

Preaching the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant Matt 18:21-35

Emerging from our analysis of Matt 18:21-35 are three themes worthy of following up to preach. All three are strong and, on their own, could be preached at different times.

1. The basic theme that emerges can be a little moralistic but is always worthy of a hearing. We are called to forgive.

We have been forgiven by a benevolent and merciful heavenly Father (18:24-27); surely the least thing that we can do is to forgive the trivial slights that we receive from time to time (18:28-30). Kierkegaard once remarked that this was like the preacher who preached fervently that God is the giver of every gift and there were no boundaries to his grace. But at lunch a poor man approached him about making arrangements concerning a small debt. The preacher flew into a rage and told the man, “How dare you bother me, don’t you know who I am and what I can do to you?”

The difference between what we claim to be and who are are is sometimes deep and wide.

2. The second theme emerged from analysis—especially from my reading of Miroslav Volf. What does it really mean to forgive? The issue is especially important when we involve the concept of memory. A lot of us wonder have we really forgiven, even after we say we have. We all carry some version of this baggage. In these situations the parable can point to the heart and word of God as the only place where we can find closure. We have to trust him. Also, a study of Peter in Matthew could well supplement this point.
3. A third possible theme is even more challenging. This comes when the spotlight is placed on Matt 18:34-35. The final treatment of the unforgiving servant. Is the judgment which the Son of Man brings on the Last Day in some kind of tension with the ethical model Jesus taught and lived? This is more than an abstract theological question. It raises a critical question about the nature of God. It also raises a question that is central to Matthew. What degree of soteriological security do we have when we arrive at the last Judgment? If you take on Number 3, let me know how you frame the resolution.

Allan J. McNicol
Sermon Seminar 2012