

“The Unforgiving Servant,” Sam Ferguson, May 31, 2020.

Key text | Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon Outline & Questions.

Introductory thoughts

What is a parable? An abstract truth illustrated and brought to life in a story (e.g., “Love your neighbor” in the story of the Good Samaritan).

Why parables? We can be “hard-headed,” but stories slip past our mental defenses and into our hearts.

Two things to keep in mind when reading parables in Scripture:

1. *Pay attention.* If Jesus speaks in a parable, we know it contains an important lesson.
2. *Have a posture of openness.* The truths contained in parables can be hard for us to hear.

What parables do you know best? On the whole, do you find them puzzling, encouraging, memorable, cryptic? Is there a parable that stands out as being particularly challenging to your heart?

Sermon focus | Matthew 18:21-35 | **The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant**

Prelude (vv. 21-22).

Peter’s question assumes there is a limit to how much we must forgive.

Jesus’ response (70x7) suggests forgiveness is limitless. Jesus knows our hearts will reject this teaching, so he uses a parable.

Scene One (vv. 21-27).

The servant owes an impossible sum of money to the king. (Many thousands of lifetime earnings.) At first, the king begins carrying out justice (i.e., bringing the servant to account).

v. 21: the king feels “pity.” He is moved by deep, heartfelt compassion and shows the servant mercy by forgiving the servant of his debts.

Scene Two (vv. 32-34).

Another servant owes the unforgiving servant 1/600,000th of what the unforgiving servant owed the king. (Remember, the king forgave *all of it.*)

The unforgiving servant does **not** show the debtor any pity or mercy.

Scene Three (v. 35).

Jesus makes a “jarring statement” in response to Peter’s question: “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Jesus wants us to see ourselves in the story. We are more like the unforgiving servant than we like to admit.

Peter is asking a “rabbinic” or intellectual question. In response, Jesus teaches that forgiveness is not a matter of the will or the mind, but of the **heart**.

Have you, like Peter, ever sought to find a “limit” to forgiveness?

In your own life, can you recall an experience where you forgave someone by will or mind, but never from your heart? How did it go?

Key question: When your heart is pricked or hurt, what bleeds out?

Example 1: The **unforgiving servant**. His is a cautionary tale. His heart bled “lust for cold justice.”

But justice on its own is not enough. We must consider our immediate reflexes (that occur in our hearts) when we are offended.

Common reflexes of the heart:

1. Self-righteous thirst for justice (“how dare they!”)
2. Insecurity—“I will make them pay, then I will feel strong again.”
3. Delighting in hate.

Do any of the above “reflexes” resonate? What might help you not indulge self-righteous, insecure, or hateful thoughts/actions when you’re offended?

Important caveat: it is not wrong to desire justice when we are wronged, hurt, or offended. In fact, justice is the “backbone” of the parable. Forgiveness is only possible where there is justice.

However, when “cold justice” is the only way we relate to one another, everyone ends up in “prison.”

Example 2: The **king**. The king bled mercy and compassion.

The parable shows us what flows out of God’s heart: mercy and kindness. God is not solely concerned with justice, but sees the condition of man and is *moved*.

God is *moved* with compassion and mercy in his relationship with us. How have you seen this truth bear out your life? What does it mean for our earthly relationships?

Mercy helps us:

1. Pause to see the bigger picture.

The offender is more than just an offender.

The victim is more than just a victim. We *all* stand as offenders before God, and God has shown us great grace and forgiveness. So we must stand within the waterfall of God's mercy and grace and then share it with others.

2. Bear our wounds (in partnership with Jesus).
3. Hold the balm of grace. The merciful heart cries for justice with the balm of grace. God desires reconciliation and life.

Can you recall experiences in your life where God helped you bear painful wounds and extend forgiveness/mercy to another from your heart?

Where do you need reconciliation right now? Maybe a family relationship, or a broader fissure within society? What steps can you take to walk with Jesus in pursuit of this reconciliation *today*?

The path forward is not vengeance; it is mercy.

Additional Questions:

What might Christ be saying to you through this passage, sermon, discussion?

How might you live differently in light of this passage and sermon?