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## *The Gospel According to Matthew*

### *Forgiveness in Christ's Kingdom – Getting it Right*

*September 1, 2019*

**Sermon Text:** Matt 18:21-35

**Scripture Reading:** Colossians 3

Luk 17:1-4 And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! (2) It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. (3) Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, (4) and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

Forgiveness is at the heart of the good news of the gospel.

Eph 1:7-8 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, (8) which he lavished upon us....

Forgiveness of sins by faith in Jesus Christ. So many of the words of the Christian faith are connected with it:

- Mercy
- Grace
- Redemption
- Washing
- Justification

And Paul tells us that this forgiveness has been *lavished* upon us. Full and free forgiveness of our trespasses so that we who once were enemies of God are now His children, heirs of all His promises, justified and righteous in His sight.

Act 10:43 To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Act 13:38-39 Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, (39) and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Rom 4:5-8 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, (6) just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: (7) “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; (8) blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

Col 2:13-14 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, (14) by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Now, obviously this receiving of forgiveness through Christ is only possible for those who *believe in Christ and confess their need of Christ*. That is to say, we must believe and confess that we are sinners. Lost. UN-righteous and condemned before God and on our way to hell unless we are redeemed and forgiven because of Christ’s salvation. *Do you need to be saved?* That is the question that is put to each of us. Or more correctly, *do you believe that you need to be saved?* Because if you don’t, if you think that you are really quite alright just as you are, then this forgiveness of sins will never be yours.

Now, the rather surprising thing about this blessing of God’s forgiveness of our sins is that it is very, very often twisted and perverted by sinful men and women. Of all the subjects that come up, of all the questions I am typically asked in ministry, these have to be most common:

- Do I have to forgive everyone no matter what they have done and no matter if they are repentant or not?
- What does it mean to forgive someone?
- Does God forgive everyone who says they believe in Christ even if they continue to live a life that is unchanged?

- What is repentance? Is it required for forgiveness?

Most of the questions concern forgiveness on a horizontal level – by which I mean our forgiveness of other people.

This tells us that there is much confusion on this subject of forgiveness and I can tell you the reason for it – *the church is plagued with false teaching about forgiveness, much of which is coming from wicked people who want to justify their evil deeds.*

So just what does the Lord mean when He tells us:

Luke 17:3 Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, (4) and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

Listen to our text from Matthew:

Mat 18:21-35 Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (22) Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Here then is Peter once again. He comes to the Lord with a good question. Jesus has just been teaching them on this very subject – how to deal with a brother who has sinned against you. If he repents, we forgive him. If he refuses to repent, he is counted as an unbeliever and put out of the church. Peter is now asking – well, how often am I required to follow this process? He makes what sounds like a generous notion: “As many as seven times?” William Hendriksen says:

“Peter may have been of the opinion that Jesus would praise him for his bigheartedness. If so, his expectation was not fulfilled. There was something wrong with Peter’s approach. I smacked of rabbinism. It sounded as if the forgiving spirit were a commodity that could be weighed, measured, and counted; as if it could be parceled out little by little up to a certain well defined limit, when further distribution would have to stop.”

I would not be surprised, and Hendriksen seems to have been thinking the same thing, that in the teachings of the rabbis there was some rule that if you forgave someone 7 times, you didn’t need to forgive them again.

Jesus’ answer of 77 times (translated 70 times 7 in other translations) is of course not to be taken as another

literal, though more generous number. His point is that forgiveness is to be given every time a brother comes in repentance asking for that forgiveness. How do we know that repentance is required? Because:

Luke 17:3 Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, (4) and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

And –

Mat 18:15-16 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (16) But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

And –

1Jn 1:9-10 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (10) If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

So, in dealing with someone who claims to be a Christian (a “brother”), we forgive them when they repent of sinning against us. We don’t hold their sin against them. This does not mean that we are precluded from, for instance, reporting them to the police in the case of a crime, or from seeking civil remedies and compensation (which they should freely offer in keeping with true repentance).

