To Tell a Tale: The Unmerciful Servant Memory Verse: Ephesians 4:32

June 9th, 2024 Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:29-5:2

**SLIDE 1: TITLE**

Today we are going to take a look at another parable from Jesus. God knows that we all love a good story. We connect with characters in a story, we remember their emotional arc. So often, instead of teaching outright information, Jesus will employ a story in order to make his point. These stories were told in crucial moments and they caught audiences off guard…I think they continue to do so today.

But we have a bit of an extra challenge. When I am reading my bible and come across a parable from Jesus, it is hard for me to hear it as a story. See, I know what is going on here. I know Jesus is teaching a very important lesson through this story. I know that there is a profound spiritual truth to be found in the story, and so it actually becomes a challenge to even hear the story in the first place! I get too busy trying to make sure I don’t miss the lesson, that I in fact barely hear the story. This is exactly backwards. Yes, there is a lesson that Jesus is communicating, but if we skip over the story too eager to get to the point, we lose the effect Jesus intended in the first place. Parables are slow release. They are meant to be mulled over for awhile and digested slowly. I was in a band in college that played a couple of shows, but one of those gigs was somewhere in Missiouri. So we packed for a road trip and I remember sitting in the back seat of a station wagon as our bass player drove through the night. And he had with him a bag of M&Ms. Not one of the giant share sized ones, just a normal pack of peanut M&Ms. And I was struck by how very slowly this man ate his candy. Now I know he was trying to stay awake and all that, but I grew impatient watching him put a piece in his mouth and just let it sit there without chewing. It was a picture of self-control. I still think about Sam our bass player when I come across M&Ms. But he got more use, more value, out of one bag of M&Ms then I ever have out of all I’ve ever eaten in my lifetime. For me, candy of any kind is pretty much here and gone as quickly as possible. I even end up chewing the hard candies. But Sam was a slow-release kind of guy.

So as we hear another parable today, I want to encourage you to let it remain for a while…take it slowly and not rush to finish it off and get on to the next thing. Sometimes we have to sit with scripture and allow it some time to sink in. So we are going to take the Sam approach as we turn to Matthew chapter 18.

In this chapter we see Jesus talking with his disciples. He is teaching them about forgiveness and what to do when someone who is a part of your community sins against you. This is actually the section of scripture that we use as a baseline for church discipline issues. Is there a point in which someone ought to be asked to leave a congregation? Jesus lays out an overall goal of seeking restoration, but he says something pretty amazing, he says whatever you bind on earth, will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. That seems to indicate that we, as Christ-followers, have been given quite a bit of responsibility. All the implications of that are for another sermon, but I want us to go into the parable that is coming up aware of this backdrop of responsibility and the understanding that what we do and how we treat others matters. This is not only regarding the situation at hand, but somehow, heaven itself is involved with the way we bind and loose people and relationships in this life.

So, we are responsible, and how we treat others has seemingly eternal effects. Then we get to verse 21 and Peter has a question. “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?”

**SLIDE 2: “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?”**

Now we don’t know for sure, but it’s quite possible that Peter has someone in mind as he asks this question. He is talking about someone close, a brother, someone who is around often enough to offend and reoffend. Someone who is on the brink of deserving rejection. Do you know someone like that? Do you know someone who re-offends, who just cannot seem to learn their lesson? Do you know someone who just seems to constantly test your patience? If you don’t know anyone like that it may be the case that you are that person! Keep that person in mind and hang on to the tension that they might bring into your life. Now, seven seems to me to be a very charitable number. To be wronged seven times and offer forgiveness each time is an amazing amount of patience and goodwill. Also, in his Jewish mindset, the number seven stands for perfection or completion. God created in seven days…you might argue it was actually six and that God only rested on the seventh, but the Bible is clear that that last day of rest was not just tacked on to the end. God’s seventh day was a integral part of the creation process. And do you remember what God concluded? He said it was very good. So Peter poses this forgiveness question, but he is pretty sure that seven is a great answer. But Jesus responds, “Not just seven times,” Well, okay, let’s up it a bit to a dozen, that sound’s reasonable. Jesus says, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as 70 times seven.” And just to be clear that he is not proposing a math problem, Jesus immediately launches into a story.

**SLIDE 3: “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants….”**

He says, “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants….” Now, before we read the story, let’s take stock of the themes Jesus is tying together here. First of all, he says, this is a story about the kingdom of heaven; the binding and loosing we do here affects this kingdom. Secondly, we are dealing with the tension between grace and justice. There’s been some talk about forgiveness, but yet, bad people should not be allowed to continue on being bad and hurting others. We should not constantly leave ourselves open to being wounded over and over again by an abusive person. So how many times is forgiveness warranted? When do we offer grace and when does justice kick in? You remember that person I asked you to keep in mind? Think of them as we listen to Jesus tell a tale. READ Matthew 18: 23-35.

