



Today we continue our series called “Parables: More than Just Stories.” I heard about a man who really loved dogs; he devoted his life to them. He read about them, studied them, and even gave talks about them to other dog lovers. One day he decided to put a new sidewalk in front of his house. His neighbor watched from his window as he smoothed out the last square foot of cement.

Just then, a large dog appeared and walked through the fresh cement, leaving paw prints behind. The man muttered something under his breath and smoothed out the damage. He then went inside to get some twine to put up a fence around the sidewalk. But when he got back outside, he discovered some more dog tracks in his fresh cement. He smoothed out the cement and put up the twine.

He then went into the house. Five minutes later he looked outside and saw some more paw prints. He was really mad now. He got out his trowel and smoothed the cement one more time. As he got back to his porch, the dog reappeared and sat right in the middle of the wet sidewalk.

Now furious, he went inside and grabbed his gun and came out and shot the dog dead. The neighbor rushed over and said, “Why did you do that? I thought you loved dogs.” The man thought for a moment and said, “I do, I do like dogs. But that’s in the abstract. I hate dogs in the concrete.”

I think that is how many of us feel about our topic this morning. We love to hear about forgiveness in the abstract, but when it is close to home, we hate it in the concrete.

Since we are flawed people, we’re bound to have trouble with forgiveness. We were reminded this week in staff meeting that extending forgiveness is costly—it’s not easy to ask for forgiveness, and it’s certainly very difficult to extend forgiveness to those who’ve wronged us. I read this week, “Forgiveness is the virtue we most enjoy and least employ.” Why is it so difficult? Because forgiveness does not come naturally to us. Extending forgiveness violates our sense of fairness. Our sense of justice and revenge is where we gravitate when we see someone hurt.

For those of us who are inclined to be open minded to forgiveness, would you agree that it’s easier to forgive someone who’s hurt you once rather than one who’s hurt you over and over? Of course. So when someone irritates me, hurts me, stabs me in the

back, how many times do I forgive them? That’s a great question. Peter asked Jesus that very same question about 2000 years ago.

To What Extent am I to Forgive Others?

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times’” (Matthew 18:21–22).

We can see by his question that Peter sees himself as a pretty forgiving guy. The Jewish teachers of the day only required that a person forgive 3 times and the 4th time someone sins against you you can stick it to them! So Peter is saying, “I’ll take the law, and I’ll raise your law 3 more times to 6 times, and you know what, 7 is the perfect number so I will raise it one more to 7 times.” Peter had to be thinking, “Jesus will be so impressed with my huge spirit of forgiveness.” Instead you hear the humor in Jesus’ voice. Not 7 times, but 77 times. Some translations show this as 7 times 70 or 490 times.

My Forgiveness is to be Unlimited

Are we keeping count and hoping to reach that point when we don’t have to forgive, when we feel we have been suckered 76 times, and now we are just waiting for 77? It’s like, “Come on do it to me one more time!” Then Wham! Pow! Splat! You have missed Jesus’ point. And really when we move from the abstract and into the concrete it seems quite reasonable to forgive 7 times and then say, “I’m sick and tired of being the schmuck, no more grace. You can fool me 7 times, shame on me, but fool me 8 times, shame on you!” The truth is that unlimited forgiveness is hard for us to grasp.

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him” (verses 23–24).

This servant comes to the king and he is hopelessly in debt. He owes 10,000 talents to his king, his master. You know how much that is in today’s money? A talent is a unit of weight equal to about 75 pounds. One talent is about 20 years’ wages for the average wage earner. So let’s say the average wage is \$30,000 per year. That’s \$600,000 for one talent! Now he owes how much? 10,000 talents. Do the math—that’s 10,000 times \$600,000 which is 6 billion dollars. We are getting into federal government

numbers now. The bottom line is this man is never going to repay this debt.

“Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt” (v. 25).

There is no bankruptcy court, no bailout. Only two options exist for this poor guy. He will either be put in jail or sold as a slave to pay off some of the debt. The king chose to sell off him and his family.

“At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything’” (v. 26).

I'm 6 billion in debt; just give me a few more days. I got a hot tip on a horse... I've got this great stamp collection I can sell.. I'm expecting a raise at work.... I'll put in more overtime. For a 6 billion dollar debt? The situation is hopeless. Get it? Hopeless. The debt is impossible to pay.

What does the King do? He takes pity on him and cancels the debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go” (verses 26-27).

He wipes the slate clean. Why am I to forgive others? Because I have been forgiven.

As amazing as this story is in the abstract of a parable, it can't compare to the concrete. I owe a massive debt to God. It's my sin. I try harder, do more good, but it isn't like paying back a car loan with interest over time. It's a national debt kind of deal. It can't be paid. If God gave us what we deserve we wouldn't be alive today. Jesus leaves no doubt: We are hopelessly in debt to God. But in the concrete, God has chosen out of his love to wipe my slate clean. I am forgiven. It's called grace—undeserved favor from God.

