

***What Is Most Important: Forgiven and Forgiving***

Matthew 18:21-35

Psalm 103:1-14

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
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What is most important? That is the question we are considering during this season of Lent. Jesus' answer to that question is this: "The most important commandment is, Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."<sup>1</sup>

Since we have let Jesus answer the question for us, it is now up to us to figure out what it looks like for us to be people who embrace What Is Most Important in our hearts. What are the implications of living into the two great commands to love God with all our being, and to love others?

Certainly we start with the love that God has shown to us. And on the basis of God's infinite and eternal love, we then determine to love God with our whole being—we give ourselves over completely to God, submitting our lives to God's providence and sovereign rule. Then on the basis of the same love with which God has loved us, we also determine to love others by welcoming them, seeking their welfare, upholding their cause.

To let What Is Most Important become the governing principles in our life has both individual and collective implications. The two great commands transform us as individuals, and they transform the way we come together as the body of Christ, the church. Joy is a natural by-product as the people of God come together and live out What Is Most Important in community. Our worship, our mutual respect and encouragement, our fellowship and our ministry are all transformed when the operative mandate for our community of faith is What Is Most Important. The truth be told, when we faithfully adhere to What Is Most Important, then the way we live will also have a transformational impact on the world around us.

Today I want to focus on one of the more challenging implications of following Jesus in living out What Is Most Important: Forgiveness. In particular, I want to address the forgiveness that followers of Jesus are to extend to those who offend or hurt us.

In his book, The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others, Scot McKnight

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 12:29-31

makes an interesting point that I hadn't thought about until now. He says that while there is plenty of teaching in the Old Testament about God forgiving us, there really is not any significant teaching regarding our forgiveness of others. He says, "Forgiveness doesn't appear in any of Moses' lists of commandments. In all the prayers of David, we don't find the prayers concerned with forgiving one another. And, the prophets don't call Israelites to forgive one another. This is not the way these biblical figures talk."<sup>2</sup>

But forgiveness of others isn't just assumed under Christ. It is expected. Jesus does not mince words in letting us know that one of the implications of living out What Is Most Important is that we will forgive others. In the prayer that Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount – what we know as the Lord's Prayer – Jesus instructs us to pray thusly: forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors. That simple two-letter word "as" means "to the same extent" or "in the same manner". So when we pray that petition in the Lord's Prayer we are saying this: Forgive us to the same extent that we forgive others. Or forgive us in the same manner we forgive others.

That puts a condition on that petition. Did you realize that when you pray that petition, you are asking God to treat you the same way you treat others? Makes you think a little, doesn't it?

And in case you don't think that is what Jesus means in the Lord's Prayer, all you have to do is read the verses that immediately follow the prayer: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."<sup>3</sup>

This is not natural for us. Forgiveness is not what we do by nature. Will Willimon points out that "Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities. It is natural for the human animal to defend itself, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not natural. It is not a universal human virtue."

I say this because I don't want to make forgiveness sound simple or easy. Because it's not either of those things. Forgiveness is tough. It is demanding. It means we must find a way to release the offense, to let go of the hurt so that it doesn't have power over us and enslave us.

In my nearly twenty-four years as a minister in the Presbyterian Church, I have seen my share of people who have been hurt and wounded, often by others within the church. I've seen it in the churches I've served, and I've seen it

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<sup>2</sup> McKnight, Scot. The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others - 10th Anniversary Edition (Kindle Locations 2660-2662). Paraclete Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:14-15

in churches I've worked with through different ministries at the Presbytery level. I've watched as people did the tough work of seeking reconciliation and forgiving one another, and I've witnessed the healing that takes place when people are willing to come together in Christ. But I've also seen people who took their hurts and their wounds to their grave, because they refused to accept or seek reconciliation for the wrongdoing done to them. And in those cases, I also noticed that their ministry was greatly diminished, because their unforgiving spirit prevented them from living into grace.

Forgiveness isn't easy.

But it is what Jesus Christ did for us, and it is what Jesus Christ expects of us.

Jesus makes it clear that as forgiven people, we are to be forgiving people.

The parable Jesus tells in response to Peter's question of how many times we are to forgive another doesn't leave any gray area regarding forgiven people being forgiving people. The first servant is called before the king to repay a debt that was un-repayable. After the servant pled for mercy, the king forgave the debt. Notice that the king didn't renegotiate the terms of payment or reduce the size of the debt—the king forgave the debt altogether.

But when the servant confronted another man who owed him a paltry amount in comparison, and when the servant refused to show mercy to this other man, then the king revokes his forgiveness of the first servant's debt, and throws the servant into prison.

Jesus isn't going to let us make our own interpretation of the parable. He gives us the point of the parable directly: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”<sup>4</sup>

I will let you in on a secret, though. Forgiving others is much easier when you consider how much God has forgiven us. Just as the servant had been forgiven a debt that was far beyond his ability to repay, so has God done for us in Christ. We do not have the capacity to undo our sin, and what it has done to our relationship with God. Our debt is un-repayable.

But God says, “Fine. You can't fix your sin; I'll fix it for you.” And he sent his Son to pay the penalty for our sin.

The 103<sup>rd</sup> Psalm has long been one of my favorites, for it is a reminder that God deals with us according to God's compassion and steadfast love. The 103<sup>rd</sup> psalm doesn't just tell us that God takes our sin away from us; it tells us that God removes our sin so far from us that it's not even in this universe anymore. “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is God's love for those

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4 Matthew 18:35

who fear him,” says the psalm. Look up as high as you can; not in here, because we have a ceiling. But when you get outside, look up at the sky. The farthest distance that you can see—even with the aid of a powerful telescope—doesn't even come close to the measure of God's love for you and me.

“As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us.” Next time you're on the beach, look out over the water, as far as you can see. Where the ocean meets the sky, well, God has taken our sin even farther away from us than that.

Don't you see—God's unbounded love has led to immeasurable forgiveness. If we are going to love with the same kind of love with which God has loved us, then it must be forgiving love.

I know the usual objections. “I can forgive, but it'll never be the same. I can forgive, but I won't be able to forget.” Those are struggles that we all have with forgiveness. But here's the deal: forgiveness heals the wound, it doesn't take the wound away. There will be scars. But just because you have scars doesn't mean healing hasn't taken place. Just because a relationship will be different doesn't mean forgiveness hasn't taken place.

Sure, we'll be different. But the amazing thing about God's healing forgiving love is that it enables us to move on. It enables us to keep What Is Most Important front and center in our lives.

In just a few moments we are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper. We also call it communion, for a reason—it is a sacrament that reminds us that Christ's sacrifice on our behalf restores our union with God and with one another. Christ's sacrifice restores our fellowship, our communion.

When Christ broke the bread and said, “This is my body, given for you,” and when Christ took the cup and said, “this is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins,” Jesus was reminding us of the magnitude of his love, that he would be willing to die for us.

When we take the bread and cup, then, let us be willing to extend the grace of forgiveness to others.

As forgiven people, let us be forgiving people.

If we're going to live into What Is Most Important, then forgiveness always has to be on the table. Always.

Amen.