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The Prevailing Church: Values Strong Community, Part 2

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TEXT: Matthew 18:21-35 (ESV)

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?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

“Therefore the kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 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. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 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.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 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. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my Heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Dear Friends:

Pastor H.B London, a writer and nationally known counselor to pastors and their families, offers this bit of wisdom on maintaining family health. "One criterion for family health," he writes, "is: are you saying, 'I'm sorry, I forgive you, and I love you' often?" I propose that this wisdom could be applied to the Church of Jesus Christ as well. After all, the church is referred to in certain places of the New Testament as the "family of God" or the "household of God." And like families do, we struggle to get along with one another sometimes. There are often times failures and breakdowns between Christian brothers and sisters in the church. You've seen it, so have I. The question is: how do we deal with them and maintain healthy relationships within the church family? Jesus answers that question today in this way: with forgiveness.

Forgiveness could be considered the most important word in the Christian's vocabulary. When you think about it, the Christian life is actually born in forgiveness, isn't it; the forgiveness we've received in Jesus Christ through His death on the cross and His resurrection? And forgiveness is to characterize us all the way through our relationships with others in the family of God as well. I like this statement that describes what it means to forgive.

To forgive someone involves three things. First, it means to forego the right of striking back. One rejects the urge to repay gossip with gossip and a bad turn with a worse turn. Second, it means replacing the feeling of resentment and anger with goodwill, a love which seeks the other's welfare, not harm. And third, it means the forgiving person takes concrete steps to restore good relations. Or, as author Anne Lamott writes, "forgiveness means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back."

As you probably know, that can be a difficult task for us. We see it was for Peter in today's story. He's concluded from the previous teaching of Jesus on reconciliation that Jesus was exalting forgiveness as a heavenly power, able to maintain the health and wholeness of the church in the midst of a fallen world. But Peter makes the mistake of trying to calculate and quantify what Jesus is saying by asking, "Well, Lord, how often will my brother or sister sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Obviously he's sure there must be some sort of limit on this kind of activity. If my brother keeps this up, how many times must I keep on forgiving? I can only go so far. Seven times probably seemed right and even generous to Peter. Seven carries overtones

of fullness and completeness in Jewish thought, and that seems overly patient and merciful in his mind. And after all, the rabbis of the day said only three times were necessary in regard to that question. But Jesus responds, "Not seven times, Peter, but seventy-seven times." Meaning, go on and on and on and on in your forgiving. Put away your math pencil for calculating and keeping score and pick up your eraser. I'm talking unlimited, constant, complete forgiveness, Jesus says.

Then to explain further, he tells this parable, a kingdom parable, which throws around some awesome numbers designed to shatter all our petty calculations and fuzzy quantifications and throw us into a new paradigm shift, a new reality. There's this servant who's in debt to his king, he owes ten thousand talents, which equals millions and millions of dollars in our present day currency. A talent was equal to 20 years of wages in those days. He obviously has embezzled this from the king somehow over the years, and the king now wants it back. The servant couldn't possibly pay the debt. Who could? So the king orders the servant with his wife and his children and every possession to be sold, to be liquidated with the proceeds going towards paying off the debt. Of course, that would pay only a fraction of it, but at least it would satisfy the king's honor and reputation and let other tempted embezzlers heed the warning. But the man falls on his knees and he begs the king, "Have mercy, patience with me and I will pay everything." You almost have to chuckle when you think of it. No way that guy's ever going to be able to repay that kind of a debt. Surprisingly, though, the king takes pity on him and releases him and forgives him the whole debt. Such grace and mercy being shown here, isn't it? Man, what a king!

Now, that same forgiving servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him 20 denarii, which was about 20 days wages. And you could say that's quite a bit, but certainly not the millions we described earlier. It looks like a pittance after that. The words that follow are a replay of the previous conversation between the servant and the king, except for the result. "Pay what you owe," he said. His fellow servant fell down on his knees and says, "Have patience with me and I'll pay you." But the servant refused and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. Now the king gets wind of this incident and calls him back and says, "You wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?"

As you consider these words, which are the climax of the parable, we're reminded of some earlier words spoken by Jesus to his disciples about the servant not being above the master. The servant is not above the master, whether it's in suffering, or serving, or as in today's story, forgiveness. Our king, as He suffered on a cross, prayed, "Father, forgive them," didn't He? Even for enemies who were taunting Him. And the king, anyway, sent the unforgiving servant to the jailers until he should pay his debt; in other words, he went off for life. Jesus summarizes the teaching by saying, "So, also, my Heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." To not forgive, as you've been forgiven by God, I guess, is wickedness in God's sight and it brings judgment upon oneself. It's not that God can't forgive the unforgiving – of course He can – but Jesus, in a summary of this teaching says that He won't. Michael Green, Bible commentator, writes, "God puts his precious gift of forgiveness in our hands, but only if we open them up to Him, not cleansing them in anger against our brethren." Dr. Haddon Robinson writes, "Although at times we may find it difficult to forgive someone who's wronged us, we can't help but see now an individual offense against us as trivial in comparison to our sin against God. When we forgive others, we're giving evidence we've entered into the forgiveness of God."

