The Formula of Forgiveness

Sermon #2 in the series
Last week’s sermon examined “The foundation of forgiveness”. We laid a foundation of forgiveness using Paul’s writing to the church at Ephesus and Colossi. He told both churches; “to forgive one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” As we grow in our understanding of positional forgiveness we will grow in our practice of forgiveness. We have been “totally forgiven” by our Lord and therefore we must forgive others “totally”. Remember our key teaching of how God in Christ forgave us; he absolves the sinner, meaning he sets them free from their debt, by absorbing the sinner’s astronomical debt.

Today’s sermon begins our construction of relational forgiveness. Our context begins in verse one when Jesus calls a child unto himself and begins to teach on the specific theme of the childlikeness of the believer. He emphasizes this teaching by bringing a child into their midst as to magnify and make tangible this vital lesson. We know by the Greek word used that this child was either a toddler or infant.

Jesus speaks directly to the reality that we are spiritual children with all the weaknesses that childhood implies. It is also essential to see that the chapter teaches the church, as a group of spiritually unperfected children how to get along with each other.

The first lesson in this masterful sermon is that everyone who enters the kingdom does so as a child (vv. 1–4). Jesus then teaches that all of us in the kingdom must be treated as children (vv. 5–9), cared for as children (vv. 10–14), disciplined as children (vv. 15–20), and forgiven as children (vv. 21–35).

There’s a great sense of tolerance with children, because we understand their weakness. We understand their ignorance. We understand their inabilities. Being childlike is indicating that we’re going to fail. There are going to be times when we do the wrong things. We’re still in the process of maturing, of growing up, of ordering our behavior. But when we do sin, and after discipline has been enacted we also are to be forgiven just as children are to be forgiven.

People can rather easily hold grudges against adults, but it's somewhat abnormal to hold them against children. We tend to forgive children rather readily. Adults we have difficulty forgiving and we need then to remember the teaching of this passage that believers are to be treated like children for in the spiritual sense we are and we need the same kind of gracious continuing forgiveness that a child does. Now forgiveness is a great, great virtue. I really believe that it is the key to the unity of the church. It's the key to love. It's the key to meaningful relationships. It's what constantly tears down the barriers that try through sin to be built up to separate us from one another to wall us off to make us bitter and angry and vengeful.

You show me a person who cannot release some vengeful, bitter, antagonistic, hateful attitude towards somebody and I'll show you a man who knows not either the glory of a man nor understands the forgiveness of God to him. It is the best of a man to forgive. Listen to this, because it is the heart of God to forgive, and when man forgives he radiates that which is true of the image of God. Forgiveness is so basic to God's heart that it certainly should be basic to the heart of God's
children. Coming at it another way, you might as well learn to forgive because people are going to need it.

And may I add, so are you. Children of all people need forgiveness and we are children. We're weak, we're ignorant, we're selfish, we're prone to disobey and we need forgiveness frequently. We are such children. Now our Lord has just concluded a section on disciplining sinners. And he follows it up masterfully with a section on forgiving them. You remember in 2 Corinthians Chapter 2 there was a man in the Corinthian assembly who had sinned. And this particular man had been disciplined by the assembly of believers and Paul says to them in 2 Corinthians 2:6, "sufficient to such a man is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority." In other words, you've sufficiently punished the man. You've sufficiently made the point. You've done what needed to be done in terms of bringing to bear or rebuke on his sin. So now rather in verse 7, you need to forgive him and comfort him lest such a one should be swallowed up with over much sorrow.

"Confirm," it says in verse 8, "your love toward him." And then he goes on to say, "if you don't do this," in verse 11, "Satan's going to get an advantage of you for we're not ignorant of his devices." And one of his devices is to generate a bitter Spirit and unforgiving heart. And we all need to learn to forgive because we all need to be forgiven and because God has forgiven us. It is the best of a man to forgive and it is the best, if I may say so, of God to forgive. For it is the expression of His loving nature.

