

October 24, 2021

THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

Matthew 18:23-35



Special Music: "Lord Have Mercy" Michael W. Smith

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMyHc1KJVog>

Matthew 18: 23-35

23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.

25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

26 “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’

27 The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

28 “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

29 “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

30 “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32 “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’

34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

BLOOD IN THE SAND

A drop of blood falls
From the sky.
And then another.
The ground soon drenched
As I am wrenched
From my indifference.
I look up, blinded by the sun
As it forms a halo around His head
Silhouettes of spikes and thorns
Malice borne
Piecing his brow.

Hands nailed in place
Through scarlet lace
I see His face.
And His eyes
Sorrow filled and gilded
With unspoken grace.
His gaze finds mine
Offering bread and wine
In sacrifice.
An edifice to the prejudice of sin.
Without words
Those eyes heal
And repeal
My filth before my creator.

Those eyes scream!
“I love you!
I forgive you.”
Wait!
It wasn't me who nailed Him there.
It wasn't me who placed that crown.
It wasn't me who spat, scorned, and beat Him.
It wasn't me who pierced his side.
It wasn't me who gambled for His clothes.
It wasn't me who betrayed Him.
It wasn't me who denied Him.

And then I realized,
It was me.
Yet still He hung there
Dying for me.
For my sin.
For my shame.
For my guilt.

That blood that fell
Well, it fell for me.
Pooled at the base of the cross
It cleansed me.
In that instant
The weight of my sin was lifted
The covenant shifted
And I was gifted new life.
He released me from my debt
Broke my chains
And set me free.
My spirit soars
To the heights of heaven.

So, if you ask
How I can forgive those
Who torment me
And try to take me down,
Threaten me with a thorny crown,
Beat me, chain my feet
Believing I am defeated;
Those who pierce my side
Break my bones and slow my stride.
Those who make me bleed.
Those who delight when I bleed.

I simply look again
Focus on the bloody sand
Then raise my eyes
To the blinding sun
And then reply
How can I not forgive?

On February 14, Valentines Day, 2018, 19-year old Nickolas Cruz entered a three story building on the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Campus in Parkland Florida with a canvas bag. Once inside, he entered a stairwell and pulled a rifle and nine magazines of ammo from the bag. Having affixed a magazine to the rifle, he returned to the hallway and began shooting everyone he encountered. Some of his victims were shot eight or nine times as they lay helpless. He worked his way through the building killing and injuring indiscriminately. When He was finished, he put down his gun, donned a hoodie and pretended to be fleeing with everyone else rushing from the building. The total count for his carnage was seventeen souls and seventeen wounded, many of them fourteen years of age. A total of seventeen counts of first-degree murder and seventeen counts of first-degree attempted murder.

I watched Phase One of the trial process the other morning, where Nikolas Cruz pleaded guilty to all charges. The event was televised. I found the whole event morbidly fascinating. The air was emotionally charged, even as I viewed the proceedings on a television screen. As each count was read and Nikolas pled guilty, the cameras would pan to the gallery of the courtroom as parents became unglued. Then the DA went through a step-by-step narrative that told of each person's death as Nikolas walked his path of destruction. It was obvious that pain was still so very raw with those parents, even after 2 ½ years, and I found myself crying right along with them as they had to relive that moment when they lost their children. I felt like I was intruding on their pain, that I was being pulled into a private moment that should never have found its way to the TV. As much

as I believe that the public has a right to know about these things, I am also convicted that there are times when a person's grief should take precedence of the public's right to be witness to an event.

There is no question that Nikolas Cruz committed the atrocities. There is video evidence, the evidence from the rifle he left at the scene, eye-witness accounts, and a preponderance of other types of evidence that is still be sifted through. It would have been futile for him to declare himself "non guilty". He readily admits that he murdered seventeen people and injured seventeen more. Nikolas did ask to read a statement at the trial. In his statement he said he was sorry and then blamed it on drugs, mostly marijuana.

I will be perfectly honest with you. Although he apologized, I didn't really see any remorse for his actions. What I saw was a very frightened 21 year old man to whom the death penalty had become a very real thing. While the parents were struggling so hard to keep their composure, I did not see Nikolas shed a tear for any of the victims or the grief he had caused for the parents and friends.

This sermon is not about gun violence. It's not about active shooters. It's not about gun laws and restrictions. There is no agenda here on my part. This sermon is about a parable that Jesus used to talk about the nature of forgiveness. When we hear the story of Nikolas Cruz, his victims, and the pain and grief of the victim's families, we want to take this parable and set it aside, move it out of our sight, maybe stick it behind the refrigerator or put it in the trash.

Let's be honest with ourselves, there are some people that hurt us so bad that we believe no one should expect us to show mercy, much less forgive them. Ask yourselves truthfully, do you believe in your heart of hearts, that Nikolas Cruz deserves forgiveness? I didn't say punishment. I said forgiveness. Would your mind be changed if one of those fourteen deaths was your son or daughter? At this point there are only two possible scenarios for Nikolas Cruz. He will live the rest of his life in prison with no possibility for parole, or he will be executed. Either is possible. He will be punished to the fullest extent of the law. But can we find a way to forgive him?

