



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMON

## “Forgiving the Wrong People”

Scripture Lessons: *Psalm 69:1-3, 19-36; Matthew 18:21-35*

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr.  
on September 17, 2023, at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church  
in Charleston, South Carolina.*

**Psalm 69:1-3, 19-36**

### **Prayer for Deliverance from Persecution**

**To the leader: according to Lilies. Of David.**

<sup>1</sup> Save me, O God,  
for the waters have come up to my neck.

<sup>2</sup> I sink in deep mire,  
where there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters,  
and the flood sweeps over me.

<sup>3</sup> I am weary with my crying;  
my throat is parched.

My eyes grow dim  
with waiting for my God.

<sup>19</sup> You know the insults I receive  
and my shame and dishonor;  
my foes are all known to you.

<sup>20</sup> Insults have broken my heart,  
so that I am in despair.  
I looked for pity, but there was none;  
and for comforters, but I found none.

<sup>21</sup> They gave me poison for food,  
and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

<sup>22</sup> Let their table be a trap for them,  
a snare for their allies.

<sup>23</sup> Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and make their loins tremble continually.

<sup>24</sup> Pour out your indignation upon them,  
and let your burning anger overtake them.

<sup>25</sup> May their camp be a desolation;  
let no one live in their tents.

<sup>26</sup> For they persecute those whom you have struck down,  
and those whom you have wounded they attack still more.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Add guilt to their guilt;  
 may they have no acquittal from you.  
<sup>28</sup> Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;  
 let them not be enrolled among the righteous.  
<sup>29</sup> But I am lowly and in pain;  
 let your salvation, O God, protect me.  
<sup>30</sup> I will praise the name of God with a song;  
 I will magnify him with thanksgiving.  
<sup>31</sup> This will please the LORD more than an ox  
 or a bull with horns and hoofs.  
<sup>32</sup> Let the oppressed see it and be glad;  
 you who seek God, let your hearts revive.  
<sup>33</sup> For the LORD hears the needy  
 and does not despise his own who are in bonds.  
<sup>34</sup> Let heaven and earth praise him,  
 the seas and everything that moves in them.  
<sup>35</sup> For God will save Zion  
 and rebuild the cities of Judah, and his servants shall live<sup>[b]</sup> there and possess it;  
<sup>36</sup> the children of his servants shall inherit it,  
 and those who love his name shall live in it.

## **Matthew 18:21-35**

### **Forgiveness**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven<sup>[a]</sup> times.

### **The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant**

<sup>23</sup> “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, <sup>25</sup> and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> 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.’ <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

## **Forgiving the Wrong People**

This past Monday while making a quick perusal of Facebook, I came across a picture that Shary Dillon had posted (Don't worry!).

It was a panoramic picture of the New York City skyline taken at night, and centered in the photo were those vertical searchlights representing the Twin Towers ... and written across the picture were the words, "We will never forget."

Most of us remember exactly where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001. And when we see pictures or video footage of that day, those memories return.

Do you recall the emotions you felt? Sadness? Vulnerability? Anger?

As our vocabulary grew to include names like Osama bin Laden and terrorist groups like al-Quada / and we saw our fellow citizens die, and their loved ones' struggle to pick up the pieces of their broken lives – it certainly wasn't a wave of forgiveness that swept over us.

I dare say that while forgiveness is the conduit for some of God's greatest blessings, the act of forgiving someone who has hurt us – can be one of the most difficult things in the world to do.

In fact, oftentimes, the act of forgiving seems counterintuitive, even countercultural.

At a time of national distress, some 10 years prior and after the declaration of war by President Bush in what we called the Persian Gulf War, Fred Craddock and a group of Christians in Atlanta gathered for prayer.

"We had songs," he said, "we had scripture, we had prayer ... and then songs, and scripture, and prayer. For a long time.

There seated next to Craddock was a young man, about 17 or 18, might have been a freshman at a local university. Craddock didn't know.

In the course of the sentence prayers, the young man asked that God be with the women and the children in Iraq who would be hurt and killed in the war.

When it was over, a man in his mid-50s came over to that young man and said, "Are you on Saddam's side?" He said, "Uh, no sir." "Well, you're praying for the wrong people."

The wrong people ... as if we ourselves were somehow the right people. We would do well to remember that Jesus didn't die for particularly holy people.

In fact, in Romans chapter 5 we read that, "while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." ... And just a verse later, the Apostle Paul says this: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us."

Sinners! The ungodly! I suppose one could go so far as to say the wrong people!”

Yet, what a powerful model of forgiveness has been given to us in Jesus Christ our Lord ... the very one who while dying on the cross declared, “Lord, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Knowing how difficult it is to forgive others for relatively minor infractions, it is hard to grasp the depth of faith from which that heavenly forgiveness comes – we’re just so frail by comparison!

Our Old Testament lesson that Carrie and Martha Jane read for us this morning does little to invalidate the frailty of the human condition in this regard. King David is grieving unto death – even loved ones have turned against him – and all hope seems lost!

“I looked for pity but found that there was none; and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.”

Now that’s bad enough, but what David says next is what makes this Psalm and a few others like it so unique ... it is what allows this Psalm to fit within the category of Imprecatory Psalms, which is basically a Psalm that prays for God to curse His enemies.

In this case, among a litany of ills that David wishes would befall those who have done him harm are there ... Add guilt to their guilt; may they have no acquittal from you. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living ...”

