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Sermon Notes

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Forgiven Sinners Owe Forgiveness to Other Sinners

Matthew 18:21-35

Ben Hur: Judah ben Hur, a Jewish nobleman, with a beloved mother and sister; had a childhood friend, a Roman boy named Messala; as the movie opens, Messala returns, now as the Lieutenant Governor of Judea; Judah and Messala try to get reconnected as friends, but it soon becomes obvious that they have grown apart... they soon quarrel, because Messala tries to use Judah as an informant against his own people... their friendship ends... but the bitterness is just about to begin

As the new governor enters the city of Jerusalem, he passes under Judah's home... a stone accidentally falls from his roof and causes the governor's horse to rear... the governor falls heavily to the ground injured, but not seriously. Roman soldiers soon pound their way into Judah ben Hur's house... they seize Judah and his mother and sister... Judah pleads that it was an accident, that he intended no threat against the governor... Messala comes in, and initially Judah is relieved, thinking that he will listen to his plea... but instead Messala looks at him with eyes of coal and a heart of stone

All three are arrested, and Judah is sentenced to die in the slave galleys

As he is making his way to the port city of Tyrus to board the galley, he is ready to die of thirst... a man mysteriously and courageously saves Judah's life by giving him a gourd-full of water against the orders of the Roman centurion guarding him

For three years, Judah lives the brutal life of a galley slave, chained to an oar... only his burning hatred for Messala keeps him alive with every stroke of the oar he is rowing

As the story unfolds, Judah returns to Judea years later, burning with a deep desire for revenge... he eventually confronts Messala with the demand to release his mother and sister from prison. However, over the years, Messala has lost track of them in the prison in Fort Antonia. He sends a soldier to find them, and discovers they are lepers... but he doesn't tell Judah

In a climatic scene, ben Hur and Messala compete in a violent chariot race, and Messala is mortally injured, run over by his own chariot and others'... as Judah goes to see the dying Messala, this wicked man, even as he lay dying, twists the knife deeper, and reveals with his dying gasps that his mother and sister are living in the Valley of the Lepers

Now that Messala is dead and his mother and sisters are to spend the rest of their lives as lepers, Judah's burning hatred and thirst for revenge turns instead to Rome in general... he yearns to destroy the Roman empire

However, as he is carrying his leprous sister into Jerusalem, he sees the man who years earlier had given him that life-saving drink of water... it is Jesus, and He is being led through the streets of Jerusalem carrying a cross

Judah is stunned, and, leaving his mother and sister with a friend, he follows to Calvary to watch the crucifixion

As Jesus is dying, his blood flows down the cross, and is carried by the rain to where Judah's mother and sister are... they are miraculously healed of their leprosy

But something even more amazing happens...

As Judah stood near the foot of the cross, he heard Jesus speak the most astonishing words he'd ever heard:

Father, forgive them... they don't know what they're doing.

Stood there, transfixed and transformed... he returns to his now healed family and tells them that he too has been healed of his hatred, his unforgiveness, his suicidal thirst for revenge... and the movie ends with Judah's awe-struck words

"I felt his voice take the sword out of my hands"

As we come to Matthew 18:21-35, we come to one of the most powerful parables Jesus ever told... and it is my prayer that in it you will hear the voice of Jesus take the sword of unforgiveness out of your hands

I. Unforgiveness is Human, Forgiveness is Divine

A. A World that Delights in Revenge

1. Hollywood has slid down a dark hole since the days when Ben Hur was made; many movies and TV programs delight in the sweetness of revenge
2. A parallel movie, Gladiator, is built around a similar theme: a man named Maximus unjustly punished by the Roman Empire, his family is slaughtered mercilessly; for the rest of the movie the hero lives for one thing, revenge, on the man responsible... the emperor Commodus...