Now after all of this discussion of discipline and how we are to confront the sinner and rebuke the sinner, restore the sinner, and all that, Peter asked a very insightful question. "Then came Peter to him and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" It's a good question. See Peter knows the tendency of men. You know why he knows it? Because he knows himself. And he knew how many times he needed to be forgiven. He also is talking out of the context of his Jewish background where there were certain hard lines drawn in relation to forgiveness. And he is saying in this whole matter of a person sinning and being restore, you know, the problem Lord is going to be, they're going to do that and we're going to restore them and they're going to go right out and do it again.

Peter's desire is to understand the formula for forgiveness. He is asking what we today are still asking; “how many times must I forgive?”

- Peter's thought his formula was gracious but it was revealed as prideful.
  - His formula was three times two plus one.

Jewish tradition taught forgiveness was limited to three times. This teaching was derived from an interpretation of Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13. The Jews concluded then that the three times you could be forgiven. When you did it the fourth time, you got the blast of God's divine judgment. They said that this justified the limit of three times for forgiveness and of course they misinterpreted the passage. They said this, if three transgressions fills up the measure of God's forgiveness, men can't go beyond God.
When Peter said he thought seven times, he was really going beyond his own tradition. He probably thought he would be commended for his graciousness. Let me state a positive about Peter before I point out all his negatives. Three years with Jesus had greatly impacted his life as he had picked up on the merciful, gracious, kind, forgiving spirit of Jesus. He knew that Jesus would go above and beyond Jewish tradition. It is in this moment that Jesus teaches Peter and the disciples His formula of forgiveness.

- Jesus’ taught the true formula of grace by stating that forgiveness is perpetual.
  - His formula was seventy times seven.

Peter was still thinking like the scribes and Pharisees and like fallen human nature is always inclined to think. He was thinking in the measurable and limited terms of law, not the immeasurable and unlimited terms of grace. Law keeps count; grace does not.¹

The Lord was not extending the legal limit of forgiveness. He was not speaking of law or limits at all. By seventy times seven He did not mean 490. He simply picked up on Peter’s number and multiplied it by itself and then by ten, indicating a number that, for all practical purposes, was beyond counting. Record keeping is not to be considered, and a Christian with a forgiving heart thinks nothing about it. He forgives the hundredth offense or the thousandth just as readily and graciously as the first-because that is the way he is forgiven by God.²

Even if a brother “sins against you seven times a day,” the Lord said on another occasion, “and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him” (Luke 17:4). Jesus was not setting a daily limit, but rather the opposite. He was speaking of repeated, regular sinning that is committed many times a day, day after day, and of corresponding repeated forgiveness. He was saying that even if a fellow Christian sins against you every day for seven times each day, you should be ready and willing to forgive him that often. The faithful, godly Christian will never allow his own forgiveness to be surpassed by a brother’s sin. Reflecting his heavenly Father’s nature, where sin against him increases, so does his gracious forgiveness (cf. Rom. 5:20).³

I warned you last week that this was not going to be easy to hear or do. Jesus formula is astounding. If Peter was standing when asked this question he is surely now sitting. I imagine his face enveloped with a look of astonishment. He is no doubt bumfuzzled by Jesus answer. Jesus further clarifies his answer with a parable. The question that should be asked at this point is; why does Jesus feel as though he needs to clarify his answer? Could it be that he anticipated Peter’s next questions?

³ cf. confer (Lat.), compare

Why must you forgive seventy times seven?

You have been forgiven an insurmountable debt. (vv. 24-27)

Let’s answer the “why” question first. We answered this question in part last week. We as Children of God have been forgiven a debt beyond our ability to number. If our Heavenly Father has forgiven us to such an extent then we can do nothing but reciprocate this action toward others.

You have been offended in an insignificant way. (v. 28)

We should forgive others because their sin against us is insignificant. It’s like comparing 200,000 years’ worth of wages to 100 days’ worth of wages. We should not be “wowed” when one forgives only when one does not. When we, followers of Christ, are amazed at forgiveness it speaks volumes as to how little we understand our positional forgiveness and how little we practice it in our lives.