Forgiveness is a comes in several forms, which is unfortunate. Because there are choices, we can be prone to treat our approach to forgiveness like the soup of the day. Or better still, we might base it on price points. "How much will this forgiveness cost me? Is it more than I am willing to part with?" The closer the pain is to our heart and souls, the harder it is to dig deep and find a way to forgive. We engage in self-reflective, justifying debate with ourselves. "Surely this man does not deserve forgiveness." "How can anyone expect me to forgive that woman after what she has done to me?"

In 1 Timothy 1:12-13, Paul says this:

"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief."

Paul never denied that he was a murderer. That he tortured and killed those who followed “The Way.” And he did it under protection of the Jewish leaders. He went about his work eagerly. He enjoyed it. He found purpose in it. And the longer he did it the more the Jewish leaders showed their appreciation by giving him the resources needed to continue his campaign to rid the world of the Christian belief. He was a Nikolas Cruz in the 1st Century. He didn’t care about the age, race, or color of any follower of Jesus Christ. But he did believe that the Jews who had converted were the worst of the worst, because they were traitors to the Jewish Faith. Instead of drugs, Paul used Judaism as an excuse to commit such vile acts. Paul goes on to say in verses 14-16:

14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life

Paul saw himself as the worst of all sinners for what he had done. He acknowledges that it was only through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ that he was able to find peace. Paul knew that through his persecution of Christians he was also persecuting the author of their belief with the ultimate goal was to rid the world of the Christian heresy.

So when Jesus comes to Paul on the road to Damascus and Paul cries out: “Who are you, Lord?” Jesus replies with, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

This parable that Jesus gives us of the unmerciful servant, is a difficult pill to swallow. It shows the standard of forgiveness that God sets, not just with regards to Jesus, but with us and how we treat our fellow humans. We want so desperately to believe there is a line that we cannot cross when it comes to forgiveness. That we can put our foot down and say, “I am not going to forgive this person. They hurt me too bad. That person hurt my family. That person deserves to suffer that same amount of pain they caused me. That person does not deserve forgiveness.”

But, here’s the secret. It is not about whether they deserve forgiveness or not. Forgiveness is not something we earn. If we think that it is then we also have to believe that we can earn our way into heaven. There always seems to be at least a little of that belief that we have to be good and do the right thing to get into heaven. But in truth, we do not deserve forgiveness. We gain forgiveness through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ who didn’t put a boundary on it. He never said, “You can only sin this much before I will stop forgiving you.” He never said, “When you store up enough brownie points, your salvation is secure.”

In Matthew 18:21-22, we read this:

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.”

This is not Jesus putting a new law in place giving a number to the times we are expected to forgive someone. This is Jesus telling us that there is no limit to the times we should forgive them. He wants us to understand that God doesn't put a limit on how much or how often our Creator forgives us. He wants us to understand that we have no authority to set limits like how and when we forgive others. Our sole duty is to forgive. We need to develop our compassion to a point that we can forgive anyone of a transgression towards us or our families.

“But if we forgive them, they may come back and do it again!” Hey, if we don't forgive them, they may come back and do it again. Forgiving them really doesn't benefit them much. But it benefits us a great deal. It allows us to let go of that pain and release it into the capable hands of our creator. As Christians, we need to realize that we give up our claim to choose the forgiveness that suits our taste.

We often talk about how Jesus gave up His life, how He died on the cross paying the debt for our sin. Freeing us from bondage. Promising that our brother and Savior, Jesus, is going to stand by our side as our when we face our Creator. As long as we believe that He is our Brother, Savior, Counselor, Healer, and Provider, He will stand with us. But, we seem to want to decide who else Jesus died for, like we have been given that authority by someone. We haven't. We don't get to decide. We don't get to sit in judgement over heavenly matters. And while we may find Nikolas Cruz guilty in a court of law for being the perpetrator of

heinous crimes, we also need to accept the fact that Jesus loves Nikolas Cruz, just as much as He loves us. Just as much as He loved Judas. Just as much as He loved Peter. Just as much as He loved Thomas. Just as much as He loved Paul, who committed so many atrocities.

I know that it is hard to accept, but Jesus died for Nikolas Cruz. Jesus died for the sins of everyone before anyone accepted him as their Savior. When someone rejects Christ, they are also rejecting all that he offers, including a relationship with both Him and our Creator. They are rejecting the Holy Spirit and the comfort and guidance that the spirit provides. That does not change the fact that Jesus died and rose again for them, just like He did for us. This sanctuary is not a country club for saints, it's a hospital for sinners.

If we have been harmed by someone, we should be the first to reach out with forgiveness. It may take a while for the dust to settle and our emotions to run their course before we reach that point. We may have to bind up our wounds first. But, we should not wait around for them to ask for forgiveness. That may never happen. We should offer it up as a gift. It may get rejected. Some people don't want forgiveness. I'm not sure that Nikolas Cruz is seeking forgiveness. The forgiveness we offer to people in our lives comes from a place of healing for us. For that reason, Jesus wants us to forgive... Jesus expects us to forgive so that we can heal.

AMEN

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