When Maximus reveals himself to Commodus after winning a battle in the arena, his lust for revenge is clear:

“My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius, Commander of the Armies of the North, General of the Felix Legions, loyal servant to the true emperor, Marcus Aurelius. Father to a murdered son, husband to a murdered wife. **And I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next.**”

3. the climax of the movie is Maximus’ supposedly sweet revenge on evil Commodus

What a contrast: Judah ben Hur feels the Lord Jesus Christ take the sword from his hand; Maximus the gladiator lives to thrust his sword into the body of his enemy, Commodus

B. The Sweet Power of Forgiveness... Even to Enemies

Matthew 5:43-45 You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

Luke 23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

C. A World Desperate for Forgiveness, But Gives So Little of It

II. Peter’s Question of Accounting: “How Many Times...?”

A. Context: Life in the Church

1. Dispute about who is greatest
2. Speaking to apostles... elders, leaders, undershepherds of the church
3. rather than argue about who’s greatest, you should humble yourself like a child
4. secondly, you should be on guard concerning sin... sin is the deadly enemy of the little children who are Christ’s disciples
 - a. Jesus gives a stern warning for anyone who causes one of His disciples to sin
 - b. Jesus then gives an equally stern warning for each of His disciples to war valiantly against sin
 - c. Then specifically to future undershepherds of the flock, Jesus speaks of the Father’s commitment to go to look for wandering sheep... this clearly refers to sinning Christians... what the Father does to restore them to healthy fellowship with Him and with the church
 - d. What follows is the teaching on the steps of church discipline

Vs. 15 "If your brother sins against you, go show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens, you have won your brother over."

As we saw, the steps lead ultimately to church discipline if the wandering sinner refuses to repent

Vs. 17 if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

e. Verses 18-20 speak clearly about the church's rights and responsibilities in dealing with sinning Christians... the right to bind and loose concerning sin, and the responsibility to pray for the straying Christian

f. This leads reasonably to Peter's question

Vs. 21 "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

It fits the whole context perfectly... dealing with the sins of other Christians

B. Issue Here: Forgiving other Christians

Peter asks about the brothers in Christ...

Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?

1. Christians should love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them

Luke 6:27-28 But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

Luke 6:36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

2. how much more should Christians forgive other Christians when they sin against them?

3. this issue here is an IN HOUSE, FAMILY matter... it's about forgiving other Christians

4. Peter has followed the instructions about church discipline... evicting an unrepentant so-called fellow Christian from the assembly if he refuses to repent

5. BUT what if he does repent? What if he does ask forgiveness? So, I forgive him... but then he does it again, and again... how many times do I have to forgive him?

C. A Question of Accounting: How Many Times???

1. Peter gives a recommendation: **“Up to seven times??”**
2. in this, almost certainly Peter felt he was going above and beyond the call of duty
 - a. in his day, the Jewish rabbis limited forgiveness to THREE TIMES
 - b. using references from the book of Amos, rabbis took statements about God’s judgments on sinning nations as a universal rule of the limits of forgiveness

Eight times in Amos, God says this kind of thing:

Amos 1:3 For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.

c. Rabbinic statements

Rabbi Jose ben Hanina “He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times.”

Rabbi Jose ben Jehuda “If a man commits an offense once, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a third time, they forgive him; the fourth time, they do not forgive him.”

3. For three years, Peter has been watching Christ’s sweet, merciful ministry; he’s seen Christ be so patient with the constant opposition of sinful men who wanted to murder Him

4. So Peter seeks to up the ante...

Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? UP TO SEVEN TIMES?

5. But Peter still thinking like man does... of forgiveness measured in an ordinary human way, by ordinary human accounting techniques
 - a. Imagine keeping a tally sheet
 - b. Saying... “You’re up to four times... you’ve used up more than half of your forgiveness.”
 - c. This is human arithmetic, human record-keeping

1 Corinthians 13:5 Love keeps no record of wrongs.

- d. Christ wants to expand Peter’s mind and heart by taking him to the infinitude of our own forgiveness before God

III. Christ's Stunning Answer, and Overwhelming Parable

A. Christ's Stunning Answer: There is No Limit!!

ESV **Matthew 18:22** *Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.*

1. Peter's answer seems godly... but it still falls short of Christ's intentions
2. His own answer brings us to the infinitude of forgiveness... the Greek definitely tends not merely to 77 times, as in the NIV, but 70 times 7 as in the KJV, NASB, RSV, and ESV
3. but lest we now think all we have to do is keep a thicker notebook for a longer-term accounting, a much more extensive record-keeping, Jesus unleashes one of the most stunning and devastating parable He ever taught
4. taken together, the teaching is clear: because there is no limit to the forgiveness we have received from God, there can be no limit to the forgiveness we give to each others

B. The Parable of the Ten Thousand Talents

1. A shocking parable
2. four real shockers
 - a. the SIZE of the slave's debt: 10,000 talents
 - b. the UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS of a debt that large
 - c. the UNFORGIVENESS of the servant after that... his shameful treatment of a man who owed him a comparatively small sum
 - d. the FINAL FATE of the servant: the unforgiving servant ends up thrown into jail to be tortured until he repays his debt

verse by verse explanation

3. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..."

