

**“Forgiveness Is Our Business”**  
**Matthew 18: 21-35**  
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**Rev. Steven McCoy**  
**First United Methodist Church**  
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We have heard it said many times to “forgive and forget.” These are easy words for what is really a serious undertaking. It is almost too easy. Even the Bible can sound trite at times when we read into the verses of: to error is human, to forgive divine.” Now the lesser the offense the easier done this is. If someone cheats us out of something small, forgets a promise, etc. we can forgive them and move on for the most part. But even in these scenarios one can think of broken promises or the like that really hurt us or left us in a bind. Then of course there are the bigger ones. Stealing, divorce, betrayal, murder. These are the things people cannot get over. Forgive and forget no longer becomes a trite saying but can be downright offensive to the person who has been wounded. None the less we are reminded that we must forgive one another. The Bible is filled with examples of forgiveness, and Jesus outright commands us to forgive. One we have even said this day when Christ teaches us to pray. “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Jesus tells us these things because we as Christians are to be in the forgiving business. That is what we Christians do. That is who we are.

What we do not read in the Bible, and what Jesus does not say is to **forget**. In all the Biblical examples of forgiveness, these are not merely acts of mercy, but great acts of **courage** on the part of the person offering forgiveness. They are taking a great risk to themselves both physically and emotionally, of being rejected or hurt again. However, forgiveness does not require one has to **forget**.

L. Gregory Jones states in his book *Embodying Forgiveness* that when one forgives it does not mean that one automatically forgets what happened, nor does it lessen the offense. What forgiveness really is about is a new way of remembering so that the person and event no longer has power over the person. This does not happen over night but can sometimes take years of struggle and heartache, before hope can be restored in that person. This takes great courage, but that is our business.

The main reason why forgiveness is emphasized in the Bible is not because it is easy, but in fact because it is hard. In Matthew 18:22 when Jesus says to forgive not seven times but seventy seven times or seventy times seven (490 times for those keeping count). He says this because it is one of the hardest but most necessary things to do. It is not about how many times but that we must forgive. Ultimately we see that as in the story with the king and the servant and as Jesus emphasizes, forgiveness is not about the other person, forgiveness is something we do for ourselves. It is not just an action, forgiveness is also an attitude. In forgiveness we no longer give power to the offender, but claim power from God,

who is the healer of all wounds including spiritual and emotional wounds. No longer do we devote our energy to being angry, or being hurt but instead can take what we have learned and move on in faith, again never forgetting what has happened, but not being consumed by it.

The parable of the unforgiving servant answers this question by revealing the reason we must offer forgiveness to one another. It has nothing to do with the pursuit of justice, and everything to do with the character of God. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven “may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves” (v. 23). So Jesus is saying that we can learn a little something about life in God’s kingdom by paying attention to a story about how this king deals with his debtors.

The king begins the reckoning by calling a debtor to appear before him. The man owes him 10,000 talents, which is an insanely large sum of money. A talent is the largest monetary unit of the day, equal to the wages of a manual laborer for 15 years. 10,000 talents would be the wages of 10,000 manual laborers, over the course of 15 years. By comparison, notes biblical scholar Eugene Boring, the annual tax income for all of the territories of Herod the Great was 900 talents per year. Ten thousand talents would exceed the taxes for all of the countries of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea and Samaria.

So this man is more than knee-deep in debt. He’s over his head, drowning in red ink, sinking like a rock. Makes the sub-prime mortgage crisis look like a problem with petty cash.

The king orders the slave to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, so that a payment can be made. With nothing left to lose, the slave falls on his knees before the king and says, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” Surprisingly, the king shows pity and releases the slave, forgiving him the entire debt (vv. 24-27).

That’s the kind of God we have, says Jesus — a king who has mercy on us, and who forgives us our debts. It’s a dirty job, but we’ve got a God who will do it!

Now that’s a pleasant parable, but we haven’t reached the end. That freshly forgiven slave races out of the palace and comes upon a second slave who owes him a hundred denarii — 100 coins, each one equal to the daily wage for a laborer. This amount is a significant sum, for sure, but it’s positively microscopic compared to what the first slave owed the king. The first slave seizes the second slave by the throat and demands that he pay him what he owes. The second slave falls down and pleads with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you” (v. 29).

No way, says the first slave. Not gonna happen. He throws the second slave in prison until the whole debt is paid.

Here, the plot thickens. When his fellow slaves see what has happened, they go ballistic — they run and give the king a full report. The king summons the first slave and says, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. You think that was easy for me? I had about as much fun as Mike Rowe performing a whale autopsy. Why didn’t you show mercy to your fellow slave, as I did to you?”

