***PARABLES THAT PREACH: THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT***

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Texts: Proverbs 6:16-19 and Matthew 18:21-35

In 1987 an Irish Republican Army (IRA) bomb went off in a small town west of Belfast, killing eleven people and wounding sixty-three others. Among the wounded was Gordon Wilson, a devout Methodist, who was buried in the rubble under five feet of concrete and brick with his twenty-year old daughter. “*Daddy, I love you very much*,” were the last words Marie Wilson spoke as she grasped his hand and waited to be rescued. Hours later, she died. Gordon Wilson had every reason to hate those who detonated the bombs and took the life of his daughter, but instead he chose to forgive. In his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* Philip Yancey recalls the words Gordon Wilson spoke from his hospital bed:

*I have lost my daughter, but I bear no grudge. Bitter talk is not going to bring Marie Wilson back to life. I shall pray, tonight and every night, that God will forgive them.*

“*The world wept*,” said one report of Wilson’s words. Another suggested:

*No one remembers what the politicians had to say at that time. No one who heard Gordon Wilson will ever forget what he confessed… His grace towered over the miserable justifications of the bombers.*

After his release from the hospital Wilson worked for reconciliation among Protestants and Catholics, even meeting with the IRA to forgive them and to urge them to lay down their arms, saying: “*I know that you’ve lost loved ones, just like me. Surely, enough is enough. Enough blood has been spilled*.” His repeated refrain in all his work for reconciliation was simply this: “*Love is the bottom line*.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Today – 35 years after that bombing – the arms have been laid down and the bombs defused and there is peace in Northern Ireland. Gordon Wilson was an instrument of that peace.

*There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to the Lord*, says the proverb. Hands that shed innocent blood are one of the seven, an abomination to the Lord. To which we say, “AMEN!” The hands that planted the bomb that killed Marie Wilson are an abomination, so too are the hands that wielded the guns that killed elementary school students in Uvalde, TX and shoppers in Buffalo, NY, and the hands that murdered the Florida couple with sixteen special needs children, and the hands of the drunk driver in the fatal crash, and the hands of all those who perpetuate violence against innocent victims. They are an abomination to the Lord and to us! Our God is a God of justice, and justice hates the shedding of innocent blood. “*And yet*,” says Gordon Wilson paraphrasing Christ’s repeated refrain, “*the bottom line is love*.”

How are we to reconcile a bottom line of love with those things that are abominations to the Lord, like hands that shed innocent blood? Hate the sin and love the sinner, some say. Yet are not some sins so heinous and so much a part of the sinner that the two cannot be separated – as in the case of Adolph Hitler, Osama bin Laden, Harvey Weinstein, or Vladimir Putin? Are there unforgivable sins and hence unforgivable sinners? Are there any actions so vile, any words so cruel, any persons so evil that forgiveness is out of the question, beyond possibility, beyond any hope? We had all best hope not, for while hands that shed innocent blood are an abomination to the Lord, so too, according to Scripture, are

haughty eyes that look down on others, and

a lying tongue that bends the truth, and

a heart that devises plans contrary to God’s purposes, and

feet that race to do or see what is evil in God’s sight, and

a lying witness who disdains the truth, and

anyone who sows discord in a family.

You may not have shed innocent blood lately, but can you truthfully say that none of those other abominations to the Lord has ever characterized your life? The proverb makes no distinction among those abominations, they are all hateful to the Lord, and we dare not think that WE can pick and choose those that are forgivable and those that are not!

A couple of summers back I preached a sermon series on The Seven Deadly Sins which inspired one of our elders to remark: “*I thoroughly enjoyed the Seven Deadly Sins*!” Those seven deadly sins are derived not from this list in Proverbs, but from other less specifically holy sources that identified

*LUST, GLUTTONY, GREED, SLOTH, WRATH, ENVY, AND PRIDE*

as abominations to the Lord. That list of vices, traced to the work of a 4th century monk and revised repeatedly over the centuries, has described those sins most egregious in the eyes of the Lord. Some of you may even have memorized that list or some variation on it at some point in your distant past. Do you fare any better when measuring the totality of your life against that list, or even in measuring this week of your life against it? Are you free of lust, gluttony, and greed? Is there no sloth or wrath, envy or pride that creeps into your life or abides there like an unwanted houseguest? Or consider the list constructed by Paul in his letter to the Galatians as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it; the obstacles to entering God’s kingdom include:

