

Radical Forgiveness  
Matthew 18:21-35

Welcome to the second sermon in our series. I want to begin by telling you the story of the redemption of Joshua Milton Blahie, which is actually a documentary about the changed life of a man once dubbed to be Liberia's most feared warlord. I believe that he's responsible for about 20,000 deaths in that country. In 1996, Blahie repented, he turned to Christ at a salvation moment and then has devoted himself for the last the rest of his life, you know, traveling the country, returning to the victims to seek forgiveness for his crimes. His story is a story of wonderful transformation, but what about if you're a survivor? What's it like for you if your enemy turns up asking you for forgiveness? There was an Australian journalist that had followed this particular story and asked one of the victims, "Will you forgive him?" And the victim said something along the lines of, "I'm aware of Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant. I'm aware the Lord's call upon us is to forgive. I'm just not yet aware that I have it in me to do so." And the article finished with the question, "Is it fair that a victim like this must forgive someone like that?" It's a good question. Is forgiveness fair? You know, it's a pretty full-on circumstance that she's had to go through, but what about for let's say Steve, whose mom was caught in adultery, destroyed the entire family? Should Steve forgive his mom or what about Jenny, whose stepdad has taken all the money from her in inheritance, leaving her nothing? Should Jenny forgive her stepdad? Or what about Cindy, whose Bible study leader publicly roasted her for who she was dating? Embarrassing her. Should Cindy forgive that Bible study leader? The father who's sick to death of his young son doing the same thing over and over after dinner and before bedtime. Should forgiveness be applied there? Or the wife who's grown hostile toward her husband because he is always short-tempered and always putting her down? Should she forgive? I mean, is forgiveness really a goal or is it just an ideal? I found some quotes online. Here's one, "You cannot forgive. Forgiveness is absolving the abuser of guilt, shame, and teaches the victim that they are meant to be a punching bag." Someone else said, "I'll never forgive. I get angry. I just know what to do with that anger now. I write it in my journal. I craft or I clean angrily. I've healed but I have not forgiven." This morning, as I said, we're in our second week in a series on forgiveness and we come to this difficult passage. Jesus speaks to us about the unforgiving servant. I just want to begin by saying if you're sitting here questioning whether forgiveness is really possible or expected of you. You're not alone. I don't think anything about Jesus' teaching on forgiveness is easy. And yet this parable, the unforgiving servant, the parable, Jesus was clear. Jesus leaves no outlaws. So let's have a look at the parable. It's broken down into a few small things. We begin with the question that begins it. It's Peter's question to Jesus. Jesus has just been talking about how the church should treat one another. Peter begins with this question, "How many times should I forgive my brother?" Peter's asking a fair question. Like if my brother keeps wronging me but then he comes back and says, "Sorry each time." And then does it again. What is the threshold? Peter's asking. And Peter says, "Is it seven times?" And I think at this point Peter was being generous. The rabbis of Jesus' day, of Peter's day, they talked about forgiveness too. They had a limit on it. They would cite Amos 1, 3 and their own Talmud, Yomah 86b. That forgiveness is limited to three but not four times. Three but not four times. That was the order of the day. So when Peter says seven times, he's even doubling the forgiveness of his day. You can imagine his chest is kind of puffed out and you know, "How humble am I?" But Jesus' answer to Peter is quite startling. He says, "Not seven times but seven times, seventy times." Or words along that effect. Now what do we say about Jesus' response here? Seven times seventy. Well I want to say the first thing. His answer, it's not really a precise number. I mean the number seven does represent wholeness, completeness, even holiness in the Bible. So it's like seven and then times that by seventy. I think it's clear. He's not really giving you a precise number but a perfect number if you know what I mean. And the second thing Jesus is doing with this seven by seventy thing times is, for all your Old Testament nerds out there, Jesus is reversing the vengeance of Lamech. Lamech was a man thirsty for vengeance and in Genesis 4:24 he says, "If my father Cain is avenged seven times, then me Lamech avenged seventy seven times." Or seventy times seven times. Jesus is essentially reversing that cry for vengeance with an appeal to forgiveness. Jesus therefore is responding to Peter saying, "There's no end to forgiveness in this kingdom. There's no place for keeping tally." As someone I read said, "If you're still counting, you're probably not forgiving." So Peter's question is met by this incredible answer, seventy times seven. And then Jesus goes on after the question to kind of explain his answer by giving the parable. And here's the first part of the parable. There's a servant and the servant is owing a king a lot of money. It's an unpayable debt that he owes. He owes not just any person, he owes the master, the king. And the debt is said to be in the ESV, it's said to be ten thousand talents. Now the average worker will earn approximately one talent per year. That's therefore an exceedingly rich person might receive five talent a year, perhaps, an exceedingly rich person. Therefore it would take between two thousand