- a. a parable for Christians, about Christians and life in the Kingdom
- b. this is covering life among believers, or at least those who claim to be so
- c. it is a drama unfolding in three Acts

4. Act 1: On Trial Before the King

Matthew 18:23 the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

a. Accountable to the King

- i) in the ancient world, the king's authority was absolute
- ii) every subject in his kingdom was under his dominion and accountable to him

Matthew 18:24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.

- iii) this servant who is called in was probably a high-ranking official, perhaps even a noble... but he is still accountable to the Master, the King
- iv) the King calls in this servant and wants an accounting of his stewardship
- v) the man's debt is astounding... 10,000 talents; an overwhelming debt, almost beyond calculation

A Talent was anywhere from 52 to 83 pounds... generally taken to be about 75 pounds;

10,000 talents of gold = 750,000 pounds

simply doing the math, a pound of gold at today's rate is approximately \$12,400 x 10,000 talents = \$9.3 billion

Information from ancient tax record shows that the Roman provinces of Idumea, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee was around 900 talents annually... this man then owed more than eleven years of taxes for those provinces

Or again, the amount of gold used to build Solomon's temple was just over 8000 talents... this man owed 25% more gold than was used in that magnificent temple (1 Chronicles 29:4, 7)

King Solomon, at the height of his wealth, accumulated 666 talents of gold per year; Solomon himself would have had to save all his gold for over 15 years to pay off that debt!!!

- vi) Greek word for 10,000 is related to our word for "myriad" ... it really could relate to an indefinably huge number

b. Obviously the desperate servant is in deep trouble

- i) We can hardly imagine how a single man could amass such an overwhelming debt

- ii) He is unable to pay... a vast understatement...
- iii) The king orders that he, his wife, his children, and all that he owns be sold to repay the debt
- iv) This is really nothing more than a punishment... nothing this man could offer could ever pay that huge a sum
- v) He immediately falls on his face and pleads with the King

Matthew 18:26 "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'

- vi) It's amazing that he actually thinks he can repay this!! As I've said, King Solomon himself couldn't repay the debt inside of 15 years!
- vii) The king is moved by compassion... the sight of this pitiable man moves the king to make a shocking pronouncement

Matthew 18:27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

Just like that?!! The man is now free to go!!! All that debt, simply forgiven by the mercy of the King

The servant walks out of the King's throne room a free man, owing nothing

But now comes the stunning second act of this drama

5. Act 2: Choking Another Servant

Matthew 18:28-30 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' ³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

- a. This is repugnant scene is almost beyond description
- b. He seeks out a man... the Greek implies he goes looking for him; he finds him... strong language about their equality before the king... this is simply one of his "fellow servants"...
- c. This man owes 100 denarii
 - i) A denarius is one day's wage for a common laborer

- ii) So this would be approximately 1/3rd of an annual salary for a working man... perhaps \$15,000...no small amount of money
- iii) It actually minimizes the implications of this parable if we make it a couple of bucks... it is a significant amount of money
- iv) **BUT IT IS NOTHING COMPARED TO WHAT THIS FIRST SERVANT OWED!!!**
- d. The first servant actually **CHOKES** the second servant: **Pay me what you owe me!! He demands**
- e. Something like a collection thug for a Mafia racket, shaking someone down for the money... willing to break his legs to get what he needs... even, it seems, willing to kill him
- f. **SHOCKING!!!**
- g. Even worse, the servant falls to his knees before him, and begs him in words that should have brought back recent memories... because they were the exact same words he used before the King

'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

- h. But unlike his gracious master, this man refuses... instead he goes away, finds the authorities and has the man thrown into debtors' prison

