

September 30, 2012 by Steve Brandon



Believe, Pray and Forgive

Mark 11:22-26

1. Believe (verses 22-23)
2. Pray (verses 24)
3. Forgive (verses 25-26)

Last week in our exposition of the book of Mark, we looked at the first 26 verses of Mark, chapter 11. We considered the triumphal entry, the cursing of the fig tree, Jesus cleansing the temple. And in all of it, we saw that Jesus is the Inspector General -- the one who comes and examines our lives. If there is fruit in our lives, we gain His approval. But, if there is no fruit, then, Jesus will reject us.

As you may (or may not) recall, by the end of my message, I was rushing through the text, spending only a few moments of our time on the last five verses of our text, in which Jesus comments upon the withered fig tree. There are several reasons for this.

First of all, it's the nature of most sermons. The first half of the text generally gets more time than the second half. More study seems to be done for the first part of a message. Furthermore, people are willing to listen longer to the first few points of a message than the latter in the message.

Second, it's the nature of Jesus' words in verses 22-26. They are difficult to interpret. And when things aren't clear in the text, I find it easier to speed up a little bit. I may pride myself of turning over every rock to look at it, skipping no verses. And yet, the reality is that when things are difficult to interpret, they can be dealt with only on the surface level.

Well, we had an elder's meeting this past Monday. As I always do, I ask for feedback on anything that has taken place in the life of the church in recent history. Is there anything that has gone on that we need to address? What about my recent sermons? We ended up talking about verses 22-26 for maybe 30 minutes. Phil recommended that I revisit these words this week, especially as they have some very practical value for us. And so, that's what we'll do. We'll just slow down today and look carefully at these five verses.

On the one hand, these verses aren't so difficult. We can see three commands coming out of the text. There is the call to believe. There is the call to pray. There is the call to forgive. These three calls are the basis for the title of my message this morning: "Believe, Pray, and Forgive." And, these three calls are the basis of my outline this morning: Believe; Pray; Forgive. When you read the text, I want for you to listen for these three things. So, the text itself isn't so difficult.

On the other hand, however, the things that Jesus calls us to are quite difficult. It is difficult to understand exactly what Jesus means. They are difficult to embrace. They are difficult to apply.

It's not that these words are unfamiliar. In fact, we have other places in Scripture where Jesus says the exact same thing, in other places and in other contexts. He is like a good teacher, repeating His material for the sake of His students. It's that these words are so far reaching in scope. When Jesus calls us to believe, He says that we can move mountains with our faith. When Jesus calls us to pray, He says that we should believe we have received answers to all of our prayers. When Jesus calls us to forgive, He says that we should hold nothing against anyone!

So, let's consider the words of Jesus. As we read them, listen for the call to "Believe, Pray, and Forgive."

Mark 11:22-26

And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. [But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.]"

"Believe" comes in verse 22, "Have faith in God." You see it again in verse 23, "whoever says, and does not doubt ... but believes, ... it will be granted to him." "Pray" comes in verse 24, "all things for which you ask and pray."

Believe comes up again, in that we are to "believe" what we have prayed for. "Forgive" comes in verse 25, "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, again, with a bit of overlap. You see forgiveness mentioned again in verse 26, "...if you do not forgive, neither will your Father ... forgive."

So, let's look at my first point, ...

1. Believe (verses 22-23)

You can see it right there in verse 22, when Jesus tells Peter, "Have faith in God." Jesus said this to Peter, because Peter lacked faith. Jesus had cursed the fig tree, saying, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again" (verse 14). And of course, what Jesus said came true. When the disciples passed by that way in the morning, "the fig tree [was] withered from the roots up" (verse 20). Peter pointed out the fact to Jesus, "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered" (verse 21). Peter was amazed that the fig tree would wither like it did. Jesus didn't poison it. Jesus didn't take an axe to its roots. He merely spoke to it, and it withered "from the roots up" (verse 20).

