

“The Blessing of Forgiveness”
Matthew 18:21–35
Dr. Mark Cushman
July 24, 2022 • Sunday Evening Sermon

I just want to say it has been a tremendous blessing for Leslie and me to serve as the pastor of Pastoral Care here at Briarwood for the last 17 years. I have benefited and learned much for the very qualified and superb staff here. I have thoroughly enjoyed the staff I’ve worked with and it’s been a wonderful place to serve for the Gospel to go out and it will continue to be that for God to do a mighty work. You can be praying for my son in law and daughter who work closely with MTW (Mission To The World) in Ukraine with all that is going on there and for our granddaughter Ellie who is at Children’s Hospital due to a recurring issue that has flared up. I thank you for your prayers for them.

We will be looking at Matthew 18. It is a remarkable text and I hope to get through it in a way that will be practical for you. It deals with one of the most important topics that exists in the Christian life. It’s one of the toughest obligations and one of the greatest blessings – that is the topping of forgiveness. I believe it is the doorway to intimacy with God and it’s also the pathway to spiritual freedom in this world yet it produces a huge amount of struggle in every single one of us because as we live as Christians invariably, regularly and profoundly we will come across situations where people offend/hurt us deeply.

We are in an increasingly difficult society with a lot of people out there we need to forgive and that’s why I believe forgiveness is one of the essential skills of a regenerate heart. It is not an option and it’s a really big deal to our heavenly Father both in His application of forgiveness in our life and in the application that is rebounded out in the world from us yet it produces a deep struggle. Ephesians 6:12 says *[12] For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

Satan hates forgiveness. He hates you to be forgiven and he will pull out all the stops to harden your heart, increase your bitterness and to increase your pride to stop your business of God through you to be a testimony of forgiveness in the world.

In fact, in Matthew 18 Jesus is giving us a remarkable picture of the importance of forgiveness and the Disciples didn’t understand it. I would suggest it would be interesting to be a fly on the wall as Jesus gives this lesson/parable on forgiveness to His Disciples. In Matthew 18:15-17 you see Jesus speaking of excommunication, which says *[15] “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. [16] But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. [17] If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”*

I’m setting up our passage here and so Jesus says in Matthew 18:18, *[18] Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* To me, it would be interesting right here to know what Peter was thinking as he heard this. He might be thinking ‘Jesus, do You mean I will be a judge over a sinful brother some day? Will I be a judge over other sinners like You have been?’ So, in the verses that follow this Peter decides to take the plunge.

Matthew 18:21 says [21] *Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"* Peter is thinking about his role and people he didn't like in need of forgiveness. Peter probably picked the number seven because back in those days one Rabbis generally taught, 'forgive once, forgive twice but the third offense merits no forgiveness. Then Jesus shocks Peter by how He responds to this.

Matthew 18:22 says [22] *Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."* This is Jesus' way of basically saying 'you just keep forgiving for there is no limit on the amount you should forgive.' I can just imagine Peter's jaw dropping at this moment and Jesus as He often did used this as an incredible opportunity to drive the lesson home through a parable. It is a very powerful Scripture. Listen to the words of Jesus.

Matthew 18:23-35 says [23] *"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. [24] When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.[25] And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. [26] So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' [27] And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. [28] But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' [29] So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' [30] He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. [31] When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. [32] Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. [33] And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' [34] And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. [35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."*

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I know that some reading this have some deep pain, sorrow and regret. Father, we are all in situations where forgiveness is needed. It is very important yet very difficult. I pray that as we look at this text that You will deliver us, transform us and make us miracles of the Gospel in each one of our circumstances or prepare us for what may be down the path. We pray You will use this time for Your glory, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

This is a great parable and you may not fully appreciate the gravity of what Jesus is talking about here. He starts out by saying 'The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to...' and this can be interpreted in different ways but generally speaking it's saying 'this is how God sees it, His perspective.' Then He speaks of 10,000 talents and it probably means that Jesus isn't speaking of a personal servant but perhaps a provincial governor. The king had several provincial governors working for him and perhaps this is a governor who owed a large sum of money in back taxes for his part of the country.

The comparison is a denarii was equal to a day's wage so let's just say for this example it was equal to \$40 so then 10,000 talents would equal 1.2 billion dollars in purchasing power. This king said he would forgive it. It was certainly not a common practice but was something that was legal to dismiss this governor's backload of taxes that he owed the king. As the story goes on the king's gesture was certainly breathtaking but it was a wonderful picture of just sheer grace that was undeserved. The servant/governor then turns to one of his peers who owed him

about \$4,000 and this peer begs for mercy and time, but the unmerciful servant/governor assaults him and throws him into prison. This was perfectly acceptable during this time period. We don't have debtor's prison in our day but then it was acceptable and your family had to somehow come up with the money to get you out. This unmerciful servant shows that his former pleas were just a lot of hot air.

