

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(June 1, 2014)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon series: THE TIES THAT BIND

Forgive One Another

(Matthew 18)

Study #5

Introduction: Becoming forgiven forgivers...

On the first Sunday of every month, we take a few minutes to remember Jesus by taking the Lord's Supper. The bread and the cup of Communion reminds us of His suffering and death, His resurrection, and His return.

We're taking Communion at the end of the service today and I'm looking forward to that time with you.

When our thoughts turn to Jesus, we often think of His final hours and of those statements He made while nailed to the cross. He said, "*It is finished*" and "*I thirst*" and "*Today you shall be with Me in Paradise.*"

The very first words from the cross are words that we are going to especially take to heart this morning.

By the time He spoke these first words, He has already undergone awful suffering. He has neither eaten, drunk, nor slept in a very long time.

He has been betrayed by one friend, denied by another, and abandoned by most everyone else. He has been rejected by His own people and condemned by others. The Father will soon turn His back on Jesus.

He has been beaten mercilessly and subjected to cruel scorn. Nails have pierced His hands and His feet.

Now He speaks. These are the first words out of His mouth.

[Luke 23:34] "Father, FORGIVE THEM for they do not know what they are doing."

Clearly, Jesus was committed to forgiveness. At many points during His life He forgave people their sins.

And here at the end, even when His life's blood was pouring out, even when the physical pain of crucifixion racked His body and the jeers of strangers wounded His soul, He still was totally committed to providing forgiveness - even to those who were directly causing His pain.

That first saying from the cross is powerful. It tells us that if our Lord and Savior was committed to being a Forgiver, we, His followers, should also be committed to becoming forgivers.

After four weeks of thinking about loving one another, serving one another, and NOT envying, NOT boasting, and NOT judging one another, today we are going to explore the Bible's command that we "*forgive one another.*"¹

The New Testament tells us that if we would love as God would have us love, if we would live the way God wants us to live, then we will "*forgive one another.*"

The command to be a forgiver takes us close to the pinnacle of discipleship. By becoming forgivers, we imitate Jesus at His most radical and extreme.

Yet, there is no more difficult command than the command to forgive. And - I'll be honest here - there is no more confusing one. We have questions about forgiveness.

Forgiveness - a challenging AND confusing command!

- People who have been wronged - terribly wronged, abused - struggle with what forgiveness should look like as they relate to an abuser.
- Almost always, forgiveness looks unreasonable. It can look stupid.

¹ If you are going to study forgiveness, check out Luke 7, where you'll find the story of the immoral woman who was forgiven by Jesus while He was dining in the home of Simon the Pharisee. She, having been forgiven much, loved much. When we understand how much we have been forgiven, we, too, will love Him much!

- We wonder if it is RIGHT to forgive someone in the absence of repentance.
- When there is chronic sin of the same variety, forgiveness looks like “enabling.”
- Does forgiveness require forgetfulness, as in “forgive and forget”?

Clearly, in a half hour this morning we won’t even address all these thorny issues, much less resolve them all. We will, however, become convinced, from the Bible, that God calls us to forgive.

And this command to forgive is not restricted to “the few, the proud, the missionaries.” It is not just for the Rangers and SEAL Christians among us. Every last one of us is called to become a forgiver.

So, what do we mean by “forgive”?

Forgiveness - in Black And White

From the Dictionary

When defining “forgiveness” Webster says, *“To give up a claim to repayment from an offender; to pardon; as, to forgive one’s enemies, or to forgive a debt.”*²

Or think of it this way...

Suppose you have taken out a loan to purchase a car from Red McCombs. Your bright, shiny new 2014 Honda, Chevy, Ford, Kia, or Chrysler product is sitting in the driveway at home.

One day you get a call from the salesman who sold you your car a few months earlier. He gets right to the point of the call.

“Mr. _____, the reason we have called is to announce a new promotion at our dealership. Mr. McCombs has decided that once a month, we are going to burn the payment book for a recent San Antonio car purchaser. And, can you believe it? This month - you are it!”