6. Act 3: Before the King a Second Time

- a. This act horrifies the other servants, who somehow have heard about it... the verse says they were deeply grieved
- b. The action is universally repugnant to everyone involved except to the self-righteous man who forced it... everyone else can see how horrible is this act of unmerciful vindictiveness
- c. They go tell the king, and soon the man is hauled back into court... the servant is still under the king's authority, and he must come
- d. The king goes over the history of their dealings... he's not forgotten the debt and the forgiveness

Matthew 18:32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

- e. Now comes the statement that stands behind my sermon title... it is a moral imperative, a law of forgiveness... if we accept the release of our debts, we come into a new obligation... a new debt

ESV Matthew 18:33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'

The English word "SHOULD" is a moral imperative... so also the Greek word behind it... this is REQUIRED... a moral obligation

Forgiven sinners owe forgiveness to other sinners

- f. The servant is given no opportunity to answer... in fact, there can be no possible answer... nothing is left but the time of rage on the part of the King

Vs. 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

There is an open question as to whether the servant is now back under the original debt again...

This parable is not dealing in precision with justification by faith, and the security of salvation; it is impossible for us to be justified by Almighty God for all sins, past, present and future, and then at a later time held accountable for those sins and thrown into hell for them

Instead the idea is that anyone who will not forgive has never really been forgiven by God

C. Christ's Final Warning

Vs. 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Some could feel: The parable takes our arm, and twists it forcefully behind our backs... forcing us to forgive others for the rest of our lives

But Christ's final words bring us to another level... we are to forgive our brothers FROM THE HEART... not grudgingly

Glad to forgive, delighted to forgive... glad to be free from the overwhelming burden of a permanent grudge... glad not to drink the poison of unforgiveness, not to pollute your souls for years and years... glad not to have to hide from someone, hoping they don't see you

Glad not to have to plan someone's demise, not to have to plot someone's assassination, not to have to marshal the army for siege warfare

Glad to see the look of relief in a brother's face, when they realize how sweetly Christ has worked forgiveness in your heart... glad to send someone on their way with a light heart

Forgive your brother FROM YOUR HEART

IV. Lessons and Implications from the 10,000 Talents

- A. God is a King, and We are All His Slaves, Accountable to Him
- B. God Has an Accurate Record of All of our Sins
- C. Our Sins Are Infinite in His Sight
- D. God is Willing to Cancel our Infinite Debt
- E. Others' Sins Against Us Make them Our Debtors
- F. We Have a Powerful Tendency Not to Forgive Those Debts
- G. If God Cancels Our Debts, We Owe Him to Forgive Others' Debts
- H. If We Don't Forgive At All, We Have None of Our Sins Forgiven
- I. If We Don't Forgive Specific Sins, We Will Have a Diminished Relationship with God
- J. Forgiveness Must be "From the Heart"

V. Practical Applications

- A. Have YOUR Sins Been Forgiven?
 1. Let's start with the gospel itself
 2. This parable makes it very plain that we have NO HOPE WHATSOEVER of surviving Judgment Day apart from Christ
 3. We have an infinite debt, and nothing but an infinite atonement can make us right with God
 4. Have you trusted in Christ?
- B. Are You a Forgiving Person?
 1. The implications of this parable is that those who have been forgiven much love much.... And those who have been forgiven much forgive others readily
 2. If you don't forgive readily, there is a clear implication that you may not be saved yourself
 3. If you do know that you are saved, and yet are sluggish to forgive, perhaps you have deeper issues
 - a. Pride: you think too much of yourself and your wounded pride

You remember at the family reunion a few years ago your brother said something unkind, seeking to be funny; everyone laughed and you did too... but inwardly you seethed with resentment

Now, three years later, you are nursing a grudge... whenever something reminds you of the person, whenever their name comes up in conversation, whenever they send you a Christmas gift or they call on the phone—a feeling of pain comes over your heart

It's called UNFORGIVENESS!!

