

# **SERMON – 09/14/08**

## *“THE F-WORD: Why We Forgive”*

I love roller coasters! When it comes to excitement & an adrenaline rush, there are few things that come close... but have you ever wondered WHY roller coasters work the way they do?

- I did a little research this week... and this is what I discovered...
- The 3 major parts of a roller coaster are: the train, the track, & the motor...
- At first glance, a roller coaster is something like a passenger train. It consists of a series of connected cars that move on tracks.
  - But unlike a passenger train, a roller coaster has no engine or power source of its own.
- There are two types of coasters: wooden.... *(pause)* & steel ...
  - Steel coasters are much smoother & have the ability to turn riders upside down.
- At its most basic level a roller coaster is a machine that uses gravity to move cars along the track.
  - For many, the cars start by being pulled up a steep hill by a chain drive.
  - From the time that a roller coaster clears the top of the lift hill, the only thing that propels the train is the weight of the train itself, pulled downward by gravity.
  - There are no cables that pull the train around the track as some people have been led to believe.
  - You’ll notice that the highest point of the ride is always earliest in the track... that’s because the friction on the wheels & track slowly drain energy from the track.
  - By the end of the ride, the train has just enough energy to pull into the station.
- Like any train, a roller coaster needs a brake system so it can stop precisely at the end of the ride or in an emergency.
  - In roller coasters, the brakes aren't built into the train itself; they're built into the track.
  - A series of clamps are positioned at the end of the track... a central computer operates a hydraulic system that closes these clamps when the train needs to stop.
- So that’s your basic “crash course” as to WHY roller coasters work the way they do...

Welcome to the 2<sup>nd</sup> week in our new series entitled, “THE F-WORD: Wrestling with Forgiveness”...

- To some people, the prospect of having to forgive certain people is about as scary as getting on a roller coaster!
  - So today we’re going to talk about WHY WE FORGIVE... taking a closer look at the Biblical foundations of forgiveness...
  - And hopefully at some point this morning, we’ll each have a new piece of understanding about forgiveness!
- Every week we, along with millions of other Christians around the world, pray a prayer together that we call “The Lord’s Prayer”...
  - It got that name because Jesus’ disciples asked him one day to teach them how to pray...
  - Among the lines of that short prayer are these words... “And forgive us our trespasses (or ‘debts’ or ‘sins’)...”
  - Jesus knew that we needed daily forgiveness as much as we needed daily bread...
  - But then he added the follow-up line: “As we forgive (or have forgiven) those who trespass against us (or sin against us).”
  - Another way of interpreting this passage is “as we also have forgiven”... meaning that we’re asking God to forgive us THE SAME AMOUNT as we forgive others!
  - Immediately following the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus adds on this PS: *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”*
- The more we look at various passages from scripture... the more we discover that **God desires us to have a spirit of forgiveness...**
  - Far too often, however, we foster the opposite – an unforgiving spirit!
  - But God is all about reconciliation & grace....
  - I can’t think of a better text to be our focus this morning, than Jesus’ parable of the Unforgiving Servant...
  - Please open your Bibles with me to Matthew 18... starting at verse 23...
- In the two verses immediately prior to this, Peter & Jesus start a discussion on forgiveness...
  - The discussion centers around **forgiving people within the church...**
  - Not just any “Ordinary Joe” from off the street... but someone from the community of faith!

- Peter wants to know a specific number... how many times should he forgive someone... you know, before he keeps getting burned over and over and over.
- That's when Jesus tells this story...

