

## “The Gift of Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:21-35

September 17, 2017

I think we would all agree that adults have a responsibility to teach children. Even if you are not a parent, adults (in general) recognize that it is their job to teach children right from wrong, good from bad, safety from danger, and many other things. However, I also think we would agree that there are some things that children can actually teach adults. Think about celebrations such as a birthday, Christmas, Easter, or any special day that involves presents. Children love to receive presents and they accept presents with great enthusiasm and without reservations or questions.

But for adults, it is a little more difficult. We worry about the cost of the gift, or about having to eventually give a gift in return, or whether the gift has any kind of strings attached. Suddenly receiving a gift is a little more complicated than just pure joy. Receiving a gift is hard for many adults. We either feel obligated, or suspicious, or unworthy, or overwhelmed of the freely given gifts that are intended to bless us. That’s why I think adults are better gift givers than receivers.

The adult vs. child version of acceptance is even greater with the other tremendous gift young children are good at offering and accepting. Preschool children might complain or cry over who gets to play with the new trucks or dolls, but after a parent or teacher calls a truce and insists that apologies are offered – saying things such as, “I don’t care who had it first, you need to say you’re sorry and you need to take turns,” in short time all is forgiven and play time goes on.

With young children there are no thoughts of revenge or anger or retaliation. The confrontation is over and done. For preschoolers or kindergarteners, forgiveness is pretty simple. They were hurt for a moment, but once forgiveness is offered they move on like nothing happened. In a sense all is forgotten and they stay together.

But with adults, extending and accepting forgiveness is an even more difficult concept to embrace than accepting gifts. When you receive a gift, no matter how difficult, you always gain something. It might be a store gift card, clothing, jewelry, or maybe even a friend. But extending or receiving forgiveness always costs us something. It costs us our anger, our right to revenge, and our thoughts of getting even. The gift of forgiveness forces us to consider what’s in our heart. Is our heart filled with love and grace or is it filled with selfishness and control?

In our Gospel lesson for today Jesus surprises Peter when He tells him that forgiveness should be offered freely, without conditions, and as often as it is needed or requested. In the days when Peter lived the Jewish tradition was that you were only obligated to forgive someone for the same sin up to three times. So when Peter asked Jesus, “How often should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as 7 times?” I’m sure Peter thought he was being very generous when he said 7 – which was twice the legal requirement, plus one. But when Jesus said “77 times,” meaning “all the time, with no conditions” Peter had to be stunned. Just think about it. Jesus says we need to endlessly forgive that backstabber in your life every single time he hurts you, treating him as if each time the offense occurs is the first. That is not easy.

Jesus then explains this concept with a parable about a man who owes a huge debt to a king – 10,000 talents. We don’t know exactly how much money that is, but the number is supposed to represent a figure so great that it would be impossible for anyone to repay it in their lifetime. The king is not a tyrant, but a fair judge. The man owes him money and has a responsibility to pay it back. But this king is also a generous king, who’s willing to cancel the debt and take a loss. In other words, the king freely forgives.

Shockingly, then this man who had this tremendous debt forgiven is unwilling to do the same to a man who owes him a much smaller debt – like \$2. This wicked man would not forgive as he had been forgiven, and as a result he loses out on the gift of eternal life in heaven with God.

Our debt of sin is so great, that it is impossible for us to pay it back or to make up for it. Our debt of sin is so heavy that without God’s forgiveness we would easily sink into the depths of hell, just like the man in the parable. Revenge or putting conditions on forgiveness, such as “She better ask me sincerely” or “He better make it up to me” is the world’s response to sin, but it is not God’s response. God holds no conditions on forgiveness, He freely forgives us, including the many times when we don’t even ask for forgiveness or remember all of our sins. Therefore, since God has surrendered His right to hold our sins against us, He wants us to do the same to others.

When we were in preschool, we could easily “forgive and move on,” but not as adults. Forgiveness becomes much more difficult the more adult-ish we become. Maybe that’s why Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these,” And “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child, will never enter it.” And “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

I know it’s difficult at times to forgive, but the amazing thing about Jesus is that He forgives us even for the times we don’t perfectly forgive others. His gift of forgiveness gives us a remarkable strength to forgive others. But when we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” we are not asking God to forgive us, because we have first forgiven others, as though we can earn God’s forgiveness. Instead, our forgiving others is an indication or proof of our faith in God, that He has first forgiven us, and that He is at work in us in our forgiving.

Notice, though, that Jesus did not say, “Forgive and forget.” Forgiveness is not forgetfulness. If someone sins against you in a big way, you can forgive them, but you probably will be more careful trusting that person in the future. If someone steals money from you, you can forgive them, but you’ll likely be more careful about leaving your wallet around or a door unlocked. Jesus wants us to live responsibly and in safety, but always to forgive.

In October 2006, a gunman broke into an Amish schoolhouse and proceeded to shoot and kill 5 young girls and then himself. It was a horrible, evil tragedy. But the Amish community not only honored and buried their daughters, they then offered forgiveness to the shooter’s widow and children left behind by this awful event. About ½ of those in attendance at the shooter’s funeral were members of the Amish community, and even as they offered condolences to the widow and her children, they offered the gunman’s family a portion of the offerings that had been given to their community in memory of their children. The evil of the act was never condoned, but the forgiveness poured out from a hurting community to a hurting family was real, absolute, and unconditional.

While forgiveness may be the hardest kind of “gifting” we can either extend or experience, none of us can truly “forgive” without knowing the forgiving love that God has given to all of humanity, through the perfect gift of His Son, Jesus. No one can be forgiving of others and their human failings until they have understood the power of forgiveness that comes from the cross, and crosses all boundaries and dividing walls. Jesus’ death on the cross made God’s love for humanity something absolutely personal. He made the forgiveness God offered a personal gift to each one of us.

So instead of saying, “forgive and forget,” maybe we should say, “forgive and remember.” Remember that we have been forgiven a debt by God that we could never pay. Remember to forgive often and completely, since our forgiveness in Christ is total and complete. Remember that forgiveness changes us as individuals and as a community, because we learn by forgiving and being forgiven, to live with others. And Remember that for Jesus forgiveness was a matter of life and death, but for us forgiveness is simply a matter of faith. Forgiveness is a gift that is to be given and received often, whenever requested, and wherever needed. And when you struggle to forgive, give it to God whose forgiveness knows no end – for this is what the kingdom of heaven is like.