

Giving Away Six \$100 Bills Today *Matthew 18:21-35*

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV – 7th Sunday after Pentecost (July 27) 2014

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

We continue today in our summer sermon series on topics. Today is about Forgiveness and Forgetting.

This FORGIVENESS thing is a tough issue, that has caused a lot of confusion over time. **It's like the woman who testified to the transformation in her life that had resulted through her conversion experience. She declared, "I'm so glad I got religion. I have an uncle I used to hate so much I vowed I'd never go to his funeral. But now, why, I'd be happy to go to it any time."**

Let me stop here for just a moment and tell you what I'm going to do with this sermon – because I think the subject matter is so important. Can you see these?

(Here I pull out of my hymnal what appear to be six \$100.00 bills. They are not real, but very good copies made with a scanner and a very good color printer. The copies are 107% the original size, so they don't actually constitute a criminal forgery. Also, they are only printed on one side, although the congregation cannot see that when I show them.)

I'm going to give each of these to six lucky people who pay close enough attention to this sermon to answer multiple choice questions at the end, to prove that they were paying attention. I think the subject matter is that important.

Is there anyone here who would rather not be eligible to receive one of these? Please raise your hand now.

OK, now let me go back to the Gospel lesson. When Peter asks Jesus this question, he is – by the standards of his day – being quite generous. The rabbis of that time taught that you should forgive a person three times, but no more.

That's not too far from our current proverb: ***Hurt me once, shame on you. Hurt me twice, shame on me.***

So Peter is more than twice as generous as the religious teaching of his day – he suggests forgiving the same person 7 times instead of 3.

Jesus' response is subject to translation differences. The NRSV we heard read today comes us with 77, but the Greek used can also be translated 70 x 7. It doesn't really matter. What Jesus is trying to say is that ***"If you have to count, Peter, you don't really understand what forgiveness is all about. Throw that abacus / calculator away."***

Then Jesus tells a story. The currency and numbers used don't mean much to us today, so let me bring it up to date. By the latest information I could get of the average wages in America, the numbers that Jesus used would be like this:

This is based on a denarius being equal to the average wage for one day; and a talent being worth _____ denarii.

- ⊕ The amount owed to the king would be more than 200,000 YEARS worth of the average income of the day – or today, approximately \$9,032,693,900 (9.3 billion dollars.)
- ⊕ The amount owed by the second slave to the first was about 20 weeks of the average income – or today, approximately \$17,047.00

Notice that the first slave makes a ridiculous request – that he be given more time in which to raise the money. How many of us could raise 9.3 billion dollars, regardless of how much time we were given? Jesus uses an astronomical figure to make clear the point of the parable.

The king, in response to the ridiculous request makes an even more astounding response. ***No, I'll not give you more time; I'll just forgive the debt altogether.***

The point is clear – **with God, there are no conditions for forgiveness.** God's grace is without condition, or it wouldn't be grace.

Ah, but there is a condition, you say. The parable tells us that if the forgiven one does not also give forgiveness, then his forgiveness is wiped out.

Is it a CONDITION? That depends on whether you want to look at verse 35 as **DESCRIPTIVE** or as **PRESCRIPTIVE**.

DESCRIPTIVE tells us how things operate. **PRESCRIPTIVE** makes it like a judgment. **If you don't do this, then I will do this.**

Let me tell you a true story that happened some 60 years ago. Corrie ten Boom told about it in her book, *The Hiding Place*:

It was a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there -- the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blانched face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein," he said. "To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!"

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. **Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.**

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. I also discovered that to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.

The other day, as I was doing a meditation on *The Lord's Prayer*, I came to a new understanding of this forgiveness thing.

When I came to the part ***Forgive us our sins AS we forgive those who sin against us***, I began to make my confession of my sins that needed forgiveness. Then I began to tick off the list of those who had sinned against me. When I finished this list, I realized that I needed to go back and supplement my confession / prayer for forgiveness – to include my sins of holding grudges and of being judgmental.

It was in that moment when I realized a new meaning for the **AS** in this prayer. I **used to interpret it** as ***God will forgive us only as much as we forgive others*** – in other words I understood **AS** to be **PRESCRIPTIVE**. That was God's condition / judgment.

But suddenly, I came to understand that it was **DESCRIPTIVE**. Sin which is the brokenness of relationship – between God and me and between me and others – **is a two way street**. BUT IT'S ALL THE SAME STREET.

In each of my grudges, there are **two forgivenesses required**: (1) mine by God, and (2) mine of them. Both are necessary to remove the barrier.

Or, to put it another way – it's all about the same DESCRIPTION that Jesus gave of the two great commandments: (1) love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and the second is like the first: (2) love your neighbor as yourself. They are both two sides of the same coin.

When **Leonardo da Vinci** was painting the Last Supper, he had an intense, bitter argument with a fellow painter. Leonardo was so enraged that he decided to paint the face of his enemy into the face of Judas. That way the hated painter's face would be preserved for ages in the face of the betraying disciple. When Leonardo finished Judas, everyone easily recognized the face of the painter with whom Leonardo quarreled.

Leonardo continued to work on the painting. But as much as he tried, he could not paint the face of Christ. Something was holding him back.

Leonardo decided his hatred toward his fellow painter was the problem. So he worked through his hatred by repainting Judas' face, replacing the image of his fellow painter with another face. ONLY AFTER HE HAD DONE THIS WAS HE ABLE TO PAINT JESUS' FACE AND COMPLETE THE MASTERPIECE.

OK – let me see if you've been paying attention. Here's the quiz for those who would like one of these. (Holding up the counterfeit \$100 bills.)

(1) The woman who needed God's help to forgive the German soldier was **[a.]** Corrie ten Boom, **[b.]** Hillary Clinton, **[c.]** Queen Elizabeth. [Those who answer **[a]** are invited to stand up and to participate in the next question.]

(2) The artist who learned from painting *The Last Supper* that he could not experience Jesus' face while he held a grudge was **[a.]** Pablo Picasso, **[b.]** Leonardo da Vinci, **[c.]** Vincent vanGogh.

(3.) In today's dollars, the first slave owed the king **[a.]** 3.9 billion dollars, **[b.]** 9.3 billion dollars, **[c.]** 11.7 billion dollars.

Now, I give the awards to six of the people who are still standing.

What do you think? [Let them express their feelings about getting bogus \$100.00 bills.]

That's what Jesus was talking about. We all want forgiveness – just like each person who participated wanted one of these \$100 bills. But you see, **FORGIVENESS IS A HEADS AND TAILS PROPOSITION.** It's all about a condition of your soul – either you know forgiveness (heads and tails) as both

giving and receiving – both sides of the coin / dollar, or [WHAT YOU HAVE IS ONLY WORTHLESS COUNTERFEIT FEELING.](#)

- ‡ If you've not been able to experience forgiveness from God in your life – take a deep look at where you are withholding it from others.
- ‡ If you think you've experienced God's forgiveness, but have refused to forgive someone else, that good feeling you have is probably worth about as much as one of these counterfeit \$100 bills.

But – and here's the most important part – neither one is the result of extra effort on your part. Quite frankly, we can't experience the liberation of forgiveness by ourselves. That's why it's called GRACE. Instead, ask God to work that healing miracle in your life ... and don't hold anything back. Then you can experience the real stuff [show a real \$100 bill] – that's worth more than 200,000 years of wages – it's a reward that will last for eternity.

You may or may not forget what someone did to you; forgiveness does not necessarily obliterate your memory. But when you understand forgiveness, the memory is no longer a set of chains that binds you.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.