

Forgiveness: Not Lawlessness, Nor Patience, But Christ!

Matthew 18:21-35

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 13, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, the parable of the unforgiving servant, concluding thus: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Over the last three weeks, the Word of the Lord has quite strongly impressed upon us the centrality of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in the Christian life. If we had entered this past month thinking that the forgiveness of sins was some cold liturgical custom limited to a Sunday morning, we would (throughout these three weeks) have had to simply have not been listening, or perhaps a bit absent-minded, to still have the same rigid thoughts of the forgiveness of sins now. How could we not cherish that the forgiveness of sins is important *for* us because it is so important *to* the heavenly Father, who does not desire that one little one should perish, but that all should reach repentance, that they might all – each and every one of them – have the blood-bought justification by the merit of Christ’s righteousness individually bestowed upon them?

But, as is commonly observed, sometimes you’ve got to say the same thing three, four times before it finally sticks. So, our Lord

says it again: now in *parable* form, Jesus again speaks to us regarding the essential divine mercy of the forgiveness of sins – foundational to our relationship with and standing before God – as well as what that forgiveness of sins looks like between two Christians, and how it defines and determines both daily life and eternal life.

Certainly there would be value in meditating upon the parable line-by-line and progress our way through it, but there are a few key phrases we are going to instead focus on to meditate upon this repeated emphasis of the life of repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

First, consider Peter’s question: “How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” Notice that Peter wants to deal with the life of forgiveness according to the law, to make it a legality governed by a rule. Jesus’ famous response makes clear that the life of repentance and forgiveness of sins is governed by Gospel and grace: “Not seven times, but seventy times seven.”

But interpret that correctly, grace is not the same as *lawlessness*. The Christian life lived with faith in God and fervent love toward one another is not a life of lawlessness and sinful anarchy, appealing to grace as an excuse to continue in sin and without any good order. Rather, Jesus has *already* (remember last week) spoken plainly of the place of the Law in the life of repentance and forgiveness when he says, “If your brother sins against you go and tell him his fault... call him to repentance!” That should not be

forgotten in this text! In fact, this use of Law (and then, for the penitent, Gospel) is spelled out further as St Luke's gospel records Jesus' dialogue of Matthew 18 this way: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you *must* forgive him." Perhaps this is why Peter asks, "As many as seven times?" And Jesus says, "No; seventy times seven." There's no legal limit on the forgiveness of sins of the penitent, for forgiveness is governed by grace, not by law.

On paper, this is far more perfect than the best of worldly constitutions and declarations of men. In practice, it seems just as messy as those nations governed by worldly constitutions and declarations of men... not because Jesus' wisdom for his kingdom's governance is as imperfect as that of worldly governance, but because his kingdom's subjects are! His kingdom is filled with sinners, and our imperfect repentance, and our imperfect forgiveness!: Husbands and wives, you know the messiness of trying to forgive that seventh time with increasing worry and anxiety whether you are being taken advantage of, whether your trust has been broken beyond repair, whether there's any end in sight of your spouse seemingly abusing the forgiveness of sins as license to display indifference toward their contributions to the marriage's ruts.

And so, how defensive we become, appealing back to the safety of the Law and assuring ourselves, “There is a limit to this forgiveness, at which point I get to settle accounts!”

And, at first, it would seem that the parable encourages such thought, for did not the king wish to settle accounts with his servants? Indeed, how true that the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God’s grace in Christ Jesus, is not without the Law and good order. If it were – if it were governed by the philosophy, “license to sin abounds because there’s no settling of accounts” – then Christ died for no reason. He accomplished and finished *nothing* if God’s Holy Law requires no accounts to be settled and no debt to be paid!

But, as much as we should see in the death of Christ that the holy God does uphold divine judgment in the settling of accounts, we ought not see such settling of accounts *outside* of the death of Christ. For the Christ-less world? Yes... but, for the Christian, no. The Christ-bearer is safe as the Christ-wearer. For our Christian spouse... Or, children, your Christian sibling... Or, Calvary member, your fellow Christian in the pew... each of these, too, and all of them, too, have had their accounts settled before the Almighty God by the rich blood of Christ Jesus, so that they are now not to be treated according to the full force of the Law, but with the Christian patience that truly is not found in any kingdom of the world, but uniquely in the Kingdom

of Christ Jesus, for that Christian patience is uniquely a fruit of the Spirit: “kindness, gentleness, *patience*, self-control,” Paul lists them.

Indeed, isn't it to *patience* that the penitent appeals in the parable? “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.”

As those who have been forgiven by God's patience in Christ Jesus – God, the epistle says, being patient and not wanting any to perish, but all to reach repentance – as we have benefited from such divine patience so immensely, are we not right to shower such divine patience upon the one who has sinned against us? Not a *worldly* patience, that grows weary, gets stretched thin, and experiences burn out... but a divine patience that hopes all things, endures all things, bears all things in the divine hope that the sinner will repent even yet again and we may all rejoice in his forgiveness yet again.

