

INFINITE FORGIVENESS

I'm convinced that the greatest challenge and most difficult act that Christians are called to do—by far—is to forgive. If we who follow Christ are unwilling to forgive other people for the wrongs they commit against us, then we're not truly following Jesus.

If we truly want to be faithful to Christ and seek to do God's will, there's nothing more important, more powerful, and more transformational for our own lives and for the world, than to forgive. For those who might disagree, I'm sorry, but the Gospel is crystal clear on this matter and there's absolutely no room for compromise. So I'll say it again.

If we who follow Christ are unwilling to forgive other people for the wrongs they commit against us, then we're not truly following Jesus. But don't take my word for it. And if what I said bothers you, please don't be upset with me. I'm just the messenger, and the message I'm proclaiming today originates from the One who, in the words of John the Baptist, "is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry."

Jesus' message of forgiveness is found throughout the Gospels. It's in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples that we recite together during worship every Sunday morning: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

It's found on a cross on the hill of *Golgotha*, where a dying Jesus prays for those who are tormenting him and putting him to death, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

And it's found in a number of the parables Jesus told during his earthly ministry. Parables like the one we read this morning.

Today's parable was told by Jesus in response to a question the disciple Peter asked him. "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Jesus went on to tell a story that invites us to imagine life in God's kingdom, where forgiveness comes from the top down, and God's mercy toward us inspires our mercy toward others.

Or, at least, God's mercy toward us is supposed to inspire our mercy toward others. But because of the gift—and sometimes it can be a curse—of free will that God has given human beings, not everyone is so inspired. This parable of Jesus allowed Peter (and us) to catch a glimpse of what the vast, immeasurable, endless forgiveness of God is like.

A king decided to conduct an audit, and called his servants before him so they would pay off what was owed to him. In effect, they had been using the king's credit card, and now the bill had come due. One of those servants owed a totally absurd amount of money: ten thousand bags of gold, or ten thousand talents. How absurd is that figure? Well, one talent was equal to what a common laborer typically earned in twenty years.

To put that amount in modern terms we can more easily comprehend, I did some math with the help of a calculator. If someone was being paid \$10.00 an hour, which is what the Scarborough McDonald's on Route One is offering new employees, he or she would earn, before taxes, \$400.00 a week. Multiply that by 52 weeks and that comes to \$20,800.00 a year. Multiply that by twenty years and the amount is \$416,000.00. That would be one talent. But the servant in Jesus' parable owed ten thousand talents. So I multiplied \$416,000.00 times 10,000, and my calculator went into cardiac arrest! The amount was \$41,600,000!

Like I said, that servant owed a ridiculously absurd amount of money! So much so that the king decided he would write off the loss on his taxes and sell the servant, the servant's wife and children and all the servant's possessions to at least get a little something back in return.

But you know what was even more absurd, by far, than that servant owing the king \$41,600,000? That would be the servant falling on his knees and making a foolishly preposterous and futile offer. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything!" I'm surprised that the king didn't laugh out loud at such an unrealistic promise. But that's not what happened.

If you've ever wondered just how radical, amazing and immeasurable the grace and mercy of God is, we catch a glimpse of it in the king's response to the servant's plea for leniency: "He took pity on him, canceled the debt—all \$41,600,000 of it—and let him go." What a stunning description that is of God's infinite compassion and forgiveness. Thank you, Jesus, for giving it to us!

For those who would shake their heads at how unrealistic this parable is and argue that something like that could never happen, keep in mind that this is a "kingdom parable" Jesus told, to give us a glimpse of life in God's realm, where forgiveness is as vast and endless as the universe. Just like the 103rd Psalm

declares: “. . . as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us.”

That’s the context in which Jesus called Peter (and us) to forgive others from the bottom of our hearts, not just once or seven times, but seventy-seven times, which is just another way of saying we’re to forgive infinitely, without limits or conditions. Or, as a pastor named J. Lynne White put it: “However many times we inhale or exhale, rise and sleep, come in and go out—we are to forgive with the same constancy!”

