

(Come out wearing heavy chains) These chains may not be fashionable but apparently they are pretty popular. In fact, I'm not the only one wearing them this morning. Some of you wore them in here. Like the kingdom, your chains are invisible but they are no less real. These chains are heavy and not very comfortable but I think I could get used to them. If you're miserable long enough you think it's just "normal." But there is a better way to live (drop chains). Let's pray.

"Lord, speak to us, search us and show us who we need to forgive today. Teach us how. Give us the strength to do it. Free us from the chains of unforgiveness." Amen

According to a 1988 Gallup poll, 94% of those polled said it was important to forgive. Only 48% said they practice forgiveness. When we refuse to forgive we become bound by the actions of those who wronged us. Forgiveness contributes to good health. In fact, a leading psychiatrist once claimed that 90% of the mentally ill could be immediately well if they were able to receive forgiveness and forgive others! But forgiveness has benefits that go beyond this life.

In Mt. 18 Jesus told another parable describing the kingdom of God as a place where we can find forgiveness. The kingdom of God is characterized by forgiveness. But the parable also carries a warning: The forgiveness of God must be replicated in the lives of the forgiven. Forgiveness is not only essential to be healthy and happy in this life but if we are unwilling to forgive others God won't forgive us in the life to come.

The occasion of the parable is Peter's question: how many times to forgive? Vv. 21-22. Peter wants to know, "What are the limits of my liability/responsibility? Tell me how far I have to go? Where is the line?" He knew the rabbis taught to forgive three times but what would Jesus do? Jesus answers with a parable about a man who faced a mountain of debt...vv. 23-27.

I. We all owe a debt we cannot pay. The man in this story had an insurmountable debt. Ten thousand is the largest Hebrew numeral in Jesus' day. A talent was the largest unit of money. Jesus is using typical Hebrew hyperbole to point out that the man's debt was staggering. He owed billions. (To pay this debt would require 60 million days or 193,000 years.) It's like the US national debt. Have you seen the calculator in Times Square that keeps a running total of our national debt? They are

replacing it because it cannot keep up. It can only go to 9,999,999,999,999. Our national debt is about 11.9 trillion. It is a staggering number. That is the picture Jesus is painting.

Forgiveness requires that we take an account. The parable of the dragnet reminded us that at the end of the age God will open the books and all of our sin will be exposed. We will account for our massive debt of sin. Some people try to minimize their debt. They say, "I try to be a good person. I'm not THAT bad." If you have ever thought that you just need to do some simple arithmetic to be cured or your delusion. Let's say you only sin three times a day? Over the course of a year that would be (let's round it off) a thousand sins. Over the course of your lifetime it would be 70 – 80 – 90 thousand sins. The Bible says that if we sin one time, break one law, we have broken them all! In other words, we don't have a chance – short of the grace and mercy of God.

Salvation begins with an understanding that our sin is a debt before God. Every time we sin we go deeper in debt. The Gospel is good news because the promise is that our debt will be forgiven. Consider the promises of God:

Psalm 103:10-12 says, "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us."

Micah 7:18-19 says, "Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins Into the depths of the sea."

Our massive debt of sin has been forgiven. It is a moral monstrosity to not forgive little when we've been forgiven much."

There is another man in the story Jesus told. He owed significantly less money than the man who was hopelessly in debt...vv. 28-30.

II. We seek mercy for ourselves but justice for others. When we are wronged it is easy to forget God's extravagant grace toward us. We are happy to be forgiven but we want what is rightfully ours. When we refuse to forgive we are trying to maintain control over the person who wronged us. As long as I withhold forgiveness they are in my debt, they still owe me and I'm in control.

Here is where the "Yeah, buts, and what-ifs," some in: "Yes but what if they didn't ask for forgiveness—they have to ask for it before I grant it don't they..? What if I've been hurt really bad..? What if they continue to hurt me..? I know they're going to do it again, what if they do something horrible against me next time..? I mean I'm only human."

We have all been abused, abandoned or betrayed by another human being. We carry painful memories and the emotional scars of some past transgression. But I want to remind you that there is no one in this room who hasn't also abused God's grace, abandoned God's Word, and betrayed God's love. God has forgiven me. That's why I pray, "Father forgive my debts as I forgive my debtors."

III. God will hold us accountable for our lack of forgiveness...vv. 31-35... Jesus takes forgiveness seriously. It is not only crucial to a healthy lifestyle in this present life but the willingness to forgive is indisputable evidence of our relationship to Jesus. Matthew 6:14-15 says, "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." There are eternal implications connected with forgiveness.