² I like Wikipedia’s definition. Forgiveness *“the intentional and voluntary process by which a victim undergoes a change in feelings and attitude regarding an offense, lets go of negative emotions such as vengefulness, with an increased ability to wish the offender well.”*

If you ever get that call, you could say that Red McCombs “forgave” you the debt that you owed him. You no longer have to make payments.

“Forgiveness” means to NOT require repayment, to clean the slate, to give someone a fresh start, and to let bygones be bygones.

That is precisely what God has done for each of us in Jesus. And that - *forgiveness* - is what we are to give each other.

On a personal level, the big idea behind forgiveness is that we release our claim to repayment against someone who has wronged us.

From the Bible (2 Corinthians 2:10-11)

That is certainly Paul’s point in 2 Corinthians 2. There, he was writing about a man in the church who had sinned, had repented, and was seeking restoration. Paul says to forgive. Require no repayment.

[2 Corinthians 2:10] But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, [11] so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his schemes.

Jesus wants the grace of forgiveness to permeate our hearts and our lives and our church. He wants each of us to relish our own forgiveness AND He wants us to grow in the grace of forgiving those who, from time to time, do us dirty.

We’ve been forgiven, so we forgive. Today, Scripture will help us become “forgiven forgivers.”

Jesus’ Teaching on Forgiveness

Setting the Context

We are turning in the Bible to Matthew 18, which brings us to a point late on Jesus’ personal timeline. He is not far from His final journey to Jerusalem, where He is going to die.

In Matthew 18, Jesus was speaking with His followers about how they should deal with their fellow disciples when they get caught up in sin.

He outlined a step by step by step by step process of discipline that moves from one-on-one personal reproof all the way to public excommunication.

The always outspoken Simon Peter asked Jesus a question that likely came right on the heels of Jesus' explanation of church discipline. Peter envisioned someone sinning against him.

And give Peter credit. He at least understood that Jesus wanted him to be a forgiver.

Peter Asked “The Question”

[21] “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”³

Peter suggested a set number of times that he should forgive a person who might do him wrong. No doubt he thought he was being magnanimous.

But Peter wants to quantify forgiveness,⁴ set limits, put a period in place. *“Lord, when should I say ‘enough is enough.’?”*

Jesus' answer exploded Peter's categories.

Jesus Provides “The Answer” (v. 22)

[22] “I do not say you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”

The point is not, *“Four hundred and ninety, Peter.”* The point is, *“Peter, STOP COUNTING!”⁵*

After Jesus' response, Peter and all the rest of the disciples were probably scratching their heads wondering at how high the Lord had set the bar. This was beyond their wildest imaginings.

Knowing their confusion, Jesus told a story to shed a little light on this most crucial theme of forgiveness.⁶ It's one of the best stories Jesus told for any of us who want to grow as “forgiven forgivers.”⁷

Forgiveness - in a Parable (Matthew 18:23-35)

The King's Great Compassion (18:23-27)

A certain slave is in DEEP debt (vv. 23-25)

[23] “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. [24] When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.”

Now, that is a lot of money!

The total annual taxes collected from all the land of Palestine for the Roman Empire was eight hundred talents. This slave owes his master ten thousand talents!

While we might wonder how this slave ever got this far into debt, we're not surprised at all to read that the king wanted this slave to pay up.

The first part of verse 25 states the obvious: This slave *“did not have the means to repay.”* So, what is the king going to do?

[25] “...his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.”

“The unlimited revenge of primitive man has given way to the unlimited forgiveness of Christians.”

⁶ Matthew is the only one of the gospels to include this parable.

⁷ Alcoholics Anonymous understands the importance of forgiveness. Step 5 in the Twelve Step program says, “We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” Step 8 goes further. “We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.”

³ The Jewish rabbis recommended three times as the upper limit on forgiveness.

⁴ Notice, too, that he assumes that it would be a brother who would sin against him, and not he against a brother!

