

Stories That Change The World

Part #1 - "On Forgiveness" Text: Matthew 18:21-35

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on May 14, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

SERIES INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Matthew 18.
- This morning we are beginning a new series on the parables of Jesus. This series will take us through to the middle of summer. Jesus' parables are powerful stories designed to transform us from the inside out.
 - The parables of Jesus function like the famous story of the Trojan horse. You remember the Greeks had besieged the city of Troy for 10 years but could not get past its massive walls. So they constructed a large horse and hid their best warriors inside. The rest of the army pretended to sail away. The Trojans then pulled the horse into their city as a victory trophy. That night the Greeks crept out of the horse, opened the gates for the rest of the army, and they conquered the city of Troy.
- Our hearts are like the kingdom of Troy. We seek to rule ourselves but we cannot rule ourselves. Our hearts are ruled by self-centredness, bitterness, anger, lust, and greed. But there is another kingdom. It is God's kingdom. God's kingdom God's kingdom is one of peace, freedom, generosity, and joy.
 - Out of love for us, Jesus besieges the kingdoms of our hearts in order to free us. But our walls are high. Jesus' parables are like the Trojan horse. Stories have a way of causing us to let our guard down because we enjoy stories. And so we let the story inside our walls. But once inside, these stories are powerful. They attack things like greed and anger.
 - Jesus tells these Trojan horse stories to change us, to renew us, to bring us freedom. Let's pray for this series.

INTRODUCTION

- In Mark Twain's famous story of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck's friend named Buck explains to him the definition of a "feud."
 - Huck asks, "***What's a feud?***" Buck answers, "***Why, where was you raised, Huck? Don't you know what a feud is?***" "***Never heard of it before – tell me about it.***" "***Well,***" says Buck, "***A feud is this way: A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man's brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the cousins chip in – and by and by everybody's killed off, and there ain't no more feud. But it's kind of slow, and takes a long time.***"
- For our purposes this morning, let's define a feud as an unresolved conflict between you and another person. It could last a few hours, days, years, or even decades. You can see it when bitterness or anger begin to rule your life. You can see it when you avoid a certain person, are cold to them, or when you are quick to react in anger rather than be patient.
 - Are you in the middle of a feud today? It is Mother's Day. Let's be really honest and admit that so many of our feuds are within our own families – with mothers, fathers, or siblings. Are you in a feud with your spouse? A coworker? Someone at church?
 - Today Jesus is going to tell us a parable, that when it gets inside of us, will conquer our anger, conquer our rage and bitterness, and begin to work peace and reconciliation. This parable is all about forgiveness. Let's get right to it.

THE COMMAND TO FORGIVE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First then notice this story is set within a command to forgive.
 - **READ 21** - *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?”*
 - Now in those days Rabbis often taught that a person should be forgiven for the same sin at least three times. So Peter believes he is being quite generous when he says, *“Up to seven times?”*
- Jesus responds in verse 22 by saying, **READ 22** - *Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”* Some versions translate Jesus’ words saying ‘seventy times seven.’ Whatever the case, the point is that you cannot keep an accurate count of how many times you forgive.
 - Jesus is deliberately recalling Genesis 4:24 where Lamech comments on the revenge he has taken on an enemy saying, *“If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.”* Where Lamech looked for unlimited revenge, **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Jesus commands his people to extend unlimited forgiveness.

THE WARNING TO FORGIVE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** Second, this story contains a warning to forgive.
 - It is driven home with great force at the end of the parable. When this servant who has been forgiven so much refuses to forgive a smaller amount we read in verse 34. **READ 34-35** - *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.”*
 - Yikes. What is happening here? It is a threefold warning.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** First, Jesus warns that unforgiving people reveal their true selves. When Jesus says we will be punished if we do not forgive is he saying we earn God’s forgiveness by being forgiving? No, our salvation is always by grace and not by what we do.
 - Jesus is saying that if you refuse to forgive even though he has forgiven you it reveals your true self. This is a common way Jesus speaks. He is saying that if you claim to know the forgiveness of God, and you know the command to forgive others, and yet absolutely refuse, then it reveals your true self. You may claim to be a Christian but all signs say you have never really understood what that means at all.
 - Positively, one of the greatest evidences that you are truly a Christian is that although you struggle to forgive, you do so because God has forgiven you. Heed this warning then, unforgiving people reveal their true selves.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** Second, Jesus warns that unforgiving people punish themselves.
 - **READ 34** - *And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.* We read in Romans 1 that God’s wrath manifests itself in turning us over to the consequences of our sins. Unforgiving people lock themselves up in the torturous prison of their own anger.
 - Listen to this powerful word imagery from Frederick Beuchner: **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** *“Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back -- in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”*