At the root of it is pride... making too much of yourself

- b. Power: it is a powerful thing not to forgive someone... it puts you in the driver seat, and others have to grovel around you, walking on egg-shells, pandering to you, if perchance you might deign to forgive them

The cross of Jesus Christ is a sure remedy to unforgiveness... from the cross of Christ flows everything needed

C. Is There Anyone You Haven't Forgiven?

1. Almost Certainly Everyone in this Room Has Someone They Need to Forgive
2. Allow God's Holy Spirit to Search You
3. unforgiveness is a poison in your soul
4. allow Him to root it out... flush it out with the river of His grace
5. and it is grace to you both

D. Search the Realms of Life for People to Forgive

1. Forgiveness at Home
 - a. Husbands and wives
 - b. Parents and children
 - c. Siblings
2. Forgiveness with Extended Family
 - a. Grown children of parents

Some of the deepest roots of bitterness and unforgiveness can exist in the parent-child relationship, long after you're grown and gone...

Parenting is a challenge in any case... but some bitter memories can cloud the final years you may have with your aged parents...

Or you aged parents may have bitter feelings toward your children: they don't call enough, don't care enough, neglect you, etc.

- b. Grown siblings
- c. Grandparents, aunts, uncles

3. Forgiveness in the Church

- a. Home base of this parable
- b. Forgiving pastors/elders: sins of omission, a decision made that you disagreed with, a moment of sinful anger
- c. Forgiving other church members: sins of omission, harsh words spoken,

4. Forgiveness in the World

- a. A boss who treats you like dirt
- b. Fellow workers who mock your Christian faith
- c. A total stranger who cuts you off on the highway or honks their horn angrily when you feel you did nothing wrong

E. Ken Sande, *Peacemaker*

1. a great resource on reconciliation
2. issues a four-fold standard for when true forgiveness has occurred
 - a. Good thought
 - b. Hurt you not
 - c. Gossip never
 - d. Friends forever

Meaning

- i) "Good thought" = I will not think evil thoughts of this person... I will guard my mind and think only blessing on this brother or sister; I will pray for them, wish them well, yearn for their happiness and their blessing in Christ

- ii) "Hurt you not" = I give up the right to seek revenge... like Judah ben Hur, I will allow Christ's words "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" to soothe my anger, heal my pride, and take the sword from my clenched hand... I will NOT HURT this person... I will try to help them and bless them; so often, Christians hurt people they haven't forgiven not by frontal assault but more by guerrilla warfare... like covert operations at night... finding some secret way to do a person harm
- iii) "Gossip never" = I will not speak words against the person, telling the story over and over again of how this person hurt me
- iv) "Friends forever" = I like this person, I want to be with this person, I yearn to spend eternity in heaven with this person

Forgiveness is an ONGOING COMMITMENT as a faith-filled act of the will to do this four things: good thought, hurt you not, gossip never, friends forever!!

F. Three Key Questions on Forgiveness

1. Should I forgive someone who hasn't repented? Who doesn't even seem to think he/she needs forgiveness?
 - a. Answer: first of all, forgiveness is a state of heart... something within us... I want my heart CLEAR of bitterness, anger, unforgiveness... so I will forgive whether that person asks for it or not, or whether that person only sees part of the harm they've done
 - b. I forgive as the Lord has forgiven me
 - c. But there is still something very necessary and beneficial that they deal properly with the harm they've done... so asking forgiveness and genuinely repenting are very healthy things for that person to do... and if you can help them do them, all the better
 - d. Thus Jesus does in some sense link forgiveness to repentance

Luke 17:3-4 So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

- e. But here's the point: you don't NEED them to ask forgiveness or repent in order to forgive... your goal is to walk with a clear heart
2. What about repeat offenders?
 - a. What if they keep doing it over and over?

- b. Remember: this is the precise question Peter asked... how many times shall I forgive? Up to seven times?
 - c. Again, the issue is I want my heart to be clear of bitterness
3. What about my memories? [Especially poignant if the sin is a great one, like adultery, and the victimized spouse wants to continue in the marriage but will struggle with their memories the rest of their marriage]
- a. Key issue for me... all forgiveness is a COVERING of sin... the sin itself can never be removed (it happened in space and time and is part of the history books)
 - b. God has covered our sin in Christ:

Romans 4:7-8 Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ⁸ Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

- c. So we cover each other's sins too
 - i) Whenever the omniscience of God the Father recalls our sin, the grace of God the Father covers our sin with something infinitely more precious: the blood and righteousness of Christ
 - ii) So at the human level, whenever your memory brings up the sin, you commit to cover it with grace and forgiveness, ultimately through the cross of Christ

Let's be a church that is characterized by a gracious, forgiving spirit