



Sunday School Lesson for July 24, 2005

Released on July 20, 2005

"Free to Forgive"

Lesson: **Matthew 18:21--35**

Time: A.D. 29

Place: Capernaum

Golden Text: "Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt" (Matthew 18:27 NIV)

Introduction

In today's vengeful society, it is very easy to hear of people who hold grudges against others that date back many years. Why do we do this? Can't we simply forgive and forget and put the whole matter behind us? The hard and fast responses to these questions are: because we're human and it's not *natural* for us to want to forgive; yes we *can* "simply" forgive; but forgetting *isn't* as easy as it sounds; and "behind us," yes, but without The Lord's help it'll soon resurface just as nasty as ever.

While all the principles for living included in God's Word are important, the principle of forgiveness is one of the most rewarding. It is also one of the most difficult for many people to put into practice. It is also a principle that must be done from a spiritual side rather than from a fleshy or human side. As will be discussed in today's lesson, *true* forgiveness is a willingness not to get even with someone who has hurt us. Jesus set a good example of this for us when He forgave His enemies even as He died on the cross. We are called to follow His example in that we were also *forgiven* to *forgive*.

Today's Aim

Facts: to show the merciless nature of the forgiven debtor who refused to forgive his own debtor.

Principle: to understand that we are called to forgive others even as we have been forgiven by God.

Application: to urge Christians to put no limits on their willingness to forgive others.

Lesson Outline

The Servant Forgiven: Matthew 18:21--27

The Servant Unforgiving: Matthew 18:28--35

Questions

1. What had caused Peter to wonder about how often to forgive? (Matthew 18:21, and 18:15-20)

Peter's question was a logical outgrowth of the teachings of verses 15--20. Actually, Peter was being very generous in his willingness to forgive "up to seven times." The traditional limit according to Jewish custom and teaching was only three times. This might have come from an interpretation of Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; and 2:1, 4, and 6.

2. How do we know Peter's concern was about fellow believers? (Matthew 18:21.)

We know Peter was asking about forgiveness between Christians because he used the term, "my brother," in v. 21. In the family of God, it is extremely important that we get along and not allow offenses to separate us from one another. Grudges should not be a part of our lifestyle, even though they are quite prominent in the secular, political, and business world--where most people are determined to look out for *themselves*.

3. How did Jesus respond to Peter's seemingly generous offer to forgive seven times, and what did Jesus mean in his response? (Matthew 18:22)

Jesus told Peter that he was to forgive his brother not only up to seven times, but "up to seventy times seven." While some argue that this actually means forgiving 77 times, or mathematically it means forgiving 490 times; Jesus' point is missed if one gets stumped fiddling around with the numbers. Jesus was teaching that forgiveness should go on *endlessly*, no matter how many times we are offended.

A child of God should never carry a grudge against another child of God, or against anyone, for that matter. This can be more difficult when unsaved friends or family members hurt us badly, but the principle remains the same: because God forgave and continues to forgive us, we must turn around and forgive others in the same manner!

Aside: I was several times *wronged* by a close family member over the past six years. And although that person has never apologized for what was said or done, I have forgiven the words and action completely, but I have had a more difficult time *forgetting* what happened. I am still prayerful in dealing with this issue, but at one time I was at the point to where whenever I saw this person at family gatherings, something inside me would snap and I would relive *in detail* all episodes over and

over again in my mind. This would sometimes make me physically ill as a result. It was horrible!

I was later tremendously helped when during a sermon I was reminded that the relative who wronged me years ago has since gotten on with his/her life--probably even forgetting what was said and done. It was I who was continuing to remove my bandages and tear open my own healing wound each time I saw this person. I was preventing myself from healing emotionally and spiritually. Healing will *never* take place under these conditions; only the scar tissue of unforgiveness continues to build up over time.

4. How does the concept of debt relate to our need to forgive? (Matthew 18:23--24)

The concept of debt can be applied to offenses because when we find ourselves offended by someone, we feel the person owes us something to make up for it. In our minds he owes us a debt of some sort, if only an apology. It is this feeling that another person owes us something that we must deal with.

The concept of forgiveness includes willingly canceling anything owed to us. When someone has offended us or hurt us deeply, our part in the matter is to not expect anything to be done to settle the account with us. If the other person asks forgiveness, we should immediately grant it; but it is also true that if that person never does ask for our forgiveness, we should forgive him in our hearts for what he has done.

