

20th September 2020
The Framework for Forgiveness
Matthew 18:21-35

What would you say is THE defining characteristic of a Christian? Most of the world's religions have a certain ritual, a certain wardrobe, or at the very least, a certain behaviour that distinguishes them. Buddhist monks wear orange robes; Orthodox Jews wear a kippa (The brimless cap) and black suits, and don't trim their sideburns, or ever order a slice of bacon; Muslim men bow toward Mecca five times a day and insist that women wear hijabs, Mormons have their special underwear, called the temple garment, which sets them apart.

But what do we have? Besides clerical collars and robes worn by some ministers/ priests, we don't seem to have much that sets us apart from the rest of the world. But appearances can be deceiving. The human eye cannot see what sets Christians apart from the rest of the world.

Instead, as Jesus explains in our parable today, being Christian isn't primarily defined by what you wear, or repetition of rituals, or what you eat, Christians are defined by what they have *received*. Today, Jesus kicks open the door of heaven for us by establishing the framework of forgiveness – teaching us that before God Christians are first forgiven, then forgiving. It is not about keeping score; it is about losing count.

Matthew 18 contains one of our Saviour's fullest and most memorable parables about God's grace and his earnest desire to seek and to save the lost. Having been personally chosen, called and forgiven by the Saviour himself, Peter was certainly familiar with forgiveness, but he could not rid his mind of the thought that forgiveness – in some respect – is earned or deserved, and therefore must have limits, and may be forfeited and lost. He asks: V21 *"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

To be fair, Peter probably thought he was being generous. The Rabbis – the teachers and preachers – of his time taught that a person could be forgiven at most, three times. After that, they were out of luck. Jesus was not like the Rabbis of the time. *"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times"* (or, according to another reading of the Greek, *seventy times seven: 490 times*). Either way, Jesus' point is that forgiveness is not a numbers game – it's the limitless gift of a gracious God. It is not about keeping score; it is about losing count.

Gary Stratman, a retired Presbyterian Minister suggests three ways Christians try to avoid forgiving: The first is by saying *"but look how I serve God in all of these ways."* He writes, *"I remember two women in a town that we lived in many years ago. They were pillars of that community. No one did more for the good of the community than they did. It was only after I had been there awhile that I discovered in addition to that, they had not spoken to each other for twenty years. They would not even look at each other. If they were in the same room, one would leave"*.

The second way of avoiding our difficulty with Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. It seems the highest road. People say, *"I can no longer be a part of the church,"* and true to their word, they have left the church. The reason given, is they know in their heart that they cannot forgive a certain person. They know what Jesus' teaching is, and it is the higher road to leave. Even then, I wonder does that really deal with the pain and the hurt within them?

Then, the third way of avoiding this having to forgive others. We say that we believe what Jesus said. We are to forgive others, but there are exceptions.

- a) The first exception is, that if the injustice against us is heinous, who could be asked to forgive such an offense?
- b) The second is, if somebody does this thing to us or others repeatedly, how can we forgive more than once, because we are simply encouraging the behaviour?
- c) The Third is, I would forgive this person, but I know if I went to her she would say, "*Forgive me. I haven't done anything wrong. Are you crazy?*" This exception could be called the indifference of the perpetrator!

Dr. M. Scott Peck, a psychiatrist, says in *The Road Less Travelled*, "*that unless we are able to at least move toward the work of forgiving the person, even the person who does not deserve our forgiveness, there will not be mental health. There won't be spiritual health either*".

V23 To illustrate what he meant, Jesus told a very pointed parable about a king, his kingdom, and his servants. I won't retell the story, but a few themes deserve emphasis. **First**, just as that servant didn't live in an isolated bubble, free to do whatever he pleased, we are not truly independent. We are servants in God's kingdom, accountable to him for all we do and think and say. And, just like that king, God is free to call us in to settle our accounts with him at any time. This isn't a reference to Judgment Day. This is any day we hear or feel the weight of our sin and guilt; This happens whenever we share communion, and are invited to confess before God and one another, every time a parent asks their child "what did you do?"

Whenever God allows tragedy or turmoil or trouble to come into our lives – times which force us to reflect on our lives, our hearts, our eternities. Previous followers of the way, had a phrase for this very important aspect of the framework of forgiveness. They said that our entire existence is *Coram Deo*, a Latin phrase meaning, before, or in the presence of God. So, the first thing that sets Christianity apart from other religions is that it isn't primarily lived for the world to see, and praise (or ridicule), it's lived before God, under his all-seeing eyes.

Second, this parable shows us how we stack up when God audits our lives according to his law. "*As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 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*".

In 1st century Jerusalem, a denarius was the pay for a day's work. A talent was roughly 6000 denarii. The average worker would have to work 60,000,000 days to pay off a debt of 10,000 talents. This is not your home mortgage; this is the national debt. This was an unpayable obligation.

Who could possibly run up that level of debt? As subjects accountable to God we fall under the rule of his law. He expects us to be perfect, holy, according to his standards – nothing more and nothing less. Goodness, kindness, patience, mercy, generosity – those are not good works that go over and above our duty to God; they are the fundamental rules for life in God's kingdom.