⁵ Note the contrast with Lamech of Genesis 4 - *“Lamech is avenged 77 fold”* while the believer is to put off vengeance 70x7! As one of the early church fathers put it,

We don't blame the king for taking this strong action. The slave deserved this punishment for going so deep into debt to his master.

But this tale takes a twist. This slave didn't go away quietly. He took bold imitative and begged.

This slave turns beggar (v. 26)

[26] “so the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.’”

Now, hats off to the slave. He didn't ask the king to write off the debt as a bad loan. He didn't pretend the amount was never owed. He asked only for the opportunity to repay (not that he would EVER be able to pay off that debt!).

This king, likewise, surprises us with his response. He did more than the slave asked and gave a super-gracious answer.

The king gives GRACE (v. 27)

Notice, first, that he responded emotionally - **“he felt compassion.”**⁸

In the Bible, the emotional response of compassion is always followed by action.

When Jesus felt compassion for a man with leprosy, He cleansed Him. When He felt compassion for a widow who had just lost a son, He raised the boy from the dead. When He felt compassion for a hungry crowd of people, he fed them. When He felt compassion for a blind man outside Jericho, He gave him his sight.

This king felt compassion for his slave – so he **[27] “...released him and forgave him the debt.”**

⁸ The Hebrew and Greek words for “compassion” are both also the words used for the inner organs (the bowels) of the body. The person who felt compassion for someone else was “all torn up inside.”

The guilty slave will not go to a different master. He will do no time in prison. His wife and kids will remain with him.

The slave and the king are now square. The slate is wiped clean. Can you imagine the gratitude that this slave must have been feeling?

Can you imagine how you would feel, if someone looked at the amount of money you owed to all your creditors (especially if you are on the verge of financial collapse, as this slave was!), and paid all of it off? You would be on Cloud Nine!

Well, I'm sure that this slave was ecstatic. But as he skipped away, rejoicing over his good fortune in having had his debts paid off, he remembered a pressing matter of personal business.

Taking a turn off of Easy Street, he went to visit one of his fellow slaves.

Slave #1's Cold Heart (18:28-30)

A fellow slave is in SHALLOW debt (v. 28)

[28a] “But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii.”

You'll immediately notice the difference in the amount of money Slave #1 had owed the king vs. what Slave #2 owed Slave #1.

Not that the debt was nothing. One hundred denarii was a decent chunk of change.

It was roughly equal to what you would make working minimum wage for about three months. In a 2014 economy, it would be a few thousand dollars.

That's nothing to sneeze at, but it is also nothing in comparison to the debt Slave #1 had owed the King.

So, why did Slave #1 seek out Slave #2? Obviously, he wanted his money back.

Slave #1 demanded repayment (v. 28b)

[28b] “...He seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’”

Roman law allowed a creditor to take a debtor by the throat. Slave #1 had the legal right to choke Slave #2. And, “*twisting the neck*” was probably even more effective than sending Luigi to break kneecaps!

Slave #1 released his grip on Slave #2 long enough to let him speak. His words are virtually identical to what Slave #1 said to the king.

This second slave turns beggar (v. 29)

[29] “So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’”

Just as before, the slave who was in debt fell down before his creditor.

Just as before, the slave in debt made a request.

Just as before, that slave in debt asked for patience, not mercy.

Just as before, the slave in debt promised he would repay what he owed.

UNLIKE BEFORE, Slave #1 was “*unwilling*” to listen to the pleas of Slave #2.

Slave #1 gives JUSTICE (v. 30)

[30] “But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.”

The first slave didn’t show mercy, as he had been shown mercy.

The first slave didn’t set the second slave free, as he had been set free.

The first slave didn’t forgive the debt, as his had been forgiven.

The first slave didn’t feel compassion, as the King had felt compassion for him.

Remember, Jesus was telling this story to expand on His answer to Peter about forgiveness. We can only imagine that all of the disciples were listening intently - and the story isn’t close to being finished.

The actions of Slave #1 against Slave #2 weren’t taken in a vacuum. The other slaves of the king saw it all go down.

