

"NOW WE CAN FORGIVE!"  
MATTHEW 18:21-35  
SIXTEENTH S. A. PENTECOST  
MESSIAH, BOERNE  
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY  
SPIRIT. AMEN.

TEXT: MT 18:21-35

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST:

TWO QUESTIONS WE SOMETIMES ASK AS HUMAN BEINGS HAVE  
THE SAME ANSWER. THE FIRST QUESTION IS THIS: WHAT IS A  
PERSON'S *GREATEST NEED*? THE SECOND: WHAT IS A PERSON'S  
*GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT*? THE ANSWER TO BOTH QUESTIONS:  
*FORGIVENESS*.

DO YOU THINK I EXAGGERATE? WELL, JUST THINK ABOUT HOW  
HARD IT IS FOR YOU TO SAY TO YOUR WIFE OR YOUR HUSBAND, "I  
WAS WRONG. PLEASE FORGIVE ME." OR THINK ABOUT HOW HARD IT  
IS FOR YOU TO LET SOMEONE WHO OWES YOU A LOT OF MONEY GO  
FREE OF THE DEBT? THAT'S THE FORGIVENESS THAT GOD GIVES US  
THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST AND TO WHICH JESUS CALLS US  
AS CHRISTIANS. THAT'S THE FORGIVENESS WHICH THE HOLY SPIRIT  
EMPOWERS US THROUGH GOD'S WORD AND SACRAMENTS TO GIVE TO  
OTHERS. YOU SEE, NOW WE CAN FORGIVE!

IT IS A COMMON SAYING: "TO ERR IS HUMAN." THAT IS  
TRUE, BUT NOT TO FORGIVE IS HUMAN, TOO. IN OUR NATURAL

HUMAN CONDITION, THAT IS, WITH OUR BODY AND BEHAVIOR CORRUPTED BY SIN, WE HAVE NO WAY TO RECONCILE WITH THOSE WHO HURT US, NOR DO WE WANT TO. IT'S INSANE THE WAY HUMAN BEINGS SEEM TO PREFER HOLDING ON TO THE ANGER AND PAIN CAUSED BY SIN RATHER THAN EXPERIENCING THE RELIEF AND PEACE GAINED THROUGH FORGIVENESS.

SINCE WE CHRISTIANS ARE SINNERS AS WELL AS SAINTS, WE OFTEN REFUSE TO FORGIVE. WE SEEM TO LIKE THE ILLUSION OF BEING IN CONTROL, THE FEELING OF HAVING SOMEONE IN OUR DEBT AND UNDER OUR POWER. IF THIS WERE NOT SO, WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CHRISTIANS, EVEN RIGHT HERE IN THIS CONGREGATION, WHO REFUSE TO FORGIVE EACH OTHER? SINFUL SELFISHNESS STILL SEEKS TO ENSLAVE US, AND BY IT WE ARE ENSLAVED, AS JESUS SAYS, "I TELL YOU THE TRUTH, EVERYONE WHO SINS IS A SLAVE TO SIN" (JN 8:34).

OUR BROODING, MOODY DISPOSITIONS, AND FEELINGS OF DEPRESSION ARE SOMETIMES SIMPLY SYMPTOMS OF AN UNFORGIVING HEART. WHEN WE MISTREAT ANOTHER PERSON BY NOT FORGIVING THEM, WE REMAIN IN THEIR DEBT UNTIL WE FORGIVE AND ARE FORGIVEN. YOU SEE, BY WITHHOLDING FORGIVENESS FROM OTHERS IN ORDER TO EXERCISE CONTROL OVER THEIR BEHAVIOR, WE ARE SINNING BY USING UNFORGIVEN SIN AS A TOOL FOR LEVERAGE TO KEEP ANOTHER PERSON UNDER OUR CONTROL.