5. What was Jesus portraying in the first servant's huge debt? (Matthew 18:25--27)

There is no doubt that Jesus purposely used such a huge amount of debt in His parable to clearly demonstrate the greatness of God's forgiveness of our sins. There is no humanly possible means of paying the Father what we owe because of our sins. He is holy, while we are unholy and sinful. In ourselves we have no way of bridging the enormous gap of unholiness that separates us from God. But, thank God for Jesus' grace towards us. *Hallelujah!*

6. What did the servant do after being forgiven, and what did this reveal about him? (Matthew 18:28--31)

The first servant who had been forgiven his debt by the king responded very differently to a man who owed him money--and a small amount of money at that. The first servant roughed up his fellow servant and demanded the money that was owed. Even with the fellow servant's begging for forgiveness, the first servant was completely merciless towards him. He had the fellow servant thrown into jail--making his repayment of the debt even more impossible from jail. He didn't have an attitude of forgiveness. How quickly he forgot about his own debt having been forgiven. Let's not find ourselves in this same position of unforgiveness.

Aside: Proverbs 22:7 reads, "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender." It is never good to be in debt, because to a degree indebtedness puts us under the control of the one we owe. Sadly, our society has

made it very easy to get caught in indebtedness through the use of credit cards. As a result, many are so deeply in debt that they will need years to get free of it. While this is not the primary teaching of this parable, it does serve as an indirect warning to us about the danger of being in debt.

7. What must we keep in mind about interpreting a parable?

A parable is a *story* that Jesus used to teach an earthly example. And although parables didn't always contain specific details, this is okay because the central message that is being relayed has more valuable significance to us. Jesus, however, purposely set up an immense contrast in order to make His point in this parable: surely no believer who has been forgiven for all his sins would ever dare to be so unforgiving of others.

8. How did the master respond to what he heard about the servant? (Matthew 18:32-33)

The first servant was called once again into the presence of his master, the king, who was very angry about what he had heard. While he had shown great mercy toward this servant, the servant had responded by being angry, bitter, unforgiving, and compassionless toward a fellow servant.

Since the master in Jesus' parable was being portrayed in the role of God, surely this teaches us that our Master is deeply affected when our attitudes toward other believers resembles these attitudes.

The master confronted his servant by calling him wicked and reminding him of the great debt he had been forgiven. He then had his servant sent to the "torturers" in prison until he paid all that was due to the master.

9. What does this parable teach?

It simply teaches the principle that we should forgive others because God *forgives* us. [See the Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:12, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."]

10. What are some practical ways in which we can apply this parable?

One way is to be sure to repay those who you owe. Romans 13:8 (NIV) says that we are to "owe no one anything except to love one another..." (Whereas this verse primarily means to respect and honor one another, money no doubt is also included.) Another practical application is to immediately and completely forgive anyone who has ever wronged you in your life--whether or not you have received an apology for what was done. And, lastly, Ephesians 4:32 tells us the principle by which each of us (God's children) should live: "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."

Conclusion

It is truly amazing how much our Lord has forgiven us. We are sinners by nature, and yet He showed us His mercy by forgiving and accepting us. Let us encourage each other to forgive someone this week.

Practical Points

Followers of Christ do not have the option of withholding forgiveness (Matthew 18:21--22).

Forgiveness is not something that is earned; it is something that is given (verses 23--27).

If we do not forgive, we demonstrate ingratitude for God's forgiveness of us (verses 28--30).

Hypocrisy and a lack of mercy are sins that cannot be hidden (verses 31--33).

An unforgiving spirit brings God's displeasure, as well as His discipline (verse 34).

Forgiveness that is not heartfelt is no forgiveness at all (verse 35).

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are so humbled by Your example of forgiveness in today's lesson. Thank you for this reminder that when You forgive us, we must in turn forgive others in the same manner. Please help us to not be like the first servant who showed no compassion of mercy towards his fellow servant. We love You, Lord, and forever praise and thank You for your gifts of grace and mercy, forgiveness from sin, and life eternal through Jesus Christ. In the Precious Name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Thought to Remember

"We've been forgiven to forgive!"

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Subject: **"Meeting Human Needs"**

Lesson Text: **Matthew 25:31-46**

Golden Text: verse 40

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