Jesus said, "Have faith in God" (verse 22). "Believe that God can act!" And then, in verse 23, Jesus puts forth an extreme illustration of what the power of God can do for those who believe. "Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted to him" (verse 23). In other words, if you think that it is incredible that God can destroy a little fig tree because of a few words, that's nothing. When we believe in God, He may do wonderful things!

If you have been attentive through the gospel of Mark, you know that this has been a theme. Jesus often encourages people to believe. From the very first chapter, Jesus calls us to believe. Mark 1:15 says, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Believe the good news that Jesus, the Messiah has come! Some believed, and some didn't.

When the woman with the hemorrhage touched Jesus' garments, she was instantly healed. Why? Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well" (Mark 5:34). And when the news came back to the synagogue official telling him that his daughter had died, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid any longer, only believe" (Mark 5:35). To the father who brought his son to be healed, Jesus said, "All things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23).

Think about what Jesus did for those who believed. He healed the woman. He raised the girl from the dead. He healed the man's son who was sick. And Jesus says, "All things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23).

This sounds a bit like the promise that Jesus gives in verse 23 of our text today. "Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted to him" (verse 23).

Now, what makes the interpretation of this passage particularly difficult is that we have never seen anyone pray like this. We have never seen anyone pray and an entire mountain be thrown into the sea. Not Moses. Not David. Not Elijah. Not Jesus. Unless, of course, we consider how Jesus destroyed the Temple Mount by becoming the last and ultimate sacrifice upon the cross, as I alluded to last week.

But, we have never seen a mountain move into the depths of the sea before. This fact may speak to the feebleness of our faith. This fact may speak to how Jesus meant these words. He may have meant them as hyperbole—intentionally overstating the case to make a point. His point is this: God can do some wondrous things if you but believe.

Just think with me about what God has done when people believed. When Moses struck the Nile with his staff, the water was turned to blood (Ex. 7:20). When Moses struck the dust of the earth, gnats swarmed all throughout the land of Egypt (Ex. 8:16). When Moses took handfuls of soot from a kiln and threw it toward the sky in the sign of Pharaoh, the Egyptians were struck with sores on their bodies (Ex. 9:8-9). When Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky, the LORD sent thunder and hail and fire to the earth (Ex. 9:25). When Moses stretched out his hand over the land of Egypt, locusts covered the surface of the whole land (Ex. 10:13-14). When Moses stretched out his hand to the sky, darkness was over the whole land of Egypt (Exodus 10:21). When Moses told Pharaoh that "all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on the throne

And the whole reason why Moses did any of these things is because Israel cried out to the Lord for help when they were in slavery. And "God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them" (Exodus 2:24-25). And God delivered them from slavery. God freed some 2 million people from their bondage. *Do you think that moving a mountain is too difficult for the LORD?*

Consider how God sustained the people of Israel. When Pharaoh and his army came after the Israelites, God stopped them in their tracks, by placing a pillar of cloud between the Egyptians and the Israelites all night long (Exodus 14:19-20). And then, "Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and ... the waters were divided" (Ex. 14:21). The Israelites walked through on dry ground (Ex. 14:22), but the Egyptians drowned (Ex. 14:27-28). *Do you think that moving a mountain is too difficult for the LORD?*

Do you remember how the LORD provided water for all of the Israelites? (Ex. 15, 17). Do you remember how the LORD provided Manna in the wilderness for 40 years? (Ex. 16). Do you remember how Amalek was defeated, when Aaron and Hur held up Moses' hands? (Ex. 17). *Do you think that moving a mountain is too difficult for the LORD?*

Consider how God was with His people when entering the promised land. Do you remember when the Israelites defeated the city of Jericho? They marched around the city and blew trumpets and gave a great shout! (Joshua 6:16). The walls of the city fell down flat (Joshua 6:20). Do you remember when the LORD delivered up the Amorites into the hand of Israel? (Joshua 10). Joshua said, "O sun, stand still at Gibeon, and O moon in the valley of Aijalon" (Joshua 6:12). "So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, until the nation avenged themselves of their enemies" (Joshua 6:13). *Do you think that moving a mountain is too difficult for the LORD?*

