

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 21, 2009**

**FORGIVENESS IS NOT OPTIONAL**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

Have you ever said something you wish you hadn't said?

Ever do something you regret doing?

Have you ever given your word and then failed to keep it?

If your answer is "yes" to any of the above, welcome to the human race. We have all done it. We all do it. Which is why we all stand in need of forgiveness.

The Bible has a lot to say about forgiveness. Perhaps the most important thing it says is that God is a forgiving God. Forgiveness is a part of God's nature. The Bible says in Psalm 130:4 that "with God there is forgiveness." David says in Psalm 32:5 that when he confessed his sins to the Lord, the Lord forgave the guilt of his sin. And the Lord promises to do the same for us. The Bible says in 1 John 1:8-9: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." In Psalm 103, we are reminded that

The LORD is compassionate and gracious,  
Slow to anger, abounding in love.  
He does not treat us as our sins deserve  
Or repay us according to our iniquities.  
As far as the east is from the west,  
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.  
- (103:8, 10, 12)

You may already know all of this. Praise God if you do. But sometimes it is good to be reminded of what we already know. This is awfully good news. Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel. And there is more: The Bible says that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). But Jesus went to the cross and shed His blood there as a sacrifice – the perfect, all-sufficient, once-for-all sacrifice – to make payment for our sins. As it says in Isaiah 53:5:

He was pierced for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities.  
The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him,  
And by His wounds we are healed.

Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might be forgiven and set free from the burden of our sin and guilt.

My friends, that is good news. And it is meant for you. God is a forgiving God. Jesus died to take away your sins. And there is nothing you have done that is beyond the pale of God's

forgiveness. Nothing. Whatever you have done in the past, or failed to do, no matter what skeletons you may have hiding in your closet, no matter what secret sins of the past – or present – you carry around with you, forgiveness is just a prayer away. There is forgiveness with God. If you confess your sin to Him – and turn from it in repentance – God is faithful and just to forgive your sin, whatever it is. Jesus died for you. He died to pay for *your* sins. That is the good news. But God’s forgiveness does no good in your life unless you take hold of it. Unless you appropriate it. Unless you turn to Him in a spirit of repentance to seek and receive His forgiveness.

Are you carrying around some unresolved sin in your life? The best thing you can do is to confess it to the Lord today, renounce your sin and receive His forgiveness. For God *is* a forgiving God. And everybody needs forgiveness.

Why do you think Jesus instructs us to pray for forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer? It is because we are sinners. Even His redeemed people, even the most devoted followers of Christ you can think of, still sin. Even though we have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, even though we have been made new creatures in Christ, we will struggle with sin. So Jesus tells us to pray for forgiveness: “Forgive us our debts (sins) as we forgive our debtors (those who sin against us)” (Matthew 6:12).

The word “debt” is a Jewish metaphor for sin. It refers to an obligation we owe to God but fail to meet. Because of our disobedience to God and His commands, because we all fall short of God’s standard of moral perfection, we are debtors to God. And it is a debt we are unable to pay. There is no way in the world we can ever pay God the debt we owe. The psalm writer asked the question in Psalm 116: “How can I repay the Lord for all His goodness to me?” (116:12). It is a good question. The truth is that we can’t repay God for all His goodness, for all His acts of mercy and grace to us. It can’t be done. And we can’t pay God the enormous debt we owe because of our sin. It can’t be done.

The parable Jesus told in Matthew 18 is really a picture of us and our sin-debt. *We* are the servant who has been forgiven this staggering debt which we cannot pay. It is really a picture of our relationship to God, who in His grace has forgiven the astronomical debt we owe. It is a picture of what God is like in His forgiving nature. If God were not forgiving, what hope would there be for us?

But what does Jesus tell us about forgiveness? He says that if we refuse to forgive others (like the unforgiving servant in the parable), if we harbor an unforgiving spirit, we cut ourselves off from the flow of God’s forgiveness in our lives.

Peter came to Jesus with a question about the limits of forgiveness. We don’t know what prompted Peter’s question. It is possible he was wrestling with unforgiveness in his own life. He wanted to know how many times he had to forgive someone who did him wrong. The rabbis said three times. On the fourth offense, forgiveness was no longer required. Peter figured Jesus might have a higher standard. He thought seven times might be the right answer. But Jesus said – and I think He might have chuckled as He spoke to him: “Not seven times, but seventy times seven (or seventy-seven times)” (Matthew 18:22).

Was Jesus attaching a number to forgiveness, giving us permission to keep a running record of offenses against us? No. Was He saying that when you get to #78 (or #491) it is time for vengeance? No, although one prominent politician, referring to what Jesus said here about how many times we should forgive, said: “I want you all to know that I’m keeping a chart.” It was probably said tongue-in-cheek. At least I hope so.

Jesus is saying there is no limit to the number of times we should forgive. *No limit*. Just as there is no limit to the number of times God will forgive us.