and ten thousand years to earn this much. In today's terms the average earner would earn forty K a year let's say. Which means this debt that's been explained in this parable is forty billion dollars. That's ten times what India currently owes the World Bank. It is clearly an unrealistic sum to pay back. Why does Jesus use such a huge number? Why is it so unrealistic? What's he doing here? Well I think he's doing two things. On one hand what Jesus is doing is he's finding the largest currency they could explain in his day. That's the talent. That was the largest single currency and ten thousand that was the largest mathematical unit they had too. The highest conceivable number. Therefore Jesus is saying imagine the most unimaginable number. That's how much this servant owed the King. He's saying that the debt the man owed is not even on a human level. It's infinite, immeasurable. I think he's saying the debt is an eternal debt. So when the King wants the debt owed he's asking for an eternal payback. It's impossible. The man cannot pay it back. Well given this look at the man's response. On the one hand it's very humbling. It's also a bit humorous. He falls on his knees. The man he's genuinely terrified. He's appealing. He's emotional. He says be patient with me. He appeals to the King's character. He says I will repay everything. And he makes an outrageous claim. I'll repay everything. He's not thinking clearly. He's desperate. He realizes he's in hot water. But look how the King responds. The King spares his life. Another day, sorry another way debts might be recouped was maybe by making the servant a slave. But the King doesn't even do that. More than anything what the King does is releases the man of every obligation he owed. Every bit of the debt was removed. The man was left owing nothing except possibly praise and thanksgiving for the King. The King however is in a different situation isn't he? The King had to pay the debt. The King absorbed the entire debt upon himself and his kingdom. Which is the nature of the forgiveness of the kingdom of God too.

Whenever you forgive in fact you take on the cost while the other person goes free. In forgiving rather than retaliating Tim Keller says you make the choice to bear the cost and every bit of it too. So that's the first part of his parable. The parable continues because now we move into how the servant responds and you would imagine being forgiven such a great debt. The servant would go out leaping and praise God but here's what happens. We move on to the new scene. The very same servant having just been forgiven meets another servant who owes him some money a debt. It's not 10,000 talents. It's a hundred denari. Now a denarius could be earned in one day. It's a day's wages so I figure a hundred days wages was what was earned. That's a third of a year. That's not small. Somewhere between 20 and 50 thousand dollars. That's not a small debt. That is a cost. It's a cost that's going to have to be borne by somebody. Now the second servant he can't repay it and we hear the very same words from him that we heard the first servant cry to the King cries out be patient with me and I'll pay back everything except this time the first servant there's no forgiveness. He grabs him by the throat. He chokes him. He demands the money. He refuses the plea for mercy throws the man in prison until he pays the very last penny. Notice what happens here because when everyone else hears it verse 31 the other servants are greatly distressed. They are in distress and they report it to the King and what Jesus implies here is that an attitude like this is distressing for the whole kingdom. In the parable the King having just heard the situation then condemns the foolish servant. He says something along the lines of how can you whom I showed so much mercy have such an ungenerous cruel attitude towards others and so Jesus finishes with the warning finishes with the warning this verse 35 so it will be for anyone of you that does not forgive your brother from your heart. I don't think the parable here is difficult to grasp the King got himself and we are that servant the 10,000 talents is the infinite debt we owe God and as we learned last week God is our creator the sustainer whom we owe everything to and yet none of us gives it to him as we should we owe him and give him nothing so we're awaiting certain judgment. Nevertheless instead of wrath God offers us peace he offers mercy he bears the entire cost upon himself and at the cross of Jesus we find the debt being paid in full with nothing left owing. It's at the cross that you and I the servant the silly and selfish servant can find our debt paid forgiveness given. It's good news and yet when we are called upon to forgive when we're caught caught upon we struggle or more seriously in this case we even refuse to forgive the other. I think the warning in this passage is that if we receive infinite forgiveness and yet refuse to pass it on we are the ones being warned. It's sobering isn't it? Jesus here is saying that eternal salvation is at stake here and it's not the only time he's ever put those two things together. He's actually repeating an earlier saying have a look with me at Matthew 6 verse 15. Jesus says in Matthew 6 15 "If you do not forgive others of their trespasses neither will your father forgive your trespasses." You know we need to be clear that your salvation it's not affected by whether you forgive. It's the reverse. Your forgiveness and ability to forgive must be driven by your salvation. See in the story of forgiveness in the unmerciful servant it was the king who forgave first and then in response that servant was expected to forgive also and so what Jesus is getting at is the posture of forgiveness follows being forgiven. There's no such thing as an unforgiving saved person so if your life is marked by holding grudges, constant hostility, cycles of vengeance, your always keeping score, loveless retribution. Well then it's possible you've either lost the heart of Christ's kingdom or