The slave is speechless.

Then, in his anger, the king hands him over to spread hot tar on the roof of a church in California, like in an episode of *Dirty Jobs* episode. And the slave is tortured by this work until he pays his entire debt (vv. 31-34, loosely translated).

The punch line? Jesus concludes with the words, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (v. 35). There’s an unbreakable bond between the forgiveness of God and the forgiveness we are to offer one another, making it illogical and impossible for us to accept the mercy of the Lord and then refuse to extend mercy to others. That is our business.

Again all easier said than done. This is not something that happens overnight as Joseph can attest to. Forgiveness takes a lifetime on our own. In the book *Mr. Ives Christmas*, Oscar Hijuelos describes the journey of a man whose son studying for the catholic priesthood, was murdered. The rest of Mr. Ives life is a journey toward forgiveness of his murderer. Others could not understand his corresponding with the man as he wrote to him in prison, sent him books and the like. It was not easy and sometimes downright painful for him, but ultimately after 40 years the offender stood in Mr. Ives living room on Christmas Eve and they embraced as forgiveness was offered to him. In a recent feature story by United Methodist news we see this played out in real life as a pastor who was able to forgive his sons murderer, and the two have formed a friendship, and they speak to congregations and testify to the life giving power that God can provide in forgiveness to one another. Again this journey took over twenty years but found itself in wholeness. They recall everywhere they go of the murder and the fall out from it. But they end up in the grace that God provides for each of us in Jesus Christ.

**(Slide 6)** In all of these examples we see them following Jesus example to be a part of the solution. If we look at the Story of Joseph from Genesis where he is sold into slavery by his brother, then years later when his brothers come to him as governor. Joseph does not forgive his brothers and then let them go their separate ways. Joseph enters back into the relationship, into his brothers own circumstances and makes them his own. He offers them the opportunity to come closer to help them and himself find wholeness again.

Sometimes this takes the prompting of others to help us on the road toward forgiveness. I refer back again to the Rev. Ray Buckley who overcame his own tragedy. As he was traveling, Ray attempted to meet his wife and son to share a key lime pie, before he had to get back on the road. While on route there was a truck driver who fell asleep at the wheel, veered off into the oncoming traffic and struck the car his wife was driving with their son in tow. His wife did not survive for very long and after several months in intensive care his son also succumbed to his injuries. There was a trial and the man was sentenced. He recalled it was his father who began prodding him after the trial that it was time to begin to forgive this man, but Ray could not. But his father did not relent. His father brought him the headlines so he could read about what had happened at the trial. He found out that the man had a family, but he could not forgive him still. His father brought him a book with the man's name written in it and then a blank line. In it he told Ray to write down the day when he was able to pray for him. He found he still could not, but his father would not relent. He continued to ask Ray if he had prayed yet. Finally Ray began to read the headlines and found out about his family. So he tried to pray but again he still could not. So Ray began to ask God for help in praying and so as he prayed he found that he could pray for the man's wife, because he had a wife once. He found that he could pray for the man's son, because he once had a son. And as he prayed for them, he was able to break through the pain and the barrier, and again at the prompting of his father, he finally mustered the courage and the strength to visit the man in prison. As they visited he finally found out about the man and his life. He learned that he was a truck driver working double shifts to make ends meet. That he was gone most of the year and just like Ray, on the day of the accident was rushing home to fulfill a promise to see his son. He learned that the man's son played baseball, and he was most upset because he could not be there for his son. He apologized and asked for Ray's forgiveness. Eventually Ray was able to pray not for the man, but with him and together they asked for the spirit of forgiveness to reside in them, and later he was able to take the man's son to some of his ball games.

Forgiveness is far from easy, and certainly even more difficult to forget. But like Joseph, we too in even our most extreme circumstances can forgive. In fact as Ray Buckley would go on to say, we must forgive, for the sake of our own soul. This can take years, and even a lifetime. But most of all it takes courage and strength, and many times this cannot be accomplished on our own. Thank God we have the forgiveness that is offered to us, modeled by Joseph and his family, lived out and made real for us in Christ, and given to us through the grace of the Holy Spirit. In Christ we can find the courage to forgive, we can have the strength to forgive, just as we are given new life and death is defeated in him, we can have new life, and a new way of remembering, releasing that power of hatred, and replacing it with the power of love, a Love that Joseph showed to his family, and that God shows us each day in the living Christ. Let us take a moment to reflect on how we can forgive, and how we have also been forgiven.