**THE FORGIVING GRACE OF GOD**

**(Matthew 18:21-35)**

He is the second most-often quoted English poet, second only to William Shakespeare. You probably don’t know his name, but many of you are familiar with some of the things he wrote. His name was Alexander Pope. He was born in 1688. In 1711, at the tender age of 22 or 23, he published a 744-line poem entitled, “An Essay on Criticism.” From that one poem alone, there are three lines you have likely heard said at one time. Here are the three:

* *Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.*
* *A little learning is a dangerous thing.*
* *To err is human, to forgive, divine.*

That last quotation has inspired some other quotes that aren’t quite so uplifting:

* To err is human, to blame it on the other guy is even more human.
* To err is human, to blame some else shows management potential.
* To err is human, but to really foul up requires a computer.

Through the years, in messages about giving, I have said often, “We are never more like God than when we give.” What are we told in John 3:16? “For God so loved the world that He thought nice thoughts about us.” Is that what it says? “For God so loved the world that He sent us a ‘get well’ card?” No, it didn’t say that. It says, “For God so loved the world that He gave . . .” And what did He give? He gave His only Son. It is true that we are being like God when we give, but in light of today’s passage, I have changed my mind, and I want to change that line to say, “We are never more like God than when we forgive.”

God longs to forgive because He knows that is what we most need. Forgiveness of sin is one of **the** main themes in the Gospel of Matthew. In the first chapter, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said to him about Mary, “She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (v. 21).

In chapter 26, we find the story of Jesus observing the Passover meal with His disciples. At one point, Jesus offers them a cup and instructs them, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 27b-28).

Today, we pick up where we left off before a three-week Christmas series. We are back in Matthew 18. On December 8th, I preached a message entitled, “Harmony Matters.”

We pick up in v. 21 where Jesus begins to talk about forgiveness, how we are to forgive others and how God has forgiven us. The passage starts with a question posed by Peter; Jesus gives an answer, and then, Jesus uses that occasion to tell a story or parable that illustrates God’s forgiveness of us and our need to forgive each other.

Peter’s question in v. 21 was occasioned by Jesus’ words in v. 15. It is a reality that you and I are sinned against, and we sin against, most often, the people we know: a brother, a sister, a relative, a friend, a co-worker, a neighbor, a fellow church member, or someone else we know. It’s the people with whom you rub elbows with because the more time we spend with them, the more likely that they or we will say something offensive or do something insensitive.

1. **THE FORGIVING GRACE OF GOD IS LONGER THAN WE THINK.**

Let’s start with v. 21. Peter asks a natural question: “How often should I forgive someone when he or she sins against me?” Peter was probably aware that this was something about which the rabbis had debated. Some of the rabbis in their teaching and writing had settled on three times. “Three strikes, you’re out. I’ll forgive you three times. You offend and hurt me a fourth time, and I’m kicking you to the curb. I’m cutting you out of my life.”

So, by suggesting seven times, Peter probably thought he was being rather magnanimous and big-hearted. He thought he was being an overachiever in forgiving others. He, also, must have been shocked when Jesus said, “No, let’s go with 70 x 7.” Other translators say that Jesus really said, “77 times.” It really doesn’t matter how you translate it, because Jesus wasn’t saying you have to keep a tally going and keep checking until you get to 490 times or even 77 times.

Jesus was saying, “Just keep on forgiving. Your job is not to keep score. Your job is to show love and grace to others, even to those who hurt you.”

We refer to 1 Corinthians 13 as “the love chapter.” In that chapter, Paul describes what real love looks like. He says in 13:5 that love “keeps no record of when it has been wronged” (NLT). The person who loves is not a record keeper.

You may have heard about the husband who complained, “I just hate it when my wife and I fight. When she and I argue, she gets all historical.”

His friend corrected him, “I think you mean hysterical.”

“No,” he answered. She gets historical. She brings all this stuff up from the past, when I did this, and when I did that.”

When you get into it with those you love, don’t get historical. Love has a long fuse and a short memory.

That is the way God loves and graciously forgives us. The phrase “slow to anger” is found 13 times in the OT. Four times we are encouraged to be slow to get angry, but nine times, it is used to describe God.

One of the most dramatic times it shows up is in the Book of Jonah. You will remember that God called Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. They were a wicked and violent people, and the Jews and the Assyrians were enemies. Assyria was a great threat to the Jewish people. Jonah had no interest in preaching to the Assyrians. He had no interest in forgiving them, and even less interest in God forgiving them.

I won’t tell the whole story, but you will remember how Jonah ran from God. God then used a big fish to help change Jonah’s mind. Jonah’s mind was changed but not his heart. He went. He preached: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” And then, disasters of disasters, the people of Nineveh repented, and horror of horrors, God spared them.

