

## *“All Means All”*

*Psalm 17; Romans 3:21-26*

November 6, 2022

When I was working at Myers Park Presbyterian Church, I had the opportunity to work alongside their children’s minister, Becky Davis. One day, Becky was teaching the kids about forgiveness. As she was teaching that day, one little boy’s face just exuded skepticism, like he was sure that Becky was selling him the Brooklyn Bridge for a song. Eventually, Becky acknowledged the little boy’s s doubt, asking him if he had any questions. The little boy replied: “So, if someone hits me, I don’t get to smack him back?” Before Becky had a chance to answer, he added, “I mean, it doesn’t seem right for someone to hit you and you don’t get to hit them back.” Becky rephrased his words, she said, “So what you’re thinking is if this kid hits, then you absolutely owe him a hit back, right?” “Yeah! Then we’re even. That’s more fair!” he said, he’s eyes lighting up. “Well,” she reminded him, “Jesus said we have to forgive and not get even.” She allowed him to process that for a few seconds, then Becky asked “What are we going to do about that?” The boy thought about it for a moment and then he asked her, “What if I hit him back really quick and then we both forgive each other? God would like that best, wouldn’t he?”

My guess is this was a pretty smart little boy. At six, he’d clearly mastered some very adult thinking when it comes to forgiveness. I think it’s fair to say we all have great difficulty with Jesus’ teaching on forgiving others. Throughout the gospels Jesus makes it crystal clear that we Christians should be easily forgiving people. In fact, right there in his prayer it is. We pray it every Sunday as we say “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” And then we get to this particular passage from the Gospel of Matthew, the one which strikes us as the most challenging.

Seeking some clarification, Peter comes to Jesus with a question about forgiving others. Peter wonders about the point at which forgiveness could end and retribution could begin. So, he comes to Jesus asking, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” I admire Peter for coming up with a number at all. And seven seems good, doesn’t it? Seven captures the idea that Peter’s willing to forgive but he won’t take it so far as to degenerate into what might be considered lunacy.

Jesus, however, has another number in mind. Jesus said to Peter, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” The number would be 490, in case you were wondering. It’s funny, I knew a student pastor at Duke who was keeping a chicken scratch list of the number of times he’d forgiven a particularly vexing person in his congregation. One day he came into class and announced the number on that list had officially reached 245, what he called the half-way point of his forgiveness for her. He was only kidding of course. He knew that Jesus isn’t working here in the realm of simple arithmetic. Here he’s using a Scriptural allusion. Jesus alludes to a passage from the ninth chapter of the Book of Daniel in which the kingdom of God is said to be coming in a period of time marked by seventy times seven. In recalling these verses of Daniel, Jesus essentially tells Peter that Christians are to keep forgiving one another until the Kingdom comes...that there isn’t to be a limit on their forgiveness.

Then, by way of an illustration of this matter, Jesus tells a parable. Now it’s important to keep in mind that a parable isn’t quite an allegory. Allegories are stories which have one to one equivalent. If we were to take this story as an allegory, God would be the king and a person like you or I would be the unforgiving servant. And that would all work fine well and good until God as the King handed us, the servant, over to the torturers for not being as forgiving as He is. So, it’s not an allegory Jesus tells but a parable. Jesus’ parables all convey a far deeper message than the story initially reveals. These parables seem simple yet the messages they convey are central to the teachings of Jesus. Think of parables as internal analogies where the story becomes a witness to the Kingdom to come. We can gather new ideas, new ways of thinking about things. In each parable, there are these items which defy expectations. Oftentimes, it’s in those details where we’re given the key by which we see the parable on a different plane. In this particular parable, Jesus speaks of a King who wished to settle some accounts, so one of his servants is called before him. Now this servant owes the King ten thousand talents. Just so you know, this is an astronomical amount of money. One denarius would’ve represented a day’s pay for an ordinary laborer. So, let’s say in today’s terms, one denarius would have been worth approximately \$80. Here’s the thing though, just ONE talent was worth somewhere between 6,000 to 10,000 denarii. Using the

lower figure, this servant owed his king the equivalent of \$4 billion dollars. In the enormity of the debt, we pick up a glimmer of one of those deep truths which the parable exposes. It's the kind of debt which is so large as to be utterly and wholly unpayable. No matter how hard you try, none of us would ever be able to pay off a \$4 billion dollar debt.