*If the sinning party refuses to repent, then this is evidence that they are not truly a brother or sister in Christ, and at that point we treat them as an unbeliever. This is exactly what God Himself does.*

Mat 6:14-15 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, (15) but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Now, what about *an enemy* who sins against us? Here is the answer:

Rom 12:19-21 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (20) To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” (21) Do not be overcome

by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Forgiveness in cases where there is no repentance by the guilty party simply entails not seeking personal vengeance upon them and doing good to them if we find the, for example, hungry or bleeding. It does not mean acting in every way as if the sin never occurred or pretending he is not an enemy.

How often do we forgive a Christian brother or sister who sins against us and genuinely (note, genuinely) repents? An indefinite number of times. Why? *Because that is how the Lord forgives us.* And that is the point of the parable Jesus told:

Matthew 18 (23) “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

(24) When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. (25) And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.

(26) So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ (27) And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and

forgave him the debt.

(28) But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ (29) So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’

(30) He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

(31) When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. (32) Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

(33) And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ (34) And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. (35) So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Do you remember Jesus’ description of the citizens of His kingdom back in the Sermon on the Mount?

Mat 5:7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

This is not a listing of works that we must do to get into the kingdom. No. It is a description of what true sons of God are. They are merciful because they are recipients of God's mercy in Christ and they know it.

This is why we have all of these sobering instructions in the Bible about what happens to people who don't forgive. They are not allowed in the kingdom and if they have been claiming to be in it, they are to be put out. When Christ saves us and lavishes His forgiveness upon us, we are filled with His mercy and love and it is an inevitable fruit produced in us by the Spirit:

Gal 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (23) gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

You see the point of Jesus' parable then? Those who have been forgiven much, forgive much. And anyone who, like the unforgiving wicked servant, refuses to forgive will be cast into Hell when Christ comes in judgment.

'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. (33) And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'

Do you understand? Now, let's think this through quite carefully. *What do we see in local churches today? What is the very common atmosphere in such places even though there is an abundance of talking about mercy and forgiveness and so on?* I can tell you. UN-forgiveness. Let me illustrate.

I have been a pastor now for 36 years. In that period of time, I have had to do battle with many, many wicked people who claimed to be Christians. Many if not most of them still make that claim and are in churches. Now, here is what I consider to be a rather shocking statement, but I can assure you that it is absolutely true.

*In these three-plus decades, out of in excess of 75 very evil, divisive, reviling, people who caused myself and churches huge grief, not a single one has ever come back, contacted me, and asked for forgiveness.* And many of you can attest to this. Not a single one.

On the other hand, most of us here now have had occasion over the years to confess sin to one another and to ask for forgiveness from one another. And it has been given.

Now, I want us all to think this through very, very carefully in light of Jesus' words. What does this tell us? The answer is simple. These people who

sinned, who never ever asked for forgiveness and confessed their sin, *are not in Christ's kingdom. They are not Christians regardless of how convincing of a disguise they wear and how many other people they fool.* And the Lord has not forgiven them either.

In fact, I can tell you that these wolves in wool are full of hate for the Lord's people. And I am not saying these things out of some kind of vindictiveness toward these kind that I have had to deal with all these years. I am using them to illustrate clearly for you what the Lord is saying to us so that we can all be very wise.

Think about it further. I have no doubt that any observant person who knows the Lord has seen that the typical local church is peppered with people who refuse to forgive as Jesus teaches us to forgive. What does this tell us? It tells us that they are not Christians at all, and if we are going to deal with such people in the Lord's wisdom, *we must come to understand these things.* Otherwise, we will be duped by them. Our faith will be assaulted because we will think that in the end, Christianity is a joke, and we will be of no help to others.

Think of forgiveness in terms of love –

1Jn 2:9-11 Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in

darkness. (10) Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. (11) But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Think it through.

- *If I truly love someone,*
- *I will forgive them*
- *And if they love me, they will confess that they have wronged me and ask for forgiveness*
- *If that love is absent, forgiveness will be absent, as will the confession of sin*
- *If love and forgiveness are absent, Christ is absent. Such people are not Christians*

Most all of this is regularly denied in local churches today. As a result, the pews are filled with people who do not love one another, who do not forgive one another, who do not confess their sins to one another, and thus who do not know the Lord at all.

Be very wise about these things. This matter of forgiveness is of vital importance, and it is a sure and certain test of whether a person knows the Lord or not.