Now, when Jesus says we must forgive from the heart, what do you think He means by that? Well, here's an insight for you: forgiving from the heart is the opposite of behavior carefully calculated to make an impression on one's peers or designed merely to conform to some hallowed rule or tradition. This phrase is actually speaking of actions welling up spontaneously, joyfully, irrepressibly from a life touched by God's mercy and forgiveness. So we learn from Jesus that forgiveness is a very big deal to God. And therefore it's a big deal to His church, His people, if it is to be a prevailing church and stand strong.

It's a big deal for us for a couple of big reasons. First of all, we need to remember that we're that first servant in the parable. We're reminded of that every time we have the confession of sin in our worship service: that we had a giant debt, our sinfulness, impossible for us to pay ourselves. But God in Christ paid for us at the cross; shocking, astounding, costly, such sacrifice. We were hell-bound, separated from God, the giver of life, now and for eternity. But God, in His mercy, gave His only Son to pay for our sin. At the cross, He erased our infinite debt with His innocent suffering and death. And as the hymn writer puts it:

Jesus paid it all

All to Him I owe.
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.

Forgiveness, you see, is our joy in life and our salvation. It's a costly gift from God to you and me which we receive through faith in Jesus Christ. It's the core of our gospel that we are to proclaim to the world. We proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and what He's done for us and call people to repentance, to receive the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ.

And of course, from today's story, we learned that the next reason it's a big deal is because Christ Jesus has commanded us, His church, to exercise it; to not only profess it and proclaim it, but practice it among ourselves. Forgiveness and mercy and patience with one another is important to God and important to the health of His church.

Forgiveness is not something that we possess and keep for ourselves, it's something that we practice towards each other. God's forgiven are to be forgivers. Someone once wrote,

Divine generosity is meant to empower hearty, mutual forgiveness within the new community of sisters and brothers. Heaven and earth embrace and are no longer separated by a great gulf when each one of us, forgiven by God, forgives the sister or the brother from the heart. Heartfelt generosity stands forever opposed to hardness of heart, a sad virus affecting not only the unforgiving servant, but humanity in general.

As members of the family of God, the church, you and me, we are set apart. We are set apart to operate differently from the rest of the world: loving and forgiving from the heart as we've been forgiving in Christ. That's an important ingredient in being the prevailing church of Jesus Christ. It's what keeps us together, standing unified, shining brightly in a dark, unforgiving world.

And yes, I agree with you, if you're thinking this: it is a tall order that we have received from our risen Lord. But here's some good news of assurance for you and for me: we're not on our own in doing this. We have the Holy Spirit here to help us carry it out.

Wonderful writer named Edna Hong, a Lutheran writer, writes in her book, "Forgiveness is a Work as well as a Grace", about this reality of the Holy Spirit. She writes,

The strongest and healthiest of human wills cannot cleanse the mind of hate and grudges and bitter memories. Even with the best of will, we cannot forgive ourselves for betraying the ideals of our youth. The soundest will is unable of

itself to have an unquenchable spirit of love and forgiveness, cannot of itself achieve the victory of forgiving enemies. Eating natural foods can't do it, yogurt and yoga can't do it, jogging and cross-country skiing can't do it. Psychiatry can say, "hang in there baby," but does not speak of guilt and repentance and forgiveness. Only the Holy Spirit can give me the willingness to be forgiving. I can never, in all eternity, forgive as God forgives. But the Holy Spirit can penetrate my weak will and make my impotent "I" a potent "we" that engages in the work of forgiveness and reconciliation in the world, starting in my own family and in the church.

Friends, if you are in a relationship with Jesus Christ, which I hope you are, you have the Holy Spirit in you. And he will counsel would help and empower you to forgive when you ask. My brothers and sisters in Christ: are there some resentments, some hidden grievances that you're holding on to, refusing to forgive? If so, I encourage you today to repent of them now. Get rid of them. God's forgiveness is indeed inexhaustible, but it can be received only by those who repent, and resentment needs to be repented of. Otherwise, it will utterly block you and me from receiving and enjoying the forgiveness and peace of mind that we longed for in our lives. Take your resentments to the Cross of Christ, and ask for God's forgiveness and His Holy Spirit's help to forgive as you've been forgiven. For God promises He will forgive and help you to forgive.

Christian author Corrie Ten Boom, who survived the Nazi concentration camps back in World War 2, who lost her family in concentration camp, shares this true story in her book, "The Hiding Place". She writes:

It was a church service in Munich, and I saw him: the former SS man who had stood guard at the shower room door at the processing center at Ravensbrück. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there: the room full of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, my sister Betsie's pained, blanched face. He came up to me as the church was empty, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, fräulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away." His hand was suddenly thrust out to shake mine, and I, who had preached so often to the people about the need to forgive, but kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man. Was I going to ask for more Lord Jesus? I prayed, "Forgive me, and help me to forgive him." I tried to smile. I struggled to raise my

hand, but I could not. I felt nothing. Not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again, I breathed the silent prayer, "Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness." As I took the man's hand, the most incredible thing happened: from my shoulder, along my arm, and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart spring a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on Christ's. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives along with the command the love itself.

Forgive as you have been forgiven. That's our message for today.

Amen.