

Rev. Silas Hasselbrook
Trinity XXII
Mt. 18:23-35

In the name of Jesus; Amen.

Dear saints of God: you are not perfect. Of course, you know that. You know that Jesus died for your sin on the cross. You know that your sinful nature was drowned in the water of your baptism and you were given the identity of God's perfect son. You know that your hands are washed of sin in Confession and Absolution so that you can come to the table and receive the forgiveness that joins you to Jesus' death-defying, faith-sustaining body and blood. You know you are not perfect and that is why these things matter. But it is easy to take for granted. It is easy to get comfortable. It is easy to be bored or unimpressed. You can take God's forgiveness to you in Christ for granted because you forget that you are yet sinners. You are not perfect. It is easy to get comfortable in the grace of God when you forget His great mercy. Forgiveness in Christ seems boring only when you think you are better than you are, when you really haven't sinned that much this week. What God has to forgive you of here today, you might think, is so small or insignificant that you let God off easy. Not much work for Him to do today when it comes to your sin.

There are many problems with that kind of faith. It treats our sin as Christians like it is less severe than those of unbelievers. It is not. The sin of a Christian is just as serious as the sin of a non-Christian. It deserves God's righteous anger and eternal punishment. The sin of an individual Christian and an individual unbeliever is an immense and damning thing. Recall the Gospel reading this morning. The servant owes his master an amount of money that is on the level of the national debt. He appeals to his master's patience. And his master keeps him employed as his servant. The servant is the Christian who recognizes Jesus to be God, to offer forgiveness, who hears the word and has the Gospel on his tongue. He appeals to Jesus' merciful character and has received forgiveness and remained in the house. The point here that when we ask God to forgive our sin, as His unworthy servants, we are not asking Him to forgive us for a few minor issues. It is an immense debt of obedience and love that we owe God, compounded by the interest of rebellion and pride. Sin is sin. Sin deserves hell. Sin is serious, no matter who commits it. If we forget what our sin looks like, look no further than the cross. There you see what your sin looks like, how ugly it is, what hell and abandonment by God looks like. There you see what your eternal future might have been, but for the grace of God. God's grace is not

given for you to feel comfortable in your sin. It is not given so that you may continue in sin. It is given so that you may live in and extend to others the forgiveness you have received.

Our sin that we ask God to forgive each week, and desire for God to battle against in the Supper, is not meant for selfish comparison. It is not meant for us to use to look down on fellow Christians and feel better that we didn't mess up as badly as they. Pay attention to your sin, because it is worse than you think. The devil's great trick is to make your sinful nature think you are better than you are. Sin is not like some quantifiable item. It doesn't work for you think of sin like this: well, I only broke 2 Commandments this week, but I know for sure that person over there broke 5. The two you broke may have been in thought, word, and deed, while the other person may have been in word alone. When we come here before God and give our sin to God in repentant faith, it is not a measured thing. It is not as if you put two bricks into God's wheelbarrow but your family member put in twelve, that they made God's burden heavier than your contribution.

Dear saints, God freely offers you forgiveness in Christ in order to comfort you, not to make you comfortable. He gives you forgiveness in order for you to see rightly, not to act hypocritically. It is a danger to take Christ's death and resurrection and the life and forgiveness He gives us for granted. When we do, we think too highly of ourselves and we are shocked when fellow Christians sin against us and each other. Probably, you know that is a common complaint against Christians and churches: the hypocrisy of comfortable Christians. "I used to go to church, but the people there are worse or meaner than the ones outside it." "Christians talk about forgiveness and second chances, but meanwhile keep sinning, talking behind backs, holding grudges, or acting pridefully." Of course, these statements may be a bit biased and not totally true. But I think these comments come from people who went to churches where they were probably surrounded by comfortable Christians, and they became comfortable themselves. So when Christians sinned against them, they were shocked. They assumed that Christians don't really sin, and that their own sin was much less than that of the person who hurt them. They took God's forgiveness for granted, they forgot how sinful they are. They were comfortable. Do not get comfortable; instead, be comforted.

This may not sound like the best outreach pitch, but we need to say it. If someone asks about our church, two things must be made clear about what we believe: 1) Jesus died for our sins and is at the center of all we believe and do; 2) We are a congregation of sinners. We cannot

make people think we are perfect people, who never hurt each other, make mistakes, misunderstand, get frustrated. We are not a group of people who will keep every Commandment in its entirety all the time. What people can expect from our church and any faithful church this side of heaven is a church full of people who are not perfect husbands, wives, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, family, friends, and people. It is a church of people who may sin in what they say and do and certainly in what they think. It is a bunch of people who do get mad at each other and are frustrated with decisions and actions, who don't always trust God or always like what His Word says. But a true and faithful Christian church does not stay there. While the sin of unbelievers and Christians is not different, the approach to our sin is. We repent of the sin we commit against God and our neighbor. We take our sin and lay it before the mercy of God. Or, better yet, we get on our knees and pray God would take away the debt, the gap, the brokenness, the unbelief that we have accrued toward Him and each other. And what we have received from God we freely give to each other: forgiveness, release, peace.

