

Christ Presbyterian Church
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We Need to Talk: About Why You Need to Forgive Me
Matthew 18: 21-35

You know, this series that we're in, *We Need to Talk*, it's a great series about relationships and so forth. I somehow feel however, that I got the short end of the stick, because my topic is, I think by far, the hardest one. It's not easy talking about forgiveness, about what we have done to offend or hurt someone and how we have to come and humble ourselves in order to ask for forgiveness. Or on the other hand, how do we forgive others? It's a tough thing, but it's a good thing. I'm going to read from Matthew chapter 18, verses 21-35. Listen now as we read from the word of God:

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸ But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' ³⁰ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵ This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Simon Wiesenthal was a holocaust survivor who wrote a book called "The Sunflower", and this book is basically his attempt to understand, to grasp, to grapple with the difference between the Jewish ethic of forgiveness and atonement, and to contrast that with the Christian understanding of forgiveness as they share those same roots. As a young prisoner of war in Nazi Germany in a concentration camp, he was confronted by a dying German soldier who had just confessed to him all of the heinous crimes that he and his unit had incurred on a village of Jews. He asked

Simon if he would forgive him; he couldn't live with the memories that he had and he knew he was dying. Well, Wiesenthal just stood there and couldn't bring himself to forgive him. Then he turned around and walked out. And then he became distressed and obsessed by this; he began wrestling with the contrast between what the Jews believe about salvation and what Christians believe that Jesus taught. In this book he consults with Jewish ethicists and theologians, and Christian ethicists and theologians, and is just really mesmerized by this contrast. Now to be fair, there is nothing in the Old Testament about how we are to forgive one another. It's just not there. I mean, there are certain references to it—like the story of Joseph and his brothers—and others, but there is no teaching on how we get forgiveness from one another. The focus of the Old Testament is how we get forgiveness from God.

Now fast forward seventy years to Charleston, South Carolina. Abi Adam Spiker, a Jewish rabbi, a civil rights leader, was asked this question, "How could they forgive him?" The "him" was Dylan Roof, the white terrorist, white supremacist who killed nine people in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. The "they" were the family of the victims. Not long after the shooting, Nadine Collier, the daughter of Ethel Lance, one of the victims, said to Dylan in his first court appearance, "I forgive you. I will never talk to her ever again, never be able to hold her again. I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me; you hurt a lot of people, but I forgive you." Rabi Spiker then goes on to describe some of the key differences in the two traditions. He writes, "On this night of forgiveness and atonement, we read for transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones, but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another." How is peace made? When the person who has done wrong goes through a process of turning, teshuvah, repentance. It starts with recognition of one's actions as wrongs, and then four additional steps: remorse, desisting from sin, restitution where possible, and confession. We lay out a process that puts responsibility on the one who does wrong. All this is necessary before one seeks forgiveness from God.

So in the Jewish tradition, you only forgive three times and you only forgive when someone repents. If it's the fourth time and they do something and it's hurtful, you don't need to forgive them and you are righteous for withholding forgiveness. So in the Jewish way of teaching, there are some things that happen that are beyond forgiveness...that just can't be forgiven. It's in this backdrop now, that Jesus comes along. It's in this backdrop that He taught a radically different idea about forgiveness and sin. He made statements, like in the Lord's Prayer, when we sin, *forgive us for our sins as we also forgive those who sin against us*. Our forgiveness is contrasted with how we forgive, and the teaching is that there is nothing that is beyond forgiveness. Now, I know for many—including myself—that can be a lot easier said than done, right? I imagine in a room this size with this many people, there are a quite a few of us struggling to reconcile Jesus' command to forgive with the deep wounds that exist. But I have also walked alongside a lot of people who have made the decision to do just that, to change course, to become the person they truly want to be because something is healed inside of them that was broken. And the interesting thing is, suddenly God becomes the God of the Bible in our experience. Before this we always interpret God through the lens perhaps, of an imperfect parent, a father perhaps, who was abusive or whatever, and that limits our ability to understand God.

I want to back it up a little bit here and let me talk about the Jewish teaching again. Jesus was taught to forgive three times. You know, He was raised in that culture. He was taught to forgive three times only if somebody repents. Peter was also taught to only forgive three times; he was

raised in this culture as well. And there is this passage here that we just read, where Peter has been listening to Jesus' teaching on forgiveness, and he gets overwhelmed by this teaching. He decides to talk to Jesus...*Master, you've just blown me away with what you are saying about forgiveness. It just boggles my mind; it stretches my imagination. I'm wondering how many times should I forgive. Seven times? Is that enough?...*imagining that Jesus would say *Peter, good job. You got it!* You know, it's kind of like, he knew the number was three, that was the requirement. He doubled it and added one for good measure. *Seven, is that alright?* Well, that is the question that Peter is wrestling with. He picked seven, maybe because that is a special number in Jewish tradition. He is blown away by Jesus' response. Jesus says, "Not seven, but seven times seventy." Four hundred and ninety. Now, can you imagine having to keep track of 490 times that somebody has offended you? You know, you're maybe at 485, you've got 5 left...you're on thin ice there. I don't think that Jesus meant that at all. What He is saying is, 490 is beyond comprehension. Just throw out the calculator because you're not going to be able to keep up with that. That's the radicalness of what Jesus is saying about forgiveness.