The list of things that the Lord has done can go on and on. He fed Elijah with ravens bringing him bread and meat (1 Kings 17). He brought fire down from heaven when Elijah called for it (1 Kings 18). He took Elijah up in a whirlwind into heaven (2 Kings 2). He filled the widows jar of oil, that it would never run out (2 Kings 4). He healed Naaman of leprosy (2 Kings 5). He caused an axe head to float (2 Kings 6). He protected Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the flames of the fire (Daniel 3). He protected Daniel from the hungry lions (Daniel 6). *Do you think that moving a mountain is too difficult for the LORD?*

Consider the miracles of Jesus that we have seen in the gospel of Mark. He healed the demoniac in the synagogue (Mark 1:21-28). He instantly healed Peter's mother-in-law of fever (Mark 1:30-31). He healed the paralytic (Mark 2:1-12). He restored the man's withered hand (Mark 3:1-6). He calmed the sea (Mark 4:35-41). He cast the legion of demons out of the Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5:1-20). He healed the woman of her hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34). He raised a child from the dead (Mark 5:35-43). He fed 5,000 people on one occasion (Mark 6:33-43) and 4,000 people on another (Mark 8:1-9). He walked on water (Mark 6:45-52). He healed the Syrophenician Woman's daughter (Mark 7:24-30). He gave hearing to the deaf man (Mark 7:31-36). He opened the eyes of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-25). He cast the demon out of the boy when the disciples couldn't (Mark 9:14-29). He gave sign to Bartimaeus just outside Jericho (Mark 10:46-52). *Do you think that moving a mountain is too difficult for the LORD?*

God has done miraculous things. God can do miraculous things. Jesus calls us to believe that He can. Do you believe?

The passage of Scripture that Phil read for us this morning contains a promise equally as big as what Jesus puts forth here. Ephesians 3:20-21 says, "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."

This is an amazing verse. It describes the amazing power of God. Not only can God do what we ask for. Not only can God do what we dream for. Not only can God do more than we ask for. Not only can God do more than what we dream for. But, God can do "far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think."

On the one hand, this verse is an expression of the omnipotence of God. God can do anything. He spoke the world into existence (Genesis 1). Psalm 115:3 says, "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." Jeremiah 32:17 proclaims, "Nothing is too difficult for You." But, this verse isn't merely a statement of God's omnipotence. It's in the context of prayer. It's in the context of us seeking His blessing upon our lives. It's in the context of God extending His favor to His people who ask. And this verse says that God is able to give generously to those who ask Him.

Do you believe this? May we cry with the father of the young boy, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). That's my first point: Believe (verses 22-23)

My second point follows closely on its heels, ...
2. Pray (verses 24)

Mark 11:24

Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.

This is where the first and second points intersect. Prayer is an expression of belief. The call to believe is fundamentally a call to pray.

The promise here is vast: "...all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted to you" (Mark 11:24). This isn't the only time that Jesus ever said anything like this. In the most famous sermon ever preached, Jesus promises us an answer to such prayers.

Matthew 7:7 says, "Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you." What an amazing promise of answered prayer this is! If you are continually asking, you will receive. If you are continually seeking, you will find. If you are continually knocking, it will be opened to you.

Consider a few more of these sorts of statements. "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:13-14). "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7). "Whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight" (1 John 3:22). "And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (1 John 5:14-15). What incredible promises!

Have you ever heard such tremendously good news that you asked for it to be repeated to you. "What did you say? I don't think that I heard correctly. Could you please say it again." Sometimes our children ask for things that they know that they shouldn't have, but really want. Often, one of them will say, "Dad, can I have a cookie? Please?" even though they know that it is somewhat close to dinner. They are expecting me to say, "No, it's too close to dinner." Or, "No, you don't need a cookie." Sometimes, however, we say, "Yes" to these sorts of questions. Such a response is almost always the same. They perk up with bright eyes and say, "What??? What did you say?" Our children are shocked. It's as if they can't believe what we just told them. They want to be sure of what we said.