But Jesus is also saying this: If you want to be forgiven by God, forgive others. If you want to be forgiven, be a forgiver. You will not experience forgiveness beyond your willingness to forgive others. If you refuse to forgive someone who has offended you, you cannot expect God to forgive you. Jesus says it plainly in Matthew 6:14-15, immediately following the Lord’s Prayer. He says: “If you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” Ouch!

And then, after telling the story of the unforgiving debtor and what happened to him because of his unforgiveness, Jesus drives the same point home: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother (or sister) from your heart” (Matthew 18:35).

C. S. Lewis observed in *Mere Christianity*: “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.” We are by nature much more eager to receive forgiveness – to be forgiven – than we are to forgive. When someone has hurt us by their words or actions, the truth is that very often we don’t want to forgive. We want to hold onto our hurt. To our anger. To our bitterness.

Is that true in your life? Are you holding a grudge against someone? Are you nursing an unforgiving spirit?

What you may not realize is that when you do that, you actually punish yourself. We’ve already said that an unwillingness to forgive others shuts off the flow of God’s forgiveness in our lives. But that’s not all it does. An unforgiving spirit locks you in a prison of hurt and anger and bitterness. We may think we’re hurting the other person by refusing to forgive – and maybe we are. But we are hurting ourselves even more. Lewis Smedes said: “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.” You and I are the prisoner when we refuse to forgive.

And here is the point Jesus is making in the parable: Compared to the enormity of the sin-debt we owe to God, compared to the debt God has forgiven, compared to the debt Jesus paid for us on the cross, anything for which we need to forgive one another is just chump change. It doesn’t even begin to compare. So, if God can forgive us, is there anything we can’t forgive one another?

This is not to say that forgiveness is always (or ever) easy. Sometimes it can be incredibly difficult.

When a drunk driver kills a loved one  
 When someone you love cheats on you or betrays you or lets you down  
 When someone lies to you, or lies about you  
 When the actions of another person bring significant pain or loss to your life

Forgiveness is not always easy. But it is not optional. An unforgiving Christian is really a contradiction in terms. To be unforgiving when we ourselves depend totally on God's forgiving grace makes us hypocrites.

The Bible says in Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Again, in Colossians 3:13 it says: "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." As God has forgiven us the incalculable debt we owe, so we are to forgive those who sin against us. *Whatever* grievances we may have. In both of these verses, the word for "forgive" is the Greek word *charisomai*, which comes from the root word *charis*, which means "grace." So, what the Bible is saying is that we are to act with grace toward one another, just as God has acted in grace toward us.

That is a tall order. And we can only do it by God's grace. But we can do it by His grace. We can act with grace toward one another by depending on God's grace. And we must, if we want to be in a right relationship of fellowship with God. Remember that you are never more like Jesus than when you forgive. For what did He say on the cross, as He bore the weight of the world's sin – including ours – on His shoulders? Just before He died, He said: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Even at the end, with the spikes driven through His hands and feet, listening to the taunts of His accusers, Jesus chose to forgive. As Isaac Watts wrote, "Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!" When you forgive those who have hurt you, you reflect the heart of Jesus.

It has been said that forgiveness is the virtue we most enjoy, and least employ, in our Christian experience. Do you think that is true? If it is, we are in a heap of trouble. That is not the way it is meant to be. The forgiven are to be forgivers.

You may have heard me say that the church is meant to be a *grace place*. This is a place – a fellowship, a family – where each one of us should experience the wonder of God's grace, and where each one of us should exhibit that grace or express it in our relationships with one another and our witness to others. The church is meant to be a place of grace. That means it is meant to be a forgiveness place, too, since forgiveness is an expression of God's mercy and grace. It is a place to find forgiveness. A place to receive forgiveness from God. And a place where, as we breathe the air of God's grace, forgiveness permeates our relationships with one another.

Unforgiveness is dangerous, because it cuts us off from the flow of God's forgiving grace. Unforgiveness is unhealthy, because it is like a spiritual cancer that will eat away at your soul.

An unforgiving spirit is a self-imposed prison of the heart. In fact, says Warren Wiersbe, “the world’s worst prison is the prison of an unforgiving heart.”

Do you know anyone like the woman in her 80s who had been holding a grudge for fifty years? Fifty years earlier, her aunt had insulted her, and this woman had never forgiven her. Fifty years later, she could recount the event in precise detail, and she still felt the same bitterness, the same anger, the same resentment welling up within her as when it happened. Sadly, she had become a bitter, crotchety, quarrelsome woman who could find no happiness in life whatever. She was stuck in the prison of an unforgiving heart.

Don’t be like her. Let forgiveness flow freely in your life. Experience the unparalleled blessing of forgiveness by confessing your sins to the Lord and (when appropriate) to one another. Embrace the gospel of grace. And extend forgiveness to those who have hurt you. Stay out of the prison of unforgiveness. If you’re in that prison today, ask God to change your heart and set you free.

Forgiveness is not optional. We can’t live without it.

Blessed are the forgiven. And blessed are the forgivers. May it be so in us, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.