The king responded to the unmerciful servant's insults which insults his forgiving spirit so he revokes the clemency and throws the unmerciful servant into jail and then shocks the audience in Matthew 28:35 when Jesus says 'this is how my heavenly Father treats each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart.'

It's a very sobering perspective but I think helpful when you realize when God sets a standard that's high, He fully intends to equip us meet that standard and blessed by that standard and in turn to be a miracle of His forgiveness, grace and mercy that truly has a transformative impact on you, your family and all around you. This is a very important topic but it's very difficult for forgiving others is one of the great challenges of life.

Dan Hamilton writes this about forgiveness; when you deal intimately with human beings you wonder if at times that forgiveness is not as rare as hens teeth. People bury the hatchet but tuck away the map which tells them where it is hidden. We put our resentments in cold storage and then pull the switch to let them fall out again. Our grudges are taken to the lake even to drown them, even the lake of prayer and we end up giving them swimming lessons. How often we have torn up the cancelled note but hang on to the waste paper basket that holds the pieces. This is not to say that human forgiveness does not occur, but only that it is rare and that much that passes for forgiveness is not forgiveness at all.

When we look at this text we begin to see just how important forgiveness is in this thing we call the Christian life – how God wants us to know His forgiveness and extend that to others. Why is it so important that we be forgiving of others? I have two reasons to share with you. What is exactly at stake for not forgiving others? Forgiving others is integral to the health of our relationship with God. Remember these two truths.

Number one, not forgiving others shows we don't appreciate God's forgiveness of ourselves. The Biblical picture of God's forgiveness is absolutely breathtaking. The word forgive literally means to lift off a heavy load and it's the load of sin. The metaphor is of a man who is sinking and staggering under a heavy load and God takes that load off of us and places it on His Son, Jesus Christ. He does it to free us and it's part of this marvelous gift of salvation. Isaiah 53:6 says *[6] All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* What God has done through Christ is completely undeserving and unbelievable – the sinner is relieved of the burden of his sin.

Years ago, I was working a summer job with a young man and I shared the Gospel with him. He seemed to be interested and his response to me after sharing was 'I don't believe it.' Then he said 'Why would God do that for me?' So, I started thinking of some apologetics to undermine any objections he might have and to respond to his question. I thought 'this really doesn't make any sense to him' and it shouldn't. I would say he got it more than me because really he understood right away what I was saying – why would God do that for me?

The problem is down deep inside we don't want to forgive others because we think we deserve it as if we have a lot more to offer God and He could really use me as we are more worth forgiving than others. The fact is, that apart from Christ we are wicked, perverted rebels whose righteousness is as filthy rags. Isaiah 64:6 says *[6] We have all become like one who is unclean,*

and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. That's a sobering picture of a hardened and bitter heart.

Paul is a little more blunt in Ephesians 2:1-2 which says [1] *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins [2] in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—*

As a pastoral care pastor, I've been at many funerals. Often when I meet with families one of the things I have to ask them is if they want to see the body of the deceased. People kind of struggle with this and there is no right or wrong answer. Some find it helpful as it helps to bring closure but then others don't want to see the body of their loved one. Most everyone is skittish about seeing a corpse and that's where we are apart from Christ. We are a bunch of walking corpses. That's how we are until the Gospel comes.

Isaiah 43:25 says [25] *"I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins."* The man I was sharing the Gospel seemed to really grasp that. Micah 7:19 says [19] *He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*

In giving us this parable, God intends for us to be so relieved, amazed and confident that in Christ our sins are forgiven and we are compelled to extend that forgiveness to others no matter what they have done especially when we see the magnitude of talents we have all brought to the table. Jesus says in Mark 11:25, [25] *"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."* When we don't forgive we show that maybe we don't appreciate God's forgiveness of us.

A second problem of not forgiving others, is it keeps me in bondage to others to whom I refuse to forgive. God knows the danger of not forgiving others. He knows the danger of bitterness and hardness that can creep into our soul. Paul writes very seriously in Ephesians 4:31-32 [31] *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. [32] Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

The danger of bitterness and hatred lurks around us all the time and it's threatening us. Maybe this describes you in your life where you have been in bondage to others. Perhaps they have offended and hurt you in some way, you're angry and you're pushing back from the idea of forgiving them. They may be going on in their life and don't even know they are causing you a problem but you're seething. What has happened is you have dropped into bondage to them and God doesn't want us to be in bondage to anyone.

S. I. McMillen wrote a book titled None of the Diseases and in this book he talks about Biblical patterns in life that can bring healing and things like that but in it he makes this interesting statement; the moment I start hating a man I become his slave. I can't escape his tyrannical grasp on my mind and when the waiter serves me porter house steak, it might as well be stale bread and water for the man I hate will not permit me to enjoy it.

