

Matthew 18:23-35 "I am ... Forgiven"
Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2017

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 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. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 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.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 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. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

- not too many years ago we did a Lenten sermon series on Jesus' "I Am" statements from the Gospel of John
- you might remember those statements of claim
 - I am the Good Shepherd
 - I am the Resurrection and the Life
 - I am the Way, the Truth and the Life
 - I am the Door
 - and so on

- this year for our Lenten messages we want to turn it around
 - because of who Jesus is, what am I ... what are you?
 - how are you blessed because of who Jesus is?
- throughout this season of Lent we will use six of Jesus' parables from the Gospel of Matthew to gain some insight into our new reality
- tonight's theme and title is very simple ... and very central
 - because of who Jesus is and what he has done, you are forgiven
 - your sins are washed away
 - your debt is paid
 - because Jesus is the Lamb of God who carries away the sin of the world, you are redeemed ... restored ... forgiven
- now, we could stop right there, but we won't
 - we want to pursue this and see what effect it will have on your heart and mine ... and on your life and mine
- do you know what the day of reckoning is all about?
 - the day of reckoning is very simple
 - there is a day coming when all people will stand before the judgment seat of God and the books will be opened
 - when that day comes, it will be too late to get ready ... any getting ready has to happen before that day
- so, on this Ash Wednesday, this day of sackcloth, ashes and godly sorrow for sin, Jesus calls us to take an honest look at our spiritual debt in the face of that coming day of reckoning
 - and whether we are prepared to admit it or not, that day will come
 - will you be ready?

- to be specific, the point of our parable tonight is this ... God has poured out his forgiveness for all of your sins
 - has that incredible blessing taken root and changed your heart?
 - has it overflowed into your life and your relationships with other people?
 - and if it hasn't, then has it really changed your heart ... or are you still in your sins?

- in the context of our parable tonight, Peter asked a question that we all struggle with
 - how often do I have to forgive my brother when he sins against me?
 - up to 7 times?
 - three was considered the rule
 - if you went to four or five, that was considered generous
 - six would qualify you for sainthood
 - seven would have been unheard of!
 - but Peter was trying to be generous

- and in the face of generosity, Jesus' answer hits Peter square in the heart
 - “Not seven times, but seventy times seven times”

- do you want to know what that means?
 - it means that forgiveness is not a math question
 - it is not answered by citing a rule of three
 - it is not answered by generosity or pride
 - it is answered by grace ... by the size of God's loving heart

- do you find it hard to say those three words ... “I forgive you”
 - why are they so hard to say to someone else?
 - and yet, why are they so wonderfully sweet to hear from the lips of another?

- we love to be forgiven ... we long for it
 - we yearn to have our conscience set free from worry and doubt and pain
 - we hunger and thirst to hear the smallest word of hope
 - "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 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. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'*
- do you see what he wants, what he longs for, yearns for, pleads for?
 - just the smallest word of hope ...
 - otherwise he is crushed
 - otherwise he will perish along with his family
 - this is the dreaded day of reckoning ... is there any light to dispel the impending darkness?

- what did you hear and see tonight? ... there were ashes and dust
 - there was a sober realization of our awful condition, “dust you are, and to dust you shall return”
 - there is the reality of the day of reckoning
 - there is the sober truth that nobody gets out of life alive
 - all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God
 - the wages of sin is death

- you've heard it before, but it doesn't always take on a reality,
because you're still here
- you confessed your sins, and you heard those sweet words of
absolution in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the
Holy Spirit
- you heard God speak those words ... again
 - “Your sins are forgiven”
 - but have you absorbed them?
 - have you considered the change in your life that they
will bring?
- will you absorb those words, will you have them touch your heart and
have an impact on your life
- what motivation do you see for forgiveness?
 - maybe it's fairness
 - today I forgive my brother, tomorrow he forgives me
 - kind of back and forth, and it pretty much comes out
even in the end
 - if it started to get one-sided and un-even, that would be
unfair and I would quickly bail out
 - maybe the motive is a deep-seated pride
 - you know ... see how far above you I can be?
 - you mess up and I forgive ...
 - you do it again, and I forgive again
 - see how much better I am?
 - see how big-hearted I am?
- is that what the kingdom of heaven is like?
 - Peter had suggested generosity ... OT tradition obligated you to
forgive 3 times

- OT tradition also expected that forgiveness would not flow unless the person apologized first
- and often forgiveness came with a price ... the wrong had to be made up somehow

