

APRIL 6, 2025

Marion weekly update

SERMON March 30- "Knowing Where We Came From" Matthew 18:23-35, Luke 17:11-17

This week I want to begin by making a note about parables in general. If we want to get a bead on the most important things Jesus is passing along to the average person, this is arguable the best place to go. Parables are the vehicle that he uses to convey great spiritual truth to people who need more concrete terms to grasp those truths.

The themes that show up repeatedly are things like the word of God, the Kingdom of God, mercy, God's love for us that results in pursuing us passionately, forgiveness, grace, gratitude, love and such. These are the staples of a faith that is pleasing to God. In truth, the behaviors that we often think of when we talk about our faith spring from these themes. And without these things even the most correct of behaviors are hollow.

Today we see front and center forgiveness. I suggest that forgiveness is often fueled by gratitude.

The parable is pretty straightforward. A man owes someone a lot of money. He can't pay it and is in danger of being jailed and/or physically punished to exact what he owes. He begs and pleads, throwing himself on the mercy of the lender. The lender forgives his debt and sends him on his way.

Then the one who just got his loan cancelled has someone who owes him but a fraction of what he'd been forgiven. In like manner this man can't pay and is looking for mercy. What he gets is thrown in jail.

Word gets back to the one who forgave the debt and he brings the man back in in light of his callousness to someone who shared his situation. Not only would he be required to pay, but he would absolutely be jailed and harshly punished until he did so.

The finish of the parable is that if we will not forgive we will not be forgiven, but rather reap the full consequences of all our wrongdoing.

Why would this man refuse to forgive the debt of the one he loaned to literally right after he'd been forgiven a much greater amount? Surely what he saved in not repaying was greater than what he was owed.

There are several reasons that this could play out.

A lack of gratitude. An ungrateful heart sees no reason to pass along anything they've been given. There is no heart value to them in what has been received. If there is no heart value there is no reason to pass it along. Take what you can get and keep moving on. There is no need to give because there isn't appreciation for what others have offered. So keep taking and taking while receiving and receiving.

Gross selfishness. This is a much larger issue that is connected to a lack of gratitude. If all I'm out for is myself then everything is an opportunity to exploit for personal gain. I get let off the hook for something? Great! If keeping someone else on the hook gets me something, also great! Mercy is a liability to the selfish. It gets in the way of personal gain.

At the end of the day, whatever the reason, the unforgiving man had no regard for what personal plight had brought about. He didn't regard the great benefit he'd been given to free him from debt and elevate him beyond where he'd been before. This caused a hardened heart that refused to see an opportunity to pass along a blessing.

We see that a lack of gratitude isn't uncommon. In the story of the 10 lepers, Jesus heals 10 men of leprosy. This was a disease that made them outcasts. They were unclean, and contagious. To heal them was to completely rewrite their future.

Of the 10, only one returned.

A detail about this man that seems like just a footnote is that he was a Samaritan. That it's included means it's significant. This Samaritan was healed by a Jew. The Samaritans and Jews didn't get along. Jesus had no reason to pay him any mind. In fact he had every cultural reason not to. These were people He shouldn't associate with. On top of that the man had leprosy. A leperous Samaritan

Jesus saw him in his need and healed him.

The Samaritan knew where he came from. He knew that in the eyes of society not only had he no right to expect anything from Jesus, but if he expected anything it should be to get ignored and treated poorly. He knew his need. He knew his unfortunate station in the world. Yet Jesus gave him this tremendous gift.

There is only one proper response to this. Gratitude. Whatever the barriers between groups of people, they vanish. Whomever is supposed to hate whomever is gone. There is one person seeing another and responding to his need. Walls are destroyed and there is a great thanks given.

We are no different and God's expectations for us are just the same.

Knowing where we came from is foundational to being able to live into the call of God on our lives. To living into the image of Jesus.

We frequently hear this sense of "not knowing where we come from" in work talk. Someone gets promoted and falls into the same attitudes and behaviors they complained about with the last person in the same position. Their friends and now subordinates complain, "so and so forgot where they came from."