Let's define it. In Colossians 2:13-14, it says this:

¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ.

So the question I would ask the apostle Paul if I were with him today is *what do you mean by this Paul? How did he do that?* And he answers and he says,

He forgave us all our sins

Well then we say *how did he do that? How did he forgive us all our sins?* And he says that He took the certificate of debt that we owed, and He cancelled it. He forgave it, He cancelled it. And so that we understand that, He goes on and says that He nailed it, that certificate, to the cross of Christ.

¹⁴ having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.

So forgiveness is the cancelling of debt. Now, all of us are familiar with banks, and sometimes banks use the term "forgiving of a loan". Loans are forgiven. At least that's my fantasy...that someday I will walk into the bank and the manager will say, "Hey Paul, you've been such a great customer all these years, you've always paid your debts on time, so we're just going to cancel it." Now, that's pure fantasy. They do forgive loans, but only after they have done everything possible to collect, and when they can't collect any more...then they forgive. I don't always understand that, but that's how it works sometimes. It's a painful process though; it's not something that is done with ease. But that's what God did through Christ. We had a debt we could never repay, and that is why we are exhorted to forgive as God forgives, in Christ. You see, we didn't deserve it. We couldn't earn it. It was given to us as a gift...nothing we did could deserve it or earn it. In fact, it was given to us as a gift when we were, the scripture says, enemies with God. When we were sinners, when we were helpless. And when we were in that critical state, God, in His love for us, decided to solve the debt problem. He sent His son to die on the cross so that sins could be forgiven, so that debt could be cancelled, so that we owe nothing. Now, if it's so amazing...if it's so mind-blowing and incredible, then why is it so hard to forgive? I'm going to give four reasons why I think we don't forgive.

The first one is because we think, since we are all believers and we want to be more like God, we have to forgive things quickly. Perhaps the way that you experience this is that someone has done something to hurt you, and then they come up and say, "I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?" And maybe you hesitate for a minute because there is still pain involved, pain inside emotionally, and we're not ready yet to finalize forgiveness, and so we hesitate. And they say, "Come on, forgive me. We're Christians, right? You gotta forgive me." And we say, "OK. I forgive you." But, you really haven't forgiven because there is still a healing process that you have to go through. And we base that, of course, on 1 John 1:9 where John says,

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

How long does it take God to forgive us if we confess our sins? God is instant. I confess; I'm forgiven. So we think then, if that's the model we are supposed to use, then we should forgive like that.

I'd like you to take a walk with me back to the garden, and we're going to encounter Adam and Eve at the beginning of creation. And God comes into the garden and He says to Adam, "Ok Adam, what have you done?" And Adam responds, "Well, you know that woman you gave me? It's her fault. But we are confessing, and You promised that if we confessed You would forgive, so You have to forgive us." And God says, "Well, I guess I have to forgive you. Just don't do it again. Now, go back into the garden." So, Adam and Eve have this conversation and Eve says "Wow! How did you figure that out? That's pretty incredible. When did you come up with that?" And Adam says, "Well, I guess the Holy Spirit just gave me that verse from the time that hasn't been written yet that if we confess, we're going to be forgiven and we're not going to die."

Well, me too. What are some of the other things that we should try to do now so that God will turn around and forgive us? Well, that wouldn't really be forgiveness, would it? God would have had to renege on His promise that when you sin, you die. And there are consequences of sin because that's the way the story goes. You know, there's the beginning of the healing process inferred in this text, because when they are thrown out of the garden, what happens? They are wearing animal skins, so there is inferred a sacrifice that was made on behalf of their sin. And now if you go forward in time, the sacrificial system is set in place, but it has to do with forgiveness in relationships with God, and it's always incomplete. It always has to be repeated over and over and over again. And you finally come to the time of Christ, when Jesus says on the cross, "It is finished." It is finished; what's finished? It is the work of forgiveness that is finished. So what started way back in the garden and progressed all the way through time, finally comes to its culmination with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, where He says, "It is finished." It is forgiven. Forgiveness is complete.