The King’s Great Anger! (18:31-34)

[31] “So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.”

And when the King found out what Slave #1 had done, he was furious.

[32] “Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. [33] Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’”

The king had forgiven the debt of Slave #1 just because that slave had begged for an opportunity to repay. There, the King was moved with **compassion**.

NOW, the king is moved with **anger**. And the reason for the anger is that having received mercy, Slave #1 didn’t give mercy.

The king had given Slave #1 more than he had asked for, and much more than he deserved.

And the point of the king’s words is that the debt the first slave had been forgiven should have made an impact on the way he treated those who were in his debt.

It is the principle of **reciprocity**.

Well, now the king is going to give Slave #1 a taste of reciprocity. Slave #1 is going to get a taste of his own medicine.

Up to this point, the King has not dealt with Slave #1 in justice. He has dealt with him in grace. But now he is going to treat him with justice, just as he had treated Slave #2.

[34] “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.”

This is the parable Jesus taught to Simon Peter and to the rest of the apostles in response to Peter’s question about how many times he should forgive when he had been wronged.

Now, are you ready for the punch line? Listen to Jesus' final words.

[35] "My Heavenly Father will do the same to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Conclusion:

The essential message of Jesus' parable is that you and I should forgive each other. We have been forgiven; we should be forgivers.

Slave #1 in this parable illustrates what we are NOT to do. He, having been forgiven an astronomical debt he could never have repaid, did not forgive a moderate debt he was owed by a fellow slave.

We understand that Slave #1 was truly forgiven.⁹ But he had not allowed forgiveness to work its way into his heart so that it reproduced forgiveness toward those who had wronged him. Slave #1 suffered for it.

Now, can we jump forward to 2014, out of the context of a parable, and ask, what are the ramifications, today, to us, for NOT forgiving?

Does this parable describe a consequence for me if I don't forgive? I think it does, but I want to be careful.

Jesus says (v. 35) that God will do "**the same**" to us that the king did to Slave #1 if we do not forgive each other from the heart. OK. The king "**turned him over to the torturers.**"

So, God will turn me, God will turn YOU, over to "**the torturers**"? Yep.

Is Jesus saying that God will take back our forgiveness, that we lose our salvation, that we who are redeemed, heaven-bound sons and daughters of God will go to Hell if we do not forgive? Nope.

Notice...

- The slaves in this parable never stop being the King's slaves. Slave #1 remained in unbroken relationship with the King. So, even when Christians don't forgive (or when Christians sin in other ways), they are still Christians.
- Elsewhere in Scripture, the possibility of a child of God becoming NOT a child of God and losing his or her salvation is patently denied. (see John 10 and Romans 8)
- The point of Jesus' parable is of brother sinning against brother, with Peter's question kicking everything off. Eternal salvation isn't the point of this story.

Who, then, or what, are these "**torturers**"?

Surely, I am not going to suggest that God would afflict Christians to persuade them to forgive. Surely, I'm not saying that God would particularly allow suffering to come our way just to convict us of the ugliness of unforgiveness, am I?

Yes, I am. Because that is EXACTLY what this parable teaches. And that is also completely consistent with what the writers of the New Testament tell us elsewhere.¹⁰

When the apostle Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 11, that a number of Corinthian Christians were physically sick because of sin in their lives, and that some of them have actually died, we understand that God takes an active, disciplining role in the lives of His children.

When we read in 2 Corinthians 2 that believers who do not forgive will find themselves taken advantage of by Satan's schemes, we understand that God has given Satan license to actively afflict the unforgiving Christian.

Paul writes essentially the same thing in Ephesians 4 - **[26] Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, [27] and do not give the devil an opportunity.**

Now, every bit of suffering in our lives is NOT necessarily because of an unforgiving spirit, or because some sin of some sort on our part. I would never say that and the Bible doesn't teach that.

⁹ "Grace" and "forgiveness" come from the same Greek root - *xaris*.

¹⁰ See Luke 11:4, Matthew 6:12, 14-15.