And so likewise are these statements of Jesus.

Mark 11:24

Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.

What did you say? "All things?" "If we pray and believe, we will receive?" Even moving mountains.

Though I have never heard of anyone actually moving a mountain through prayer alone, I have heard of many examples of those who did

great things through prayer alone. The two that come most quickly to mind are Hudson Taylor and George Müller. Hudson Taylor was a missionary to China, who God blessed greatly. He pledged "to move man through God, by prayer alone". [\[1\]](#) Indeed, he did, in reaching many for Christ in China.

George Müller was a man of similar convictions. When describing why he began the orphan houses, he wrote, ...

I had constantly cases brought before me, which proved that one of the special things which the children of God needed in our day, was, to have their faith strengthened. I longed to have something to point to, as visible proof, that our God and Father is the same faithful God as ever He was; as willing as ever to prove Himself to be the LIVING God, in our day as formerly, to all who put their trust in Him. ... I longed to set something before the children of God, whereby they might see, that He does not forsake, even in our day, those who rely upon Him. Also I longed to be instrumental in strengthening their faith, by giving them not only instances from the Word of God, of His willingness and ability to help all those who rely upon Him, but to show them by proofs, that He is the same in our day. ...

Now, if I, a poor man, simply by prayer and faith, obtained, without asking any individual, the means for establishing and carrying on an Orphan House: there would be something which, with the Lord's blessing, might be instrumental in strengthening the faith of the children of God, besides being a testimony to the consciences of the unconverted, of the reality of the things of God. This, then, was the primary reason for establishing the Orphan House. I certainly did from my heart desire to be used by God to benefit the bodies of poor children, bereaved of both parents, and seek, in other respects, with the help of God, to do them good for this life; ... but still the first and primary object of the work was (and still is), that God might be magnified by the fact, that the Orphans under my care are provided with all they need, only by prayer and faith, without any one being asked by me or my fellow-labourers, whereby it may be seen, that God is FAITHFUL STILL, and HEARS PRAYER STILL. [\[2\]](#)

George Müller did that. He cared for thousands of orphans. God was faithful to provide for all of their needs. Many sinners were converted by reading the accounts that were published in connection with Müller's work. The hearts of many saints were strengthened as a result of his ministry.

I wish someday to have some great stories about God accomplishing great things in my life through faith and prayer alone like these men have. All I can offer before you is this church as proof that the Lord is faithful to answer prayers. The Lord has built it. I certainly have prayed much for it. I have seen the Lord answer prayers. There are things going on in this church that I could never orchestrate or plan or coerce people to do. The Lord has built this church. I am trusting and praying that He will continue His work for the glory of Christ.

Are there things that you have prayed for that only God can answer? Are there things that you have prayed for that God answered in a mighty way. Nothing stirs my heart of faith more than to see the Lord answer prayer.

But, in order for the Lord to answer such prayers, you need to be praying. And there are some reasons why prayers go unanswered.

1. Prayers go unanswered because of a lack of faith.

Such is the clear implication of our text this morning:

Mark 11:24

Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you.

Do you remember after the transfiguration what Jesus said to the disciples who attempted to cast the demon out of the little boy? The disciples asked Him, "Why could we not drive it out?" (Mark 9:28). Jesus said, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer" (Mark 9:29).

A lack of faith will result in unanswered prayer. When we come to God, we must "believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). James said the same thing. I already mentioned James 1:5, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (verse 5). When you continue on to verse 6, you see the connection of faith to answered prayer. "But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (verses 6-8).

2. Prayers go unanswered because of a lack of purpose to glorify God.

In one of the verses I quoted earlier, Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:13-14). Notice the connection here between "My name" and "the Father's glory." The things for which you pray ought to be "in the name of Jesus," which ends with the glory of the Father. We often end our prayers with the phrase, "in Jesus' name, Amen." Yet, we often fail to realize what this means. When we say, "in Jesus' name," we are essentially saying, "for the glory of Jesus." And when the Son is glorified, the Father is glorified.