*(v.23) "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves..."*

- For starters, this is not a story about some wealthy homeowner who has a house-load of servants... this is a story about a KING...
  - One commentator used the phrase "Oriental sultan" to describe him...
  - The word "slave" was often used when referring to administrators or subordinate officials...
  - So this very well could have been ministers of state and provincial governors!
- And the king/sultan decides to conduct an annual audit to see how his leaders have been handling operations...
  - It's during this process of going over the official books that he discovers that one... perhaps the satrap of a wealthy province, has indeed mismanaged the king's resources...
  - Perhaps he has been found to have embezzled an immense amount of tax revenue.
  - *(v.24) "When (the king) began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him..."*
  - Now it's crucial for us to be able to wrap our heads around the figure here...
  - A talent was the largest monetary unit in Biblical times... equal to the wages of a manual laborer for 15 years!
  - 10,000 was, at that time, the largest possible monetary unit...
  - Combine the two, and you have the largest figure that could possibly be given... it's like when kids say today, "a Gazillion dollars!"
  - Actually, to be accurate... 10,000 talents would have been roughly equivalent to a day's wage for **100 million workers!**
  - This was a HUGE amount, people... huge... literally beyond calculation!
  - Scholars say that the annual income for all of King Herod the Great's territories (back at the time of Jesus) would have been 900 talents/year... this is TEN THOUSAND TALENTS!

- This is a very, very serious situation...
- *“When (the king) began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 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.”*
  - Restitution is impossible.
  - The king could have, by rights, simply executed this good-for-nothing official... but instead he decides to make an example of him... and inflicts a more degrading & protracted punishment – debtor’s prison.
  - The man, his wife & his children will be put on the block and sold into slavery... a practice that quite often also resulted in sexual abuse!
  - Basically, all of their lives are now OVER.
- (v.26) *“So the slave fell on his knees before (the king), saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’”*
  - This is actually the comic relief of the story...
  - There’s no way this guy can ever, ever, EVER repay the king!
  - If this official worked 40 hours a week for 150,000 years... he still couldn’t pay off the debt!
  - I know I said it was beyond calculation... but in today’s money... 10,000 talents could be estimated at \$1.5 billion!!!
  - Let me repeat... there is no way he can repay this debt. Period.
  - And yet he says, “Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.”
  - The guy is in full-on “begging for his life” mode...
  - And something quite amazing... quite unthinkable... happens:
- (v.27) *“And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.”*
  - The servant asks for time... and what he’s given, instead, is complete forgiveness!
  - The debt is cancelled... wiped out... eliminated... gone! AMAZING!!!
  - And all he had to do was ASK for it.
  - Of course, he doesn’t understand this at all...
  - As Robert Farrar Capon says, “Unfortunately, the servant thinks that his master is actually responding to his ridiculous offer of repayment. He assumes that the king is not

only a bookkeeper interested in solely in money, but also a stupid bookkeeper who can't spot a losing proposition when it slithers up to him.

- The king, however, offers grace! For reasons entirely unto himself, he cancels the debt.
  - He ignores the nonsense about repayment...
  - He makes no calculations about profit & loss...
  - He simply forgets the debt ever existed.
  - He was willing to put an end to bookkeeping.
  - Wow.

Let us pause for a moment here... and go back to the start of the parable...

- Jesus said, “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king...”
  - This is a God story, friends... this is a parable about what God is like.
  - This is at the heart of the Christian message... God's forgiveness & grace for us.
- When Jesus was at the very end of his earthly life... when he had been arrested, condemned, and sentenced to death...
  - When he had been abused, scorned, tortured & humiliated...
  - When he was completely exposed & utterly vulnerable...
  - When Jesus was hanging on the cross... his life slipping away from him...
  - **It was at this time** that Jesus prayed to his Father saying, “Forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.”
- With the whole world against him... Jesus interceded on behalf of that same world and asked God to forgive. TO FORGIVE!!!
  - Not just to forgive the particular people who had a hand in his crucifixion...
  - But as Christians we believe that Jesus was asking for forgiveness for all of humanity... for those who came before & would come after... for all of us!
  - God is in the reconciliation/restoration business, my friends... not the retribution business.
- Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *The Seeds of Heaven*, puts it this way, “It's a matter of understanding that you have already been forgiven, that someone to whom you owe everything – your life & breath, your blue eyes, your fondness for fresh tomatoes, your pleasure in the moon & stars, all the loves of your life – someone who has given and given and given to you and who

has gotten precious little in return has examined your enormous debt in great detail and knows from your credit rating that the chances of repayment are nil. Someone who knows all of that has taken the stack of your IOU's and torn them in two, balancing your books in one fell swoop for one reason and one reason alone: because that someone wants to remain in relationship with you, and wants you to be free to respond.”

