

"I Can and I Will: Forgive"

Matthew 18:21-35

Genesis 37-50

One of the most repeated and powerful ways Jesus taught lessons in ministry is through parables. In short, parables work to expose us to the very nature and the ways of God. Parables allow us glimpses into the very essence of God and the will of God for us. No matter how disturbing they may sound to our everyday ear, the parables reveal what Isaiah prophesied, "God's ways are higher than our ways. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts."

What we are going to talk about today, and what the parable I am about to read is all about, is central to Christian faith and practice. What we are going to talk about is forgiveness.

### **Read Matthew 18:21-35**

A couple notes about the parable reveal to us that the king of this parable forgives a debt of unimaginable proportions. It is a messianic act of forgiveness of debt. The parable reveals that the first man received mercy but was not merciful. He is called out as a hypocrite. The mercy he received, while it should have compelled him to be merciful, only made him sanctimonious. The parable creates a scenario in which the king or lord is likened to God (willing to be gracious and merciful) and the dynamic of the story is like what happens to disciples when they do not learn to imitate God's actions as exemplified by Jesus to others.

The action anticipated by the reader of the man whose debt had been forgiven is for him to then forgive others. But he didn't. Why? One of the most common interpretations taken from this parable is that the reason the first man didn't pay the king's grace forward was because his heart was still in bondage! When we choose to be unforgiving, we choose to create prisons in our own lives. When we refuse to forgive, it is like we hold people captive in our hearts and minds. At the same time, by our own choosing, we determine to imprison ourselves in cells of bitterness, distrust, and vengefulness. We isolate ourselves from genuine loving relationships because we cannot look beyond another's faults (or things we perceive to be faults), we cannot absorb the results of another's wrong (or what we perceive to be wrong), and we refuse to forget the weaknesses and indiscretion of others. And ourselves too! When in bondage like this, our first step toward healing is to forgive: to forgive "them"- whoever "them" maybe. Keep in mind that "them" maybe you.

This parable doesn't leave us guessing too much about what it means or what it suggests for our lives. We may not want to follow through with it or may even be scared of what it suggests but with what we know about God and God's will for our lives, it sounds good and sounds right. But how? How do we forgive? Where do we get the strength, because it takes strength

and courage to forgive? To answer these questions, we must look to God and stand firm on one of God's greatest promises: God is a God of grace and mercy and forgiveness. And as we receive God's mercy, we pray we will receive God's strength and courage to the point of embodying forgiveness to ourselves and others.

I want to start with God's promise and then turn to how God's promise empowers and calls us.

If we can hang our hats and jackets and lives on what John proclaims in chapter 3 verse 16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life," which the Christian sector of the world has promoted publicly on just about every surface, then we can also hang our hats and jackets and lives on what John proclaims immediately following in chapter 3 verse 17, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Did you hear that awesome news? God's gift of Jesus to the world is not about condemnation. God's gift of Jesus to the world, to you and to me, is about grace, mercy, and forgiveness, to save us.

Here it is. God loves you! And because God loves you, God doesn't want anything bad to happen to you. So, when things in your life become chaotic, confused, disoriented, and distracted, God seeks to calm the storm in you and help you reorient. How? God meets you where you are and in meeting you where you are (and there is no place God won't go) offers you forgiveness for the things that have pulled you apart so that you can renew the covenant relationship.

There is a story about God sending a man named Jonah to a city called Nineveh because the people there had pulled away from God and begun to do awful things. Along Jonah's journey, it is proclaimed to Jonah, "The Lord is slow to anger and great in power." (Jonah 4:1) Could God have chosen not to send Jonah and simply smite all of Nineveh? Yes. There are examples of God doing that to cities who have been given chances and still refused. But smiting people in anger is not what God wants. God wants people to love God and live for God the way God loves and lives for them.

What we come to know and witness all throughout scripture is that God, in God's love for humanity, is merciful and longsuffering, gracious and generous. God loves us and God, in faithfulness to God's covenant relationship with us, will not change His mind about us. We are all (whether we acknowledge it or not) recipients and beneficiaries of God's amazing grace.<sup>1</sup> God freely and abundantly says I can and I will forgive.

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<sup>1</sup> "An Unpayable Debt: On Forgiveness", Adam Mixon. *Journal for Preachers: Lent*. Pg. 28-30

Because of God's power and love and God's willingness to be abundantly patient and gracious with us (Thank you Lord), I believe there is nothing we can do on earth in which God will not forgive us and provide us the opportunity of turning our life around. Do you have hate in your heart? God can and will forgive you. Do you tend to tell lies to get what you want? God can and will forgive you. Are you addicted to alcohol, drugs, pornography, or anything else removing you from being your best you? God can and will forgive you. Does worry and doubt fill your mind? God can and will forgive you. Have you hurt someone in your life, a family member or friend? God can and will forgive you.

But just because God can and God will doesn't mean it is real to us. For God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness to be real in our lives, we have to believe God can and God will and lean into God with our hearts. Even though we believe God already knows our hurt and need, because God sent Jesus to earth for that very reason, we have to turn to God, recognize our hurt and need before God, and genuinely (meaning with our whole heart) ask for God to forgive us.

One of the things I have come to believe about God's forgiveness is that God, in forgiving, is not telling us what we have done is ok. Actually, it is just the opposite. God is saying what we have done is not ok and we need relief to move on. From God's perspective, our hurt and need are holding us captive and what God wants us to know is that there is a way out of that way of life, out of captivity, with an opportunity to begin again. God's forgiveness breaks the chains of whatever is holding us captive and opens the door to new beginnings and new hopes. The goal of forgiveness is to help us move past the bitter offense and not continue repeating the same offenses over and over. Forgiveness is not a blank slate intended to be taken advantage of by adding more offenses to the list.