When we pray with a lack of purpose to glorify God, we ought not to expect that our prayers will be answered. James said, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3). This verse rules out the "God, give me a new boat" kind of prayers. This verse rules out the "God, let me win the lottery" kind of prayers. Again, Jesus isn't a genie, who will

give you anything that you want! Our prayers need to be aligned with God's purposes and God's glory.

3. Prayers go unanswered because of a lack of obedience.

Again, I go back to one of the verses that I read for you before: 1 John 3:22, "Whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight." In other words, a disobedient life has no reason to expect that it will experience answers to prayer. The Psalmist says, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear [i.e. so as to act]" (Ps. 66:18). God says, "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you, Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood" (Is. 1:15). The Proverb says, "The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous" (Prov. 15:29).

You must tie a life of obedience to a life that experiences answered prayer. This is what Jesus meant when He said, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you" (John 15:7). It is the life that abides in Christ that is obedient to Christ and will only request those things that glorify Christ.

Perhaps you have heard the story of a captain on a ship who said, ...

We had George Müller of Bristol on board. I had been on the bridge for twenty-four hours and never left it and George Müller came to me and said, "Captain, I have come to tell you I must be in Quebec on Saturday afternoon."

"It is impossible," I said.

"Then very well, if your ship cannot take me, God will find some other way. I have never broken an engagement in fifty-seven years; let us go down into the chart room and pray."

I looked at that man of God and thought to myself, "What lunatic asylum can that man have come from, for I never heard of such a thing as this?" "Mr. Müller," I said, "do you know how dense this fog is?"

"No," he replied, "my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God who controls every circumstance of my life."

He knelt down and he prayed one of the most simple prayers. When he had finished I was going to pray, but he put his hand on my shoulder and told me not to pray. "As you do not believe He will answer, and as I believe He has, there is no need whatever for you to pray about it."

I looked at him and George Müller said, "Captain, I have known my Lord for fifty-seven years and there has never been a single day when I have failed to get an audience with the King."

"Get up, Captain, and open the door and you will find the fog has gone." I got up and the fog indeed was gone, and on that Saturday afternoon George Müller kept his promised engagement. [\[3\]](#)

How could George Müller pray this way? Because of the years he obediently trusted His Lord in prayer. If today, you are not experiencing the joys of answered prayer, consider that you might have (1) a lack of faith, (2) a lack of purpose to glorify God, or (3) a lack of obedience in your life. The promises of Christ are great. He simply wants us to ask.

Let's look at my final point.

3. Forgive (verses 25-26)

Jesus said, ...

Mark 11:25-26

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. [But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.]

Again, we see the overlap of these words. The issue of forgiveness is coming in the context of prayer. When you come to the Lord in prayer, if there is anything between you and another person, Jesus calls us to forgive. That is, Jesus is calling us to release our bitterness and hatred and animosity toward other people on account of what they have done to us.

Jesus said a similar thing in the sermon on the mount, "If you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering" (Matthew 5:23-24). The same idea is here: if you are coming before the Lord, do all you can do to come before the Lord with a pure heart.

As Paul said, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Romans 12:18). Let's not try to play the game of religion -- making a show of our prayers, going through the motions, and expecting the LORD to respond to our prayers, all the while stewing up bitterness in our hearts toward others. The results of such an attitude are tragic. Look once again at verse 25, ...

Mark 11:25

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.

Did you see the purpose clause here? "Forgive ... so that your Father ... will also forgive you" (Mark 11:25). Listen closely. God's forgiveness of you is tied to the way that you forgive others. "Forgive ... so that your Father ... will also forgive you" (Mark 11:25). That's the point of verse 26, "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions."

Now, some of your translations don't have verse 26. If you have an NIV or and ESV in your laps, this verse will be in the footnotes explaining that some manuscripts add verse 26. The NASB has verse 26 in brackets, noting that "Early manuscripts do not contain verse 26." The KJV and the NKJV both include the verse, with the NKJV giving a footnote that some manuscripts omit this verse.

