

Who Is the Greatest?

St. Mark Lutheran
Three services

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At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven..."

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I did not say to you seven times, but seventy seven times. Matthew 18:1-4; Matt. 18:21-22 Also read parable: Matt. 18:23-35

Who is the greatest? Muhammd Ali made his case as a boxer in the ring. His self-evaluation was "I am the greatest!" Many would say that Bill Gates is the greatest based on his work with computers and how they have changed the world. Some theologians might say that Luther was the greatest, with his taking a brave stand and nailing 95 theses to a church door, and being used by God to bring the church back to the Bible. By the way, have you looked at the copy of the theses posted on the side entrance of our church? Try to do so. It was posted by David Toth, our head elder. Since this is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it is a good time to read it.

Even the disciples got caught up in the question of "Who is the greatest?" They came to Jesus and wanted to know who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus took a child and put him in the midst of them. He said that if we do not change and become like children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus seemed to indicate that one's greatness is measured by how humble a person is.

Now Peter was a leader and sort of an outspoken guy and maybe wanted to show how great a disciple he was. He came up and said to Jesus, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus replied, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy seven times." Some translations have it "seventy times seven" which may be easier to understand. It's generally believed that Jesus really meant that our forgiveness should be inexhaustible, that it should have no end.

Shortly after that Jesus told a parable to try to teach us the importance of forgiving one another. A master decided to settle his accounts of what was owed him. He called in one servant who owed him ten thousand talents, an enormous amount of money in that day. There was no way the servant could pay him back. He and his wife and children could have been sold because of his debt, a great punishment indeed. The servant fell on his knees and begged for mercy. Get this: out of pity for him, the master released him and forgave him the enormous debt.

But this forgiven servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him much less. He was not able to pay his debt right away either, but he wound up in prison because of it. When the master who had forgiven the great debt of the first servant heard of this, his mercy turned to wrath because that servant did not have mercy on his fellow servant. The first servant was delivered to the jailers until all of his debt was paid.

We could hardly be talking about anything more important this morning. Forgiveness is a major problem in our world. It is even a problem in the Christian church. It is a major problem between husbands and wives. It is a huge problem in our society.

Our gift of eternal life and our going to heaven is dependent on God's forgiving us our sins. Jesus died on the cross to take care of that. We apprehend that forgiveness by believing in what Jesus did for us. God expects us to reflect his love and mercy for us by forgiving other people.

Rev. Jeffrey Smead, in his sermon on Matthew 18, suggests four steps to forgiveness. First, you should acknowledge that you have been hurt. We often like to pretend that what was said or done did not really bother us. We are not talking here about minor things or passing slights here. We are talking about serious situations like betrayal or brutality, where personal, unfair, and deep pain has been inflicted. We must be careful to deal with these things before they develop into hatred and affect our lives.

Second, we should surrender our right to get even. We need to leave ultimate justice and vengeance, if it is called for, to God. By doing this we deliberately choose the path of forgiveness. FORGIVENESS REALLY SETS US FREE. It doesn't mean that the other person was right or that what they did was not important. But as a believer in Jesus Christ, it is the only path we should take.

Third, as a believer in Jesus Christ, God may be calling you to do ministry in this situation. Many people would rather not hear that, but it is true. People of Christ's church are expected to do ministry. When there is a serious problem, we should be concerned with trying to bring about reconciliation in the situation. Those who submit to the Lord and continue to care about others please God and will be blessed.

Albert Tonei was a justice of the New York State Supreme Court. A young defendant in his court was guilty of gunning down another person, in what really was an execution. The young man was a troublemaker and had a long record. He was a hardened criminal already. He stared in defiant anger at the jury as they returned a verdict of guilty.

The victim's family attended each day of the two week trial. On the day of sentencing, they were permitted to address the court. The victim's mother and grandmother spoke directly to the defendant.

Hear some of their words to him: "You broke the rule to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. You broke the law to love your neighbor as yourself. 'I am your neighbor,' the older woman said, and she gave him her address. 'If you want to write, I'll write you back. I sat in this trial for two weeks, and for the last sixteen months I tried to hate you. But you know what? I could not hate you. I feel sorry for you...because you made wrong choices.'" ("Four Steps to Forgiveness" by J. Jeffrey Smead, www.sermoncentral.com)

Judge Tomei wrote, "For the first time since the trial began...the defendant's eyes lost their laser force...and appeared to surrender...to a life force...that only a mother could generate...unconditional love. After the grandmother finished, I looked at the defendant. His head was hanging low. There was no more swagger, no more stare. The destructive and evil forces within him...collapsed helplessly before this remarkable woman."

The fourth step, in our four steps to forgiveness, is to desire that good things would happen to your wrongdoer. This may sound impossible to you, but ask for God's help and do this. This does not mean that we are excusing their wrong. This does not mean they should not be punished for breaking the law. We are forgiving, not excusing. Remember the words of Jesus who said "I came to save that which was lost." That should be our goal also. We are on a journey here. The Holy Scriptures say that when we leave this world we are either going to heaven or to hell. How we handle these situations may have something to do with where that person spends eternity.

What is our motivation for doing this? We are simply doing for them, what God has done for us. God could simply have seen our sin and said, "I've seen enough. I am going to end this human creation." But God looked beyond our sin. He saw something worth loving. He put into effect his great plan of salvation through Jesus Christ.

The really great people of the world are those who humble themselves and forgive others. The really great people in the world are those that still have compassion no matter what the other person has done. If we are really honest with ourselves, if each of us added up his own sins, we are the ones who have the great debt. Our forgiveness depends on Christ's forgiveness earned for us on the cross. Who is the greatest? Jesus is the greatest, because he humbled himself to become one of us and has given us a forgiveness that is total and undeserved. And when we humble ourselves and forgive one another, we share in Christ's greatness, and we will eventually share in all the great things he has planned for us. Amen.