



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

Jesus said (in Matthew 6:9, 12), "Pray like this: 'Our Father who art in heaven . . . forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.'" Then in verses 14–15 he explains why he taught us to pray this way: "For if ye forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

If we hold fast to an unforgiving spirit, we will not be forgiven by God. If we continue on in that way, then we will not go to heaven, because heaven is the dwelling place of forgiven people.

In Matthew 18 Jesus tells a parable to illustrate this point. Peter asks the question in verse 21, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" And Jesus answers, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

Then Jesus tells the parable about the king who forgave his servant a million dollar debt. The servant went out from the king and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a relatively small amount, refused his desperate pleas for mercy, and had him thrown in prison. When the king heard about it, he called for the servant and said (in vv. 32–35),

"You wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow servant, even as I had mercy on you?" And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.

The point of Matthew 6:15 and 18:35 is that if we hold fast to an unforgiving spirit, we will be handed

over to the tormentors. We will lose heaven, and gain hell. The reason is not because we can earn or merit heaven by forgiving others, but because holding fast to an unforgiving spirit proves that we do not trust Christ. If we trust him, we will not spurn his way of life. If we trust him, we will not be able to take forgiveness from his hand for our million dollar debt and withhold it from our ten dollar debtor.

St. Paul said in Ephesians 4:32, "Forgive each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." In other words God's forgiveness is underneath ours and creates it and supports it. So that if we don't give it to others—if we go on in an unforgiving spirit—what we show is that God is not there in our lives. We are not trusting him. And not trusting him will keep us out of heaven and cause us to be handed over to the tormentors.

Today, I want to examine what is forgiveness? What does it look like? What is it not? We have heard from Jesus that it is essential. It is not icing on the cake of Christianity. If we don't experience it and offer it to others, we will perish in our sin. So it is tremendously important to know what this is that is so essential to our eternal life.

Let me begin with a definition of forgiveness that we owe to each other. It comes from Thomas Watson about 300 years ago. He is commenting on the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we for give our debtors," and asks, Question: When do we forgive others? Answer: When we strive against all thoughts of revenge; when we will not do our enemies mischief, but wish well to them, grieve at their calamities, pray for them, seek reconciliation with them, and show ourselves ready on all occasions to relieve them. (Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, p. 581)

I think this is a very biblical definition of forgiveness. Each of its parts comes from a passage of Scripture. 1) Resist thoughts of revenge: Romans 12:19, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." 2) Don't seek to do them mischief: 1 Thessalonians 5:15, "See that no one repays another with evil for evil. 3) Wish well to them: Luke 6:28, "Bless those who curse you." 4) Grieve at their calamities: Proverbs 24:17, "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles." 5) Pray for them: Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." 6) Seek reconciliation with them: Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." 7) Be always willing to come to their relief: Exodus 23:4, "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him."

Here is forgiveness: when you feel that someone is your enemy or when you simply feel that you or someone you care about has been wronged, forgiveness means, 1) resisting revenge, 2) not returning evil for evil, 3) wishing them well, 4) grieving at their calamities, 5) praying for their welfare, 6) seeking reconciliation so far as it depends on you, 7) and coming to their aid in distress. All these point to a forgiving heart. And the heart is all important Jesus said in Matthew 18:35—"unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

But now notice what forgiveness is not: Forgiveness is not the absence of anger at sin. It is not feeling good about what was bad. Anger against sin and its horrible consequences is fitting up to a point. But you don't need to hold on to that in a vindictive way that desires harm for another. You can hand it over to him who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23) again and again, and pray for the transformation of your offender.

Forgiveness is not the absence of serious consequences for sin. In other words, sending a person to jail does not mean you are unforgiving to him. Thomas Watson was helpful to me again on this point. He asks, Question: Is God angry with his pardoned ones? Answer: Though a child of God, after pardon, may incur his fatherly displeasure, yet his judicial wrath is removed. Though he may lay on the rod, yet he has taken away the curse. Correction may befall the saints, but not destruction. (Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, p. 556) This gives us a pointer to how we may at times have to discipline a child in the home, or a leader in the church, or a criminal in society. We may prescribe painful consequences in each case, and not have an unforgiving spirit.

One last observation remains: forgiveness of an unrepentant person doesn't look the same as forgiveness of a repentant person. In fact I am not sure that in the Bible the term forgiveness is ever applied to an unrepentant person. Jesus said in Luke 17:3–4, "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." So there's a sense in which full forgiveness is only possible in response to repentance.

But even when a person does not repent (cf. Matthew 18:17), we are commanded to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27). The difference is that when a person who wronged us does not repent with contrition and confession and conversion (turning from sin to righteousness), he cuts off the full work of forgiveness. We can still lay down our ill will; we can hand over our anger to God; we can seek to do him good; but we cannot carry through reconciliation or intimacy.

Thomas Watson said something very jolting: We are not bound to trust an enemy; but we are bound to forgive him (*Body of Divinity*, p. 581). You can actually look someone in the face and say: I forgive you, but I don't trust you. But O how crucial is the heart here. What would make that an unforgiving thing to say is if you were thinking something like this: "What's more, I don't care about ever trusting you again; and I won't accept any of your efforts to try to establish trust again; in fact, I hope no one ever trusts you again, and I don't care if your life is totally ruined." That is not a forgiving spirit. And our souls would be in danger.

The risk is high at St. Stephen's right now. We all have people we need to forgive. We need very much to see Jesus and feel what it means to be forgiven our ten million dollar debt as we forgive our ten dollar debtor. I pray that the Lord will reveal that to us.

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***