Now is not the time or the place to go into the details of these things. But, suffice it to say that Jesus did say these things. Turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew, chapter 6. This is the Sermon on the Mount. This is where we get the words, of the Lord's Prayer.

Matthew 6:9-13

"Pray, then, in this way:

'Our Father who is in heaven,

Hallowed be Your name.

'Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

'Give us this day our daily bread.

'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. [For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.]"

And then, Jesus provides some comment on the prayer. Particularly, Jesus provides comments to verse 12, "And forgive us our debts." Jesus said, ...

Matthew 6:14-15

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

This is almost verbatim what Jesus said in Mark 11. So, whether it was in the original text of Mark 11 or not, it makes no difference. Because, this is what Jesus taught.

If you forgive others, then the Lord will forgive you. If you don't forgive others, then the Lord will not forgive you. Now, it's not that God's forgiveness of you is based upon your forgiveness of others. No, God forgives us based upon the shed blood of His Son upon the cross. But, the reality of the matters is this: those who have been forgiven will forgive others. Or, to say it another way, "Forgiven People Forgive People."

That's the point that Jesus makes in Matthew 18:21-35. I alluded to this story last week. Let's read it this week.

Matthew 18:15-35

"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus *said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord *said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that 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. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

If you just can't forgive others, even after they have sought forgiveness from you, then it may just be a sign that the Lord hasn't forgiven you. Because one of the fruits of faith is an ability to forgive.

Now, this doesn't mean that we forgive everybody of everything. Even God doesn't do that. There are people that God doesn't forgive. Unrepentant, unbelieving, rebellious people will not receive the Lord's forgiveness. They will face the wrath of God against their sin for all

eternity. And it is fully right to plead God's justice upon the unrepentant.

In Revelation 6, we see the souls of martyrs who are in heaven, longing for God's justice to prevail. They cry out, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10). Note, that these people are in heaven, which means that they are saved, which means that they are forgiven. And yet, they are crying out for vengeance upon those who have sinned against them. And this is not wrong. God doesn't say, "Oh, you are so unforgiving!"

No, God has given to each of us a desire for justice to be carried out in this world. And they are crying for God's justice to prevail -- that God would not forgive the unrepentant, but that God would destroy them. And such cries are right! But, if these murderers would turn and repent and seek forgiveness, I'm sure that these martyrs in heaven would be the first ones to receive them into heaven.

Chris Brauns is very helpful at this point in his book, "Unpacking Forgiveness." He asks the question, "How should I respond to the unrepentant?" He gives two answers to the question.

First, resolve not to take revenge. The Scripture is clear, "Vengeance is Mine," declares the Lord (Romans 12:19). This is exactly what the souls under the altar are doing. They are crying for God's vengeance, because only He can deal out appropriate punishment.

"How should I respond to the unrepentant?" Second, proactively show love. Is this not what the Lord does with the unrepentant? "He [does] good and gives rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). He extends the offer of forgiveness in the cross of Christ.

Let me read for you a portion of Chris Brauns' book which I think is very helpful, ...

On November 8, 1994, Scott and Janet Willis were driving through the Milwaukee area on I-94 with their six youngest children in a minivan. They had left a couple of hours before from Chicago. They had fun singing and laughing together on the first part of the trip. But after they stopped and got gas, they encouraged the children to get some sleep. Three older children were not with them.

When he was able, Scott Willis described what transpired on I-94 that November day.

I was looking at the road and was alert. Our little baby was behind us; Ben was behind us on the other side. In the back were the other four children; they were all buckled in. I saw the object (a metal brace, 6" x 30", 30 lbs.). I thought it was one of those blocks that maybe came off a flatbed truck. The car in front of me swerved, and I knew I couldn't miss hitting the object. I thought if I took it on the tire I might roll the car. It was a split second decision.

When we hit the object, the rear gas tank exploded, taking the car out of control. I was able to grip the wheel and take the car out of the slide. When we were sliding and the flames were coming around the seat, it was a shock -- a surprise -- like, "What is this?" It was just roaring flames coming up on both sides. I was yelling to get out of the car. Janet and I had to consciously put our hands into the flames to unbuckle the seat belts and reach for the door handles.