- but forgiveness the way Jesus talks about it is a hard thing to do
 - it's hard because it always costs the forgiver something
 - it's never without a price

- did you ever notice how traditional churches look like courtrooms?
 - I suppose that's why we want to sit near the back s
 - less noticed back there
 - we approach the judge with fear, because he is high and exalted and because we owe this debt
 - we tremble, we beg him to have mercy on us and not exact the full payment of what we owe
 - just give me time ... give me a little bit of hope
 - otherwise I am crushed
 - otherwise I perish

- standing before the judge on the day of reckoning, we really are like the poor servant in the parable
 - we find ourselves under a crushing load of debt that no one could ever pay
 - no clerical error
 - no computer malfunction
 - it's mine ... all mine
 - and someone has to pick up the tab

- suppose this happened ... you were about to be tried and convicted of terrible crimes that you really did commit
 - you are guilty and judge lock you up and throw away the key

- but then, the person on the docket just ahead of you was just convicted and sentenced for the crime you did
 - you have now been absolved ... and you are free to go
 - the debt you could never have paid, has been paid
 - and the person who paid it, did it on purpose
- now, that's an imaginary story, but here's the real deal ...
 - Jesus has paid the debt of your sin with his life
 - he stood in the gap and took your place before the judgment seat of God
 - he took your place on the cross
 - now, you who are guilty are declared innocent and Jesus, who was really innocent, has been declared guilty
- and so, now, tonight, this courtroom-like building with its railing separating the holiness of God from the stink of sinners is no longer a place of terror and judgment
 - the seat of judgment became an altar where the sacrifice for sin was made, once and for all
 - then it became a banquet table for the wedding feast of Jesus and his bride, the church
- this place has become a place of celebration as we rejoice in our debt forgiven
 - we need no longer fear condemnation when we approach God's holy altar ... here we receive a foretaste of the feast to come
- you and I are the debtors who owed our master a zillion dollars
 - we are the ones who could only hold out the smallest shred of hope that he would give us time pay ... purgatory for 10,000 years or so
- but instead, your debt has been cancelled in and through Jesus Christ

- sometimes we have this idea that our forgiveness didn't really cost Jesus anything
 - after all, he's God and he has limitless resources

- it's like when you cheat your insurance company and inflate your claim by a couple of thousand dollars
 - you rationalize that they made a couple of billion dollars last year net profit and they've got more money than God
 - to them, it's a trifling amount
 - they won't even notice

- but how much is 10,000 talents?
 - lottery winners take home millions and we can't fathom it
 - governments and big business work in billions and trillions
 - we can't wrap our heads around those numbers either

- so here's the reality ... what Jesus paid to forgive your sins can't even compare ... it was more costly that you or I could ever imagine

- back in Eden, back in Genesis 3 the devil tried to convince us that God didn't really love us or care for us
 - in fact, the devil said that God was holding out on us and we shouldn't really trust him

- is that true?
 - tell me what you see on the cross of Calvary
 - was the price of your forgiveness a mere pittance?
 - did Jesus cover your debt out of petty cash?

- the truth is, the debt of our sin actually cost Jesus everything
 - he resigned from heaven
 - he emptied the bank
 - he poured out his blood on the cross until there was none left

- and in response ... we bend our knees and praise him
 - in response ... we want to tell of his wonderful deeds
 - we want other people to know that God's courtroom is a strange and wonderful place
 - in this courtroom the judge himself takes our place
 - he declares us who are guilty to be innocent and he himself picks up the price of our transgressions
 - then he invites us to live out our lives in a radically different kingdom than what the devil would offer us

- his is the kingdom of grace and it has a whole other set of rules from what you might expect
 - he has declared us to be his friends
 - he has made us citizens of his kingdom
 - he has set us free from guilt and from the fear of death
 - he has given us new life

- and he invites us to be like him
 - you have been given immeasurable mercy
 - enough for yourself ... and enough to share with others
 - did it really cost the unmerciful servant anything to forgive his fellow servant the few dollars he owed him?
 - the money he had lent to his fellow servant yesterday or last week or last year was part of the mountain of debt that had just been forgiven

- so when you forgive your brother, the cost has already been covered and anything of this world's things that it might cost, God can repay
 - God blesses us with this world's things in abundance so that we can afford to share with others
 - he also forgives us in abundance, so that we can afford to forgive
- that's what faith does
- those who have tasted the forgiveness of God will want to share the recipe
 - we, the forgiven, want to forgive