So now you walk forward in time. You have 1 John 1:9 which says that when we sin and we confess, it goes back to the cross, and we are clean and we start fresh because the work of forgiveness has been done. Now if God can take His time, from the garden to the cross, all of those millennia, to process His forgiveness, to process the anger and frustration with sinful people, to express sadness over how He is grieved by us, to express those emotions, but always working toward that final act of salvation, of forgiveness...if God can take all of that time, what's our rush? Now, if you bump into me on your way out of here this morning and you say, "Oh, I'm sorry", it would be kind of silly for me to say, "Well, let me think about this. Maybe at

four or five o'clock this afternoon come back and talk to me and I'll see if I've forgiven you." It's silly. It was an accident; you made a mistake. "Sorry." "OK, no problem."

On February 12, 1993, Mary Johnson's only son was murdered. Twenty years old. The perpetrator was a 16 year old named Oshay Israel who received a 25 year sentence for first degree murder. As a Christian woman, she struggled with the feelings of hatred that she had towards this young man. Eventually she knew that if she was going to live with herself, she needed to deal with her state of mind. Here's what she says, "I was pleased he was going to be tried as an adult for first degree murder, so when the judge suddenly changed the charge to second degree murder, I was livid; I was mad. In court, I viewed Oshay as an animal and the only thing that kept me going was being able to give him my victim impact statement. I was inspired by my faith and so I ended by saying *I've forgiven Oshay because the Bible tells us to forgive*. When Oshay's mother gave her statement, she asked us to forgive him, and I thought I had, but I hadn't actually forgiven. The root of bitterness ran deep. Anger had set in and I hated everyone. I remained like that for years, driving many people away. But then, one day I read a poem that talked about two mothers—one mother whose child had been murdered and the other mother whose child was the murderer. It was such a healing poem, all about the commonality of pain, and it showed me my destiny. Suddenly I had this vision of creating an organization to support not only the mothers of murdered children, but also the mothers of children who had taken a life. I knew then that I would never be able to deal with these mothers if I hadn't really forgiven Oshay, so I put in a request to the Department of Corrections to meet him." Then what ensues is this amazing, beautiful process of healing, of true forgiveness over time. Today they are next-door neighbors; she has practically adopted him as her son. He lives in the duplex right next to her. A friend of ours here at CPC, Chad Amour, is in fact working on a full length documentary about their relationship. There have been stories about them that have kind of been like the ripple on the pond...this is going to be a deep dive into the lake of that. Forgiveness for a deep wound like that doesn't heal overnight. God took His time; we can take our time too.

Second thing I want to point out, second reason we don't forgive is: I think that somehow we feel that if we forgive, we're going to make what happened okay. There was this movement in the early church that said grace is so great! It's wonderful! This forgiveness is so free, we can just go out and do whatever we want and act like crazy because we know that God is going to forgive us. Paul asked *should we continue to sin so that grace and forgiveness can abound?* Paul attacks that square on. He says *no way! If that's the way that you believe, then you don't understand the cost God paid to forgive*.

Forgiveness never turns evil into a good. It's still an evil, it's just that the debt has been cancelled. So, your forgiving really frees *you*. You know, forgiveness is really a selfish act; it doesn't benefit the other person, it benefits me, it benefits you. Recently I heard the story of Anthony Ray Hinton. Anthony was a poor young man living in the south in Alabama who served nearly thirty years on Alabama's death row for a crime he didn't commit. He was a victim of a system that favors those who have resources. He was given years of poor legal representation and he saw the outside world, interestingly enough, thirty years after he had gone into prison. That was the first time he had been outside and seen rain. And you know, he didn't mind getting rained on because it was just such a wonderful feeling to be free. His attorney, Brian Stevenson, said, "He was convicted because he is poor. We have a system that is compromised by racial bias and this case proves it." When Anthony was asked about forgiveness for what he had gone through, this is what he said: I gotta forgive. I've lived in hell for thirty years, so I don't want to

die going to hell. I gotta forgive; I don't have a choice." Forgiveness never turns an evil into a good, but it's good for us.

Third thing I want to talk about is the belief in the myth that forgiving means forgetting. The way I often hear it is *You know, I haven't forgotten so therefore I must not have forgiven*. You know, I've heard that almost every culture, except for the Middle East, has a saying: Forgive and forget. And I want to say right now I think that's not true; I think that's a lie. It's not human to forgive and forget. When you forgive, you're going to remember. And sometimes, it's important to remember, sometimes it's painful to remember, but we forgive and remember. Now, God forgives and forgets. He buries our sin in the sea of forgetfulness. And why does He do that? Because He doesn't have to learn anything. God knows everything. I forgive and remember because I need to learn something. I'm going to use a silly illustration. Let's say that you have this anxiety about talking to whoever is speaking. And several times you have come to talk to me and when you do this you release your anxiety by stepping on my foot and then apologizing. Now about the third time that this happens, I see you coming and I say, "Whoa, that's close enough! You can stop right there." And you say, "What's the matter Paul? What's wrong?" And I say, "Well, I remember you. You're the guy who likes to step on my foot." And you say, "But I thought you forgave me?" And I say, "Well, I did forgive you. I have no hard feelings about it. But I learned something about you, and I don't want you to step on my foot again, so that's close enough." I have, at least, protected my foot. So, there are some things that we need to learn when those kinds of things happen.