This forgetting can bring about a failure of humility, grace, and understanding.

We'll take this in two fronts. The first is represented in the parable. Remembering when we were down and out. When were the times that we were mistreated, misunderstood, taken advantage of, hurt by attitudes or actions? When were we sick or broken?

Sometimes remembering is painful, sometimes even unbearably so. Yet this memory is beneficial to our soul and our mission for Christ. It is the source of humility and compassion. Being in touch with our past connects us to people who are enduring the same or similar things in their present. In seeing their plight we have a chance to offer our own experience and resources to uplift them. In helping another, at least two people benefit. They do because, like Jesus with the Samaritan leper, someone sees them in their humanity and value. Then they offer something to help make it through. We do because we have become an instrument of God's mercy and grace in the world. There is wonderful fulfillment and peace in knowing we have done well in serving God through serving others. All the more when that other has been neglected or dismissed by others.

The other side of the coin is connecting God's desires for us when we may not have had as much hardship and pain. There are those who have had lives that were abundant in love, opportunity, security, and support. They have wanted for little and have a hard time relating to people who have been through harder times.

It is a truly good fortune to grow and live in the absence of hunger, neglect, abuse, and feeling unseen and like a lower level of person.

Not experiencing this darker side of living can lead to assumptions of those that have. "They are lazy". "They don't care". "They don't want to do the right thing." And so forth. Fight against these if they ever cross your ears or mind.

Break out of the insulating bubble around us and see people for where they are and what they need. This is the call of Jesus so that we can reach out to and meet the needs around us.

Kids are hungry, cold, and have hard home lives. We hear "they need Jesus". I would agree. What they also need is to see Jesus in the person who gives them something to eat, a coat to wear, a listening ear, and sometimes the courage to intervene to protect.

This heart is the heart of the Jesus who spoke with the Samaritan woman, healed the Samaritan leper, and healed the child of a Roman who was no sense of Jewishness and represented the empire that harmed the Jews. They all had something in common. They had a need.

The story of the rich young ruler carries weight in this. The rich man wanted to know how to get eternal life. Jesus gives him a short list of behaviors You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, 19 honor your father and mother,'[c] and 'love your neighbor as yourself.

The man claims to have done all of this. Jesus gives him one more task. Sell all he has and give the money to the poor. He rejects it because he's more in love with his wealth and the ease of life that provides than he is with helping those in need. He walks away saddened and Jesus gives the famous "it's

easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.”

The point is extreme, the message is simple. Loving others means giving of ourselves to uplift them in their place of need.

What the rich man missed is the parable we saw last week. The value of the Kingdom of God is like a priceless hidden treasure. That treasure is worth sacrificing everything to get.

The call of Jesus when we are in a place of influence, resources, status, authority, etc. is to remember where we came from even if it was what others might call a “charmed life”.

The point is to look at all we’ve had and been given with a heart of gratitude. Not entitlement. Seeing others in need then moves us to compassion, just as if we were moved by a past marked by need and hardship. One we are grateful that we’ve been given a leg up. The other we are grateful that our lives have moved along with relative smoothness.

Either way it brings humility and the wonderful privilege of seeing the opportunities around us to be instruments of God. We find that light of Christ in our hearts and reap the satisfaction, the Kingdom of God in our hearts, when we shine it in genuineness.

Knowing where we came from and letting God speak to and through that knowledge in our lives is how we build God’s Kingdom in our hearts and the world around us.

BIBLE STUDY 2 Samuel 17

Chapter 17 is a grand set up for the coming battle between David and Absalom. Ahithophel is in the middle of giving Absalom advice about how to proceed in his takeover of the throne. He had just encouraged Absalom to fulfill Nathan’s prophecy by sleeping with his father’s concubines in plain view of anyone looking. Now he is laying out a plan of attack.

The plan is actually quite sound. David is running. He’s likely tired. He isn’t truly organized. Hit him fast and hard. Take out the leader, sparing as many as possible. Why? It shows mercy. Restraint in the battle demonstrates that Absalom has regard for every Israelite life. He only wants the king dead.