The greatest sins that a man commits against a man are nothing. They’re change, pocket change compared to the sins committed against God and He forgives them all and who are we to do any less.

What happens if I don’t forgive seventy times seven?

You live inconsistent to your profession. (vv. 28-35)

Some people question whether or not this man was a Christian. Our text beginning in verse one establishes this teaching for believers. His forgiveness is genuine, if not; the remainder of this parable means nothing. It is not a parable about genuine salvation. It is a parable about forgiveness, namely forgiveness between fellow Christian’s. What makes this parable even more powerful and dramatic is that this man was truly forgiven.

This brings into light a dark place for many of us in this room. We are more like this servant than we care to admit. Though we might find his action appalling and unbelievable they are but a true reflection of ourselves. We who have been forgiven an insurmountable debt are often inconsistent to forgive the insignificant sin that has been sinned against us. We cry out for mercy before the Father but seek swift justice with our brother.

He was consistent in the fact that he sought out the one who owed him a debt. However, he was inconsistent when he asked for full-payment rather absolving the debt.

In Titus chapter three, listen to what Paul says. "Speak evil of no man, be no brawlers," don’t get into fights, "but gentle showing all meekness unto men, unto all men." In other words, you're to be forgiving. "For we ourselves were once foolish disobedient, deceiving." Or rather "deceived serving various lusts and pleasures living in malice and envy, hatred, hating one another." I mean we used to be like that, "but after the kindness and love God our Savior toward men appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to
his mercy, he saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior."

In other words, he says, don't treat people like you used to. Look at what Christ has done for you. It's the same idea. Sadly the church has been riddled all its lifelong by the tragic sin of unforgiveness and the consequent bitterness and hostility and discord and I really believe that this is to go against your new nature, because I believe that if you're in the kingdom, you're a merciful person. Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. I think we're marked as merciful people. That's our newness. It's only the flesh that rises and makes us merciless.

So consider the source. If you're not forgiving, that's your sin, your flesh, vaulting itself into prominence. When you do that, you will cut yourself off from that relational forgiveness with God that makes the communion sweet. if you see a lack of power and depth in your spiritual life, you see a lack of hunger for God's word, a lack of love for the private place of prayer and communion, it may be that you'll never have that because there's a blockage there and the Lord isn't giving you that forgiveness that brings a sweet relationship with Him, because you've got it blocked somewhere else with somebody else.

Until you forgive that other one, the Lord isn't going to open up the flow of communion with Him.

You invite the involvement of other believers. (v. 31)

“When his fellow servants," there's that term again, and here's a group of Christians, believers, who saw what was done. They saw the whole thing. Now at the risk of sorting reading into the parable a little bit, let me suggest to you that, if this parable were a true story, these fellow servants would have no doubt followed the sequence of Matthew 18:15-20.

They would have seen this unforgiving servant and they would have gone to him. Then they would have taken two or three with them, then they would have told it to the whole assembly and then they would have put him out if he didn't respond.

Apparently they have exhausted that capacity. This servant who is determined to get his due out of this guy is resistant to all their efforts. So when his fellow servants saw what was done, apparently, they've seen it firsthand. They've been involved in the process. They did the only thing they had left.

“They were greatly distressed” and some translations render it “they were very sorry.” I love that. These people are acting in accord with the new creation.. They know the standard God has established and they know how God longs for forgiveness and they understand the holiness of His law. They understand the importance of unity and they further understand the richness of fellowship and this is why they are sorry.

It's a strong word for distressed. This word means excessively grieved, violently grieved. They are very distressed and this is a beautiful thing when Christians become concerned about another Christian's sin. They are violently, excessively grieved about this, because there's a lack of response
to the law of God, the will of God, and the way of God. This lack of repentance is disrupting their fellowship. What do they do? "and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place."  

