

# Sermon Text for February 9, 2025

By: Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

*Genesis 50:15-21 and Matthew 18:21-35*

*“How could you?”*

You all know what is one of my happiest times during the week, Friday morning at 11:15 when I have chapel with the pre-K class. The routine is the same every week we sing a song, they act out a Bible story and we pray, and most everyone wants to be Jesus in the acting out of a Bible story. This week, just by Providence and God’s wish and desire, there was a kid who was wearing a Dallas jersey. Guess who got to be Jesus this week in chapel. It was a good week, except it started off last Saturday with me getting ready for Joe Johnson’s funeral here and it has been a fairly busy few weeks and I had my tax papers on my dresser expecting to get them done. I grabbed something off my dresser and the papers fell on the floor and I thought to myself I’ll get them after the funeral.

I come home and the papers weren’t there so I asked Stacy and she knew nothing about them, you know both my and Stacy’s W-2, taxes, all those things that you need to fill out your taxes, and sure enough my dog Ellie ate all of our tax papers, all of them. I looked at her and asked her How could you? How could you do something so hurtful to me, and she just wagged her tail and nuzzled up to me, she had no idea what I was talking about since it is clear in our house that anything that falls on the floor belongs to her.

Forgiveness is hard sometimes even when the person, or the dog, is clearly sorry and clearly contrite and wants your forgiveness and you know that they will never do it again, we sometimes like to hang onto what we might consider past harms. Today we just baptized little Peyton, this precious little girl who knows nothing about sin and forgiveness, and yet baptism is the most powerful sign and symbol of God’s redemption that we have. As John and Katelyn stood before you and professed their faith in Jesus and promised to reject sin and evil in their life, this ancient promise that has been made by disciples of Jesus for thousands of years, we are able to declare for all of our sake that God, even while we were yet sinners claimed us and sealed us and forgave us through the blood of Jesus.

God’s mercy reveals itself powerfully in baptism, one of the most powerful ways in which it does reveal itself. And we are grateful and glad to receive mercy and we will leave today knowing without a shadow of a doubt that we are forgiven and that God’s mercy spreads even to us, the vilest of sinners. As Christians and disciples of Jesus we come to expect this mercy and we take for granted the fact that when we confess our sin we have a God who forgives

us. This comes as a shock to none of us in this room, in fact, when I just said it now, some of you are probably saying, yeah, tell me something I don't know.

Well, here is something that you may know but that we don't take seriously enough. This parable that we are about to read almost implies that if we are not willing to show others the same repeated extravagant mercy to others as God has provided to us, maybe, just maybe we don't receive what we expect from God. Let's read.

### **READ**

For our better understanding of forgiveness, we can say from Scripture that the opposite of forgiveness is revenge. This was at least clearly the understanding of the brothers of Joseph in our first Scripture. Their father has just died, and you can see them huddled together without Joseph and they are worried because of how terrible they had treated Joseph, you know that whole throwing him into a pit when he was a kid and then selling him to be a slave, that was pretty bad, right? He might still have some hard feelings against us that he was waiting to take his revenge until dad died. Now that dad has died he is free to do whatever he wants with us, maybe ship us out of the country and send us far away from our families and our homes that we have established here. He will take his revenge on us, simply because we did that to him.

Their fear is justified because that seems to be how people behave. When they have the power to hurt those that they feel have hurt them, well, they go ahead and do that because they simply can. When they approach Joseph the opposite happens and what Joseph says and does is what we expect God to say and do. He speaks kindly to them, I love this detail, he doesn't approach them with a reluctance but rather kindly and offers them extreme mercy. Look at the Scripture. Look at the abundant and extravagant grace of Joseph.

Not only will I not harm you, but I will also protect and keep your children and all of your families. Forgiveness is the opposite of revenge. Mercy is the opposite of cruel judgment. You know as Christians we don't have a monopoly on forgiveness. Other religions embody this concept and have teachings on them. But if we are followers of Jesus, no matter where we are, forgiveness should be our primary reputational trait. People should say about disciples of Jesus, oh yeah, I now who they are, they are the people that forgive.

Amish Grace recounts a horrific event that we know very well around here, the shooting that took place in Nickel Mines. The response of the Amish community to that shooting caught the attention of the world not because of the revenge that was taken afterward, but because of the grace and the mercy toward the family of the shooter that was shown. For a brief blip in time

forgiveness was a headline, for a very brief period of time. Mercy was shown and this was what remains a somewhat defining feature for a community around us. If the United States is meant to be a Christian nation, it is going to very hard for mercy to be its defining feature, But it has to start with us demanding mercy and grace in the midst of actions that may make sense geographically, but do not make any sense theologically.