My best friend from high school is at CPC today. He was quite a basketball player in his day. He was good. He also liked to shoot. He liked to shoot a lot. When I was on the court with him, and when I got a pass from him it was a special thing. So it was the Friday night high school basketball thing and we were playing El Dorado High School in their gym in Placentia, CA. We went to Brea-Olinda, a big rivalry, and a big game in their gym. My friend threw me the ball, and I launched a 22-footer. There was that split second of quiet in the gym as my high arcing shot rained down from above. But there was no clank off the rim, and there was no swish of the net. It was a pure air ball. I think that was the last time he ever passed me the ball!

Well, I did get to the free throw line later in the game, and standing there going through my pre-shot routine I was hearing “air ball.” Hey, it's the guy from Brea who threw up the air ball. That was like a code, a label was being written about me—“You

stink. You've messed up once and you will do it again. You don't qualify, you don't measure up.”

The same thing happens spiritually. When we fail God, others, ourselves, all our sins, those spiritual air balls, become a written code that hangs over our heads. And we internalize this code. It is so painful that most of us try to flee from it. We deny it, or at least minimize it, excuse it, or justify it.

This is our sin problem. So what did God do with our sin problem? He canceled it, wiped it clean, erased it. Then he took it away from us and nailed it to the cross. The Gospel of John tells us that when Jesus died, a document was nailed to the cross above his head, a document in Latin called *tite-u-lus*. When Jesus died, the Roman Governor Pilate had someone write “The King of the Jews” on Jesus' *tite-u-lus* and had it nailed to the cross right above his head. That way everyone walking by could see why Jesus had to be put to death. Pilate, the ultimate politician trying to cover himself, spun out this charge that Jesus claimed to be a king of a heavenly kingdom, that this somehow threatened Caesar's rule on earth.

Now here is the amazing thing: When Jesus died, and he had to die to save us, God himself took the written code against us, our *tite-u-lus*—all those times we fail God, fail others and fail ourselves, all the air balls, all the ways we didn't measure up, all those things that disqualified us, that made us want to run away and hide—he took all of that and wrote it on a document and then nailed it to Jesus' cross. When Jesus said, “It is finished” and gave up his spirit in death, he took it away.

His blood washed away the record of charges against us. That list of charges—that 6 billion in sins we owe—gone, gone, gone, completely and forever. God won't bring it up again, and we shouldn't either.

Have you received God's forgiveness for all the ways you have failed? It is an amazing thing, an amazing gift that gives us amazing freedom. Paul says, **“There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 8:1). What is written on our *tite-u-lus* now? Not “you stink.” What is written is “Child of God.”

That was Part One of our story. I'd like to stop at Part One, but here is Part Two: What God has done for me, he expects me to do for other people. I am to forgive other people their debts against me because God has forgiven me my massive debt.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. (100 denarii is not a tiny sum of money. It is the equivalent of about \$12,000.) He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. (I read this week that under Roman law you could legally choke someone who owes you money. You could legally and literally squeeze it out of him.) His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you

back'. (this servant actually says the same thing the other guy said to the king. Be patient, I will pay you back.) **But he refused. Instead he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt" (verses 28-30).**

What God has done for me he expects me to do for others.

"When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened"(v. 31).

What was the lesson these other servants were learning? They had debts too. Why wouldn't this guy who was shown grace, show grace to another? It makes you wonder, Deep down did he really understand grace? Deep down did he really feel forgiven? Was he really able to take the King at his word?

The guy didn't understand amazing grace shown him, so he didn't show grace to others. Instead he choked and squeezed others. It's like, "If I don't feel good about me, I certainly don't want you to feel good about you." Real relief is found only by taking God at his Word and believing him. Trusting in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and then letting the grace that flows to you flow through you and into your relationships.

Paul says, **"Be kind and compassionate to one another forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you"** (Ephesians 4:32). Every day is a new opportunity to realize how much God forgives me. Every day is a new opportunity to walk in that forgiveness and show others just a taste of what God has given me by forgiving others.

Jesus said, "Then the master called the servant in, 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed" (verses 32-34).

Jesus tells us that in this story the master is horrified when he hears about this guy. Not only is he placed in jail, he was put on the rack and all kinds of things happened to him. Is this a picture of hell? Yes it is, but I think it is also a picture describing a hell on earth that we create for ourselves when we don't forgive people.

What happened to that man will happen to each one of us unless we learn to forgive. These tortures may not be visible like a rack, but hidden tortures. Hidden tortures of anger, bitterness that eats your insides. Tortures of frustration and resentment that give you ulcers, high blood pressure, migraines. Hidden tortures that cause you to lie awake at night, that suck every bit of joy out of your life. Why? Because we will not forgive others from the heart.