We read in 4:1 that Jonah was hopping mad. In v. 2, Jonah prayed, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love . . .”

When God forgives us, He displays a really bad memory.

Look at Jeremiah 31:31-34. You and I are living under the new covenant. The author quoted from this passage twice—in Hebrews 8 and 10. He argued in Hebrews 10:12 that when Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sin, He sat down at the right hand of God. There was nothing left to do. No more sacrifices were necessary.

We replay our sin, and we replay how we have been sinned against. It is on a loop, and it just keeps going through our mind. God’s forgiving grace, however, is longer than we think. We need to forgive others like He forgives us.

1. **THE FORGIVING GRACE OF GOD IS DEEPER THAN WE KNOW.**

Jesus tells a colorful story and prefaces it by saying, as He often did, “this is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.” There was a King who had used some of his slaves to do some business for him. He was ready to settle accounts with them. There was one servant who had borrowed money from the King, and it was time for him to pay back what he had borrowed.

Jesus said the amount he owed was 10,000 talents. Jesus’ hearers would have laughed when he said that. We don’t laugh because we have no idea what a talent is worth. Different cultures have different senses of humor. In the Jewish culture, they loved exaggeration. Jesus often used exaggeration in His teaching. He talked about a camel going through eye of a needle. He talked about trying to remove a speck from your brother’s eye while there was a log in your own eye. The people who listened to Jesus would have cracked up at such verbal images.

Consider first of all that the talent was the largest sum of money possible. In the US, the largest bill in circulation is the $100 bill. The largest bill ever printed was a $100,000 bill. It was just exchanged between Federal Reserve Banks back in 1934 and 1935. In today’s money, the talent would have been worth more than $100,00. It represented 6,000 denarii, and 1 denari represented one day’s worth of pay for a common laborer. So, a talent equaled 6,000 days of pay. If you worked seven days a week, 6000 days would be more than 16 years.

In the Greek language, there was no term for any number higher than 10,000. Jesus took the highest number and used it to multiply the largest unit of money.

In our culture, if you made $12.50 an hour, and you worked 8 hours a day, you would make $100 a day. So, if you multiplied $100 a day by 6000 days and multiplied that by 10,000, the total sum would be $6 billion. In today’s money, that would be what this servant owed the King.

Jesus hearers would have laughed out loud at the idea of a mere servant owing the King 10,000 talents. What is even more comical is the what the promise the servant makes to the King. Look at v. 26. How much time would the servant need to repay his debt if gave every daily paycheck to the King and kept nothing for himself?

Let’s put you in that servant’s position. Let’s suppose you make $100 a day and you have a debt of $6 billion. If you paid $100 a day towards your debt every day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, how long would it take you to retire your debt. It would take something over 164,383 years. But if your creditor was just patient, you would get it paid it off.

At first, the King was going to sell the servant, as well as the servant’s wife and their kids, and everything else the man possessed, but he knew that would only make a dent in the man’s debt. When the servant kneeled before him and begged for time, the King had mercy upon him. He graciously forgave the entire debt. Look at v. 27.

The point Jesus is making is that you and I are drowning in a sin-debt to God. The debt is so vast and it runs so deep that we would never be able to retire that debt. What we cannot do, God has done. In Romans 5:20, Paul wrote, “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”

I love the last verse of “Grace Greater Than All Our Sin.” The author, Julia Johnston, wrote:

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,

Freely bestowed on all who believe!

You that are longing to see His face,

Will you this moment His grace receive?

Grace, grace, God’s grace,

Grace that will pardon and cleanse within,

Grace, grace, God’s grace,

Grace that is greater than all our sin!

How much of our sin will God’s grace forgive? Some of it? Most of it? A good portion of it? All of it!

His forgiving grace is deeper than we know.

Honesty forces me to say that this next point does not come directly from today’s text, but it is a related truth that needs to be acknowledged.

1. **THE FORGIVING GRACE OF GOD IS WIDER THAN WE WISH.**

Human nature is such that we want God’s grace for ourselves, but we want God to exercise His justice on the other guy.

I mentioned Jonah earlier. We can go back to his story. Jonah had traveled the length and breadth of Nineveh preaching that God’s destruction was coming if they did not repent. When he had completed his preaching tour, he traveled outside the city. He was sat down to see what would happen. He was hoping that God would destroy it anyway.

When it became apparent that God wasn’t going to rain fire down from heaven upon the Ninevites, Jonah was both mad and depressed. Earlier, I mentioned Jonah’s complaint. Jonah basically said, “God, I knew this was going to happen. I knew that in the end You were going to spare them because You are just too loving and gracious.”