Have you ever felt the presence of God? Have you ever been in a setting where you were convinced that God must be in the room? How did you know? Was it music that lifted your spirit? Was it a time of communion that brought you to a moment of clarity? Maybe you witnessed a sunset or looked out over the ocean and you felt nearly overwhelmed by the presence of God? Jesus described that one of the surest tests of all for the presence of God and His kingdom is when you have been wronged and you extend mercy.

Five Freeing Facts about Forgiveness:

1. Forgiveness is humanly impossible. It is no more possible to forgive those who have wronged us than it is to save ourselves. Counseling can help us understand our emotions and our behavior but it can't help us forgive. Forgiveness requires spiritual power that is only available by bending my will to the will of God. Notice the response of the apostles to Jesus' words in Luke 17:3-5 "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and IF he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

2. Forgiveness is costly. It is a conscious decision to let go of the offender. Forgiveness (the Greek verb is *apheimi*) means to release, let go. It is unilateral. It means to let go of the offender and turn them over to the justice of God. It is always costly. "Forgiveness cost God his Son on the cross, but what does it cost us to forgive one another? Forgiving costs us our sense of justice. We all have this innate sense deep within our souls, but it has been perverted by our selfish sinful natures. We want to see "justice" done, but the justice we envision satisfies our own interests. We must realize that justice has been done. God is the only rightful administrator of justice in all of creation, and his justice has been satisfied. In order to forgive our brother, we must be satisfied with God's justice and forego the satisfaction of our own." Jerry Bridges

There are four places in the Bible where we read, "Love covers a multitude of sins." (Proverbs 10:12, 17:9, James 5:19-20; 1 Peter 4:8) "To cover" someone's sins doesn't mean to ignore or to hide them, to pretend they didn't happen. What is loving about failing to confront someone who

repeatedly sins and injures others in the process? “To cover” means “to pay for,” as in “I’ve got you covered.” Instead of making him pay (revenge), you pay (forgiveness). When we gossip or slander someone who has hurt us, we are making them pay for their sins. If you keep silent it exacts a price from you. It hurts. Jesus says, “I paid for you, now you go and do likewise.”

3. Forgiveness is a process. God calls upon us to maintain an attitude of forgiveness. When I am offended I must extend mercy to my offender. God doesn’t desire mechanical mercy that fakes forgiveness but grace that is extended to the undeserving from a transformed heart and an obedient life. Spiritual progress is measured by a willingness to let go of those who hurt us.

4. Forgiveness is remembering no more. That is different from forgetting. We’ve all heard the expression, “Just forgive and forget.” Whoever said that was smokin’ crack at the time! You can’t just forgive and forget. Even if we could, we shouldn’t. Forgetting is passive. It is unconscious. Forgiveness is active and a conscious decision. To forgive means choosing not to remember. Isaiah 43:25 says, “I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins.” It is not that God cannot remember my sins, it is that He will not.

5. Forgiveness stimulates our love. Those who are forgiven much love much. That’s the lesson Jesus taught in Luke 7:41-50...The Pharisees didn’t see their sin or their need for forgiveness. Since they were forgiven little they loved little. If you see the cross as a payment for your little sins then you will have little love. If you think Jesus died just to make your mediocre life exceptional then you have missed the point and missed the depths of His love. If I examine my own life, my own shortcomings and know how much God has forgiven I will be more likely to want to extend forgiveness to others.

Ranjit David recently told us the story of a man in India who attacked another man of a different caste. The victim was hacked nearly to death but survived with serious injuries. The attacker went to prison and his family disowned him. He was an angry bitter man isolated in an Indian prison beyond any hope of rehabilitation. Though his family never visited him, one

visitor persisted in trying to see him. The angry prisoner refused until one day, out of curiosity, he went to see who it was. It was the man whom he had attacked. The man said very simply, "I have come to tell you that I forgive you. I am a Christian and God has forgiven me. I forgive you." Initially the imprisoned man rejected the offer of forgiveness but eventually he surrendered to the love of Christ and experienced forgiveness himself.

All of us need forgiveness. The magnificent promise of scripture is that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 Jn. 1:9. I want to invite you this morning to spend some time confessing your debt to God. Allow Him to search you and reveal to you any hardness of heart and then confess that to Him. Receive God's forgiveness because if you do not experience His forgiveness you will have no forgiveness to extend to others. Let's take a moment to do just that.

Now I want you to forgive someone who has hurt you. Take one of these chain links and as you leave and deposit it at the foot of the cross outside. Let go of the person who has hurt you and be free of the chains of unforgiveness that bind you.