Last week, as David said during the announcements, we traveled on a bus...a group of African Americans and Caucasians...we all traveled on this journey down this trail of tears, if you will, recollecting the shared memory that we have of our racial legacy in the United States. While we were there, we visited this law firm run by Brian Stevenson called The Equal Justice Initiative. [See below] And among other things like defending wrongly incarcerated people, they have been documenting the history of lynching in this country. Thousands and thousands and thousands of people of color were lynched in this country and it's a sorted history that many of us know, but the extent of which most of us don't. And one way to do this, not to wallow in the past, but to acknowledge it and to create a space for corporate repentance...one very distinctive way they did this was that they went to as many of the places they could identify and collected a sample of the soil where these lynchings had happened. And not only did they collect the soil, but they actually put the soil in jars and you will notice [picture shown] that each of the jars has the name of a human being—a father, a brother, an uncle, a son, a daughter—someone whose life mattered, someone whose life was discarded because of the sin of racism. We know our future when we understand our past. We have opportunity to repent when we know what we have done or what we have inherited.

The fourth reason we don't forgive is we equate forgiveness with reconciliation or repentance. Now, it's interesting how Jewish teaching has crept into Christian teaching, and yet it's not valid, it's not true. Forgiveness is one process, reconciliation is a separate process. Forgiveness is a unilateral process; I do it by myself. Reconciliation is a bilateral process; we do it together. Another way to say it is: it takes two to reconcile, it takes one to forgive. So if I'm going to be reconciled, there has to be genuine Godly sorrow on your part if you're the offender and there has to be forgiveness on my part. Then we can reconcile. But if there's no sorrow, if there's no repentance, there is no need for reconciliation. Unless, you know, maybe it's in the family...I think it's always a good idea to make an effort in the family for reconciliation. But if it's a co-worker or someone like that, and they hurt you and deny that they did anything, and they're not

safe, then reconciliation may be very shallow, because you are on your guard and you protect yourself. But you can still forgive them, which is to say that you have cancelled the debt. They don't owe you anything anymore; you can walk away free, without the burden of that event, because God has forgiven you and you forgive them, there is no reconciliation that is required.

Now, look at the model in relationship with God. There is nothing that is beyond God's ability to forgive. There is nothing that you can do. The testimony of Scripture is that everything that you're going to do for the rest of your life, everything that I'm going to do for the rest of my life, every sin that I'm going to commit for the rest of my life, God has already taken care of it—it's covered by the blood of Christ. It's already forgiven. So what's the good news? The good news is that we have been forgiven and now it's up to us to be reconciled to the forgiving God. See, that's the step that is next. When we have been forgiven, God has taken care of His side of the process. He, by Himself, has solved the sin problem. Now He is saying *it's up to you. Are you going to accept it? Are you going to be reconciled to me, because that's the nature of the church?* God is at work in Christ and in the church, and He is seeking to reconcile the world to Himself. That's the end result. Reconciliation is the end result and it requires a response from us. But forgiveness is already taken care of. And so when I forgive someone, my part of the process is already taken care of and now it is up to them to make the move and come and apologize and make amends and try to reconcile. If it is genuine and I have genuinely forgiven, then the beautiful thing called reconciliation happens. But I can forgive and never be reconciled, and if that's the case, then I've done my part.

To know that we have been forgiven, that there is nothing that we can do that will stop God from loving us, that there is nothing we can do that condemns us...that's good news. So the hardest one to forgive is myself. People talk to me and they say *I've done such a horrible thing. I just can't forgive myself.* And I say, *Well, has God forgiven you? Yes, of course He has.* And I say, *it seems strange to me that you would have a higher standard than God would for you.* Kind of stops us in our tracks, doesn't it? Forgiving ourselves is just as important, maybe even more important, because it frees us from negative, hostile feelings towards ourselves, and it leads to the acceptance that allows us to really accept the work of God through Christ in us. So I have a final question: Who is it that you still need to forgive? And while I'm waiting, perhaps the spirit of God has brought a person's face in front of you, a name...what are you waiting for?

Forgive one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.

**Pastor Tshihamba highly recommends the book *Just Mercy* by Brian Stevenson