What I didn’t mention is that toward the end of the book, Jonah asks God to take his life. He said he was angry enough to die.

When I was in seminary, I spent a year studying the Hebrew language. In the class we translated the Book of Jonah from Hebrew into English. When we were in the last chapter of the book, I remember what the professor said about Jonah’s request to die. He claimed that Jonah was saying to God, “I would rather die than live in a world governed by a God like You.”

Had I been God, I would have granted Jonah’s request. Fortunately, neither you nor I am God because we like to get even. We like to see the bad guy get what’s coming to him. What we fail to remember is that we used to be the bad guy, and in many ways, we still are, because we still sin. We still mess up. We still blow it.

It is good that God does show mercy to us and not judgment to the other guy because in the eyes of many, we are the other guy. It just may be that somebody wants God to let the hammer fall down on you, and he or she might have a good reason to want that.

It is a good thing that the forgiving grace of God is wider than we wish.

1. **THE FORGIVING GRACE OF GOD DOES HAVE BOUNDARIES.**

Nine times the OT says that God is slow to anger. It never says that God never gets angry. It is possible to move beyond the boundary of God’s forgiving grace.

We compared the forgiving grace of God to a deep ocean, but even the deepest parts of the oceans have ocean floors.

It is possible to move beyond the boundary lines of God’s grace. One way we do that is by failing to enter into a saving relationship with Jesus before we die. If you die without having trusted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you have moved beyond the forgiving grace of God. There is not a second chance for salvation after death.

The parable Jesus told in Matthew 18 illustrates another boundary line of His forgiving grace. We read in v. 27 how the King offered mercy to the man who couldn’t repay his enormous debt, but look what happens next. Let’s pick up in v. 28. (100 denarii would represent just over three months-worth of wages. This was just the kind of debt that could be repaid if the debtor was just given some time).

The King points out, however, that the second servant should have been given more than time, he should have been given mercy because mercy is what the first servant had received. Look at v. 33.

Jesus brings the message home in v. 35. Here, we are shown that we move beyond the boundaries of God’s forgiving grace if we refuse to forgive those who sin against us in any way.

Jesus had clearly taught this truth earlier in the Gospel of Matthew. Look back at Matthew 6. In vv. 9-13 we find what we commonly call, “The Lord’s Prayer.” Notice v. 12. In vv. 14-15, Jesus chooses to comment on this prayer, but the only portion of the prayer that He decided needs commentary is that part about forgiving our debtors. Look at what Jesus said. He was very clear. Our forgiveness is dependent upon our forgiving others. If we withhold our forgiveness of others, God will withhold His forgiveness of us.

I preached from that Matthew 6 passage back in early August of 2018. I want to share a little of what I said in that sermon. People rarely quote me, so I have to quote myself:

Jesus is teaching us that horizontal forgiveness paves the way for vertical forgiveness. In other words, forgiveness must go out if we expect it to come down. If we are unwilling to forgive others then God is unwilling to forgive us. It is not that God forgives us because we forgive others. That would be tantamount to earning forgiveness, and the Bible is clear that forgiveness cannot be earned. Vertical forgiveness is based solely on God’s grace. Nevertheless, God has chosen not to forgive those who will not forgive others.

Jesus said at the end of Matthew 18 that we are to forgive our brother or sister from the heart. That means it goes beyond just saying the words with out mouths. Here’s how you know whether you have forgiven someone truly: Can you honestly ask God to bless the person you claim to have forgiven? Can you ask God to show His kindness, goodness, and mercy to that person? Can you rejoice for them when God answers your prayer?

In the conclusion to his book *Total Forgiveness,* R.T. Kendall told about a woman who had been in a car accident many years before, and she suffered neck pain for 22-years. The pain was so severe that she couldn’t turn her head far enough to drive safely, and she had to surrender her driver’s license.

One day a Christian friend asked her if she had ever prayed for the man who had run into her and who had caused the accident. The woman said she hadn’t. The friend suggested they do so. The woman bowed her head and said, “Lord, I forgive him.”

Her friend said, “Now, bless him.”

The lady began to ask God’s blessing upon the man. As she did so, the pain in her neck left her. The next morning, she was able to move her neck freely for the first time in 22-years. The pain and stiffness never returned.

Kendall wrote, “Forgiveness is not *total* forgiveness until we bless our enemies—and pray for them to be blessed . . . *totally* forgiving them has been fully achieved when we set God free to bless them. But in this, we are the first to be blessed, and those who totally forgive are blessed the most.”

Who has offended and hurt you? Forgive them from the heart. Ask God to bless them. You will be blessed and so will this church.