In a way, we all amass a similar kind of un-repayable debt to our Lord in our ongoing transgressions. If there were a celestial account sheet with our names on it, then you and I would stand with the sin-equivalent of \$4 billion dollars. We could work and do good all the days of our lives and never make a dent in what we already owe. Yet the king in the parable does the amazing. He forgives the servant of the debt. He writes the account clean, bringing the balance down to zero. To do so comes at an incredible cost, for, even though he's a King, this is a huge amount of wealth that's just disappeared.

I'm reminded of a story the other day I read from a pastor. Now this pastor grew up as a little boy during the Depression. Every week, their family would shop at a local food store. At this particular store, the owner extended every family a line of credit. He'd write down their purchases every week and total them all up. Each family had a sheet of paper which operated as their account. If their account got above \$25 dollars, then credit was shut off until they were able to pay. Well, one day the pastor and his mother went into the store to pick up their food for the week. The store owner pulled their sheet of paper and saw the balance was right there at \$25. He said to them "I'm sorry but you can't have the groceries until you pay down your bill." The pastor recalled his mother beginning to tremble, her eyes welling up with tears. She knew they didn't have any money. You can only imagine how hard it must've been for her to realize that there would be no food on the table that night. It was then that the store owner, a man who himself was struggling to make ends meet, tore the sheet of paper up and threw it away. He then pulled a new white sheet out of the drawer. He wrote down their purchases and told them to take their groceries and he'd see them next week. *It was a merciful act which came at a cost to him.*

The Scriptures reveal Jesus Christ purchased our forgiveness from sin. By ourselves, we would never, ever be able to pay the kind of debt we amass in our ongoing sinfulness. St. Anselm, an 11<sup>th</sup> century theologian, figured it this way in *Cur Deus Homo* – "none but man *should* pay the debt however no one but God *could* pay the debt." In other words, Jesus Christ, son of God, took on human flesh to atone for us. What we as limited broken humans could not do, God in the person of Jesus Christ did on the Cross at enormous cost to himself. Jesus wiped away our \$4 billion dollar debt. He tore up the account sheet with our names on it. Through his blood, we are forgiven. And that means something. It means that this costly forgiveness is the entryway into our relationship with God. And in that relationship, *one that came at a great price*, we're called to a new way of living, a new way marked by easy forgiveness of others.

The parable of the unforgiving servant illuminates for us what happens when that forgiveness doesn't penetrate our beings. Having been righted in his relationship with the King, the servant runs into a colleague that owes him money, a hundred denarii to be precise. A miniscule amount in comparison to what he owed the King. But instead of tearing up the debt as the King did for him, the servant holds his acquaintance fully accountable, choking him and then putting him in prison.

This story speaks in a way to something we all do. Having been forgiven of a debt which lies beyond our ability to pay through Jesus Christ, we ought to be the most forgiving people in the world. The fact of the matter is something far short of that. The truth of it is we all hang onto the debt sheets of others with a hardened tenacity. In this regard we're the best accountants in the world. We remember everyone who we believe owes us for their transgressions. Instead of burying the hatchet, we've kept it right at our bedsides, ready to pull it out at the slightest provocation. And this is bad business.

First of all, holding onto the trespasses of others is terrible for us, mentally, physically and spiritually. Think about it for a moment. When somebody's harmed you and you just can't forgive them, who stays up at night, rolling it over in their mind? Who do you think remains bitter and angry over it all? To hold on to anger and resentment is toxic to us.

At the end of the parable, the unforgiving servant's debt is reinstated and he himself is placed into prison until he can repay it all, which we know is impossible. Now while this doesn't mean that in our unforgiving natures that we'll be damned it does speak to the awfulness of not forgiving others. By holding on to the trespasses of

others, in some very real way we're torturing ourselves. Fredrick Buchner puts it this way - To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back is, in many ways, a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is none other than you!" NT Wright makes a brilliant analogy saying that forgiveness is like the air we breathe. We take it in and *we then must exhale it*. If we simply hold onto it, breathe in as deeply as we can and never let that air go, we'll die. It is only in the ongoing act of both accepting and offering forgiveness as air comes in and out of our lungs that we thrive and live fully!

