

We Are the Lord's

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Matthew 18: 21-35

I have to admit that I've been in a conundrum this week as to what to preach on. Hey, it's Rally Day! A time of pep and energy and good cheer. The children are excited starting a new year of Faith Circuit and meeting up again with their Sunday School friends, the choir is once again back together in full voice, and the adults are having an opportunity to renew old friendships and see people they haven't seen for a while over the summer. It's a time to get back in the groove with enthusiasm. It seems like I should be preaching a short, peppy, "upper" of a sermon. Yet we can't ignore the fact that the date on the calendar today is 9/11 and it's not just another September 11th but exactly ten years after the tragedies of September 11th, 2001. Today's scripture lessons are all about acceptance and forgiveness. As we reflect on what it means to be a Christian in a world molded by terrorism, fear, and distrust of "the other" I'm feeling a need to address these issues.

For those of you who were unable to be with us this morning at our 9/11 memorial service in Wilder Park, let me fill you in a little on what happened. During our short time together we moved from a time of remembering that awful day of ten years ago, to a time of comfort hearing the Word of God, and finally to a place of hope for our future. The reality however is that it will be hard for any of us to move on to the future if we are still stuck in the past – if we are stuck in a position of not being able to forgive the egregious acts of September 11, 2001. Forgiveness is almost always complex and difficult.

As we ponder Jesus' concept of forgiveness this morning I'd like to ask you to put on a couple of different hats. Our focus on this particular morning is 9/11, but the Biblical teachings on forgiveness apply to all human relationships. Quite possibly there is someone in your family that you'd like to be able to forgive, or a friend, or even someone here at church. So, although my focus will be on the events of 9/11, I encourage you as you listen to expand your thinking to all aspects of your life.

I'm wondering if some of us here this morning are still harboring some ill feelings toward Al Qaida and the terrorist bombers of 9/11. I know that I struggle with that and it wouldn't surprise me if you do too. I know that I'm resentful that the safe, serene, life that we have always known is no longer the norm in our country – that because of 9/11/ 2001 we no longer feel completely safe flying on a commercial jet or walking around in major metropolitan areas. We used to think that our country was safe from attack by foreign powers but now we worry that bridges are going to be blown up and that the hubs of our major cities are going to be hit by car bombers or worse. I have to admit that I worry a lot that my daughter works in the Dirksen Federal Building at the corner of Jackson and Dearborn in downtown Chicago. That would seem to me to be a prime target for terrorists. My son-in-law works in the Willis Tower – another obvious target for terrorists and my husband Paul works half a mile from US Cellular Field, still another possible place to kill thousands of people at the same time. Let's face it. Our

lives have been significantly impacted by the actions of ten years ago today and the years that have followed.

So, let's address the question, "Why should we forgive such heinous acts such as the 9/11 bombings? Why on earth should we forgive Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaida and the terrorists who carried out this terrible plot against the United States of America?"

First of all, let's look at what our inability to forgive has done to this country. I ask you, has going to war worked? Has assassinating Osama Bin Laden worked? Many of you I'm sure will say that we had no choice but to respond with military might and aggressiveness after we were attacked – that we had to settle the score and that retaliation was the only way to go. I admit that I'm not a military strategist and I know I'm speaking right now to a number of you who have honorably served our country and have fought in incredibly dangerous situations and have put your lives on the line for world peace. I apologize if I offend you. That is not my intent at all! Both my Dad and Paul's father were WWII veterans and we all were extremely proud of their military service in the Army and the Navy. But the truth of the matter is that I'm still not feeling a whole lot better about what's happening in the Middle East since our country has been at war and since Osama Bin Laden has been "taken out". I'm still not feeling terribly safe and secure. Retaliation doesn't seem to have done much and it might be argued that it has only made things worse. There must be more that we, especially we Christians, can do to bring some peace and serenity into this world and into our own lives.

And there is something that we can try to do. We can try to forgive those who attacked us.

I want to be clear; forgiving is not forgetting. I agree with the signs that have popped up recently that say, "Never forget!" We want to never forget the brave men and women who lost their lives in the twin towers. We want to never forget the dedicated men and women of our armed services who have loyally served our nation. We can never forget the many veterans who are going to have to live for the rest of their lives with horrible permanent injuries. And we can't ever forget those who have for generation after generation died for our country. Forgiving is not to be confused with forgetting!

But let's get to the real reason we want to work on forgiveness. Forgiveness is not done for the other person. It is done for ourselves. Our goal is a clean heart and emotional balance. When we carry around a grudge be it anger or a resentment it poisons us. It doesn't affect the other person at all. A lot of the time they don't even know that we are mad at them. We are the ones who are obsessing and fuming. The other person is oblivious to our suffering – the suffering that they have caused.

The fact is that forgiveness is about cleaning our own hearts. It doesn't do us much good to carry other people's sins. And if we are not forgiving of the other, it is we who are carrying their sins in our bodies, minds, and spirits. Other people's sins, when not forgiven, come back over and over again to haunt us by destroying our joy in life and any feelings we might have of serenity and peace.

The truth is that it is a spiritual axiom that every time we are disturbed, no matter what the cause, there is something wrong with us. When we carry anger, resentments, and grudges and are unable to let go of them, it is we who are at fault. When we are able to forgive and turn the sins of others over to God, who is the only judge that really matters, emotional balance returns and we are able to live our lives to good purpose – the purpose for which God intended us.

The sticky point though is that forgiving someone once often doesn't work. We say to ourselves, "OK. Fine. I'll forgive them" and then we still continue to carry around a grudge. As Jesus said to his disciple Peter, we don't usually forgive once or even seven times. Sometimes it takes seventy-seven times before we're able to really forgive. Jesus tells us that forgiveness can be incredibly difficult. We often have to forgive over and over and over again before we are finally able to turn the sins of "the other" over to God.

Forgiveness starts with prayer. As we wrap up this rather heavy Rally Day sermon, I'm going to challenge all of us. I'm going to challenge us to pray for Al Qaida and the people in the world who want to terrorize us, kill us, or paralyze our country. I know this is going to be hard to do. After this last week and all the reliving on TV and in the media, the horrors of 9/11/2001 are fresh on our minds. If you cannot right now pray for the terrorists in this world, I urge you to pray for the willingness to pray for the terrorists. We are doing this because we are Christians and we want peace in the world. We are doing this because we want peace in our own lives. And lastly, we are doing this because it might, it just might, make a difference in our world.

We don't need to live in fear. We can forgive and lift the heavy burden of other people's sins from our shoulders. We are Christians and as such we do what Jesus would do. And Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies because we believe in God the Creator of all things good. Lastly, we remember these words from Romans, "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

Amen.