

# THE UNFORGIVEABLE SIN

---

**GENESIS 50:15-21**

**MATTHEW 18:21-35**

**SEPTEMBER 17, 2017**

**TOM WHARTENBY**

**WELL, THE LECTIONARY GURUS HAVE DONE IT TO US AGAIN.**

The same folks who asked us to preach on the passage about "hating father and mother for my sake" on Mother's day and "go sell everything you have and give it to the poor" on Stewardship Sunday, now want us to preach a sermon on the critical importance of forgiveness just following the 16th anniversary of the terrorists' attacks on New York City and the Pentagon. This mandate to forgive over and over again surely supplies most of the wood for the crosses we are called to bear as Christians. Why do both God and God's son stress the importance of forgiveness? Why is it so critical for the coming of the Kingdom of God?

**FORGIVENESS SEEMS TO BE A PROBLEM FOR MOST OF PEOPLE...EVEN US CHRISTIANS.**

Read the Ann or Abby offspring or even Carolyn Hax regularly and you will come across a column about one family member unable to forgive another. Something like "My brother Zeke drank the last bit of Coke out of the bottle one hot summer day just as I was coming in for a drink. He put the empty back in the fridge and laughed at me when I went to drink from it. I haven't spoken to him since. If he apologizes to me should I forgive him?"

O.K., perhaps that's a bit more trivial than the letters we read. I remember one that went something like this: "My sister stole money from my mother's wallet and blamed me for it. My mother believed her...she was always my

mother's pet...and punished me for it. She made me pay back the money. My sister bragged to her friends about how she had gotten away with it and laughed at me when I confronted her. I have never forgiven her for that. Am I wrong?" As I said, forgiveness is a problem for most of us.

### **AND YET I HAVE NEVER COME ACROSS A LETTER LIKE THIS:**

I come from a very large family; I have ten brothers. They hated me with a passion because my father loved me best. One day they threw me down a pit and then sold me into slavery in another country. They told my father I was dead, and he believed them. I survived and am now in a position to pay them back, to do to them what they did to me. Am I wrong? Or should I forgive them and help them survive?

### **HOW WOULD THE ADVICE COLUMNISTS RESPOND?**

Would it have been: "They wanted you dead; no one could ask you to help them? Tell them you can't help them, you're dead." Or perhaps they would have urged taking the high ground and not stooping to their level. "If you can't find it in your heart to help them, ask a colleague to do it. And if your anger is still churning your guts, get some counseling." Of course if the guy with the problem called into a talk radio show he might well have heard, "Don't get mad, get even. Burn the bums!"

I doubt anyone would have prompted Joseph to say to his brothers, "As for you, you planned evil against me; but God planned to bring good out of it so that many people should be kept alive. So fear not, I will provide for you and your family." No... such counsel comes from beyond the human realm.

### **WAS THIS THE STORY THAT PROMPTED JESUS TO TELL HIS DISCIPLES WHAT HE DID ABOUT FORGIVENESS?**

In chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives detailed instructions about *living together as a church family*. He talks mostly about sin and

forgiveness. Again I stress he talking about forgiveness within the Church Family. Jesus begins by laying out a procedure for going to one who has sinned against you. ***If the person repents, you are to forgive him Jesus says.*** This prompts Peter, who must have been the apostolic bookkeeper, to ask how often he should forgive someone who repents and apologizes...as many as seven times? Peter is being very generous because the rabbis in his day said that one Jew must forgive another three times. Let's face it, three times would push us to the limit, seven times, way beyond. That would be perfect forgiveness.

### **BUT WAIT! JESUS THINKS EVEN SEVEN IS MISERLY!**

Jesus pulls a number out of Genesis, the number of times Lamech bragged that he would avenge a wrong committed against him. This makes Lamech the patron saint of avengers, the mentor of those who hold a perpetual grudge. Jesus calls upon Christians to be the antidote to these revenge seekers.

Surely Jesus cannot be serious, can he? Surely he is engaging in Semitic Hyperbole, Jewish overstatement. Peter no doubt was stunned, telling him such behavior is not possible in the real world. Jesus responds with a story:

### **A STORY ABOUT *HIS* REAL WORLD: THE KINGDOM OF GOD.**

"The Kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a King who wished to settle accounts with his servants..." We know the rest: one servant is found who has embezzled 10,000 Talents (it would take an average worker 150,000 years to pay off the debt applying 100 % of his income to it). The king orders the man thrown into prison until he pays it...in other words the man will never see the light of day again. The servant begs for mercy by making the absurd promise that he will pay it all back. The king knows this to be

impossible, but for some unfathomable and unstated reason, he forgives the debt completely. Amazing Grace How Sweet the Sound!

The servant gleefully skips out of the palace, the weight of the world having been lifted from his shoulders. As he is heading home to wife and children, he comes across a fellow servant who owes him the equivalent of 100 days wages...no mean sum, but trivial compared to what he owed the king. He demands payment; his fellow servant begs for mercy. The unforgiving servant won't be moved; he has the man thrown in jail. His fellow servants are enraged and rat him out to the king, who then turns the unforgiving servant over to the torturers where he will spend the rest of his miserable low life.

### **JESUS CONCLUDES HIS STORY WITH THE MOST CHILLING WORDS HE EVER SPOKE:**

"So too will my heavenly Father do to you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." This chapter began in response to a question of the disciples about who was greatest in the Kingdom of God. It ends with a declaration from Jesus about who will not even enter the Kingdom...those who refuse to forgive. For Jesus at least, the hard-hearted refusal to forgive one another is the unforgiveable sin. Why?

### **THE PARABLE JESUS TOLD CONTAINS THE ANSWER.**

The part about the king forgiving gazillions of dollars refers to the forgiveness God has given each one of us. We enter the Kingdom of Heaven on a pass given to us by God for Jesus' sake. Our sins are so great that not even 150,000 lifetimes would suffice to make amends to the King of the Universe against whom we have sinned. But God has forgiven our debt, and that forgiveness cost Him the life of His son. Having accepted that forgiveness, and out of gratitude for it, we are to forgive those who have sinned against us. Remember what we pray...forgive **us** our debts, **as we forgive our debtors.**

**OF COURSE IT DOESN'T WORK THIS WAY IN THE REAL WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE.**

It is certainly not the case that most of those folks who lost a brother or sister, mother or father, son or daughter on September 11, 2001 have forgiven the terrorists who murdered their loved one. Surely God will not hold that against them. And yet this text does speak to the rest of us. It reminds us that we are members of the Community of Forgiveness, an alternate "Real World", God's Real World, if you will. It reminds us that we are to forgive one another and that our forgiving spirit should speak to a world so often driven to violence by the desire for revenge.

- ❖ Jesus is calling us to work on our own angers and resentments within house if you will.
- ❖ Jesus is calling us to let go our desire for revenge.
- ❖ Jesus is specifically calling us Christians to forgive one another and so give the world a model to follow, a counterweight to the Law of Talion which seems so pervasive.
- ❖ Jesus is calling us to let loose the transforming force of forgiveness in our part of the world.
  - The force that transformed Esau from a potential murderer to one who embraced his brother in love.
  - The force that transformed Joseph from a vindictive eye for an eye person to one who embraced his brothers in love.
  - The force that Paul from an enemy to a servant of God.

Forgiveness is God's principal way of dealing with evil. We are called to join God's fight using His weapons.