

Week 23
February 22, 2009

Mercy, Mercy
The Unmerciful Servant
Matthew 18:21-35

Jesus is teaching about forgiveness and confrontation in Matthew 18. “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.” He adds instruction for those cases when the confronted brother refuses to acknowledge the wrong done.

Clearly, Peter’s curiosity isn’t satisfied. “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” Then Peter offers a rather liberal suggestion, using a good, biblical number. “Up to seven times?”

Jesus’ answer is extravagant. Depending on your translator’s view, Jesus either said to forgive seventy-seven times or seventy times seven. Either way, the message is clear. “Don’t stop forgiving. Keep extending mercy. Over and over. Again and again. Forgive.”

To solidify the point, Jesus tells one of his most famous stories. He begins, as he so often does, by saying, “the kingdom of heaven is like ...” This time, the kingdom is like *a king*. What about this king? He is lavish with mercy. He forgives a man an immense debt. Does he do this because the man pleads out of his desperation? Or does he do it because mercy was already on his heart? Either way, or both, the king forgives his servant.

By the way, this debt is ten thousand talents, which would be the modern equivalent of millions and millions of dollars. Imagine that this servant is one of the king’s stewards. Perhaps he’s invested badly. Or maybe he tried to set himself up nicely with loans from the king and investments and projects went badly. Either way, this high level official and servant of the king has a monumental debt and the unrealistic and desperate hope to pay it back.

The king hears his appeal and does three things.

First, he takes pity. Second, he cancels the debt. Third, he sets the man free. By the way, the kingdom of heaven is like that king.

So how does the official use his newfound freedom? He finds one of his own servants who owes him the equivalent of a few dollars. He also does three things. He grabs his servant, chokes his servant and demands his money back. And though the servant pleads with him, this ungrateful and forgetful official throws the desperate debtor into prison.

When the king gets wind of this, he rescinds his lavish mercy. The fate of his ungrateful servant is awful.

Jesus is clear. “This is how my heavenly Father will treat you – each of you – unless you forgive your brother from the heart.”

Quickly, we start softening and dismissing this story as an extreme example of hyperbole. “Of course, God is so gracious that he would never deny forgiveness if we refuse to forgive!” But this story is consistent with Jesus’ teaching in the middle of, and immediately following, the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:12, 14-15). In very clear language,

Jesus suggests that we shouldn't expect forgiveness if we're unwilling to extend forgiveness.

The key word might be unwilling. It's possible that some of us are willing to forgive, but the degree of our hurt or harm is making the exercise difficult. It does seem as if willful forgiveness and the healing process can operate on separate time frames. If healing is slow, then it might be necessary to forgive many times as the inflammation of unhealed hurts makes forgiveness a come-and-go reality. Others are stuck on the barb between forgiveness and trust: "If I forgive this person, does that mean that I knowingly subject myself to the same old abuse? I want to forgive, but I can't trust this person!"

Like healing and forgiveness, trust and forgiveness also travel separate tracks with somewhat independent influences. When I forgive someone, I'm making a decision to let go of the need to punish that person emotionally, and I'm making a conscious effort to release bitterness and ill-wishes.

With God's help and with brave renegotiation, trust can often be rebuilt and full reconciliation is possible in many relationships. Sometimes, the connection and trust are actually stronger after the process of merciful reconciliation.

In other cases, forgiveness brings freedom to the one who forgives, even though ongoing relationship is not possible. Without the radical participation of the one who has done the harm – which simply can't happen in some instances – forgiveness leads to some emotional resolution but not with relational reconciliation. Others can be forgiven even when they won't or can't participate in the reconciliation process. And they can be forgiven even when they show little capacity to change behavior or show genuine remorse.

Ultimately, God wants more from us and for us than merely the forgiveness of particular offenses. He wants to grow our hearts toward love, mercy and grace to the point where we are *difficult to offend*. Jesus is trying to teach his followers to see the world through his Father's eyes. This means seeing people as loveable, yet broken; filled with potential, yet flawed; capable of great nobility, and also great evil. Jesus was never surprised by sin, evil, abuse or betrayal. He saw it coming and already had a worldview that was braced and shaped by God's heart of mercy.

While forgiveness covers the specks and spots of harms and offenses, grace paints a lavish coat of mercy over all of humanity and allows us to see people as they are and still love them willfully and compassionately. The Father loves us this way. Jesus' blood coats us with grace and mercy. We are covered and known and loved and accepted, even while God never stops hoping for more and better instincts to take hold in our lives. He longs for us to live into our purpose and potential, choosing to overlook and even redeem our foibles. Not because God is ignorant or forgetful or naïve, but because God is that big and that good.

And we're invited into this extravagant current of mercy. If we don't want in, we can reject it – we can reject God. If we do want in, then we are accepting our place in a flow of grace. We freely receive; we freely give.

Refusing to be a part of this is unfaith. It means we don't really get it. Jesus suggests that if we don't get it, then we won't get it. Sadly, this is a course that many choose, to keep God and this flowing course of divine mercy at bay.