The poet Heinrich Heine wrote: "My nature is the most peaceful in the world. All I ask is a simple cottage, a decent bed, good food, some flowers in front of my window, and few trees beside

my door. Then, if God wanted to make me completely happy, he would let me enjoy the spectacle of six or seven of my enemies dangling from those trees. I would forgive them all the wrongs they have done me from the bottom of my heart, for we must forgive our enemies. But not until they are hanged." Some of us live in simple cottages with a decent bed and good food, even some flowers and some nice trees, but you walk by your window and believe those trees would be even prettier if your enemy were dangling from one.

If we don't forgive we remain bound to the people we cannot forgive, held in their vise grip. Lewis Smedes said, "When I genuinely forgive, I set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner I set free was me." **"One man dies in full vigor, completely secure and at ease, his body is well nourished, his bones rich with marrow. Another man dies in bitterness of soul, never having enjoyed anything good"** (Job 21: 23-24).

I don't know about you, but I can't afford the luxury of a bitter heart. So how do we break out of the prison of bitterness? There is only one key. The key to unlocking bitterness is to accept God's forgiveness he offers me and then offer that forgiveness to others. Jesus said, **"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart"** (v. 35).

Try to look hard at verse 35. I know it is painful. Jesus is saying that the way I treat other people matters. If I don't forgive others, why should I expect God to forgive me? The Bible is clear that we cannot expect to receive what our heart is unwilling to give. I need to forgive because I'm going to need more forgiveness in the future. I continue to blow it and I continue to need God's grace and forgiveness. **"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"** (Mt. 6:12).

Do I really want to pray this prayer? What this parable is teaching and what the Lord's prayer is teaching us is that forgiveness is to be a way of life if I claim to be a believer. Who is it that I need to forgive? For some of us God may be revealing that the very next thing we need to do is go to someone and forgive them.

Here is a little quiz that could be helpful if you are still wondering who you might need to forgive. Answer the question: Who am I blaming for my unhappiness? Who am I blaming for the hurt in my life? A parent, relative, neighbor, boss, pastor, child? If a person surfaces in your mind, you need to forgive them. God is bringing that person to mind.

Who is in debt to me and I refuse to let off the hook? Has someone done a major screw up against you and you have never let them forget it? So every time that person is good to you it is simply a small repayment against an unpayable debt they owe you? You need to forgive and you need to ask for forgiveness for your sin of bitterness against them.

Who do I punish today because of someone else's debt? Do I not show grace to somebody simply because they remind me of

someone I resent? Do I punish them for the little annoying things they do because they remind me of someone else in my past? I need to forgive and let go, and I need to ask their forgiveness for the unfair judgment I am showing them.

During WWII, the Nazis sent 1000s of people to concentration camps. One of those people was Corrie Ten Boom. Her parents died in the camps, and she and her sister endured numerous indignities and humiliations at the hands of their captors.

But when the war was over and she was freed, she found she was still imprisoned by her hatred of those who had hurt her and her family. After much tears and prayer ... she finally succeeded in forgiving. She was so successful that she began to speak at churches all across Europe trying to help others accomplish the same objective.

Over and over again she would forgive one person, then another, of what they'd done to her. But there was one individual who she had great difficulty in forgiving. In fact, she spent several sleepless nights struggling with her memories of this man. So she went to speak to her preacher. He thought about it for a few moments and then pointed to the bell rope hanging in the foyer. "Do you see that bell rope?" he asked. "Every Sunday the sexton pulls on the rope and rings that bell, announcing to the community that it is time for worship. As he pulls the rope, the bell rings ding and dong, ding and dong. Eventually he lets go of the bell rope ... but the bell still swings and rings ding and dong, slower and slower until at last it stops ringing."

I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our

grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding dongs of the old bell slowing down. But the key thing is this: you've got to let go of the bell rope. You've got to quit tugging at your grievances over and over again ... or you'll never forgive.

So, have you let go of the bell rope?

I want to close with one more verse this morning. *"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins"* (Colossians 2:13).

I love how Paul puts "giving life" and "forgiveness" in the same breath. We find life when we are forgiven. We find joy, hope, peace and strength. And we give life when we forgive, to ourselves and to our victims of unforgiveness.

We find life when we are forgiven. We give life when we forgive. May God's forgiveness flow freely into you and flow freely out of you—to breath life into our jobs, our neighborhoods, our families, our schools, our friendships, our ministries—that every encounter we have with every person becomes a sacred encounter. Christ died for us, but he also died for our neighbors, even our enemies, or at least the people we have the hardest time loving and accepting. Thank you Lord for moving us from the abstract to the concrete.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.