What do you do when you've done all the steps of discipline and the person hasn't responded? Then where do you go? You go to the Lord don't you? I see this as these people coming before God with a broken heart. It's a beautiful picture. If believers would be this concerned about each other's sinfulness, oh what a healing thing there would be in the fellowship. They go to the presence of the king. It assumes in my mind they've already been to the servant and been unsuccessful in getting him to respond. And it says "and they went and reported." The word "reported" is a strong and complex word. They gave him a careful detailed outline of everything. They must have gone through the whole process.

They told him everything that had gone on. No doubt they recited the whole process to the king. They said we've tried everything we can to settle this thing and we just come to you as a last resort.

What was the response of the king? Verse 32, "Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.'"

You will incur the discipline of the Father.

Now some people get nervous here and they so oh, he can't be a Christian. God would never say that to a Christian.

What is wickedness? Sin.

Do Christians sin? Yes.

Could God say to a Christian; "you sinful person?" Yes, in Romans 7, Paul affirms his sinfulness even as a believer and so the Lord is simply affirming what is true about the guy.

He then affirms once again the basic principle of the whole parable. "I forgave you all that debt." This is the interpretive key. He doesn't back off and say boy it must not have worked or maybe the transaction never was made. No, he reaffirms the reality of that full forgiveness when he says; "because you pleaded with me" Look back in verse 26; "So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'" Here is a broken person aware of his sin, brought to conviction, pleading for God to be merciful and it was out of

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10 Greek bondservant; also verses 27, 28, 29, 32, 33
8 Acts 10:25; See ch. 8:2
that pleading that he was saved and forgiven and loosed from the debt. I believe a correct interpretation is that it was a real forgiveness.

He says, "I forgave thee all that debt because thou besoughtest me." And then in the next verse we find "shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant?" The point is if the first forgiveness wasn't legitimate, the second point is meaningless. Is he saying to him, if my forgiveness didn't work for you, then maybe yours doesn't need to work for somebody else? No, it has to be legitimate in the first forgiveness and that's the substance on which the second forgiveness is built.

Look at verse 33 "And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" Lenski calls this a moral monstrosity, that anybody should be so forgiven and unable to forgive someone else.

Look again at verse 33 and note the word mercy. This is a beautiful thought. It isn't that he said to him now you should have given the guy the opportunity to pay back the debt. I mean, you should have let him work it off in freedom without going into prison. I mean, you should have sought out justice some other way and gotten your justice. No, he didn't say that. He said, "And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" How did he have compassion? He absolved the sinner by absorbing the sin.

That is the most liberating thing there is. It is utterly liberating.

Look at verse 34, and now we're really getting down to the nitty gritty folks. "And in his anger." This verse makes a certain type of Christian nervous. They say, oh this can't be a Christian. Is the Lord angry with a Christian? Sure. The Lord gets angry every time you sin, don't you think so? What makes Him angry? Sin makes Him angry and if He wasn't angry, there's something wrong with His holy nature.

The Lord has holy indignation against evil, even in your life and mine. He was angry and he delivered him to the tormentors, to the jailers, to the inquisitors till he should pay all that was due unto him. Now this can't be a Christian. What are we doing with this Christian turning him over to the inquisitors, the tormentors? You don't think that could be a Christian? Look at Hebrews Chapter 12 for a minute.

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1 [ch. 6:12; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13; 1 John 4:11]


Hebrews 12:5, “And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?” ⁹ This is to children now of God, sons, believers, Christians. “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.” ¹⁰

Verse six says, For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. ¹¹ In the King James the word chastises is translated “scourges”. Every Christian feels the tormentors. Every Christian feels the scourging. Every Christian at some point in time is going to feel the inquisitors putting the pressure until we confess and repent.

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons. “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.” ¹² The Christian will be turned over to the inquisitor. You say, now what is the point here? The point is that the inquisitor sort of put you under the gun, under the stress, under the difficulty, under the pressure, under the chastening until you confess your sin.

If you're not forgiving someone the Lord will put you under chastening. He'll apply the pressure to you until your response is right. I think that's what he means at the end of verse 34 when it says, "till he should pay all that was due."

