

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 23, 2010**

## **THE LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

### **INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING**

I have preached on this passage and the subject of forgiveness before. So, some of what I have to say today may sound familiar to some of you, especially if you have been part of this church family for a while. I come back to this passage because it represents another important moment in the life of Simon Peter, who came to Jesus with a question about the limits of forgiveness. In the teaching of Jesus here, there is an important life lesson, a spiritual lesson about being forgiven and forgiving. Not just for Peter, but for all of us as well. Regardless of your age, race, gender, national origin, marital status, education, or employment situation, this is a subject that is relevant to every one of us.

Let's look together at God's Word as we find it in Matthew 18:21-35. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

### **NO FUTURE WITHOUT FORGIVENESS**

Peter asked Jesus a question about how many times we are supposed to forgive those who sin in some way against us. Jesus answered, as He so often did, by telling a story. He used stories to explain or illustrate spiritual principles. So, let me begin by telling you a story. A true story.

I'm sure you know who Desmond Tutu is. Called the "moral conscience of South Africa," Tutu was the first black Anglican bishop in South Africa. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his tireless work against apartheid, the policy of racial segregation and oppression of non-whites by the minority white ruling class in South Africa. In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu shares stories and insights from his experience as head of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 1994, when apartheid was finally abolished and the ruling whites relinquished power, and Nelson Mandela was elected president, the question in need of an answer was this: *How does a country with so much hatred and pain, so much violence and division in its past, move forward?* The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established as a way forward. The purpose was for people who had committed atrocities in the past to come forward and tell the truth – both blacks and whites. But that is not all. After confessing the truth, the goal was to achieve forgiveness and reconciliation, to break the cycle of violence and hate, so the whole country could move forward.

In the book, Tutu recounts the testimony of one person after another, both black and white, who came before the commission to confess to having tortured and murdered others. They told horrific stories in graphic detail. If we could, we would rather believe that human beings are not capable of such evil. Unfortunately, we are.

Among those who came before the commission were a woman and her daughter. The woman's husband had been an advocate for black South Africans who lived in rural communities. Because of his work, he had been arrested, detained, and tortured by the police numerous times. Then one day he disappeared. On the front page of the newspaper, his wife saw a photo of her husband's car on fire. As she described the autopsy report about his torture, she sobbed so uncontrollably that the commission hearing had to be adjourned.

When the hearing resumed, the daughter spoke. Years had gone by since her father's death, and she was now a young woman. She pleaded with the commission to discover who had killed her father. But she was not there to seek vengeance, or even to demand justice. She said to the commission: "We want to forgive, but we don't know whom to forgive."

Eventually, the policemen who had done it confessed. Rather than continue the endless cycle of hatred, this woman and her daughter chose to forgive the men who had tortured and killed their husband and father. They chose to forgive, because that is what God calls His people to do. In Ephesians 4:31-32, the Bible says: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice (hate). Be kind to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

If you were in the position of that mother and daughter, would you be willing to do what they did? Could you forgive someone who committed such terrible acts against someone you love? How is it possible? Only by the grace of God. And even then, it might be the hardest thing you would ever have to do.

If your name is Elin Woods, and your marriage has been shattered by the discovery that your husband has been unfaithful to you not once but with dozens of other women, and the whole world knows about it, the idea of forgiveness may be out of the question. It may seem totally out of the realm of possibility. To forgive a husband or wife who is unfaithful once is hard enough. How can Elin possibly forgive Tiger? Impossible, except by the grace and power of God. And I'm not suggesting it would ever be easy.

C. S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*: "Everybody thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive." Then, when you have something to forgive, when you are the one who has been hurt or offended or betrayed or wronged in some way, you begin to appreciate how difficult forgiveness can be. We all want to be forgiven when we say or do something we shouldn't have, or when we fail to do something we should have done. We all want to be forgiven. But not all of us are willing to forgive. Forgiven? Yes. Forgiving of others? That's a different story.

Or, like Peter, we want to know about the limits of forgiveness. We want to know how many times we're supposed to forgive someone before they run out of chances. We want to know how many strikes we should give a person who sins against us in some way before they strike out.

Peter probably thought he was being generous when he suggested the number seven to Jesus. After all, it was more than twice the going rate, according to the teaching of the Pharisees.

They taught that you should forgive three times. But on the fourth offense, no more. Four strikes and you're out. So, in Peter's mind, he was going above and beyond the call of duty. But he thought there must be an upper limit to forgiveness, a point beyond which we are no longer required to forgive.

What did Jesus say? "No, Peter. You've got it all wrong. Not seven times, but 77 (or 70 x 7) times." Which was Jesus' way of saying, we are not to keep track of how many times someone sins against us and comes to us to be forgiven. There is no ceiling or upper limit to the number of times we are to forgive. A person who has been forgiven by God must forgive the one who sins against us whenever the offending person repents and asks for forgiveness.

Because we are all sinners, because we all sin against God and against others, Desmond Tutu is right: There is no future without forgiveness. Not for any of us.

### **IF YOU WANT TO BE FORGIVEN**

In the parable of the unforgiving debtor, Jesus shows us the peril of being unforgiving. The man in the story had run up an astronomical debt which had come due. When the king demanded it of him, he begged for mercy. He asked for more time, and promised he would pay it, even though it was way beyond his means. The king was touched by his plea. He took pity on him and forgave the debt completely. He wiped it off the books. He took the debtor off the hook.

But this now-forgiven debtor turned right around and refused to forgive a co-worker who owed him maybe \$100. When the co-worker pleaded for more time, he showed him no mercy, and had him thrown in jail.

When the king heard about how the forgiven debtor had treated the guy who owed him money, the king flew into a rage, un-forgave him, and had him thrown into jail until he paid back every last penny he owed.