- This past week during my scripture journaling I encountered a verse from Micah that said God has taken our sins and cast them into the depths of the sea!
- All the evil we've ever done has been forgiven...
- All we need to do is ask... and it's ours!
- What a gift!

Back to our story... (v.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.’”*

- So this government official... the one who just had a \$1.5 billion debt cancelled... **as he is walking home that very day**, encounters someone who owes HIM money!
  - It turns out this fellow servant owes the former a small loan: 100 denarii.
  - A denarius was a day's wage... so this is about 3 months' salary here...
  - For a day laborer, this is still a sizeable figure... but one that is definitely payable!
  - (By the way, to put things in perspective... the first servant's now-pardoned-debt of 10,000 talents could be equated to 50 Million denarii. So we've got 50 Million vs. 100 denarii!)
  - I also find it striking that Jesus doesn't just say the guy “demanded” his money... but instead, the servant grabbed the other servant ‘by the throat!’
  - Wow. Nice guy?!?
- (v.29) *“Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’*
  - Gee, where have we heard that before?
  - Oh yah, that's right... those are the same exact words the first servant used when confronted with his GINORMOUS debt!
  - The only difference here is that the 2<sup>nd</sup> servants' debt could actually be repaid!

- (v.30) *“But he refused; then he went and threw (the second servant) into prison until he would pay the debt.”*
  - How quickly one forgets, eh?
  - This servant was in his legal right to do what he did...
  - But it didn't go over well with those around him.
- (v.31ff.) *“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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.”*
  - Capon says that the king's response is, in effect, “I died for you, for Christ's sake! But you were so busy making plans for your stupid life, you never even noticed!”
  - And therefore the king pronounces judgment on him.
  - Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way: “He gets thrown in jail until he can pay his debt, which amounts to the rest of his life, but his imprisonment is a technicality. The wicked servant was already behind bars, bars of his own making. By refusing to be forgiven and refusing to forgive, he had already created his own little Alcatraz, where he sat in solitary confinement with his calculator and kept track of his accounts.”

And Jesus said, *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”*

- Friends, WHY DO WE FORGIVE... we forgive because we have been forgiven!
  - We have, each one of us, been forgiven a HUGE debt! Huge!!
  - But if we fail to forgive... if we, who have been freed from our sins, insist on binding others' sins to them... then we miss out on the incredible power that God can use in and through us.
- It's Capon who reminds us that in heaven, there are no perfect people... only forgiven sinners.
  - There are no good guys... no upright, successful types... who, by merit of their own integrity have been accepted into The Great Country Club in the Sky...
  - There are only failures who have died to their sins... and have been raised by the King into new life.

- But likewise, in hell... there are also only forgiven sinners!
- When Jesus died on the cross & asked God for forgiveness... he didn't single out only a specific group of people to be forgiven, he interceded for everyone!
- And even the gates of hell cannot remove God's forgiveness of us.
- The only difference between heaven & hell... is that in heaven, the king's forgiveness is accepted and passed along... while in hell it's rejected & blocked.
- Hell is made up of eternal bookkeepers. How awful is that!?!

A year ago this month, Sean Penn directed a movie called "Into the Wild."

- It was based on the true story of young Christopher McCandless... a top student & athlete who, upon graduating from Emory University in 1992, abandoned his possessions, gave his entire \$24,000 savings account to charity and hitchhiked to Alaska to live in the wilderness.
  - Along the way he encountered a variety of individuals...
  - Including a lonely leather worker, Ron Franz (played by Hal Holbrook), who offers to adopt and be a grandfather to Christopher.
- In this scene, towards the end of their time together... Ron talks to Christopher about his past... and what seems to be holding him back.
  - Let's watch.
- Friends, we forgive because we have been forgiven...
  - We love because we have been loved...
  - And in the process, God's light shines upon us.
  - That doesn't mean it's always easy – not by any means. So next week, we'll look at how to forgive the hard stuff... those big hurts we have all faced.
  - In the meantime... may we recognize just how deep our Father's love for us truly is!

AMEN.