Now, there is much to be said about these imprecatory Psalms, not the least of which is that we need to consider them within the breadth of the Biblical witness. What’s more, and as I alluded to a moment ago, David is not just talking about his enemies ... he’s talking about God’s enemies!

In other words, David testifies to the deeper consequences of anyone rebelling against God.

Still, there is that very human component to David’s response, and he reminds us just how easy and natural it is to react to our circumstances with pain and anger and retribution rather than forgiveness.

With but a single word, that so-called friend embarrasses us on social media. A co-worker took our job. A parent abused us. A spouse cheated on us. An employer stole our pensions!

And they may show absolutely no signs of repentance! In fact, they’d probably do it all over again, if given the opportunity. They don’t deserve our forgiveness!

Well, the truth is, forgiveness is not about what any of us deserve.

Forgiveness is about doing unto others as Jesus has done unto us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “Christianity is forgiveness; nothing more and nothing less.” ... One of Bonhoeffer’s contemporaries Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way, “Forgiveness is the final form of love.”

In the parable we read from Matthew chapter 18, Jesus teaches us that we need to forgive 70 x 7 or

“seventy-seven times,” according to the NRSV which, parabolically is Jesus’ way of saying that there should never ever be a time when we do not offer forgiveness to those who ask for it.

I would add that elsewhere in Matthew 18, we find occasions where offenders are confronted and sin is dealt with head on, and so, exegetically, we would be less than honest, if we didn’t acknowledge that, at least within this parable, there is a measure of repentance that is associated with forgiveness.

Another way of saying it is that what we have here is a particular word on the topic of forgiveness, but it is not the Bible’s only word on the subject.

From the outset of this morning’s New Testament lesson, we are introduced to a man who owes what is essentially an overwhelming and unpayable debt. He’s brought before his King, and he begs and pleads for mercy / for forgiveness ... and lo and behold, it is granted to him.

As the man leaves the King’s presence, he embarks upon his own debt collection ... and when he approaches someone who owed him some money – a paltry amount in comparison to what he had just been forgiven – what does he do?? He grabs the man by the neck ... “Pay what you owe!”

Word of this gets back to the King – and the forgiveness that had been granted to him ... it was rescinded / it was taken back!

Notice the King didn’t take it back because the man had mismanaged his money. No! The King took it back because the man had mismanaged God’s mercy / God’s forgiveness.

We who have been forgiven, we must learn how to forgive when it is asked of us – and that doesn’t mean we forget / that doesn’t mean there is no justice – but it does mean that there is no moral debt that is owed to us that is greater than the depravity of our own life / those sins for which we have been absolved – not in part, but the whole – by the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ!

It is not surprising that many people come away from God’s word with a very strong sense that forgiveness is God’s command, and that for our part, we would grant it even to the unrepentant ... if for no one’s else’s benefit than our own!

Imagine we’re walking in the woods, and stepping over a log, and by the time we notice the rattle, we feel the bite ...we look down and see the two small puncture wounds and we realize that we have been bitten by a rattlesnake ...

What are we going to do? Are we going to get in our car and drive ourselves as quickly as we can to the hospital? Or are we going to waste precious time kicking the leaves and turning over logs, looking for that blankety-blank snake so that we can kill it? ... all the while the snake’s venom is wreaking havoc on us.

I know a person who is angry / has every right to be. Someone they loved did them great harm and never looked back ... and it eats away at them. They have a hard time even talking about it. It is like a poison coursing in their veins, a venom that blinks them to the joy that comes in the morning!

And it breaks my heart, because I know that granting forgiveness is not what the person who offended them needs ... that other person could care less – they’ve slithered off into the undergrowth of history – ah, but for the person I know and love, it just costs them so much to hold that grudge ... to harbor that resentment.

Friends, our inability to forgive – to extract that anger and resentment from our souls – allows a person or a previous situation to maintain a hold on us. It’s like wearing an anchor around our neck, which is not a weight that God intends for us to bear!

On the contrary, that kind of burden is the sort of anxiety that the Bible tells us to cast upon God, because God cares for us!

And boy, did David ever cast his anxieties upon God! He was brutally honest with God about his angst and worry and fear and anger – and maybe it worked! I mean, listen again to what David says at the end of Psalm 69 ...

“Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them. For God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah; and his servants shall live there and possess it; the children of his servants shall inherit it, and those who love his name shall live in it.”

Tell me, where did that come from? I mean, nothing in David’s experience has changed ... people are still out to get him ... he still has every good reason to be scared to death – But his language has changed completely ... from saying things like, “I am weary from crying; my throat is parched,” he now says, “I will praise the name of the God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving.”

Is that how David’s heart truly feels? Has his disposition miraculously changed? Is it really well within his soul? Or could it be that David is saying what he knows in his heart to be true about God, even though that has not yet been his experience?

I don’t know ... but what I do know is that sometimes – after we rant and rave and complain bitterly to God about those people who have done us wrong, or who, by our estimation, are wrong – sometimes the only thing we can do is speak the word itself.

We can’t show it – we may not even mean it or believe it – but we say it, because we know that we are supposed to say it ...

And maybe, just maybe ... if we keep on saying that we forgive, one day, by God’s grace, forgiveness might become our reality!

Jesus put it this way, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

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

\*The above sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.