Jesus tells the parable from the Gospel reading to Peter when Peter asks how often he needs to forgive his brother. Peter is aware that the Christian community is not perfect. He knows people are sinners. But Peter wants to know where he can draw a line in the sand, he wants to know when he can say, "This far and no farther, I have done my part as a Christian." Peter wants to know at what point he can label a Christian as a hypocrite. Jesus tells Peter that he must forgive his repentant brother as many times as he asks. There is no limit. There is no end. But why not? We can't go on forgiving forever, right? Must we forgive even those who have deeply hurt us? We often hear the word 'forgiveness' and ask, "What is its shelf life, its expiration date, its limit? How do I get to qualify it? When can I withhold, renege, deny, and ignore it? When will my loan of forgiveness default?"

Never. There is no limit to forgiveness. There is no qualification to it. You don't get to deny and ignore it, or withhold like an ace in your pocket that you'll bring out at the right time to hold over the one who has wronged you. The simple meaning to the parable Jesus tells is this: don't get forgiveness wrong. Forgive those who are sorry. Forgiveness is free and it never runs out. The sobering meaning of the parable Jesus tells is this: God will send Christians to hell who do not forgive every fellow Christian. The serious meaning of the parable Jesus tells is this: if we are to live as faithful Christians, we must forgive our neighbors. The comforting meaning of the parable Jesus tells is this: the forgiveness we extend to others is grounded in the greater

forgiveness that God has extended to all people, and especially to us. When we start to ask when we can withhold or limit forgiveness, it is because we are getting too comfortable. We are forgetting our sin. We are forgetting God's forgiveness and life in Christ's death and life. We are forgetting the many ways He continues to forgive us each day. Jesus warns Peter and you of about this hypocrisy because He knows we do it. We are stingy forgivers. He knows that it is hard for sinners to forgive. But Jesus knows that forgiveness is the pulsing heart of our Christian life and salvation. If you can't forgive your brother from your heart, you don't see your need for forgiveness from God.

Jesus does not address this parable to those outside the church, but to Peter, to you and me, to the holy Christian church. A certain king, wanting those who owed him to pay up, had a servant who owed him something in the ballpark of a small country's national debt. The generosity of the king is already hinted at in this detail: no creditor would have allowed such a massive amount to build up in the first place. The kind of money this servant asked for is something that one country would ask from another. But the king was kind and generous in his giving. The servant knows this. He appeals to the king's patience, saying that he will pay him back. 10,000 talents is somewhere in the range of hundreds of millions to billions of dollars. The servant's request is ridiculous. He cannot pay that off. If he worked normal hours with no days off, the soonest he could pay off the debt was 1000 years. Longer than even old Methusaleh lived. The king, moved with compassion, not only released the servant from the debt, not only forgave the many defaults, bankruptcies, and empty promises of the servant, but even allowed him to continue in his service, his protection, his care. But we already know that something is amiss with the servant. He lives in a world of justice, not mercy, of fairness, not compassion. His first answer to the king was that he could work his debt off. He didn't ask that the king would forgive the debt. The servant falsely believed he could make things right through his efforts. And that is what he expects of his fellow servant. The man he starts to strangle and throws into prison owed him something like \$10-15,000 dollars. A substantial amount, but not beyond payment, and certainly not as much as the servant owed the king. But the generosity of the king made no impact on the servant. What he was given, he refused to give. He was forgiven, but he would not forgive. He was comfortable with the king's grace, but he had not been comforted by it. And what a hypocrite he proved to be. The king, when he heard, clearly expected the servant to act with the same compassion toward his fellow servant that the king had shown to the servant. But

there was no repentance. The servant took the king's forgiveness for granted. So the last punishment of the man was worse than the first. He will not have the ability to work off his debt with his family in acceptable conditions. Instead, he will be imprisoned, tortured, and alone. The original debt is reinstated and then some. It is not because the king's forgiveness ran out. It is because it was taken for granted.

That servant was a church-going Christian. But he was stubborn, hard-headed, hypocritical, and comfortable. He did not appreciate and take to heart the forgiveness shown. He spurned God's forgiveness, used it for his selfish benefit, but did not extend it to his brother. And for that, the merciful king turned into the wrathful God. The just anger of God will deliver these kinds of Christians into merciless judgement, into hell, where there is no salvation.

But because we have been forgiven, we are not comfortable. We are comforted. Jesus' parable stirs up our desire to be the opposite of that cruel servant. We know how much we have been forgiven, a monstrous debt toward God. And though others have wronged us, their debt to us is far less than what we have been forgiven of. So we do not say "fool" but "friend". We do not wish to be in danger of hell fire, but an expression of heavenly mercy. We leave our gift at the altar to be reconciled to our brother. We forgive others our trespasses because we know how God has forgiven ours. We see the plank God has removed from our eye and so forgive the speck in our brother's. We are the ones whose sins Jesus has the authority to forgive and we rise and walk and do likewise, as those to whom Jesus has given authority. We do not blaspheme the Holy Spirit by denying His presence in our broken relationships, but implore Him to heal the damage of sin. We tell our brother his faults in order to restore our Christian life together. We seek our sins to be loosed from around our necks by God and do the same toward others who have wronged us, releasing our neighbor from the retaliation and retribution that we might otherwise claim. We do not simply hear about forgiveness at church, but receive it and do likewise, for that is the will of our Father. We are the faithful servant whom God finds forgiving our neighbor when He returns to bring us home. And we are strengthened to forgive all who have wronged us from the heart when we receive the body and blood of Christ given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness is central to our Christian faith and life. Offering forgiveness can be difficult. But I am confident that God, who began a good work in you, will bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; Amen.