

**Sermon Series: God Is**

**Sermon Title: Compassionate and Just  
Matthew 18:21-35**

**by David Hockett  
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God is compassionate, forgiving, and just. If we know anything at all about God, it is that God is merciful and always ready to forgive. Our Lord, from the cross, speaks and embodies the very nature of God, “Forgive them; they don’t know what they are doing.” Forgiveness, mercy, compassion – it can be so very hard to forgive. And yet, if we are made in God’s image, and if in Christ we are being renewed and remade in God’s image then forgiveness must define our lives. It’s not optional. Hard as it is, forgiveness is a part of what it means to be fully human.

And yet, perhaps no other teaching of Jesus causes such visceral reaction among us than the command to forgive. An ancient Chinese proverb says,

“Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.”

A couple of years ago I heard a radio interview with two individuals who knew firsthand the challenge and the power of forgiveness. One had been assaulted and raped and the other had been wrongly accused and convicted of the crime. Together they discussed the power of forgiveness in their lives. Both spoke of the horrible circumstances that brought them together and which had almost destroyed them. Both spoke of sleepless nights, anger, fear, depression, shame; but they also spoke of the beauty and goodness they had found in being able to forgive. They talked about what it meant to not be defined by their pasts, to be set free from a burden they had not chosen, and how life giving the practice of forgiveness had been for them.

Forgiveness is a hard road to walk. Sometimes the pain and hurt others have caused us has such a grip on us that we struggle to shake ourselves free and allow the mercy of God to flow through us. But, reflecting on who God is, Jesus commands his followers to practice mercy and forgiveness. Forgiveness is the way of Jesus, the way of the cross, it is at the heart of what it means to live life in the Kingdom of God. But for many of us, who live in a violent, messed up world, settling the score may seem much easier and much more desirable. It’s hard to forgive, in fact, apart from God it’s impossible. And while getting even may seem very tempting, Jesus tells us that revenge, seeking our own brand of justice is in reality the way that leads to bondage and death. Jesus, from the place of death, from the place of vengeance and coercive violence, from the cross, a sign and symbol of the politics of empire and force, Jesus from there, reminds us of who God is speaking words of forgiveness and pointing to the way that leads to life. Jesus calls our attention to a very different kind of Kingdom ordered by a very different politics. At the heart of Christian discipleship lies the difficult and challenging practice of forgiveness. Not because we believe forgiveness will “fix things”, and not because forgiveness undoes the hurt or

wrong, it doesn't. Jesus calls us to practice forgiveness because that's who God is – when we didn't deserve it, God forgave us.

Matthew tells us that Peter came and said to Jesus, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not hardly. Try seventy times seven.'" (Mt. 18:21-22) Which of course doesn't mean 490 times but is another way of saying don't keep score, be merciful the way God is merciful. I love the way Jesus answers this question. He gives very clear instructions about the importance of forgiveness as a way of life in the Kingdom, but perhaps sensing that Peter just hadn't gotten the point he decides to tell a story.

In the parable Jesus deftly describes our propensity to seek vengeance, to demand a righting of the scales of justice in a manner that we believe balances our accounts with others. One man experiences the undeserved mercy and compassion of his Master to whom he owes a significant debt. In other words, he gets what he does not deserve, and his debt is forgiven. Instead of allowing his dealings with others to be shaped and defined by the mercy he had so undeservedly received he immediately turns to one who owes him a much smaller debt, seeks his pound of flesh and demands the account to be paid and the debt settled. Upon hearing what he had done, his master, who had extended him mercy, now calls him to account, saying essentially if that is the kind of mercy and justice you want to mete out, then you yourself will be held to the same standard. So that now, he who was once set free by the mercy offered to him by his master, now finds himself in bondage to his own greed, to his own misguided sense of justice, to his own need for vengeance. He who had been set free for life, forgiven, has chosen the way that leads to bondage and death. He chose not to forgive.

Sadly, he did what so many of us often do. After being liberated from his debt, after being forgiven, he took on a much larger burden, picked up a shovel, and began digging two graves.