But, the message of this parable is that those who do not forgive suffer as a direct result of not having forgiven people who have wronged them.¹¹

But, how can we, as Jesus says, “*forgive our brother from the heart*”?

Forgiveness can be tough! I have and continue to struggle with it. I’ve talked with lots of others who struggle with it. Maybe you struggle with it, too.

Forgiveness is essential discipleship. But it can be very challenging and I don’t want to be guilty of offering a “pat answer” to a tough question. We’re not going to put a band-aid on a deep, cut-to-the-bone gash.

So, here’s what I understand Jesus is saying to us who struggle with forgiveness. Here’s some surgery for your wounded soul when it comes to forgiving people who have hurt you.

We travel the path to forgiveness as we view every wrong we have *suffered* against the backdrop of every sin we have been *forgiven*.

In a nutshell, that’s how you become a “forgiven forgiver.”

Have you ever tried to calculate the measure of your indebtedness to God? If you have, you have discovered that it is incalculable.

In Jesus’ parable, the ratio of the debt owed by Slave #1 to his king vs. the debt owed by Slave #2 to Slave #1 was 1,000,000:1.

By telling the story the way He did Jesus was pointing out how little we **CAN** sin against each other when compared to the enormity of the wrongs we have committed against a holy and righteous God.

And, then, notice the price of forgiveness.

¹¹ Warren Wiersbe, a well-known pastor, says in his commentary on this parable, “*I have met Christians who carry grudges and have discovered how miserable they are. Instead of loving and using their energy for ministry and creative living, they waste their lives in hating enemies they can’t even fight. How much better off they would be if they would simply forgive those who have wronged them.*”

In the parable, the forgiveness that Slave #1 received was not cheap; it was incredibly costly to the king. In today’s figures, it was billions and billions of dollars.

But the cost of forgiveness to Slave #1 was precisely ZERO, just like the cost of your forgiveness from God is precisely ZERO.

The price of forgiveness from can’t be boiled down to a dollar figure. As Peter says,

[1 Peter 1:18]... “you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver and gold...[19] but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.”¹²

God, in Christ, has forgiven us. And the same Jesus who said from the cross, “***Father, forgive them...***” wants you and me to forgive the people we know who wrong us.

How, then, can we forgive those who sin against us? Again...

By placing the weight of wrong that we have suffered against the weight of sin that we have been forgiven.¹³

I believe that sentence I just read is true. It took about six seconds to spit it out and it will take a lifetime to work it out.

Of course, today’s time in God’s Word certainly hasn’t answered every question you may have about forgiveness. It’s assured us that we are to forgive, but it’s also surfaced questions that still need to be asked.

I have been hurt, but much less badly than many of you have been hurt, I know. Some of you bear scars and wounds from horrible mistreatment. You have been sinned against grievously.

¹² My faith in Jesus’ death provides forgiveness of every sin I committed before trusting Him - and every sin I will commit after having come to faith. Every evil thought, word, or deed, every act of discrimination, every biting accusation I have known to be false or unloving, every instance of lust, every immoral deed, illegal deed, unethical deed. They are all, as we say it, “*under the blood.*”

¹³ Forgiveness requires a most unnatural decision to demand that the one who has offended us experience no punitive consequence for the wrongs they have done us - at all. And this, because that is how God has treated us.

Given that you are to forgive, how should you treat the one who:

- gives you the cold shoulder or the angry pout?
- has cooled in their affection and has withdrawn their friendship?
- gives you that sick, superior smile?
- has been stubbornly uncooperative?
- has been just plain rude?
- has made veiled or open threats
- has attempted to humiliate or intimidate?
- has deeply wounded your body or your soul?

For you, the last few minutes may have been the first round of a lifelong wrestling match with Jesus' most challenging assignment.

Today may just be the prelude to a lot of thinking and praying for the grace to fight to become forgiven forgivers.

To forgive is costly - Jesus proved that! But, to choose to not forgive is more costly still.

[Ephesians 4:32] And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.