God is merciful and longsuffering, gracious and generous. Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this promise we can stand firm, out of God's love for us, God can and God will forgive us.

In the power of God's good news for us being healed, whole, and forgiven by God, we must realize that our receipt of these good gifts are also required of us. Think back to the parable. The grace received by us is also required of us. Can we forgive? Yes, with God's help. Will we forgive? I hope you will again join me in saying yes, with God's help, because having been forgiven by God, we too, you and I, are called to say I can and I will forgive.

As we think about what is required of us by God, I am first reminded of Micah 6:8, "What is it that the Lord requires of us? To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." Grace, God's grace, is at the heart of each of these. I am also reminded of a question: "What if the Messiah came and nothing changed?" Think about that for a moment. What if Jesus was born,

lived, suffered, died, was raised, and ascended, and nothing of life (purpose, meaning, actions, beliefs) changed as a result? For those who know of and experience them, the very life of Jesus and the presence of God alive and active demand transformed and changed lives full of love, light, grace, mercy, forgiveness, peace, and joy.

Richard Lischer goes as far to offer, “Failure to forgive within the Christian community cannot be forgiven by God because when we refuse to forgive, we cancel the identity of God. Without forgiveness, God disappears from the earth. Without forgiveness, all we can know of God is the very thing we dread about God.”<sup>2</sup>

A positive spin offers, “To receive forgiveness both enables and obligates one to offer forgiveness, not as an occasional exception to the rule but as a habit of life and not without an awareness of the forgiveness one has received but as a response to it.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the most infamous stories in the Old Testament, in particular Genesis, is the story that has come to be known as Joseph and the technicolor dream coat. It is located in chapters 37 through 50 of Genesis. Joseph’s story includes interpreting dreams, but the more important part God working in the story is in the forgiveness Joseph gives to his brothers and father at their remarkable reunion.

We do not read far into the story before encountering troubles, lots of them. These troubles are related to Joseph’s age and maturity. Family dynamics are complex involving a mixed family with none of his brothers being a full brother. Fraternal favoritism gives weight to Joseph over other siblings. These troubles cause more trouble between Joseph and his brothers, mostly identified in their hatred and jealousy of Joseph. An emotional chasm is created between them and a plot to kill Joseph is devised. It is Reuban’s intercession (Reuban is the oldest of the brothers) that saves Joseph’s life initially. Still Joseph is stripped of dignity under his brother’s betrayal.

To say there is hurt and there is need of forgiveness amid the troubles is an understatement. Joseph is young and certain things lie out of his control- things like his birth order, his father’s feelings, his dreams. But some things are within his control- like what he says about his brothers and what he says to his brothers and eventually to his father Jacob after finally being reunited with them. This is what the story unfolds to be about more than anything. How will Joseph respond to the troubles of his earlier life when given the opportunity to face them face to face? Can Joseph forgive his brothers for what they have done? Will Joseph forgive his brothers? Or does he devise a plan of his own to enact vengeance for what they did to strip him of his earlier life?

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<sup>2</sup>Interpretation: Reading the Parables. Richard Lischer. Pg. 83.

<sup>3</sup> Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed. William R. Herzog II. Pg. 133

As we discover in the story, yes, Joseph forgives his brothers in the strength and empowerment of God's grace alive and working in and through him.

The story of Joseph in Genesis is often compared closely to that of Jesus in the New Testament. In God (Jesus), there is a different power at work. Instead of gaining honor through avenging wrongs with violence and vengeance, Jesus shows the way of power through vulnerability. Potency is evident in willingness to forego vengeance and to engage in the hard work of reconciliation.

How do we wrap our minds around embodying forgiveness in our lives?

1. We must try. "On the one hand, in our present moment, forgiveness seems like the most impossible of things. It seems that anywhere- everywhere! - one looks, there is offense of one sort or another, and if you don't see it yourself, someone will happily (or angrily) point it out to you. On the other hand, forgiveness seems like the most important of things right now. True, there is much to forgive- more than one can stomach- but forgiveness seems to be an imperative if there is to be any movement forward of any sort."<sup>4</sup> We might think something is impossible, but there is no impossible with God. In faith that God will help, we must try.
2. We must stand ready. Immediately preceding the parable is a query by Peter: How many times does a disciple have to forgive? "As many as 7 times?" Seven is symbolic for a full number. Jesus' response of, "not 7 times but 77 times" stretches the boundaries of forgiveness to astronomical and limitless proportions. Important Note: This parable does not advocate unlimited forgiveness by victims for their unrepentant abusers. There are actually limits to forgiveness. The one who has been forgiven and does not in turn act toward another cannot receive boundless forgiveness. What this parable implies is that one must always stand ready to forgive.<sup>5</sup>
3. We must yield our heart to God's way. When we pray in the Lord's Prayer for God to forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors or forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, we are asking God to let the experience of being forgiven so transform our hearts that we may likewise forgive others. Whatever debt our sin has accrued, Jesus came to eliminate it. And the only response to such bountiful mercy is to let it transform our heart and so be able to act with the same kind of mercy toward others. God sent Jesus out of love, for the well-being of all creation.

God can and God will forgive. Can you? Will you?

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<sup>4</sup> "The Slow Burn of Forgiveness: St. Joseph Preaches Lives Forgiveness." Brent Strawn. Journal for Preachers: Lent 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Parables for Preachers: Year A. Barbara E. Reid. Pg. 131-142.