worse you never know one Christ's kingdom. You see when you believe you enter God's kingdom and when you enter God's kingdom you enter one as one who has been forgiveness but it's a kingdom of forgiveness so we forgive just as the Lord has forgiven us from the heart not just lips not just with clauses of punishment attached Jesus expects total forgiveness from the heart. Church can we ask ourselves this question is the Christian church across the world known for its wild acts of forgiveness and restoration? I don't think so that's not what I can see but let me narrow it in even further. What about you? Well those people who look to you as a Christian they know you as a follower of Jesus what would they see in you? Are you known as one who forgives easily? Lavishly? If not maybe this is parable for you. Jesus is speaking to you this morning. Perhaps it was a feature of your Christian life once but as time has eroded so has the joy of your own salvation. Some of us here probably find forgiveness pretty straightforward so today's a reminder that's good news but for others of us there's a real warning shot called out by Jesus and the warning is this if you've begun building a life without forgiveness then something needs to change. Now remember warnings are good warnings come from love God desires that no one faces his judgment and perhaps the Spirit the Holy Spirit is stirring in you even now to rekindle that desire of forgiveness and make a step towards it. I think there's six categories that we probably fall into this morning it's probably not a perfect diagram but the first category is we've been hurt and we are unwilling to forgive. Full stop. Notice that really Jesus is warning against this category the most and unwillingness to forgive is dangerous it's not a kingdom mindset and we should be very wary if this is us. But the second category is we've been hurt we haven't forgiven yet but we're willing at some point to forgive it's not the right time perhaps but you know in your heart that you will seek forgiveness or seek to forgive I should say. Now this is the category where the church has got it wrong so much why because we want to rush people to forgive we sometimes jump too quickly you gotta forgive and forget and if this is the case that that's for us that's you know not the victim it's us the church is in the wrong at this point the person who's been sinned against is just taking their time to forgive and I think that's completely normal so we have to be slow and patient the way the Lord is in these matters. Now that's different from encouraging bitterness to grow it's giving the victim time to grieve to hurt and to grow. Category three you've been hurt you're willing to forgive but the other person hasn't repented. Category three that is a really hard place to be in. You have a desire to forgive and a willingness to bear the cost of the other person's sin but that person is unrepentant or perhaps has passed away without the chance to see that forgiveness played out. How hard it is to be in that position and yet your heart posture is right here and I think that is what God is after here isn't it? From the heart you would have been willing to forgive. It just hasn't come to the point where you've been able to talk it out and so for you there's an internal thing that's going on prayerful daily asking God to help you forgive that person even if they haven't asked for it. Category four is being hurt and you're making in the steps in the direction toward forgiveness. Category five you've been hurt and in fact reconciliation has occurred but the relationship is broken it's never going to be back to where it was. That person's hurt is so much that it cannot be restored and then finally you've had hurt and reconciliation has occurred and in fact for whatever reason the relationship has returned to what it is and we kind of fit probably somewhere in these categories. Notice time plays a part in the last four four five and six the heart of the person's the posture of the person's heart is toward forgiveness which is what Jesus is after here. That's exactly the way the kingdom is. It's kingdom forgiveness there's a willingness to forgive that's probably because the Holy Spirit's been working toward that. When you forgive you're bearing the cost and that's evident in your life. Now on our website or on our handout next week I've got eight tips that I've borrowed from somewhere else. Eight tips to help us forgive. Little tips along the way it's not comprehensive it might help particularly if you're struggling to forgive or if you're ready to make those first early steps. So I'll put that out and yeah radical forgiveness this is what the kingdom is about. [BLANK\_AUDIO]