This parable that we read in Matthew is an example of extravagant forgiveness. Peter approaches Jesus and tries to impress him by laying out a scenario that he thinks would be extravagant mercy, the forgiveness of a brother 7 times. You see the rabbis around Jesus and the writing of that day in the Youma said that you were to forgive three times and then no longer were you to allow a person's sin to be forgiven. So 7 times, that's pretty extravagant, right Jesus? Jesus responds with a number but he really doesn't mean the number literally, 70x7 or 77 was so many times that he basically means to infinity and beyond, forever, every single time that a brother of yours sins against you, you are to forgive them.

Let me give you an example, he says. Jerry Jones has an equipment manager and he lent him over the years close to a billion dollars. Those are the amounts that we are dealing with here. A single talent was worth about 12 years of wages for a workers, so 12 years of wages times 10,000. It was more than anyone could ever pay off, ever. Why Jerry Jones was lending this much money to someone is beyond me, but that's the way the story goes. He calls the equipment manager in and asks for his money back, the guy says he doesn't have it, so Jerry says fine, I'm going to sell you and your wife and your children into slavery just to recoup some of my money. The equipment agent falls on his knees and begs Jerry Jones to be merciful and promises to pay all of it back. Is he going to be able to pay it all back? No, never, it is impossible.

But the guy is remorseful, he asks for mercy, he genuinely is sorry and asks for patience. What the person in this story does is not only gives him more time, but actually says, you know what, you don't owe me anything, your slate is clean, go on your way, we have a big game tomorrow. It is as if nothing ever happened, your debt is forgiven. The equipment manager leaves Jerry's office and goes back into the bowels of the stadium and runs across a Dallas Cheerleader that he lent \$10,000 to some time back and he assaults her and demands that she pay back the money. She falls on her knees and begs for patience and says she can pay it back and will, but he says no, calls the police and they arrest her and she goes to prison.

The other cheerleaders see this and report him to Jerry Jones who then sends him to the Eagles until he is able to repay his debt, which means forever. The difference in this story is that God is moved to compassion by our repentance, but we are moved to demand what is ours in the same situation. The man did not even listen to the person who owed him. In our Christian walk we come to see our forgiveness as normal and part of the plan and so we lose the extreme nature of what we have been forgiven for. People, our sins have been present for a lifetime and God has said through Jesus our Savior, they are no more, you have no more debt to pay, you are free to go and live your life. But the life that we live has to reflect the same mercy, and forgiveness and generosity that we have received. It isn't normal on this earth to receive what we have received from God and yet that is what is required of us as we interact with the people around us.

The failure to forgive someone who is repentant casts doubt on the genuineness of a person's discipleship. The church must treat each other as God treats us. The church must treat the community around it, as God treats us. We act in this world as if we deserve the mercy that we get from God and so demand from others what we expect God to give to us freely. We don't want to embrace others and so we set up limitations to our grace. I'll never forget a conversation I had five years ago with a pastor of a megachurch in this region and I was working with CWS to organize a prayer vigil for immigrants and he said I will participate only if we pray for those who are legal, if they are not legal I want nothing to do with it.

The limits that we set on the mercy we are willing to give is stunning in the face of the extravagant forgiveness and mercy that we have received. I think part of the problem is that how we interact with others is often what we expect God to do with us. If we aren't fully confident that we are forgiven and that the full weight of God's mercy is upon us, then we may treat others with the same insecurity that we feel vis-à-vis God. We will not really show mercy to others because we are unsure of the mercy that God has toward us.

Let me help with that. Both of our Scriptures today provide us with the firm foundation that God has forgiven us completely and without barriers in Jesus Christ. In our Lord and Savior we have been shown extravagant, undeserved, mercy, it is ours period. Baptism is the reality in which we live. We have been washed clean, you don't have to hold back on others because has not and is not holding back on you, be confident in that.

There is some danger in parables because they are stories, they aren't historical events that really happened. The resurrection of Jesus, that is a real historical event that really happened and it was a miracle of God breaking into our history. The prodigal son, that was a story that

Jesus told to prove a point, just like the point he is trying to make today. We can't attribute all of the details of this parable to the nature of God. If we wanted we could take this parable and go in the wrong direction. The last line makes us think if we aren't careful that we can earn God's forgiveness by forgiving others. No, that's heresy. God is capable of forgiving us even when we are unwilling to forgive. God never treats us with a tit for tat or quid pro quo mentality. That's not the God we serve.

This parable is meant to get our attention. Your debt of a billion dollars is forgiven, gone forever, do I have your attention now? Because you didn't show mercy to your brother, to others around you, you will be tortured for the rest of your life. Do I have your attention now? We may be sitting there today wondering how God can forgive a mess like you. He has, your slate has been washed clean. And forgiveness is a necessity whenever people are living life together as disciples. Disciples are the forgiven who forgive. God's forgiveness is inexhaustible, his mercy is never ceasing, and ours ought to be as well. Amen.