



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Set the Prisoner Free
Matthew 18:21-35

This sermon is about a man who is in prison. His name is unimportant. Actually his name could be Steve, or you could put your name in the blank. This particular man, let's call him Steve, has been given a life sentence. And his sentence is so harsh that once Steve dies, his corpse will remain in the prison paying off his debt.

The interesting thing about this prison is there are no guards and there are no bars, but only walls. These walls are not made of steel and concrete, but the walls are made of resentment, bitterness, anger and hatred. The key to the prison is on a nail beside the door and is within Steve's reach. The key has been graciously left there by the one who operates the prison. All Steve has to do is pick up the key and open the door to freedom.

Oh, yes the key is there. It is just that Steve is so entirely convinced that he deserves his resentment, his bitterness, his anger and his hatred; he even relishes in it. He loves to tell others about it as he clings to these deserved feelings and attitudes as a dog holding a bone. For the fact of the matter is, by his very nature, he really does not want to be free. For his feelings of resentment, bitterness, anger and hatred are what give him life. They make him feel somewhat justified for all the suffering and pain he has endured from others. But the fact of the matter is that he is imprisoned in a jail that is not guarded and the key is hanging beside the door.

In his book, *Forgive and Forget*, the late Dr. Louis Smedes, wrote, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was me."

On the front of the bulletin this morning is a picture of a cross. There had to be a picture of a cross on the bulletin to remind us that we have a debt to pay. Or, should I say that our debt has been paid through the cross where Jesus died. The door to the jail is open and through Christ we walk through to freedom. The problem is that we have a habit of locking ourselves back into the prison of resentment and bitterness and anger and hatred.

We have our reasons. And there are some whose reasons for being in the prison are justified to the extreme. Some have every right to be bitter and angry, and I wonder how anyone could forgive such attacks against them. To be raped at knife point--that of course is resentment and bitterness that I don't see how anyone could get over. To have the police show up at your door to inform you that your child was on the subway in London where a bomb exploded; how do you forgive that? How do you forgive the Neo-Nazi white supremacists who has left you paralyzed for life by driving his car into a crowd of people?

Some folks believe that miracles happen and some don't. But I believe that Jesus can take your resentment, your pain, your hatred, and bitterness and do another miracle. You just have to take all these negatives to him.

One day Jesus gave instructions to his disciples concerning church discipline. That was rather strange in itself, since there really was not an organized church in place at the time. But the day would come when Jesus was not there in bodily form, and the church would need to organize and discipline errant members.

So Jesus said, "If your brother or sister sins first go to them and correct them. If they continue to sin, go a second time, but take two or three wise church members with you, and try to convince them to do better. If they continue, take the matter before the whole church. If they continue, they are to be as tax collectors and Gentiles."

"Alright Jesus, we got it, our brothers and sisters get three sins then they are out."

"Well, that is not exactly what I said."

"Jesus, it sounded like they get three chances. The first time we go as individuals to correct them, then we go as a group then we take the matter up in church."

"Well, that is partly what I said, but you have missed the point."

"You mean we are not to treat habitual sinners like tax collectors and Gentiles."

"Alright listen up, this is the point. You are all habitual sinners and need to support one another. And have you noticed how I, (that is Jesus) treat tax collectors and Gentiles?"

Jesus ate dinner with tax collectors like Zacchaeus and Matthew, and both were changed into disciples. Jesus healed the Phoenician woman and the

Centurion's servant. Jesus loved tax collectors and Gentiles. He gave his life for us and for tax collectors and Gentiles. That is the point. We are all sinners and we need God's grace, and we do better when we support one another.

Now look at Peter. He is counting on his fingers as he continues to miss the point. "Let's see, we are to forgive three times. That is what the rabbis say, so Jesus what do you say? How often should I forgive? I'll double the traditional teachings and add one."

Hear the word as I read from Matthew 18:21-35:

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Jimmy was the umpire who called many of the games in the church league fast pitch softball association. He was a very good, except the time when I tagged the runner out at home and Jimmy called him safe. I mean, I risked life and limb

to block the plate, concentrate on the shortstop's throw home, and with his off-the-mark throw, I had to dive into the runner, cleats and all, and make the tag long before the runner touched home plate. And to my surprise Jimmy called him safe! Well, we all make mistakes, and Jimmy had the personality that you could joke around with him but dare not argue with him, but everyone loved him, and it was a church league.

One night after a game, Jimmy got a call from his wife. She was sick and needed Jimmy to come home at once. On his way home he was pulled over by a policeman. Jimmy tried to explain that he was a good driver, but his wife was sick and he needed to get home. To which the policeman, writing his ticket, said, "Tell it to the judge."