- Part of God’s judgement for unforgiveness is allowing you to be imprisoned in your anger until you become one of those people we all know who irrationally believes they are always the victim, who become self-centred, cynical, self-righteous, and who burn every relational bridge until they are all alone in the prison of their bitterness raging against the world for how unfair it has been to them. Unforgiving people punish themselves.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** Third, Jesus warns that unforgiving people put themselves in danger of eternal punishment. Obviously this servant would never be able to pay his debt and so he will be imprisoned forever. Jesus is making an allusion to this uncomfortable subject of a hell. Jesus, the most loving man who ever lived, is warning against *eternal* punishment.
 - Jesus is the king who exhibits lavish grace in forgiving but he is also the just judge who punishes those who destroy other people by their stubborn lack of compassion.
 - Don Carson writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** “*Jesus sees no incongruity in the actions of a heavenly Father who forgives so bountifully and punishes so ruthlessly, and neither should we. Indeed, it is precisely because he is a God of such compassion and mercy that he cannot possibly accept as his those devoid of compassion and mercy.*”¹
- Jesus intends his words of warning to crash into our anger and bitterness with all the destructive force of a wrecking ball against a wooden house. So let’s simply let Jesus’ words speak where they need to. **READ 35** - *So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*
 - To summarize, there is no clearer evidence of where your heart is at and therefore where your eternal destiny will lie than whether you forgive or not.

THE WAY TO FORGIVE

- In the command to forgive and the warning to forgive we see how seriously we must take this. We are now ready in the third place to look at **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** the way to forgive.
 - I heard one preacher points out that the way to forgive is outlined right here in how the king responds so I am going to borrow some thoughts and follow that outline.
 - Notice the three things the king does in verse 27. **READ 27** - *And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.*
- **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** If you want to avoid the prison house of anger you must first take pity on those who wrong you.
 - This word literally means that the king’s heart went out to the man. He identified with him. Unforgiveness does the opposite. It separates itself from the wrongdoer. To borrow an illustration, it is like when a cartoonist draws a person. What do they do? They accentuate all the person’s physical faults. If they have big ears the cartoonist makes them look like Dumbo.
 - That is what we do to stay angry and bitter. If someone has lied to you then you see them only as a liar, disregarding their other characteristics. But do you ever lie? Yes. Why? You say, “*well, it was complicated.*” You do not say, “*I lied because I am a liar.*” You view yourself as a complex three-dimensional person.
 - To take pity means that although you want to stress how different you are from the person who wronged you, you choose rather to stress how much you have in common

¹ Carson, *Matthew*, 407.

with them, that along with them you are a great sinner in need of grace. Focusing on your common need for God's forgiveness keeps you from exalting yourself over them.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** Secondly, to forgive means to cancel the debt of those who wrong you. The power of this parable rests on the size of the servant's debt and what the king did with it. Verse 24 tells us that his debt was 10,000 talents. Scholar Arland Hultgren reminds us what an astronomical figure this is.
 - The average day labourer would take 20 years to earn one talent. But this man owes 10,000 talents which means he owes 200,000 years wages. In modern terms at \$15/hour that works out to about 6 billion dollars.²
- Shockingly we read in verse 27. **READ 27 - *And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.*** Now let's be clear here – the servant may have paid no price for his freedom, but the king paid a huge price for this servant to go free. He literally had to absorb the whole debt himself. This was his money that the man owed him. But debts do not just disappear. When a debt is owed someone always has to pay.
 - Before we had kids I bought an expensive road bike made of aluminum and carbon fiber. One week some very good friends of ours came over with their four boys. When they left I was shocked to find the top tube of my bike with a massive dent in it. I think they took one of my golf clubs and brought it down like an ax on the top tube. The frame was ruined.
 - After talking about it, Heather and I decided not to tell the parents because we knew they could not afford to replace the bike. We took pity on them. But someone did have to pay the price to replace the bike. We canceled their debt by absorbing the cost ourselves. We paid the price.
- When people wrong you in life you rightly feel that they owe you an emotional debt. Verse 28 says, **READ 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.'*** In modern terms at \$15/hr, a hundred denarii is about \$10,000. That is not \$6 billion but it is a real debt. Jesus does not downplay the emotional debt that people owe you when they wrong you. But when they do owe you an emotional debt you have to make a choice. You can make them pay the debt or you can pay the debt yourself.
 - You can make them pay the emotional debt by lashing out at them, by slandering them to others, by giving them the cold shoulder, by refusing their apology, and by rejoicing when they fail. You make them pay.
 - In essence you are throwing them in prison and guess what, you will feel better. But as you do this you will find yourself imprisoned and tortured by your own anger and bitterness.
- The other way to deal with the emotional debt they owe you is to absorb it yourself. This is painful to do.
 - When they glare at you, you refuse to glare back. When you think about yelling at them you refuse. When you feel like telling everyone about how mean they are you refuse. When you feel like playing the DVD of what they did to you over and over in your head, you push the stop button.
 - This will be painful because they owe you and instead of making them pay you pay their debt yourself. But as you pay their debt you find the prison door of your own anger slowly opening and you walk out a free person.

² Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, 23.

- So the way to forgive is to take pity on people who wrong you, to cancel their debts, and finally now, **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** to release those who wrong you.
 - To release them means you don't keep bringing it up with them. But you may say, *“what about if the person abuses forgiveness by continuing in people destroying actions?”* Does forgiveness mean not calling the police and not going to court? Not at all. For we see when this man went out and destroyed another man's life the king held him accountable for his wicked actions.
 - There are times when for the sake of our own or other people's safety we must pursue justice. But here is the key: we must first take pity and cancel their debt. We must seek justice in a spirit of forgiveness. For if you do not cancel the debt you will only be seeking vengeance and revenge and will imprison yourself.

THE POWER TO FORGIVE

- Now as we come to our final point of the message, we must all say that we all know we should forgive. Even Oprah and Dr. Phil will tell you that it is good to forgive. But right here is where psychology ends because self-help books and psychologist cannot provide you with the one thing you really need and that is **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** the power to forgive.
 - C.S. Lewis writes, *“Every one says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.”*³ We all know we should forgive but what we lack is the power to do it. Right here is where Christianity stands alone for in it we receive that power.
- What is so shocking about this parable is that a king would actually forgive such an astronomical debt. This parable is a picture of how God the king forgives sinners their astronomical debt. So where do you get the power to forgive?
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** The power to forgive comes when you live the story of your life within the greater story of what God has done for you in Jesus.
 - The power comes from daily remembering the great story.
- Remember that because of your sins you owe God an astronomical debt. Remember that like the servant you cannot repay God for all your sins. God would therefore be entirely just to cast you into eternal judgement. Oh but the good news of the Bible is that rather deal with your according to strict justice God took pity on you. His heart went out to you. He identified with you so closely that God sent His one and only Son to become a man and to bear your sins on the cross. God cancelled your debt at extreme cost to Himself. On the cross God transferred all your debt to Jesus' account. And Jesus paid the price that was due to you. He paid to have your debt cancelled and that price was his own death.
 - Having cancelled your debt God released you. Oh glory in this with me. God does not say, *“Barton, I will forgive you if you can prove that you will not sin anymore.”* God does not say, *“Barton, I will put you on probation for 20 years and if you can prove that you will obey me then I will let you go.”* No, his forgiveness is immediate, full, and free.
 - When you enter your life's story into this grand story your anger against others completely melts away. No longer do will you feel the need to make them pay their \$10,000 debts because you will see how much was paid for your \$6 billion debt to be cancelled.
- In Colossians 3 Paul succinctly states where we get the power to forgive when he says, *“Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”* Christians do not forgive simply because it is the good thing to do.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, chapter 7.

We forgive because it is the only thing we can do when we look upon what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

- Our hearts are melted and we sing with all our might, ***“My sin not in part but the whole is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul.”***
 - The power to forgive comes when you live the story of your life within the story of what God has done for you in Jesus.

CORRIE TEN BOOM AND HER NAZI GAURD

- During WWII Corrie Ten Boom, her sister Betsie, and their entire family hid Jews in their home. They were eventually caught and all but Corrie died in a concentration camp. All of you should read her book entitled *The Hiding Place*.
 - Following the war, Corrie went around the world telling people her story and sharing the message of Jesus. One night she came face to face with one of her prison gaurds.
- ***“People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken...It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives...and that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man...the place was Ravensbruck and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard – one of the most cruel guards.***
 - ***Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: ‘A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’ And I, who had spoke so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course – how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.***
 - ***‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying. ‘I was a guard there.’ No, he did not remember me. ‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein,’ - again the hand came out – ‘will you forgive me?’***
- ***And I stood there – I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven – and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place – could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?***
 - ***It could not have been many seconds that he stood there – hand held out – but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it – I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. ‘If you do not forgive men their trespasses,’ Jesus says, ‘neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.’***
 - ***And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion – I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘Jesus, help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’***
- ***And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.***
 - ***‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart.’ For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner.”***⁴

⁴ Corrie Ten Boom, *Tramp for the Lord*, chapter 7, pgs 53-55. See also Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, chapter 15, pgs 238-239.