THAT'S WHAT THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT DID IN JESUS' PARABLE. HE HAD HIS FELLOW SERVANT THROWN INTO PRISON UNTIL HE COULD PAY THE DEBT OWED HIM. WHEN THE KING HEARD WHAT HE HAD DONE AFTER HE HAD FORGIVEN HIM SO GREAT A DEBT, HE CALLED HIM INTO HIS PRESENCE AND SAID, "YOU WICKED SERVANT!" THE KING'S JUDGEMENT WAS JUST. AND WE, TOO, ARE EVIL INTENTIONED AND EVIL DOERS WHEN, LIKE THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT, WE DENY FORGIVENESS TO OTHERS IN ORDER TO CONTROL THEIR BEHAVIOR ACCORDING TO OUR OWN SINFUL DESIRES, AS THOUGH WE WERE IN THE PLACE OF GOD.

YET, FOR JESUS' SAKE, GOD RELEASES US FROM OUR DEBT TO HIM. IN JESUS' PARABLE THE KING FORGAVE HIS SERVANT A DEBT HE COULD NEVER REPAY BECAUSE HE HAD MERCY ON HIM. GOD THE KING IS LIKEWISE MERCIFUL TOWARD US, FILLED WITH PITY, LONGSUFFERING, AND COMPASSION FOR US SINFUL HUMAN BEINGS. HE WITHHOLDS THE PUNISHMENT WE DESERVE AND PLACED IT ON HIS OWN SON INSTEAD. JESUS CHRIST PAID OUR DEBT IN FULL BY MEANS OF THE CROSS, PAYING WHAT WE DESERVE BECAUSE OF OUR SINS BY DYING IN OUR PLACE, GIVING HIS LIFE FOR THE LIVES OF ALL PEOPLE.

OUR TRIUNE GOD'S GREAT ACT OF LOVE IS SEEN IN JESUS' DEATH ON THE CROSS. ON CALVARY'S CROSS JESUS SUFFERED AND DIED FOR THE SINS OF THE WHOLE WORLD. NOW, THROUGH HIS

DEATH ON THE CROSS, FORGIVENESS OF SINS, LIFE, AND SALVATION ARE AVAILABLE TO ALL WHO BELIEVE IN HIM. AS ST. PAUL WRITES: "WHEN YOU WERE DEAD IN YOUR SINS AND . . . YOUR SINFUL NATURE, GOD MADE US ALIVE WITH CHRIST. HE FORGAVE US ALL OUR SINS . . . THAT STOOD OPPOSED TO US; HE TOOK IT AWAY, NAILING IT TO THE CROSS" (COL 2:13-14).

YOU SEE, OUR DEBT TO GOD IS ASTRONOMICAL. A DENARIUS WAS THE STANDARD WAGE FOR ONE DAY'S WORK IN JESUS' DAY, SO THE DEBT THE FELLOW SERVANT OWED THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT WAS A SUBSTANTIAL AMOUNT OF MONEY—OVER THREE MONTHS WAGES. ON THE OTHER HAND, A TALENT WAS WORTH 6,000 DENARII, SO THE DEBT THE KING FORGAVE THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT WAS 600,000 TIMES LARGER THAN THE DEBT OF THE FELLOW SERVANT. SO, FOR EXAMPLE, IF THE KING FORGAVE THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT \$12 MILLION, THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT WAS DEMANDING FROM HIS FELLOW SERVANT \$20, A VERITABLE "DROP IN THE BUCKET" IN COMPARISON. YET WITH INSTANT, FULL, AND FREE FORGIVENESS, OUR TRIUNE GOD SETS US FREE OF SINS, REMOVING OUR DEBT OF GUILT AND SHAME THROUGH THE ONCE-AND-FOR-ALL SACRIFICE OF HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST, ON THE CROSS IN OUR PLACE.

NOW, IN OUR NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, ESTABLISHED BY CHRIST JESUS, HE EMPOWERS US TO FORGIVE OTHERS. NOW WE CAN TRULY FORGIVE. NOW WE CAN ALSO MATURE IN OUR ABILITY BOTH