And, James explains God's grading scale: "*whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it*". (James 2:10) Our debt of sin before God is unpayable – not only because it is an amount beyond comprehension, but because nothing we can do, not even the best thing, can wipe away even one sin.

Oh, we may try, like that servant, to negotiate with God. **Be patient with me...and I will pay back everything.** No. He couldn't and wouldn't. "God, I'll try harder tomorrow." "God, I'll get my act together when I'm married, when the kids are grown, when I'm retired...tomorrow, next week, next year..." "God, just be patient, and I will pay back good for all the bad I've done." "God, just wait till Sunday, I'll go to your house, I'll give my offering – I'll make everything right." Bargaining doesn't work. All the work, all the money in the world, all the good works and all the promises we may make cannot pay off even a single cent of the debt we owe God. And those that die with a debt to God will pay for it forever in the debtor's prison, separated eternally from God.

That's what we deserve from God. But what do we get? **The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.** I hope you never get tired of hearing this good news. When it comes to your debt of sin, God doesn't want your promises, he doesn't want your commitment, he doesn't want your best effort and intentions. God is not interested in negotiating. The Christian life is not a debt repayment plan full of new obligations. Because what God wants to give us is the one thing we would never expect and never think to ask for – he wants to forgive us, to pay our debt for us. God wanted to do that for you so badly that he didn't even wait for you to ask for it. Long before you and I were born God came and spoke through the prophet Isaiah: **Come now, let us reason together...though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. (Isaiah 1:18)**

While our hands and hearts and lips were still taking out loans on God's patience, still busy piling up a debt of sin that we could never repay – that's when God had compassion and sent his Son to pay the debt we had earned. Paul writes, **while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)** That's when Jesus determined to climb Mt. Calvary carrying not just our debt, but the debt of all the sinners in the world. And, that's when, to remove all doubt, he shouted with his dying breath **it is finished (John 19:30)** – to declare that humanity's debt to God has been paid in full – once and for all.

That is THE defining characteristic of the Christian. We stand before God not clothed in holy underwear or our personal sacrifices or most sincere commitments – we stand before him as confessed and convicted debtors...who have had forgiveness and salvation handed to us. More than we ever hoped, more than we would have ever dared to ask for, God has taken away our sin and credited us with Christ's sinless, debtless life.

Yes, we are debtors before God, there is no denying that. But what sets Christians apart is that we are *forgiven* debtors. That is the invisible, timeless seal of faith that links us with Abraham and David and Jeremiah and Peter and James and John and Paul. That is the single characteristic that unites us as people of all different ages and backgrounds and economic levels. The framework of God's forgiveness, levels the playing field. Before him we are all kneeling. Before him we are all beggars. As Paul told the Romans: *there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:22-24)* Before God the only thing we can possibly do is beg for mercy. In Christ, we are forgiven beggars.

Forgiven. That's the defining characteristic of the Christian. - But it doesn't end there. Forgiven Christians are **forgiving Christians.**

You heard what the unmerciful, wicked servant did with his master's pity – he went out and found a fellow servant who owed him what amounted to pocket change, grabbed him up, choked him out, and had him thrown into prison. This forgiven servant forfeited his master's forgiveness. And if we ever imagine that we can expect to receive God's forgiveness while at the same time holding onto a grudge against a fellow believer, Jesus states categorically that unforgiving sinners are unforgiven sinners: v34-35 *"in anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart.*

The inevitable and absolutely necessary product of being forgiven is the willingness to forgive others. Easier said than done, right? As we hold the keys of Christ's kingdom in our hands, we might believe that using the binding key – the law – to show a fellow brother or sister their sin is the more difficult key to use. That is, until someone hurts us...deeply, painfully, repeatedly. Then we are tempted to stand with Peter and believe that forgiveness needs to have some limits; Those repeated sins don't deserve repeated forgiveness. And do you know what? That's exactly right. No sin and no sinner deserve forgiveness.

Finally, even if forgiveness is humanly impossible, with God all things are possible. I will never forget the story of Corrie ten Boom, who had heard an unbelievable speech by a person in reconstructed Germany, about how God had forgiven him. He put out his hand to her after the speech and said, *"Sister, God has forgiven me."* She recognized him as one of the guards in the concentration camp where her sister died. She said, in effect, *"I could not raise my hand to shake his, but in that awful moment I realized how much God's mercy and grace had been extended to me. What I could not do by my own strength, I did by the strength of God."*

That's how it works in God's kingdom. Forgiveness cannot be earned and often, it's not even asked for. It is based, not on the worthiness of the recipient, but on the compassion of the giver. God's grace in Christ is the only thing that caused him to forgive us. God's grace in Christ is the only thing that can possibly motivate us to forgive others – not because they deserve it, not because they earned it, not because they can pay us back – but because they can't. As Paul said, we are *imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1) who are kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)*

So, no; no special wardrobe, special ritual, no special diet for us – because we're citizens of God's kingdom. Before Him we are defined by being first forgiven and then, forgiving. It is not about keeping score; It is about losing count!

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I come in the name of Jesus Christ, the one said to pray, forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. I pray right now; in the name of Jesus that forgiveness would be released to every person who is now bowed in prayer. Help me to let go past hurts, and receive forgiveness of all my sins. In Jesus precious name. Amen.