**SLIDE 4-5: Matthew 18: 23-35.**

So there is no veiling of the moral to this story. Jesus begins with a statement about the number of times to forgive, 70 times seven and he ends with almost a threat: Getting thrown into debtor’s prison, experiencing separation from God, will happen to you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart. But remember, we want to take this story a little more slowly. Clearly, the master represents God and he brings us, his servants, in to “settle accounts.” This is just another way of saying that God is looking to collect payment. Presumably, as a servant, I work hard for the master, but I also enjoy the commodities he supplies, I get to live in his home and eat from his pantry. I enjoy the protection my master affords me and, as implied in the story, I can go to him when I come up a little short. So over the course of time, I have racked up a bit of a tab to the tune of 10,000 talents. One talent is 6,000 denari and one denariaus is a normal day’s wage. Again, we have some hyperbolic math from Jesus. But it’s easy to see his point: If I owe my master 60 million days wages, well then it’s pretty clear that, as a servant on staff, I am not a very good investment. It costs the Master much, much more just to have me around, and so every ounce of wisdom and prudence points to getting rid of me as so much dead weight. The master will never recoup the 2,000 lifetimes of service that he is owed.

But the slave, who is me, who is you, pleads and begs. He asks for patience. He flat out lies, “I’ll pay back everything!” And instead of making a good business decision the master responds with something we have seen already from the prodigal son’s father, we saw it from the good Samaritan, and now we see it from the Master…compassion; to be deeply moved.

**SLIDE 6: compassion; to be deeply moved.**

Against all the we deserve and all the we owe, the Master looks upon us with compassion. He knows full well he will never see any of that money, so the master not only doesn’t enforce his legal rights against this useless servant, but he goes so far as to cancel the debt entirely. That is the result of compassion…freedom from debt…forgiveness.

Imagine the relief. Maybe the best thing this servant could have hoped for was some sort of extension, but everyone knows that would have only delayed the unevitable. But beyond his wildest dreams, the servant leaves the palace freely able to breathe. You can imagine the lightness in his step as he sort of skips down the street humming a happy tune. What a glorious day! To be forgiven an insurmountable debt! You would assume this servant would run right home and share the good news with his wife, his neighbors, their dog and whoever else might listen. It’s as though we have been called by collections, we have been brought to our court appointment, we have been shown our outstanding amount, and yet, by some miracle, we have been released scot-free. What would your response be to this good news? I want to remind you once again, keep that certain someone in mind.

The servant in the story does not react as we would imagine. He acts out what might actually be a more real scenario. This forgiven servant immediately heads out to track down another guy that owes him some money, nothing to sniff at either, 100 days wages! The servant is within his rights to demand repayment. And so he does. He physically grabs his fellow servant and begins chocking him. Despite hearing the exact same request, “Please be patient” the servant has his co-worker thrown into prison. Now remember, maybe aside from the assault, this punishment was perfectly in within his legal rights to demand.

The other servants were “deeply grieved”, or the CEB says that they were offended and go to tell the master the whole story. Now we begin to get a small understanding of why God might have wrath! The master bursts onto the scene, “You wicked servant! Shouldn’t you have shown mercy, as I had mercy on you?” And notice here the reason the slave was forgiven in the first place…because you begged me. The servant was forgiven because he asked for it! Forgiveness is ours for the asking. When we come before God the King, the Master, know that his disposition toward you is compassionate. We can know forgiveness just by asking for it!

**SLIDE 7: We can know forgiveness just by asking for it!**

But that forgiveness comes with a responsibility…we can bind or loose. So as we leave the palace and we come into contact with that certain someone…what will our response be? Mercy or justice? Will we enforce our legal right or take on the responsibility of forgiveness? The threat is real: The Master becomes angry and throws the servant into jail, again knowing full well that he will never recover any money. This is what awaits those of us who do not forgive others from our heart. Jesus is clear, you must forgive. I must forgive. My wife hates it, but sometimes I will say to her, you have to forgive me. The opposite is also true, I must forgive her. And there is no tally of which one of us must forgive more. I will let you all guess who needs to forgive who more often…but the source of our forgiveness, the power to forgive, comes from our own insurmountable debt that has been forgiven. I know that God has forgiven me. I know the feeling of walking out of the palace with all my burdens lifted and with no cares in the world. I know the glory of freedom. I know the compassionate heart of God. And now I must share that with others, even those who don’t seem to learn, even those who I know will screw it up again, I know I’ll never see a dime from them. But…I’ve been forgiven.

Now, forgiveness does not equal trust. You can free someone from their legal debt without having to trust them in the same way. Sometimes it is appropriate to put space into a relationship, to protect your heart and peace of mind, maybe even your actual money. Such boundaries are necessary. Trust is something that must be earned and that can be broken. Forgiveness is not earned! Forgiveness is offered freely. The Lord’s prayer sums it up: Our Father…forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Do you hear how active that is…forgive us Lord, as we are currently in the process of forgiving others. It assumes that we will have to do this often, continually even. It’s a picture of a constant cycle that is always in motion, like an infinity symbol.

**SLIDE 8: Infinity**

I’m being forgiven moment by moment, while at the same time I am forgiving others.

Which by the way, makes me think of the master coming back in anger and throwing the servant in prison. Did the master take back his original forgiveness? Did he re-open the debt that had already been forgiven? My guess would be no. Rather, in the time it took the servant to walk out and find his co-worker who owed him, I think he had already accrued a new debt. And it was for this new debt that he was thrown into prison. Like the national debt, it keeps growing and growing and growing.

**SLIDE 9: DEBT**

You and I are in constant need of forgiveness. We cannot go a minute and then stand before God and say “We’re good right?” But God is compassionate, and Jesus’ blood is eternal. He paid our debt and in him we can find all the forgiveness we need so that we can be empowered to forgive others unendingly. So now, go back to that difficult person, the one who puts you on edge and makes you grit your teeth…I think we all know what our response to that person needs to be. May God give us the strength to forgive as we have been forgiven. Amen.