And yet, when you are the one pleading patience, do you plead it with an empty repentance, mouthing the words with no heart behind it, no penitent conscience, no intent to right the wrong or learn from your mistake? The servant fell on his knees and pleaded for patience, saying he would repay. Isn't that what repentance truly desires? To right the wrong, where possible? ... and the king did more than wait patiently for repayment, he proactively forgave.

Forgiveness may require patience, but it goes beyond patience. Patience has its limits. Even divine patience has its limits, for God's holy Law has its limits, at which point judgment *will* come.

Just as God once in his forbearance overlooked sins until the Christ came and paid for them, for all who refuse Christ, that same judgment will come and accounts will be settled... for the holy wrath of God has its limits and the divine justice has its patience.

But, forgiveness – that’s something different – it’s not about waiting for repayment; it’s about granting a substitute payment (a “Christ-crucified payment”) to settle the account and, thus, erasing the past so that no further payment, no condemnation, is needed.

That’s exactly what Christ has done for each of you: as husband or wife, parent or child, fellow Christian with fellow Christian... each of those sins you know and feel in your heart, he could simply have been *patient* and said, “If you repay it completely (and I *can* wait!), *then* I will relent;” but he was *more* than patient: “I’ll pay for it. I’ll lay down my life for it,” he volunteered, that He may with authority declare, “I forgive.”

So then, when you say, “I forgive” – to your spouse, your child, your parent, your fellow Christian – do you simply promise them patience that will buy them some time before you pounce. Or, as you speak to the penitent – to the one who has fallen before you and implored you to see them for the sinner they are, the one redeemed as they are, redeemed by the King! – do you proclaim to them the divine work of Christ? “I forgive you.”

It may feel a vulnerable thing, this forgiveness. But, it is no more vulnerable than is repentance. In repentance, we make no

excuse and hold nothing back and reserve no dignity nor justification; but only plead, “I am the sinner.” And, what’s more, that repentance – as full-throated and vulnerable as it is – does not thereby earn or deserve forgiveness or grace; otherwise, it would not be grace or forgiveness! But, the vulnerable nature of the penitent before his spouse, parent, child, or fellow Christian is the one who simply knows he has no merit on which to stand, no argument worthy to voice, but may voice only his hope in Christ, may stand only on the rock and foundation of the holy Christian church, against which not even the gates of hell – let alone his sin – may prevail.

In that same faith of that same rock of the holy Christian Church, the one who forgives gladly takes on the vulnerability of the one who has transgressed him. It’s as if the forgiver says, “I know you have sinned against me, and I know you are quite capable to do so again. But, together we appeal to Christ; together, we reside at the feet of his cross; together, we depend on *His* righteousness, His blood, His merit... and together we rejoice in grace... the grace that God has toward us alike for we are together sinners, yet together justified, baptized, and together servants of our good and gracious God.”

Yes, in a sense, what a weight is heaped upon the one forgiving by the one repenting. For the penitent pleads the forgiver to excuse his sin, which is to say, to carry the effects of his sin without consequence. But, the forgiver says, “I cannot carry it; but

Christ can. And has. And thus, no weight at all is mine in forgiving you, but only joy.”

Is this not why the fellow servants in the parable are “greatly distressed” by what they see and hear – that their fellow servant who has been forgiven so much would not be willing to bear so little for the sake of his fellow penitent; and they flee to report to their master that the master’s grace and forgiveness has been abused – which is to say, it has not been trusted when divine patience is needed, or better yet, divine forgiveness is to be shared.

And how does the King respond to such news? He says “I dealt with you, not by an appeal to the Law and divine patience with its righteous limits! I dealt with you according to forgiveness and divine intercession and mercy and grace. And yet, you turn around and say that you’d rather appeal to the Law and its righteousness – not where it *should* be appealed to – among the impenitent – but where it joyfully gives way, when the one who has repented may hope in forgiveness and mercy. If this holiness of the Law is that to which you appeal over the penitent, then I will likewise appeal to that same holiness of the Law over you!” And the King throws the unforgiving servant in the dungeon to remain locked away forever, for the only key to open that dungeon belongs to Christ and his forgiveness, to whom the unforgiving servant was unwilling to appeal for others and was unwilling to love others and *their* benefit

in forgiveness as much as he loved himself and *his* benefit in forgiveness.

Let us learn to pray that we would always rejoice in the forgiveness of sins, not only when it benefits me, myself, and I, but also when it benefits my fellow penitent. For the heavenly Father knows nothing better in the whole world than to individually apply to each little one of his baptized children the full merit and righteousness of the blood and sacrifice of Christ Jesus. Thus, as much mystery and divine benefit as I may relish as bestowed upon me as I repent, I may equally relish it for my fellow penitent, even as we individually and together sang,

Baptismal waters cover me;
 Christ's wounded hand has set me free.
 Held in my Father's strong embrace,
 With joy I praise Him for His grace.

In the Name of the Father
 And of the Son
 And of the Holy Spirit.
 + AMEN +

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