This particular policeman was new in town and did not know Jimmy, and in one of those stories that prove there is a God in heaven, the policeman played in the church softball league. The night came when the policeman's team was playing and he came to the plate and he recognized Jimmy. He said, "So, how did the thing with the ticket go?"

Jimmy gave a huge smile, thanking God for this particular situation and said to the softball playing policeman, "You know, everything that pitcher throws looks like a strike to me, so you had better swing at everything." Oh, how revenge is sweet!

Actually, Jimmy was having a little fun with the police officer and he called balls, balls and strikes, strikes. Forgiveness is not easy. But forgiving others, over and over and over and over for their sins is proof that you are a child of God.

As impossible as it may be to forgive, when we do forgive from the heart we are expressing the very nature of God. It is almost sacramental to forgive, for in forgiving those who hurt us, we express the very nature of God who forgives and redeems us. To forgive another is to love.

I wonder what the answer would be if Peter asked, "Jesus, how often should I love?" Or, "How often should I show mercy, three times?" You know what a better question would be, Jesus how often have I been forgiven by you? How often have I been loved by you? Or, how often have you showed me mercy?

You see, the answer to the question, "How often have you forgiven or loved, or showed mercy to me?" is the answer to the question of how often are we to demonstrate the love of God even to those who are most offensive to us.

There is a man whose name has become synonymous with forgiveness. It is retired South African Bishop Desmond Tutu. After the final defeat of apartheid in South Africa, it was Bishop Tutu who set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by which black persons in that country publicly forgave those who had done them serious harm. It was one of the most stunning events in history . . . literally. People who had family members tortured and murdered by police confronted the officers who had committed these crimes and publicly forgave them. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission saved South Africa from a bloodbath in those days following the election of Nelson Mandela as the President of that nation.

Maybe the reason Desmond Tutu could be so effective in this role is that he himself had to deal with a very personal battle of forgiving the person who had harmed someone he loved.

In a book titled *The Book of Forgiving* Tutu tells how as a young boy, he had to watch helplessly as his father verbally and physically abused his mother. He said that he could still recall the smell of alcohol coming from his father's lips, he could still see the fear in his mother's eyes, he could still feel the hopeless despair that comes when we see people we love hurting each other in incomprehensible ways. He said he would not wish that experience on anyone, especially a child.

He wrote, "If I dwell on those memories, I can feel myself wanting to hurt my father back, in the same ways he hurt my mother and in ways of which I was incapable of understanding as a small boy. I see my mother's face and I see this gentle human being whom I loved so very much and who did nothing to deserve the pain inflicted upon her. When I recall this story, I realize how difficult the process of forgiving truly is. Intellectually, I know my father caused pain because he was in pain. Spiritually, I know my faith tells me my father is to be forgiven as God forgives us all. But it is still difficult. The traumas we have witnessed or experienced live on in our memories. Even years later they can cause us fresh pain each time we recall them."

I am no expert on forgiveness, but maybe we can learn from Bishop Tutu that if we concentrate on the offense we will not forgive, but if we concentrate on Christ, as difficult as it is, we are at least in a position to forgive others.

Please do not think I am saying that we should make ourselves vulnerable to the abuse of others. If someone hurts us they may hurt us again. I would never counsel a battered wife to remain with an abusive husband, but I would counsel her to forgive him.

Reader's Digest once asked its readers to complete this sentence: "I never regret . . ." Think about that for a moment: "I never regret . . ." Here is how some of their readers responded:

"I never regret the day I quit smoking."

"I never regret taking naps and leaving large tips."

"I never regret serving my country."

"I never regret eating the last cookie."

"I never regret forgiving the person who caused me pain, which gave me relief I never thought I could have." Erika Jones, New York, NY.

Erika Jones has learned about the power of forgiveness. "I never regret forgiving the person who caused me pain, which gave me relief I never thought I could have, for forgiveness is the only power which can stop the stream of painful memories."

Nelson Mandela wrote, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."

Is there someone you need to forgive? An unfaithful spouse--an overbearing parent--a friend who has stabbed you in the back--an employer who has taken advantage of you? I know there is pain. But the most powerful witness we have to the grace of God at work in our own lives is the ability to forgive others. As we forgive, we may or may not heal the wounds of a broken relationship, but we will find healing for wounds inflicted in our own hearts by anger, hurt and resentment.

Yes, it is true that the unforgiving servant in the parable was sent to debtor's prison for his inability to forgive a small debt after he had been forgiven of a debt he could not pay. Maybe the prison Jesus is referring to is the prison of our own bitterness. Maybe it is the prison that incarcerates Steve with walls of bitterness, resentment, anger and hatred. Dear friends, believe me, I know it is difficult to forgive, but it is the only way to find freedom.

The cross on the front of the bulletin this morning is a reminder of the payment of our debt. Now what are you going to do when you leave the king's chambers? Amen.