We’ve already seen that Ahithophel’s word is like that of a prophet. His wise strategy should be a slam dunk. Except...

Hushai is summoned. David is one step ahead and has the monkey wrench already in place to such sound advice.

The countering advice is cautionary. Recognize the strength of David’s seasoned warriors. If Absalom’s troops are defeated it will send the wrong message to Israel and his bid for the throne will be over before it begins. Instead, take time to amass a large force. Overrun David and all his men so there’s no chance of defeat.

Hushai’s plan is adopted.

David’s other spies, the priests, send their sons as David had instructed to inform what this plan is. The wires seem crossed as what they are carrying in terms of information seems closer to Ahithophel’s plan than Hushai’s. Nevertheless, David has sufficient warning to get moving and now has some extra time to develop a ready plan of his own.

As the spies head out, we see that despite the support for Absalom there are still those loyal to David. The spies are rattled out and in danger of being found and caught. They find people willing to hide them for safety. This good favor allows them to complete their mission. It also shows us as the readers that loyalties in Israel are divided. Whatever David is perceiving there are still people outside of those presently in his company that are devoted to him.

Ahithophel, in a story not unlike that of Judas, is distraught that he has been ignored. He hangs himself. Perhaps this is a combination of not only being ignored, but also at guilt for having betrayed the true king, David.

This is as good a place as any to take a moment to reflect on suicide. It happens several times in

scripture. Saul, Ahithophel, and Judas all take their own lives. In scripture there is no value judgment on any of them. It doesn't weigh in as to consequences of the act. It doesn't make a judgment on the ones who commit it. The actions are simply reported, leaving us to interpret meaning for ourselves.

Rather than argue back and forth the consequence (or not) of suicide, here it may be more fruitful to look at the cause.

Certainly there are mental health conditions that can lead to someone taking their own life. The reasons the condition seizes upon are as unique as the individuals afflicted.

Culturally it can be an instilled sense of honor. To be sufficiently dishonored through betrayal, failure, or otherwise is redeemed through an act of suicide. How this factors in is up for conversation, as those ascribing it have had such a cultural norm instilled likely since childhood and it seems as correct as any other correct action.

Then there are situations where circumstances drive someone to a depression or desperation so overwhelming that suicide becomes the answer for them. This is the issue at hand here to at least some extent.

Ahithophel's choice was his and his alone. That said, Hushai unintentionally gave him a strong push. The purpose of offering counter counsel was to thwart Absalom's plan, which succeeded. Unfortunately that led to a great shame on Ahithophel who responded by hanging himself. While I wouldn't pin the culpability on Hushai, it is unavoidable that without his counter counsel Ahithophel wouldn't have hanged himself.

But what about harsher realities that occur every day? Relentless bullying is a very real thing. It is made worse by the additional access to mistreat one another through social media and the digital communication age.

Churches aren't exempt from the kind of messaging that makes people feel worthless, unloved, hated, and like they'd be better off to not exist at all. Unfortunately when it comes from a faith position there is the added impact that it's not just the person or community that is making the harmful comments, it is the opinion of God Godself.

The point here is that while at the end of the day it's easy to point the finger at someone who takes their own life, if they have been hammered over and over again by friends and family that they aren't worth the air that they breathe, there is responsibility to be had otherwise. In Genesis Cain is reminded in no uncertain terms that yes, he is his brother's keeper. As are we all. We share a calling to consider how we affect one another. If my actions and words cause another to feel unloved by God and like a pox in the world that is on me. If those actions and words lead to despair so great that something awful happens, I have to own that were it not for my cruelty perhaps the outcome would have been very different.

The final scene in the chapter paints a picture of a battle ready and waiting to happen soon. The armies are gathered. Camps are made. David and his men are now fed and rested. It seems Absalom did make a faster run than Hushai anticipated, but it was slow enough that David isn't taken by surprise. He's not running. He's not weak or weary. He is ready.

In the coming chapter, though he will not take Ahithophel's way out, David himself will have to bear the tragic consequences from much of how his life has been lived.