That's a profound statement. We need to be careful in our interactions with others because in a fallen world that happens, but we need not live in bondage to that. Jesus wants us in bondage to no one but Himself and therefore we forgive to guard ourselves, to protect our relationship with Christ, to permit the opportunity to grow and allow the free flowing of the Spirit through us as He works. We need to forgive others.

I just want to review for you what forgiveness is. What was Jesus talking about? First, I want to say what forgiveness is not. Number one, forgiveness is not instantaneous. It's not a sudden, climatic release of hatred and suddenly a quick return to a state of kindness and compassion. Jesus knows that. It's naïve to assume that perhaps a lifetime of abuse, a tragic injustice, a loss of a life under dreadful circumstances or even one's own failure will be forgiven and resolved all at once in one moment.

Dan Allender says 'to forgive another is always an ongoing, deepening process rather than a once and for all event.' We may pick a moment where we say 'I forgive you' and often that's what the case is which many times is a desire and resolution of our heart and mind that we do to forgive someone, but the actually process of working through forgiveness may take a long time.

Secondly, forgiveness is not forgetting. Forgive and forget is often combined together in a way that is not especially helpful. Forgetting doesn't mean we eradicate from our memory an anger. This is not really what the Bible teaches. Offenses, difficulties and hurts may ebb away from the frontal parts of our memory but to naively assume that they will all go away suddenly is not correct. God says in Jeremiah 31:34, *[34] And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*

This refers to God in Christ who refuses to drag out our past sins and threaten our eternal security with it. It's been hurled away. II Corinthians 5:10 says *[10] For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.* There is a sense in that God's understanding of our sinfulness when we appear before God where we will give somewhat of an accounting for our sins but it will not effect our salvation or be vanquished from God's presence. We don't know all the implications with that but likewise with us it's not that our brain is turned off and we simply forget what has happened in the past. That's why forgiveness is an ongoing process. Yet when it comes to forgetting, forgiveness is not contingent on that.

Thirdly, this is important, forgiveness is not dependent on reconciliation. Perhaps you have said something like 'I'll forgive him when he comes and says he is sorry.' We have all said this but the problem with that is, Jesus forgave all our sins before we repented. The reason it's not dependent on reconciliation is because reconciliation requires the agreement of others. Restoration of a relationship means we come together in agreement, make amends and built a relationship which is wonderful, but forgiveness is not dependent on that. We are called to forgive even when reconciliation is not reached. Reconciliation might not even be possible because that person may not be no longer with us. Forgiveness is something we control by the power of the Holy Spirit and it's something we need to make in our relationship with God.

So, what is forgiveness? I would suggest this definition which is a collection of thoughts from several different sources. Forgiveness is an act of grace. It's not earned by someone else but it's an act of grace whereby we refuse to make someone pay their debt to us and in doing so we open the door to repentance and restoration of a broken relationship. I'd like to frame this in four simple little steps, so consider four elements of this definition.

First, is if we are having a problem with someone the first thing we do is pray. We lift prayers up. It's important that we don't just muscle our way up to do this. Forgiveness can be so tough that we start by taking it before God rather than others for He understand forgiveness far more than we do. Look at the Lord's Prayer. In this very elementary prayer for the newest

believers the Disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. It's interesting to see what Jesus includes in this prayer.

Matthew 6:9-15 says [9] *Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. [10] Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. [11] Give us this day our daily bread, [12] and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. [13] And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [14] For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, [15] but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*

We pray for our daily for food, for protection, security deliverance from evil and then like ham on a sandwich tucked between those two we pray for forgiveness. Forgiveness is as fundamental as our security and food as believers. It's an indispensable part of what we need to learn. We need to learn to forgive. I believe it's one of the most powerful elements of our witness. We start out by praying as we take it to the Lord for He knows exactly how difficult it is.

The second step is we let history lie. We live in a fallen world. Bad things happen. Hurt people hurt people – we have been hurt and failed by others. Broken promises, relationships and bodies are facts of life that are painful but are part of history and we can't altar history. It's a temptation to say the only way you will ever forgive a person is if they never did it. We may never articulate that but we can get pretty stubborn when it comes to forgiving a person. We can't change history and we're not called to. We must acknowledge it and let it stand.

We see it time and again in the Bible those who have lived successful lives as believers through bad history. Some examples would be Job, Joseph, King David – both attacks from others and his own failures. Then there is Daniel who knew betrayal, hardship and persecution. We see what Joseph said to his brothers in Genesis 50:20 which says [20] *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.* God can use all the hurts, difficulties and pain for His glory in ways that we can hardly imagine.

Romans 8:28-29 says [28] *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. [29] For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.* Not all things are good, but verse 29 is God's solution to what He did to conform us to the image of Christ. I'm conformed to the image of Christ much more readily in times of difficulty than in times of affluence and prosperity. I'm like the team that gets nine runs ahead and blows it in the late innings. I don't handle prosperity very well but in times of difficulty when I have to go before the Father He really conforms me to His image. We need to let history lie.