In 1 Corinthians it said among the Corinthians that some of them were weak. They'd literally lost their physical strength because of illness. Some of them were sick, which seems perhaps even more severe and some of them were dead.

1 John 5 says there is a sin unto death. I believe 1 Corinthians 5; is referring to a believer who's literally put out of the church. Satan destroys his flesh. His spirit will be saved. I believe there is discipline and chastening to every son that God loves and that's when he puts us in the hands of the inquisitors or the jailers or the tormentors, parabolically speaking, who apply the pressure to us until we admit our sin and confess our sin and in this case, it is the sin of unforgiveness. If you wonder why there's trouble in your life and you wonder why things are going well and you feel the inquisitors or the tormentors in your life, you feel the pressure being applied and the chastening be


⁸ Job 5:17


⁸ Ps. 94:12; 119:67, 75; Rev. 3:19


¹ Deut. 8:5; 2 Sam. 7:14; [Prov. 13:24; 19:18; 23:13]

¹ [1 Pet. 5:9]

applied, and you don't have the liberty and the joy and the freedom that you think you ought to have as a child of God, maybe you ought to look around in your life and find some unforgiving spirit. As long as it's there and you're not forgiving the way you were forgiven by God magnanimously and compassionately and totally, you're not going to experience relief from these inquisitors.

Now, I think that's what the parable is saying, plain and simple. The sinner will satisfy God. He'll pay what can be paid. He'll satisfy the debt when he is broken, repentant, and contrite in heart and steps into the sphere of obedience. Fellowship is restored. Chastening in a sense then makes us pay, that's what it does. Chastening makes us pay with a view, not just to punishment as such, but to refinement as a goal. You don't punish your child just with that in mind. When your child does something bad, you don't just whack them around so that you can deliver the punishment. You do that with a view to changing their behavior, right? To modifying their behavior so they'll do right next time. God is doing the very same thing.

So as Christians, this is a strong, strong word to us, it is a powerful passage and its summation is drawn in verse 35. “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you.” And again the “you” is the group of disciples who are believers, genuine ones. “if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” And I promise you one thing He's not saying this to unbelievers because there's one thing unbelievers can't do and that's they can't act like God toward each other and forgive.

These are Christians and he's simply saying just like in that story when a guy was forgiven and wouldn't forgive and he was punished, you've been forgiven and you better forgive or you're going to be chastened.

One old saint of long ago said:

"Revenge indeed seems often sweet to men, but oh it is only sugared poison. Forgiving, enduring love along is sweet and blissful. It enjoys peace and the consciousness of God's favor, by forgiving it gives away and annihilates the injury. It treats the injurer as if he had not injured and therefore feels no more the smart and sting that he had inflicted. Forgiveness is a shield from which all the fiery darts of the wicked one harmlessly rebound. Forgiveness brings heaven to earth and heaven's peace into the sinful heart. Forgiveness is the image of God the forgiving Father and an advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world. Your unalterable duty is clear. As surely as we are Christians, men who have experienced great compassion who see in every man a brother in Christ and are going forward to God's righteous judgment so surely must we forgive."
A great commentator on this parable is William Arno who wrote this:

"A traveler in Burma after fording a certain river found his body covered all over by a swarm of small leeches busily sucking his blood. His first impulse was to tear the tormentors from his flesh. But his servant warned him that to pull them off by mechanical violence would expose his life to danger. They must not be torn off lest portions remain in the wounds and become a poison. They must drop off spontaneously and so they will be harmless.

The native prepared a bath for his master by the concoction of some herbs and directed him to lie down in it. As soon as he had bathed in the balsam bath, the leeches dropped off. Each unforgiven injury," says Arno, "rankling in the heart is like a leech sucking the life blood. Mere human determination to have done with it will not cast the evil thing away. You must bathe your whole being in God's pardoning mercy and these venomous creatures will instantly let go their hold and you will stand up free."

You must bathe your whole being in God's pardoning love. That's the parable. You must see how much you have been forgiven. We can stand around praying for the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace, but we'll experience it when we learn to forgive won't we?