Of course, not everyone is able to do that. In fact, even in Jesus’ kingdom parable, the servant who was shown such immense and extraordinary mercy was unable to show even the tiniest amount of mercy to another servant who owed him a much, much, smaller debt: about \$4,800 if he was working at McDonalds. The greatly forgiven servant sternly, even violently refused to forgive the amount of money equivalent to one hundred days, or a little over three months’ wages for a typical worker. After the incredible clemency the king showed to him, he held on to the debt owed him and demanded repayment.

The message of Jesus’ parable, of course, was that anyone who doesn’t forgive another person is just like that foolish and heartless servant who was forgiven thousands of lifetimes of debt, but refused to forgive the tiny, infinitesimal debt of someone else.

Jesus ended his parable with a stark and chilling warning. The master handed his ungrateful servant over to the jailers to be tortured, until he paid back all he owed. I think we all know how that turned out. That servant would never be able to repay the debt he owed; therefore he would never get out of prison. It was a life sentence. And Jesus warned, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Some of you may be thinking right now, “Oh, so God wants to frighten us into forgiving one another with the threat of eternal judgment and condemnation, huh? That’s not exactly the best, most effective motivation.” To which I would respond, “No, it’s not.” At best, fear and dread, anxiety and terror, might move us to grudgingly and reluctantly try to forgive. But it would still make loving the person we forgave and loving the God who forced us to forgive very challenging, to say the least.

Personally, I interpret the prison the ungrateful servant in was cast into in Jesus’ story a little differently. Instead of understanding it as the literal, fire-and-brimstone Hell that’s the stuff of nightmares, I consider it to be a hell of his own making.

In other words, those who refuse to forgive become jailed in a lifelong prison of pain, misery and literal self-destruction of their body, mind and spirit. Which makes those who refuse to forgive some of the most unhappy, broken, tortured people on this planet.

I want to close my message this morning with this story.

Simon Wiesenthal was an Austrian Jew who was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. In his powerful book, *The Sunflower*, he shares an experience he had, and then asks the reader a very difficult question.

While working at the field hospital, a German nurse ordered Wiesenthal to follow her. He was taken into a room where a lone SS soldier lay dying. The soldier was a twenty-one year-old German from Stuttgart named Karl Seidl. Karl had asked the nurse to “bring him a Jew.” He had been mortally wounded in combat and wanted to make his dying confession—to a Jew.

After offering a brief history of himself, including the fact that he was raised in a Christian home, the soldier said he wanted to confess the atrocities he had witnessed and which he, as a Nazi soldier, participated in. One of the most horrifying accounts Seidl shared was being part of a group of SS soldiers ordered to round up Jews in the city of Dnepropetrovsk. Three hundred Jews—men, women, children and infants—were gathered and driven with whips into a small three-story house. The house was then set on fire. Here’s how Karl Seidl described what happened.

“We heard screams and saw the flames eat their way from floor to floor . . . We had our rifles ready to shoot down anyone who tried to escape from that blazing hell. . . . The screams from that house were horrible. . . . “Behind the windows of the second floor, I saw a man with a small child in his arms. His clothes were alight. By his side stood a woman, doubtless the mother of the child. With his free hand the man covered the child’s eyes . . . then he jumped into the street. Seconds later the mother followed. Then from the other windows fell burning bodies . . . We shot . . . Oh God!”

Seidl was most haunted by the boy he shot, a boy with “dark eyes” who he guessed was about six years old. Karl’s description of that boy reminded Wiesenthal of a boy he knew in the Lemberg Ghetto.

During the several hours that Simon Wiesenthal, the Jewish prisoner, sat with Karl Seidl, the Nazi SS soldier, Simon never spoke. At Karl’s request, Simon held the dying man’s hand. Simon brushed away the flies buzzing around his face and gave him a glass of water, but he didn’t speak. During the long ordeal, Simon never doubted Karl’s sincerity or that he was truly sorry for his crimes. Simon said that the way Karl spoke was, to him, proof enough of his repentance.

As their time together came to a close, Karl said to Wiesenthal, “I am left with my guilt. In the last hours of my life you are here with me. I do not know who you are. I only know that you are a Jew and that is enough. . . . I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him; only I didn’t know if there were any Jews left. . . . I know that what I am asking you is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.”