The third step is we need to leave emotions behind. What I mean is that our response to the past may include grief, depression, hatred and fear which are deep, legitimate emotions. God has given us a sense of righteousness and when that is violated you will respond emotionally, as you should. We see this in even Jesus' life as we would see Him respond in various situations with righteous indignation or even weeping and those are real emotions, but we need to realize those emotions are under our control. We live in a society that says we're a puppet to our emotions and you can't control them but yes we can. That's a whole sermon within itself but the Bible is complete when it says that God can give us the strength to control our emotions. It's best we don't feed them or deny them but we leave them behind.

I love track and field. I remember the coach saying to me in seventh grade after seeing how slow I was, 'I want you to be the manager of the track team.' That means I kept the books, worked with the equipment, watch the meets and learn all about track and field. My brother was a much better runner than I was. This week has been the world finals in track and field. There is a girl who is 22 years old who set the world record in the 400 meter hurdles – that is running one lap of the track jumping ten hurdles and she broke her on record by three quarters of a second. It doesn't sound like much but in that distance it was like 20 to 30 feet. She has set the record four times in the past 13 months. This is just an astounding thing for such a youngster to have such success.

How did she do that? Did she beat up her opponents? Did she scorn and ridicule them? No, she left them behind. She smoked them. It's interesting because that's what we do with our emotions. They are there and very real. So, we don't express them recklessly in anger, vent in rage or bitterness and we certainly don't take revenge and at the same time we don't stuff them or bury them. There is a balance there and perhaps you need to talk with a counselor or fellow believer about them to work them out but we need to leave them behind. They are very real but we need to keep them from controlling us.

Hamilton said 'To take the thoughts captive one by one as they surface in our minds and seek an outlet. We are called to give no concession to our self indulgences, make no room for storage or unseen revenges for there is no time for raffle acts to be replayed on a fantasy screen of our mind.' My emotions are under my control and they are not going to control me. I leave them behind.

Fourthly and lastly, I love with mercy and grace. These must become the defining qualities of my relationships. I go of the offense. Mercy says in so many words I will cancel the penalty of my offender. Whoever has hurt me perhaps deserve punishment, but I no longer demand that he or she pay. No one forces me to take revenge or act against my offender. No law says I have to stop speaking to someone who has slandered me. I can choose to do that, but no one requires that. Grace says I will pay the price for their sin. What does this mean? Think of ways you might pay the price. Simply refuse to hate someone, that's part of that payment. I'll renounce anger and self pity. I speak positively about someone when I want to slander them. I pray for someone who I would rather curse. I'll choose to demonstrate love in my mind and heart sometimes when even no one else knows. I won't brag about it. I won't make them pay and grace says that it will pay in doing those positive and Biblical responses to a person who has harmed and hurt you.

Paul says in Romans 12:19-21 [19] *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."* [20] *To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."* [21] *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Paul is talking about paying for their sins here. Don't stab them in the back. Seek in some way to bless them. I just keep my mouth shut when I want to vent my rage. Perhaps you are thinking 'you have no idea how much I have been hurt and I could never do that.' The Bible would say to you 'but that is what Jesus did.' That is exactly what Jesus did for you. In mercy He said, "I'll take the penalty for your sin, you no longer have to bear it, I will pay the price for your sin Myself." That's just the simple Gospel. I wasn't deserving and I didn't care but He paid the penalty for my sin. We know Him because He did not give us what we deserve but loved us with mercy and grace.

Isaiah 53:5-6 says [5] *But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. [6] All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*

What a picture of His redeeming and gracious love! The summary of the Matthew 18 parable is that Jesus says to deal with others as you are counting on Me dealing with you. That's the bottom line. Is this really possible? Of course it is! Is my salvation possible? Of course it is! Are we really willing to become miracles of God's grace? When people say they want to see a miracle in their own life they are usually thinking in terms of the feeding of the five thousand or raising Lazarus from the dead or Jesus turning water into wine or healing someone from a disease or something along those lines, but when He works forgiveness in your heart for someone that has really hurt you, that's an astounding miracle of grace and no one else may know it – the courts of heaven, the cloud of witnesses in heaven will know it – but that is what He is calling us to do. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, I thank You that You have done an amazing, miraculous work in each one of us. I thank You for Your forgiveness and Your grace demonstrated on the cross. I pray that as we grow as believers that You will help us become more and more effective in this business of forgiveness. Some of us have late starts in life, some did not grow up in homes where they ever saw anything like forgiveness and I pray You will help us take what we have learned from the past and work for Your glory in each one of our lives so that we may step into eternity having served You well with a truly miraculous life in Christ Jesus. We thank You for this and we pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.