In telling this story Jesus is reminding us of whom God is and is holding up a mirror for us to see ourselves clearly in light of who God is. He wants us to see how we have a tendency to withhold from others the very mercy and forgiveness we have already received. The truth is that we who are unworthy of God's mercy and forgiveness, but yet who have received God's mercy and forgiveness, too often live as if it ours to decide who is worthy and who is unworthy of that very same mercy and forgiveness. Jesus, the *only* righteous judge, the only one in a position to condemn, from the cross, says, "Forgive them." We, from our positions of self-righteousness, we who deserve condemnation, cry out "Pay me what you owe." I've done it. There are some people I don't want to forgive. But what a tragedy that we often forfeit the gift of freedom, the gift of life, because we are unable to allow the reign of God to form us into a people who deal in the abundant economy of forgiveness rather than the bankrupt market of payback, vengeance, getting even, and settling the score.

If only we could be more like God, but forgiveness is such a hard road. It may take months, years, countless tears, and endless prayer to even mutter through clenched teeth, “I forgive you.” And we may have to say it over and over again as we seek to live into the new reality that forgiveness creates because forgiveness is rarely a one-time thing. It is not as simple as saying, “I forgive you now let’s move on, everything is ok again.” No, the hurt is still there, and there are often significant consequences to our wrongdoing. This isn’t “forgive and forget” with a slap on the back and a cheerful, “That’s ok.” No, everything may not be ok. It will take time and hard work to find the way forward as we practice forgiveness, but forgiveness makes it possible for us to travel a new road toward peace and reconciliation rather than continuing down the well-worn path of revenge and settling the score.

Now some will say that the practice of forgiveness is just unrealistic; it will never work in the real world, and that it turns us into passive, weak, doormats. But “forgiveness “is not soft-headedness. It is not a way of denying, ignoring, condoning, or tolerating the wrong. Remember, God is merciful *and* just. This is a different kind of justice grounded not in getting even but in restoration and reconciliation. Forgiveness begins by recognizing and naming the wrongdoing, and by taking the wrongdoing seriously, and if at all possible, bringing it to a stop. Forgiveness isn’t a license to go on sinning. This isn’t cheap grace. This is grace with accountability, and a call to leave sin behind and seek holiness. You see, forgiveness is a different way of actively engaging the world and responding to those who have harmed us.

In forgiving his abusers and murderers Jesus was actively engaging his enemies and disarming them by refusing to retaliate and play by the old rules of violence and revenge. The principalities and powers of sin and evil were overcome, not by the force of violence but by the overwhelming power of God’s love. Forgiveness is about being victorious, not bound by our past or the horrible things others might have done to us. And, it is about being able to live out of God’s love. Not as a naïve strategy for turning our enemies into our friends; but as a grateful response to what God has done for us. We forgive others as a way of being faithful to God who in Christ has graciously forgiven us, and as a way of living into the new reality that Jesus made possible on the cross where we see what God’s justice looks like.

Finally, practicing forgiveness does not deny the possibility or the necessity of justice and accountability. Rather, it redefines justice and accountability and insures that it is God’s peculiar brand of justice we are practicing and not mere retribution and retaliation that often masquerade as justice. Jesus never says that people should not be held accountable for their misdeeds; it is how we seek justice and hold the offender accountable that matters. In calling us to forgive Jesus is offering us a different kind of justice that holds open the possibility of a new future, a way through the hurt and pain that puts an end to the cycles of retaliation and getting even we often

find ourselves captive to. “Resentment is like drinking rat poison and expecting the rat to die. Forgiveness allows us to let go of our false hopes for a better past” in order that we may find the way forward to a better future.<sup>1</sup> Forgiveness is about having our lives defined by the reign of God which is founded on the pattern of cross and resurrection rather than the politics of the kingdoms of this world which are often grounded in settling the score. It is a risky alternative, but one that is worth the price and one that offers healing and hope and release from the chains that bind offender and the offended alike.

The world was forever changed on the day when the kingdoms of this world tried to secure their own future and power through an act of horrible violence and terror – hanging God’s son on a cross. To which God responded – “forgive them.” Because that’s who God is. The disciples wanted swords, and chariots, and fire raining down from heaven, I don’t blame them, but Jesus showed them another way, overcoming evil with good, and violence with love once and for all, because again, that’s who God is. And Jesus says, that if we wish to be counted among his friends, if we want to know freedom, and joy, and peace, and abundant life, we will do the same.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Konkol.