With that, Simon Wiesenthal made up his mind and left the room in silence. During the hours that he had sat with Karl Seidl, he never uttered a word. That night Seidl died. He left his possessions to Simon, but Simon refused them.

Against all odds, Simon Wiesenthal survived the Holocaust. Eighty-nine members of his family did not. But Wiesenthal couldn’t forget Karl Seidl. After the war he visited Karl’s mother to investigate Karl’s story. It was just as Karl had said. Karl’s mother assured Simon that her son was “a good boy” and could never have done anything bad. Again, this time out of kindness, Simon remained silent. Wiesenthal believed that in his childhood, Karl Seidl might indeed have been “a good boy.” But he also concluded that a graceless period in his life had turned him into a murderer.

Simon Wiesenthal concluded his riveting and haunting story with an equally riveting and haunting question addressed to the reader.

“Ought I to have forgiven him? . . . Was my silence at the bedside of a dying Nazi right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience of the reader of this episode, just as much as it once challenged my heart and mind. . . The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness.

“Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make that decision. You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question, “What would I have done?”

The author Brian Zahnd, in his book *Unconditional? The Call of Jesus to Radical Forgiveness*, offered this unsolicited reply to Wiesenthal’s question.

Dear Mr. Wiesenthal,

First of all, let me say that I will not presume to sit in judgment of your actions. You showed kindness to a dying Nazi soldier as you held his hand, brushed away the flies, and gave him water to drink. You showed great kindness to his mother in not destroying the memory of her son. . . .

Nevertheless, since you ask the question, let me try to reply. I cannot say what I would have done, only what I could hope I would have done. As a Christian, I would hope that I would reply in something of this manner to my dying enemy:

I cannot offer you forgiveness on behalf of those who have suffered monstrous crimes at your hands and the hands of those with whom you willingly aligned yourself; I have no right to speak on behalf of your victims. But what I can tell you is that forgiveness is possible.

“There is a way for you to be reconciled with God, whose image you have defiled; and there is a way for you to be restored to the human race, from which you have fallen. There is a way because the One who never committed a crime cried from the cross, saying, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ Because I believe in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I believe that your sin does not have to be a dead end, that there is a way forward into reconciliation.

“The forgiveness of which I speak is not a cheap forgiveness. It is not cheap because it was not cheap for Jesus Christ to suffer the violence of the cross and offer no retaliation but love and forgiveness. It is not a cheap forgiveness because it requires of you deep repentance, including a commitment to restorative justice for those you have wronged. There is no cheap forgiveness for your sins, but there is costly forgiveness.

“If you in truth turn from your sin in sorrow and look to Christ in faith, there is forgiveness—a costly forgiveness that can reconcile you to God and restore you to the human race. I cannot forgive you on behalf of others, but on my own behalf and in the name of Jesus Christ, I tell you, your sins are forgiven you. Welcome to the forgiving community of forgiven sinners. May the peace of Christ be with you.”

That is what I hope I would have said. But for all I know, I might have treated a dying enemy with far less kindness than you did.

In deep admiration of your dignity, Brian Zahnd

Earlier in this sermon I gave you an idea of the massive, almost incalculable amount of debt the king—who represents God—canceled on behalf of the servant who turned out to be ungrateful for such forgiveness and mercy. If anyone had anywhere near as much debt owed to God, it would be individuals like Karl Seidl who committed horrific atrocities.

But, and now here comes the most challenging statement I’m going to make in this sermon, if we believe that divine forgiveness is impossible for a repentant war criminal because his sins are just too terrible, we’re saying that Jesus’ parable we heard this morning isn’t true and that Jesus is, in effect, a liar.

We’re rejecting the good news of our faith that no amount of debt, no sin,

is too great that God in Christ can't forgive it.

And we're saying that the salvation Christ won on the cross and died for is conditional, and God's grace is unavailable to some people, even when they repent, return to God and genuinely seek God's mercy.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother or sister; up to seven times? Jesus responded, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times!"

To which I say, if we're told by Jesus to forgive others seventy-seven times—or, in other words, we're to forgive infinitely—then we can surely trust God to forgive us infinitely, too.

That's divine grace.

My prayer is that we will make God's great mercy toward us our inspiration and motivation to show great mercy toward others. Amen.