*Repetitive, loveless, cheap sex;*

*A stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage;*

*Frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness;*

*Trinket gods*

*Magic-show religion*

*Paranoid loneliness;*

*Cutthroat competition;*

*All-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants;*

*A brutal temper;*

*An impotence to love or be loved;*

*Divided homes and divided lives;*

*Small-minded and lopsided pursuits;*

*The vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival;*

*Uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions;*

*Ugly parodies of community.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

The list goes on and on and on. Do you fare any better by those standards? Is your life and personal history free of all those abominations to the Lord?

The truth is that we are all sinners in need of God’s redeeming grace and mercy. While we may be anxious to draw distinctions among the sins or the sinners, Scripture seems less willing to do so. There are no categories of sins to be forgiven and sins that are unforgivable. Those who were most meticulous in avoiding sin – the Pharisees – were the very ones whom Jesus described as far from the kingdom, for their sin lay in the self-righteous legalism with which they pointed to the sins of others. When Peter asks Jesus, “*How many times must I forgive my brother?*” he doesn’t name the sin. He simply asks how many times he must forgive? Jewish law suggested three times. Peter suggested as many as seven times – which is a lot. “No,” says Jesus, “not three, not seven, but seventy times seven.” Seven may seem a lot for any one sin and is certainly a lot for any one sinner to be forgiven, but seventy times seven is beyond measure, beyond reason, but not beyond God!

Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant illustrates his point. The servant who owes a debt greater than 150,000 years of his wages is forgiven by the king even though he lies through his teeth and promises to make payment. Then on his way out the jailhouse door, that same servant turns around and refuses to forgive the debt of another servant who owes him a mere pittance in comparison. When word reaches the ears of the king, he calls back the unforgiving servant, un-forgives his debt, reinstates it in full (He is after all the king), and has the unforgiving servant thrown into prison until the debt is paid off – which means today that servant would only have about 148,000 years to go on his sentence!

Like that king, God can forgive any sin in any amount any time that God chooses. For, nothing is beyond the reach of God, and our God is not only just, but also compassionate – abounding in mercy and steadfast love. The bottom line for God is love, and no one is beyond the love of God, beyond the reach of God, beyond the grace and forgiveness that God gives. It is not for us to say who is forgiven and who is not. We simply bear witness with Jesus to the mercy of the Lord which is from everlasting to everlasting – which is more than we can imagine, seventy times seven more!

Like that servant, we have been forgiven beyond what we deserve, beyond what we ask, and yet somehow, we are reluctant to forgive certain others. In so doing we prove ourselves every bit as hypocritical as was that unforgiving servant. Christ calls us to forgive others – not once, not twice, but the same seventy times seven times that God forgives us. We dare not impose a lesser standard upon ourselves unless we intend to be judged by that same standard. After all, we pray as Jesus taught us saying, “*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us*.” How are you doing on that count? How comfortable are you with the forgiveness you are asking of God based upon the forgiveness you extend to others?

Do you withhold forgiveness from one who has yet to ask your pardon? Then do you intend for God to withhold forgiveness for those sins for which you have not specifically asked pardon? Do you withhold forgiveness for certain categories of sin that are greater than others in your mind? Then, do you intend for God to do the same – to create categories and judge you by those?

*In the final analysis,* writes Philip Yancey*, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God’s hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy… Such a decision involves risk, of course: the risk that God may not deal with the person as I would want.*[[3]](#endnote-3)

Are you willing to bear that risk, to leave to God the judging, and to offer to the one who has sinned against you the same forgiveness you crave from those against whom you have sinned and from the God against whom you have sinned again and again and again?

*Forgiveness*, writes Paul Tillich, *is remembering the past so that it might be forgotten*.[[4]](#endnote-4) Are you willing to remember and then to forget, to forgive as you want to be forgiven – seventy times seven times? Are you willing to love as you are loved by Christ who died that you might be forgiven for all your sins – seventy times seven times? For Gordon Wilson is right, love is the bottom line – for God and for us – not seven times, not even seventy times seven times, but all the time! Amen

1. Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1997, pp.118-119 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, NavPress: Colorado Springs, 1993, p.470 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Philip Yancey, Id. at 93 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Id. at 126 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)