TO RECEIVE AND TO GRANT FORGIVENESS. ANGLICAN ARCHBISHOP RICHARD TRENT ONCE NOTED: "THE CHRISTIAN STANDS IN A MIDDLE POINT, BETWEEN MERCY RECEIVED, AND A MERCY WHICH HE YET NEEDS TO RECEIVE. SOMETIMES THE FIRST IS URGED UPON HIM AS AN ARGUMENT FOR SHOWING MERCY: 'FORGIVING ONE ANOTHER, AS CHRIST FORGAVE YOU' (COL 3:13; EPH 4:32); SOMETIMES THE LAST: "BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL, FOR THEY SHALL OBTAIN MERCY' (MT 5:7) . . . THUS WHILE HE MUST EVER LOOK BACK ON A MERCY RECEIVED AS THE SOURCE AND MOTIVE OF THE MERCY HE SHOWS, HE LOOKS FORWARD AS WELL TO THE MERCY WHICH HE YET NEEDS [TO RECEIVE]."

NOW WE CAN ALSO GIVE UP OUR ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL OTHERS THROUGH THE USE OF GUILT AS A LEVER. WE CAN LET GO OF THE SINS OF OTHERS AGAINST US. THEY ARE SET FREE. AFTER ONE OF HIS SERMONS, MENNONITE PASTOR MYRON S. AUGSBURGER WAS APPROACHED BY A LAWYER WHO SAID, "I'M NOT A CHRISTIAN; I'VE NEVER ACCEPTED THIS IDEA OF THE INNOCENT SUFFERING FOR THE GUILTY, THIS BLOOD RELIGION." AUGSBURGER REPLIED, "I'M VERY SORRY FOR YOU, FOR YOU CAN'T HAVE A HAPPY MARRIAGE, OR A HAPPY FAMILY, OR ANY LASTING FRIENDSHIPS IN YOUR SOCIAL RELATIONS." "WHY NOT?" THE LAWYER ASKED. "BECAUSE YOU ARE NOT AN ANGEL," AUGSBURGER SAID, "AND YOU MAKE MISTAKES, AND AS YOU MAKE MISTAKES, THE ONLY WAY PEOPLE CAN KEEP ON

ACCEPTING YOU IS IF THEY, AS INNOCENT, WILL FORGIVE YOU AND ACCEPT YOU" (MATTHEW, WORD 1982). FORTUNATELY, THE LAWYER HEARD AUGSBURGER'S NEXT SERMON. IN IT HE PREACHED ON "THE CROSS, WHICH SHOWED IN JESUS' DEATH THE DEPTH OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS AS HE ABSORBED HIS OWN WRATH ON OUR SIN BY HIS LOVE AND EXTENDED FORGIVENESS" TO ALL.

FURTHERMORE, NOW WE CAN MOVE FROM BROODING RESENTMENT OVER THE HURTS WE HAVE RECEIVED, MOODINESS, AND DEPRESSION TO THE FORGIVENESS OF CHRIST WHICH SETS US FREE. AS JESUS SAYS, "NOW A SLAVE HAS NO PERMANENT PLACE IN THE FAMILY, BUT A SON BELONGS TO IT FOREVER. SO IF THE SON SETS YOU FREE, YOU WILL BE FREE INDEED" (JN 8:35-36). IN THE FAMILY OF GOD, THE CHURCH, CHRIST JESUS, GOD'S SON, SETS US FREE FROM OUR ENSLAVEMENT TO SIN. IT IS SIMPLY A WHOLE LOT CHEAPER TO PARDON THAN TO RESENT. FORGIVENESS SAVES THE EXPENSE OF ANGER, THE COST OF HATRED, THE WASTE OF EMOTIONS. FORGIVENESS FOR JESUS' SAKE GIVES LIFE!

DEAR FRIENDS, YOU KNOW, IT'S TRUE! THERE'S ONLY ONE ANSWER TO THE TWO PENETRATING QUESTIONS WHICH I ASKED AT THE BEGGINING OF THIS SERMON AND WHICH WE ASK OURSELVES AGAIN. WHAT DO I NEED THE MOST? FORGIVENESS. WHAT IS MY GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT? FORGIVENESS. FORGIVEN BY GOD FOR JESUS' SAKE, WE CAN NOW FORGIVE EACH OTHER. SO, WE PRAY TO

OUR GRACIOUS HEAVENLY FATHER WITH ALL BOLDNESS: "FORGIVE US  
OUR TRESPASSES, AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST  
US." AMEN.