zero. My astonishment at seeing the page that the Bible was open to made me realize that the Bible's message survives throughout time, and in every era we have the opportunity to apply its teachings freshly, as the occasion demands." (Joel Meyerowitz)

As I explained last Sunday, we are spending this month of September, asking ourselves what Jesus would do if He were in our shoes and circumstances, and He was limited to our own stewardship components of TIME, TALENT, TESTIMONY and TREASURE.

What would Jesus do if He had our Time, Talent, Testimony and Treasure?

Last week we talked about how Jesus called us to use those four Ts to spread His love around to anyone and everyone we meet. His is a continuing love that does no harm to a neighbor – one that needs to be shared urgently because it's later now than it has ever been before.

Today's message builds on that love to express itself in the area of forgiveness. Our Jesus statement is this:

Jesus is forgiving.

I make three observations:

#1: FORGIVENESS DOES NOT KEEP RECORDS

Look at verse 22:

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:22)

Can't you picture Peter? He thought he was showing overly holy and generous when he offered to forgive at least seven times. After all, the rabbis taught that three times was sufficient.

There is confusion in this text about whether Jesus responded seventy-seven times or seventy times seven (which equals 490). One commentator will argue one way and another picks the opposite answer. Either way, the number is a lot higher than three or seven.

The answer of Jesus must have startled Peter. Who could keep count for that many offenses? But that was exactly the point Jesus was making.

When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthian Church, he included this line in the 13th chapter (the Love Chapter):

(Love) keeps no record of wrongs. (1 Cor. 13:5, NIV).

The love of Christ that flows through us just keeps on forgiving. 77 or 490 make no difference, because by the time we have forgiven someone that many times, we are in the habit of forgiving.

That's a good thing, right? Think about it for a minute. Do the math with me. Let's assume that you are here at Grace every week and that every week you have something to confess during the Brief Order at the beginning of the service. Are you with me?

- If the Rabbis were right, and 3 was the maximum required times God needed to forgive, you and I would run out of forgiveness by the end of this month. (Counting today there are three Sundays remaining this month.)
- If Peter's approach is right, and 7 was the maximum, you are good through the end of October.
- If 77 is the correct answer, you are good through February 2028.
- If 490 is the correct answer, you are good through the end of January 10 years from now.
- It takes 10 years to use up 490 forgiveness cards, so those of you who have been in church a while have long-ago used up your quota.

I am grateful 1 John 1:9 reads like this:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

And not like this:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness up to 490 times. (1 John 1:9)

God keeps no records of His forgiveness for us, so we should get rid of our own record keeping software.

#2: FORGIVENESS IS NOT SHALLOW

Look at verse 28:

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coin.^a He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded. (Matthew 18:28)

At this point in the text, Jesus moved from teaching to illustrating.

He tells the story of a man very much like us.

- He was a debtor (vv. 23–27). This man had been stealing funds from the king and, when the books were audited, his crime was discovered. In today's dollars he owed over \$10 million.
 - He actually thought he could pay it back. His case was hopeless, except for one thing: The king was a man of compassion. He assumed the loss and forgave the servant. This meant that the man was free and that he and his family would not be thrown into a debtor's prison.

- The servant did not deserve this forgiveness; it was purely an act of love and mercy on the part of the master.
- He was a creditor (vv. 28–30). Someone owed him money, too. The servant left the presence of the king and went and found a fellow servant who owed him 100 pence. In today's dollars, he owed \$10,000.
 - Instead of passing the forgiveness on, the servant mistreated his friend and demanded that he pay the debt. The debtor used the same approach as the servant: "Have patience with me and I will pay you all of it!"
 - But the unjust servant was unwilling to grant to others what he wanted others to grant to him. Perhaps he had the *legal* right to throw the man in prison, but he did not have the *moral* right. He had been forgiven himself—should he not forgive his fellow servant?

In this story Jesus makes the point that 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. Some of the most miserable people I know have been those who would not forgive others. They lived only to imagine ways to punish these people who had wronged them. But they were really only punishing themselves.

What was wrong with this man? The same thing that is wrong with many professing Christians: They have *received* forgiveness, but they have not really *experienced* forgiveness deep in their hearts. Therefore, they are unable to *share* forgiveness with those who have wronged them. (Warren Wiersbe)

Instead of forgiveness, they demand justice.

- If we live only according to justice, always seeking to get what is ours, we will put ourselves into prison.
- But if we live according to forgiveness, sharing with others what God has shared with us, then we will enjoy freedom and joy.

Peter asked for a just measuring rod; Jesus told him to practice forgiveness and forget the measuring rod.

#3: FORGIVENESS IS AN EXPECTATION

Look at verse 35:

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart. (Matthew 18:35)

This is serious stuff. Jesus warned us that God cannot forgive us if we do not have humble and repentant hearts.

- We reveal the true condition of our hearts by the way we treat others.
 - When our hearts are humble and repentant, we will gladly forgive our brothers.
 - But where there is pride and a desire for revenge, there can be no true repentance; and this means God cannot forgive.

In other words, it is not enough to receive God's forgiveness, or even the forgiveness of others. We must experience that forgiveness in our hearts so that it humbles us and makes us gentle and forgiving toward others.

- The servant in the parable did not have a deep experience of forgiveness and humility. *He was simply glad to be "off the hook."* He had never really repented.

APPLICATION

In October 2006, twenty years ago, Charles Roberts shot 10 young school girls in their one-room Amish school house before turning the gun on himself. Five of those girls died. While most of the world was crying for justice and encouraging revenge, the Amish of Lancaster County PA did not cast blame, they didn't point fingers, they didn't hold a press conference with attorneys at their sides.

Instead, they reached out with grace and compassion toward the killer's family. The afternoon of the shooting an Amish grandfather of one of the girls who was killed expressed forgiveness toward the killer, Charles Roberts. That same day Amish neighbors visited the Roberts family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain.

Later that week the Roberts family was invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls who had been killed. And Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at Charles Roberts' funeral.

It's ironic that the killer was tormented for nine years by the premature death of his young daughter. He never forgave God for her death. Yet, after he cold-bloodedly shot 10 innocent Amish school girls, the Amish almost immediately forgave him and showed compassion toward his family.

The world was in shock "How could they forgive such a terrible, unprovoked act of violence against innocent lives?"

The answer is simple. The Amish culture closely follows the teachings of Jesus, who taught his followers to forgive one another, to place the needs of others before themselves, and to rest in the knowledge that God is still in control and can bring good out of any situation. Love and compassion toward others is to be life's theme. Vengeance and revenge is to be left to God.

As faithful stewards of Jesus, we forgive. That's who we are. That's what we do. Because that's what Jesus did.

And we invest our time, talent, treasure and testimony to make sure that message continues to be spread throughout our community and world.

Amen.