

FORGIVENESS, THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTIANITY

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

The famous story of the Bible I present to you today deals with a place we all will have to visit, if we haven't gone there already. Some have had to go to this place many, many times. The place of which I speak is the place called forgiveness. This has been a hard week, not only for the people of Charleston, South Carolina, but also for our whole nation. The judge ordered Dylan Roof, charged with the deaths of nine innocent people, to stand and listen to some of the most heart-wrenching words uttered by the loved ones of those whose life was mercilessly taken. The remarkable thing was the mercy proffered by these gracious people. Here are just a few of these bouquets of grace: "You took something very precious away from me," said Nadine Collier, daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, her voice rising in anguish. "I just want everybody to know, to you, I forgive you," Lance's daughter told Dylan Roof during his first court appearance Friday. "You took something very precious away from me. I will never talk to her ever again; I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people, but [may] God forgive you, and I forgive you." In a quivering voice, Mrs. Sanders spoke, "Every fiber in my body hurts, and I will never be the same. Tywanza Sanders is my son, but Tywanza was my hero. Tywanza was my hero. But as we say in Bible study, we enjoyed you. But may God have mercy on you." The sister of DePayne Middleton Doctor said, "I'm a work in progress, and I acknowledge that I am very angry. She taught me that we are the family that love built. We have no room for hate so we have to forgive." Anthony Thompson, the grandson of victim Myra Thompson, told Roof, "I forgive you, my family forgives you.... We would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Do that and you'll be better off than you are right now."

Chris Singleton, the son of victim Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, responded to the tragedy by expressing gratitude for those who reached out to him since his mother's murder. "Love is always stronger than hate, so if we just love the way my mom would, then the hate won't be anywhere close to where love is," Singleton said. "We've come together as a community to try to get past these

things. A tragedy has happened, but life is going to go on and things are going to get better."

From every area of the media and political genre, both liberal and conservative alike, we heard these words, "Where does this forgiveness come from? There is no rioting; there are vitriolic deeds of unkindness. Where does this come from? Today, I want to talk about where this comes from.

The Bible says in Ephesians 4:31 and 32, *"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."* In Colossians 3:13 we read, *"Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye."* How important is forgiveness? Allow me to read with you the words of Jesus without my commentary, then you answer the question in your heart: Mark 11:25, 26: *"And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses."* Matthew 6:12, 14-15: *"And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*

Let's look closely into the greatest life-lesson Jesus ever gave on the subject of forgiveness.

1. A Transparent Disclosure

Matthew 18:21-22.

Peter never seemed to hide what he was thinking. I would speculate he had just forgiven someone seven times -- a perfect number to forgive, wouldn't you say? Rather than our Lord congratulating this magnanimous person who forgave seven times, He says, *"I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."* Our Lord is not saying we must forgive four hundred ninety times, but we should forgive as often as is necessary. I Corinthians 13:4a, 8a: *"Charity (Love) suffereth long, and is kind...Charity (Love) never faileth..."*

2. An Insurmountable Debt

Matthew 18:23-25.

The king in our story examined the records of his servants and discovered one who owed him, in modern terms, twenty million dollars. When the servant stood before the king we find that he did not have the wherewithal to pay what he owed the king. The Psalmist said in Psalm 130:3, *"If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?"* As a matter of fact, we all fall into this category according to Romans 3:23, *"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."* No matter how much good we do, we will always fall short.

3. A Cry for Mercy

Matthew 18:26-27.

God is a God of mercy. *"It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not"* (Lamentations 3:22). We see throughout the Scriptures that God is a God who hears the cry of hurting people who cry out to Him. Exodus 3:7: *"And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows."* Psalm 34:15: *"The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry."* Micah 7:18 declares, *"...He delighteth in mercy."* Paul could not escape this astounding truth which he states in Ephesians 2:4,5a: *"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins..."* God does not wait for us to clean up our act. He loves us, saves us, then cleans up our lives by His loving power! This is explained very well in Romans 5:8-10.

4. An Ingratitude Attitude

Matthew 18:28-30.

Here is the part of the story that shocks us! The man who was forgiven twenty million dollars by his king refused to forgive his fellow servant the twenty dollars that was owed to him. Does it not make sense if we are forgiven a debt of so great that we should not return the mercy to another when given the opportunity? The parallel message in light of the cross is that God forgives us all our sins when we accept the finished work of Jesus. Our debt could be compared to twenty million dollars. When anyone offends us, comparatively speaking, they could not offend us more than twenty dollars worth. Therefore, it is to be considered a given that if we are Christians, the Christ-like thing to do is forgive any and all who sin against us.

5. A Moral to Our Story

Matthew 18:31-35.

If we do the wrong thing, we will eventually be discovered. *"And be sure your sin will find you out"* (Numbers 32:23b). Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 10:20, *"Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter."* The king said to his disobedient servant, *"O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me"* (Matthew 18:32b). The king pointed out that the same compassion bestowed to him, should in the same spirit be bestowed on his fellow servant. Because he did not forgive, he was turned over to the tormenters. The tormentors lived up to their name. When a debtor didn't pay his debt, he was turned over to these enforcers. They would wake him up in the middle of the night making all kinds of noise. By making this racket they were notifying the neighbors of his conduct, defaming his name. They would follow him to the market place letting the merchants know he doesn't pay his bills, thus destroying his credibility. The tormentors would make the debtor miserable until he paid his entire debt. The moral of the story is: if we forgive, we are forgiven. If we do not forgive, we will be tormented until we forgive. We when forgive, two people are made free – the one we forgive and ourselves. Jesus said, *"And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise"* (Luke 6:31).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.