Janet fell out the door while the car was still moving. [Our son] Benny was in the midst of the burning; his clothes were mostly burned off by the time he got out. The five youngest children, who had been asleep, died instantly. No sound was heard by Janet or me as we struggled to get out of the van. An unknown man took his shirt off his back to soak Benny's wounds, and another beat out the burning clothes on Janet's back. Benny died in intensive care around midnight.

If possible, the tragedy got even worse for Scott and Janet Willis. They had found some comfort in knowing that their children had died instantly. But months later they learned that there were signs that some of the children struggled to get out of the van. Their son Benny lost consciousness at the scene. They assumed he had not regained it before he died. But a hospital worker told them he was alive and alert at the hospital. He had asked her to hold his hand, but she was unable to do so because of his burns. He had asked her to pray with him.

Then Scott and Janet Willis learned that the driver of the semi had obtained his license illegally because of corruption under George Ryan, future governor of Illinois, at that time Secretary of State. Licensing facilities had accepted bribes that allowed unqualified drivers to receive licenses. These bribes became a part of Ryan's campaign fund. Ironically, Janet Willis had voted for Ryan the very morning of the accident.

On the morning of the accident, the driver ignored repeated warnings from other drivers that a large piece of metal was going to fall off the back of his truck.

It all seemed so senseless, so preventable.

So Scott and Janet Willis had to decide how to relate to a driver who should have heeded warnings, who should not have been on the road in the first place. They had to decide how to treat a politician whose corrupt values had played a part in their children's deaths.

In the short run, it would have been easiest to gravitate to one of two extremes. they could have been angry and vindictive; they could have hated the politicians who allowed unqualified drivers to get a license through a bribe. Or they could have granted automatic forgiveness. This would have meant that there would be no accountability for actions. Instead of either of these extreme choices, the Willis family chose to live out the principles of Romans 12. This is evident from letters that they sent to a U.S. District Judge, including this one written recently by Janet:

My husband and I have prayed and asked God to keep us from bitterness and to help us be faithful to him and he has. We tried to honor God by not complaining.

But there is a time to speak. I am sharing these facts only because I believe if justice rules, wrongdoing will be deterred. I have learned "when [God's] judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness. Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil" (Isaiah 26:9,10).

Scott Willis added his thoughts to her letter:

Janet and I are ordinary people. Not powerful, not forceful. Our children brought great joy to us. Benjamin, Samuel, Hank, Elizabeth and Peter were like anybody else's kids: playful, happy, mopey, energetic. The boys loved reading and sports. Elizabeth was her mom's shadow and her doll's mom. We love them. We miss them. We do not despair. We live with a God-promised hope in Jesus Christ.

Almost 12 years have passed since Nov. 8, 1994. The heartache remains but has softened. Janet and I have prayed to not have a bitter or revengeful spirit. These feelings have only occasionally flared up but have not consumed or dominated our thoughts and are not the motive for this letter.

Our thoughts are not on punishment. That is for the court to decide. The real tragedy is that no reconciliation has yet been attained between George Ryan and Janet and me. My wife and I have a strong desire to forgive Gov. Ryan but it must be on an honest basis: sorrow and admission. Even a 6-year old boy knows when he's done wrong he need to be truly sorry, and admit it. Then forgiveness and mercy can be graciously offered. That would be our joy. ^[4]

If you are here this morning and struggling with how to respond to others who have hurt you, perhaps this may be a mountain that needs to be cast into the sea. Some hurts are that bad! Perhaps you need to believe what the Lord says. Perhaps you need to pray to the Lord. Perhaps you need to forgive.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 30, 2012 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Hudson Taylor, The Growth of a Soul, p. 135

[2] Autobiography of George Müller, pp. 80-81

[3] Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations, Paul Lee Tan #1494

[4] Chris Brauns, "Unpacking Forgiveness", pp 148-150.