Forgiveness of others is ALSO how Christian's evidence the reality of Christ's love to the world. And I know that's a high and lofty concept but, just for a moment, let's work it from the other side. One of the chief reasons people cite for not going to church is the hypocrisy of Christians. They say, on the one hand, Christians believe that they're forgiven of their sins by Jesus Christ. But on the other hand, they themselves are terribly unforgiving. And there's more than a kernel of truth in that assessment as churches oftentimes can be hotbeds of simmering anger and resentment towards one another for the misdeeds of the past. But you see, forgiveness is the means by which the church is called to exemplify the love we've received from God. It's the most powerful witness we have in a world that keeps records on debts backed up on multiple hard-drives, never to be forgotten. In the world around us, debts can hound you all the days of your life and then, after you're dead, they follow your heirs. We ought to be quite the contrast to that. By being forgiving people, we Christians open up non-believers to the power of the Gospel.

I got to see this a few years ago in my service for the CRO. A few days after the flood in which rescue crews pulled her from the waters, Peggy Putnam, the local director of the agency, came to the CRO building to discover that all the appliances had been stolen. They were an easy mark as they'd been sitting outside drying from the flooding. Amazingly, they all worked and Peggy no doubt was looking forward to seeing them in operation again. But someone took them and sold them for scrap. And this person was known to us. We knew who did it. We traced down the recycling agency the man sold them to. Had them fax over the receipt along with the man's driver's license photo. We had the man dead to rights and we were looking forward to handing it over to the police. Until Peggy pleaded with us not to. You see, she knew this man. He'd been by to receive food assistance from time to time. Now Peggy, knew that what he did was terribly wrong, but didn't want to see him jailed for it so she offered another solution. The man would sign a document admitting his guilt. He'd stay off the premises indefinitely, except, Peggy included, every three months when he could come by for food.

Like a great many of you, I didn't quite get Peggy on this matter until this week. It was being reminded of this parable that I began to realize that the reason Peggy was able to offer that kind of amazing forgiveness is because she must understand herself as being amazingly forgiven. And think of the testimony this forgiveness offers! Every three months, that man is going to come by to get food and every time he does so he'll remember the amazing forgiveness that Peggy extended to him. That's the most powerful witness to Christ a Christian can offer!

One last thing needs to be said. *Forgiveness is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit*. Too much pop-wisdom on the matter suggests otherwise, saying that it's up to us to do this work *on our own*. If we do not or cannot, it's only because we're not smart enough to see its advantages or that we just like feeling bad. This outlook on forgiveness was expressed in the book "The Shack" in a way that disappointed me from a book I largely liked. Near the end, the protagonist, Mack, is shown by God all the reasons he **SHOULD** forgive the man who killed his daughter. But it was up to him to do it. He needed to do it by himself. God was going to lead him up to a certain point but, after that, Mack had to go it alone, by the strength of his own will. I certainly don't think it's theologically accurate. First of all, it negates the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives which empowers every good thing we do. But besides that, it leaves a great question unanswered. *What are we to think of ourselves when we find ourselves unable at a point and time to forgive someone else?*

With this view on forgiveness, what we'd be left with is yet another reason to beat ourselves up. Not only would be torn up over the injustice done to us, we'd also be torturing ourselves with our own inadequacies when it comes to forgiveness.

Here's what I wish to say to you today. Forgiveness isn't an act of will. It's a function of divine grace. By that

I mean that *none of us* can make ourselves forgive anyone. But we can make the intellectual connection between God's forgiveness of us in spite of our transgressions and our reaction to those who have injured us. We can bring that into the forefront of our minds, even if we can't make it seep into our hearts. And if today you're at a point at which you simply cannot forgive someone else, I do know one thing you can do. You can pray that the time will come when you can forgive. Even if you can't pray that prayer, you can be honest before God in confessing that you cannot. And I have wonderful news for you! God will take you in whatever condition you're in.

I saw this play out this week at Kershaw correctional Institution. One of our table mates came wearing a troubled spirit on his face the first day. You could just tell something was wrong with him. Then, as the week started rolling, he got into things. One talk, in particular, really got to him. A talk on forgiveness. It really got under his skin and when we were talking about it, he revealed something to us. He was about to commit a violent act on someone there at the prison. The reasons aren't significant but he was thinking violence was the only answer. But then, hearing about forgiveness, he realized – he'd been forgiven by God and so now he was supposed to forgive others.

Well, during each Kairos walk, we share a giant bag of cookies with each of the participants. These cookies aren't to be eaten but are instead to be shared. Specifically, shared with someone whom the person has an issue with. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.