If you don't forgive, Jesus said, if you *won't* forgive, don't expect to be forgiven. Don't expect to receive God's forgiveness if you are unwilling to extend forgiveness to your brother or sister or neighbor. If you want to be forgiven by your Father in heaven, forgive those who sin against you. If you won't forgive, you better watch out, because one thing God doesn't like is an unforgiving spirit. If you want to be forgiven, be a forgiver.

### **FORGIVENESS AND UNFORGIVENESS DEFINED**

Maybe we need to stop right here and talk about what the words *forgiveness* and *unforgiveness* mean. To *forgive* is to give up the right to retaliate or seek revenge against someone who has hurt us. *Forgiveness* is the willingness to let go of your resentment toward a person who has wronged you, regardless of how serious or painful the wrong may have been. It is a decision to give up the desire to get even. It does not mean that the hurt doesn't hurt anymore. It does not excuse what the person said or did. Forgiveness means that I give up my right to hurt you for hurting me.

I love the way Spencer Perkins described it. He said that forgiveness is “playing the grace card.” Not the *race* card, but the *grace* card. The words *forgive* and *grace* come from the same word in Greek, the word *charis*. To *forgive*, then, means “to act with grace” toward others. Which is how God acts toward us. As David reminds us in Psalm 103, God does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities (103:10).

*Unforgiveness*, on the other hand, is a deliberate decision to hold onto the hurt, to bear a grudge against the wrongdoer, and to seek revenge or retaliation of some kind. It is a refusal to extend grace and mercy to a fellow sinner.

Charles Stanley calls unforgiveness “a land mine in the life of a believer.” What does a land mine do? It explodes on the person who triggers it. The person who is hurt the most by unforgiveness – not necessarily the *only* victim, but the *main* victim – is the person who triggers the land mine by refusing to forgive.

Anne Lamott compares unforgiveness to drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die. If you drink the poison of unforgiveness, if you harbor resentment and bitterness in your heart against someone, you are the one who will be most harmed by it. It may or may not affect the other person, but it will most definitely damage you.

A spirit of unforgiveness will hinder your prayer life. In Mark 11:25, Jesus said: “When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” If you hold *anything* against *anyone*. A refusal to forgive is a barrier to receiving God’s forgiveness in your life. If you want God to answer your prayers, do not allow the root of bitterness or unforgiveness to take hold in your life.

An unforgiving spirit will hinder your worship and your witness as well. It gets in the way of a healthy relationship with God, and compromises or even contradicts your testimony to the power of God’s grace.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, opens the door to healing and peace in our hearts. It opens the door to a healthier, more vibrant relationship with God. Not to mention healthier relationships with others, less stress and anxiety, lower blood pressure, and other health benefits.

But Jesus didn’t tell Peter to forgive without keeping count just because it would make him (Peter) feel better. No. Jesus wanted Peter to understand that being a forgiver is at the heart of the gospel. Instead of focusing on the limits of forgiveness, Jesus wanted Peter to understand and embrace the freedom of forgiveness, both the freedom of being forgiven and the freedom of forgiving others: The freedom of letting go of the desire to get even and the need to get revenge. When we give up the right to retaliate and instead extend the grace of forgiveness to the one who has wronged us, we reflect the image and likeness of God.

Chuck Swindoll said it this way: “We are most like beasts when we kill. We are most like men when we judge (others). We are most like God when we forgive.”

## **FORGIVING AND TOLERATING**

Lewis Smedes wrote one of the classic books on forgiveness. It is called *Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. In it he distinguishes between forgiving and toleration. He says: "You can forgive someone almost anything. But you cannot tolerate everything. We don't have to tolerate what people do just because we forgive them for doing it. Forgiving heals us personally. To tolerate everything only hurts us all in the long run."

Do you hear what he is saying? Some things in life are absolutely intolerable, and you should never tolerate them. What Tiger Woods did in his marriage is intolerable. Unfaithfulness to your spouse is not tolerable, even if it is only one time. Abusing a child sexually – abusing anyone sexually or physically or emotionally – is never tolerable. Rape is never tolerable. Driving drunk is not tolerable. Nor is murder. Racial prejudice and the violence it produces are not tolerable. None of these things is tolerable.

But they are forgivable. That is a hard thing to get a handle on, especially if you or someone you love has been the victim of any of these. The blood of Jesus shed on the cross is sufficient even to pay the penalty for sins such as these.

When you forgive, it does not mean you are excusing what the person did or said that hurt you. If you have been abused in some way, you don't simply go back to the way things were and pretend you were never abused. No! Forgiving someone doesn't remove the consequences of their words and actions. Actions do have consequences. Even when there is forgiveness. So do words. But when you choose to forgive, you give up the right to avenge the wrong you have suffered. Instead, you leave it in God's hands. Romans 12:19 says: "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath."

## **NO EASY BUTTON**

Forgiveness, unfortunately, does not come with an "easy button." Sometimes forgiveness is easier than other times. But sometimes it is just about the hardest thing in the world. Even then, it is God's will for you and me.

God is a forgiving God. He is full of compassion and mercy and grace. His grace is greater than all our sin. But if we refuse to forgive others when they sin against us, we cannot expect God to forgive us. If you want to be forgiven, be a forgiver.

Jesus didn't want Peter to be concerned with trying to figure out the limits of forgiveness, for God's forgiveness has no limits. Instead, Jesus wanted him to understand and experience the freedom of being forgiven and the freedom of forgiving others.

There may be something terribly painful in your past or even your present that you have not been able to forgive. The step of forgiveness may seem impossible to you. But it is not impossible with God. Give it to God. Ask Him to give you both the desire and the power to forgive whomever it is for whatever they did. Choose to play the grace card.

May you know in your life the liberating joy of both being forgiven and being a forgiver.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.