

A World of Unconditional Mercy

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Matthew 18: 21-35

Years ago, Fred Craddock was invited to preach at the Riverside Church in New York City. You know, he was in tall cotton. William Sloane Coffin was the preacher there at the time, and he had to go somewhere and so he'd asked Fred to come and preach for him. So Craddock took a plane from Atlanta, and there he was, he was in New York City. Coffin had told him he could stay in his apartment, and so he'd found his way there, found the building superintendent, who gave him a key and he went up to the rather modest apartment where Coffin lived.

But, just down the street was this enormous church, one of the most influential, powerful churches in the country at the time. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the great preacher, had preached there for years, at Riverside. Well, there was nothing in the refrigerator, that next morning which was Sunday morning, and Craddock needed something to eat before he was to go preach at *Riverside Church!* But there was a note on the refrigerator door that said, "if you usually eat breakfast, you can go to the church, we have a breakfast for the homeless people." So Craddock walked down the street, this was a dangerous part of New York, but it was already daylight.

But, he walked down there and stood in this line of maybe two hundred people with metal trays being served in the basement of the church. He talked to the people in front of him and behind him, and to the people across from him at the table. "Well, what's put you in this situation?" "Well," he said, "it's alcohol. Might as well be honest with you, it's alcohol. But I'm dry now, I'm dry now." "What put you..?" "It was a woman. She took it all." "Really?" "Yeah." "What put you here?" one of them asked Craddock. "I was invited," he said. He didn't know really how to answer them, because of course, he wasn't really *in* the situation they were in, but he didn't want to create any distance. So, he just ate what they ate and talked with them and then went back up to the apartment. Because, of course, they were all in a world of pain. And all those decisions they'd made with their lives didn't just affect them, of course. They had hurtful effects on wives and husbands, children, fathers and mothers, friends. Even if they somehow got back on their feet, how would they ever make all of that back up? But, Craddock wasn't really in their situation, so he just talked with them, so as not to create any distance, although I'm sure he might have also been thinking about all the hurt their decisions had caused. He no doubt knew that those family and friends no doubt had a whole lot to forgive these people for.

I think that's kind of where Peter was. He comes and asks Jesus just how often he should forgive someone who's hurt him. And Peter sounds like he's willing to do some of that work of forgiveness. But, I think Jesus wants to show Peter something else that he's not seeing, and that is that there is an inherent advantage when you the one doing the forgiving. Jesus sees that Peter likes his position of having to worry about how many times he'll need to forgive someone *else*. You know, it's nice to be on the top of the forgiveness equation.

So, Jesus tells this parable about someone who starts out way down on the bottom of that equation. You know, this slave owed his king a huge debt. He's way down on the bottom in terms of how much he needs to be forgiven to ever have a life again. And although by the law, the king is perfectly within his rights to have the slave, his wife and his children all sold to try to recoup some of the debt, this slave begs for mercy. And of all things, the king sets the slave free and forgives the whole huge debt! (In the story the debt is 150,000 years wages for a laborer!) It's hyperbole, of course. You get the idea of the huge debt owed. The king just forgives it all, and sets the man free. And then no sooner than he leaves the king's castle, the man remembering what world he lives in, realizes that now he's on the top of the forgiveness equation. Now, people owe *him* more than what he owes. And that's a nice position to be in. He can benefit from that position, so he goes out and demands payment from a fellow slave who

owes him about three or four months wages. And you remember how it goes, the slave can't pay, begs for mercy, but his fellow slave instead has him thrown in debtors prison.

Well, we're shocked. I think Jesus wants us to be shocked, just like he wanted Peter to be shocked. Because, he wants us to see how quick we are to reject God's offer of life in a world of unconditional and infinite forgiveness and mercy. We would rather live as those owed something in a world of tit for tat and strict record-keeping. We somehow think the world as it is... life as God gives it, is not enough. And so, we're always looking for ways to get advantages, material or spiritual, it makes no difference. And so, if we can think of ourselves, as we do most of the time, as being on "top" in that forgiveness equation then that feels like a good place to us. It's nice to feel like you don't have any debt, but others just might owe you.

But friends, says Jesus, the world as it really is, as God created it... life as God gives it is grace. It is unconditional forgiveness and mercy, and our preference for our world where we can feel like we're owed something is to miss the Kingdom! It is to reject God's offer of a different kind of life. That's what we do. We reject God's offer of salvation. So, how do we let go of wanting material or spiritual, or interpersonal "advantages" that we might gain life? Most of the time we think of ourselves as being on the top in that debt equation and that suits us just fine.

Listen to this parable! God offers a world of unconditional mercy and forgiveness. There isn't even any repentance of the slave's part, only a plea for mercy, and the king gives it...sets him free, forgives it all. And do you see what happens when the slave refuses to live in that world offered to him? The king "hands him over" to be tortured. Now that's the same word that Paul uses when he speaks of God "giving humanity up" to their sins. That is, this is not God herself now *refusing* to forgive. But, rather it is God allowing us to live in the hell of our own making, the torture of our "tit for tat" world, if that's what we want. God doesn't force us to live in his world of unconditional mercy and forgiveness. God just keeps offering it.

This is not a parable that threatens that God will finally get you, if you don't straighten up and fly right. We know in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ that God's love is shown to be a love given even to enemies, even to those who reject him. It is an overcoming of our sin and unforgiveness, of finally finding a way around it yet again. This is not a parable that threatens God will finally get you. It's a parable that seeks to show us the "hell" and "torture" of the "tit for tat" world that we create and insist on living in. But, it is not the last word! We can make a different choice!

How do we let go of wanting material, spiritual or interpersonal "advantages" that we might enter true life? By knowing ourselves as people constantly in need of forgiveness. By knowing ourselves as people who *owe* our whole lives to God! And by knowing ourselves as people who in Jesus Christ have received and constantly receive unconditional mercy and forgiveness. By knowing ourselves as people who have been given, freely ... life in this creation. Why would we ever need all our supposed "advantages?"

Fred Craddock, that Sunday morning at Riverside, when church time came, went up there and put on his robe with all his stripes on it and stuff. And he stood up in that beautiful pulpit, with hundreds and hundreds of people out there worshipping, the enormous choir and the organ filled the front of the church. And it gave him goose bumps on his goose bumps! He was in the pulpit of Riverside Church in New York City! And then he thought to himself, Who am I? And it came to him that he really was no different from those homeless people at breakfast. He was a guest, a guest of God, a guest of Christ, a guest of the church. And all this is offered without price. We're in *God's* world, and we can live there if we choose.

Amen.