

Recipe for a Peace-Loving Church

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Preacher: Billy McKillop, Executive Pastor

[0 : 00] So we're talking about a recipe for a peace-loving church. This morning, looking at Matthew chapter 18, 21 to 35. And we'll read that scripture in just a minute here.

But let me just say a couple of words of introduction about this passage. In Matthew 18, Jesus is teaching on the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation in our personal relationships.

You're familiar with the passage where Jesus says, Go to your brother if your brother sins against you, if you have some conflict. Because forgiveness requires a lot of humility, he says things like in this passage, in this chapter, Whoever humbles himself like a little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

He's teaching his disciples that if a brother sins against you, you know, you're to humble yourself And go and show him his fault and seek reconciliation, peace and reconciliation.

A wise person once said that forgiveness is such a beautiful word until you have something to forgive. And Peter may have struggled with what Jesus was teaching.

[1 : 12] You know, Peter is one of the most honest disciples. And so Peter is not ashamed at all. He follows up with a question on just how many times he's required to forgive.

So Jesus tells this compelling parable in response. And we know the parable is just, it's a story intended to apply truth to struggle. And so he's, Jesus is applying truth to Peter's struggle and to ours.

So reading from Matthew 18, 21, 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 do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. Side note here, a servant, you know, could work twenty years to earn one talent.

[2 : 17] So over a lifetime a servant might earn two or three talents. So in Jesus' parable about the kingdom of heaven, this servant has an impossible debt.

Maybe you could say five thousand lifetimes of debt. And verse 25, And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold with his wife and children and all that he had and payment to be made.

So the servant fell on his knees imploring him, have patience with me and I will pay you everything. And out of pity for him, the master of the servant released him and forgave him the debt.

But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. And this would amount to about four months' wages.

And seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, Pay what you owe. So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, Have patience with me and I will pay you. He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

- [3 : 21] And when his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed. And they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, You wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.
- And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you? And in anger, his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt.
- And in verse 35, Jesus brings the application. He says, So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.
- Amen. This is the word of the Lord for us. Let's pray. Father, as the psalmist reminds us that if we do not delight in your word, we would have already perished.
- Help us to never forget the commands that you give us that are meant for our good, for our flourishing. So do good to your people today.
- [4 : 27] Teach us knowledge and good judgment as we trust in your word, as we seek you for help. Father, we pray for all those in our church who are suffering with various types of illness or suffering with other things.
- We met yesterday as elders and deacons, and we must have prayed for 30 different people that we know that have cancer or suffering from other health, debilitating conflict in their lives.
- Father, we just pray that you will bring peace, bring healing, bring reconciliation, bring health and restoration to those who are suffering. And we give you praise and thanks for your word.
- In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. You can be seated. So the master asked the servant, you know, should you not have shown mercy?
- This unmerciful servant is probably the title in your Bible, this section of Matthew 18. Should you not have shown mercy? Should you not forgive that little tiny debt compared to the massive debt that you owed?
- [5 : 52] Forgiveness. Beautiful word. But it's a struggle. You know, every married couple who's been blessed with a culture of peace in their marriage or in their home, they understand the importance of humility and of showing mercy and offering forgiveness.
- How is a culture of peace developed in a marriage or in a family or in a business or in a church?
- We know it's not something that just comes naturally. It has to be done with commitment and effort and intentionality if you're going to have this culture of peace.
- Every church has a unique culture. We have a unique culture at New City Fellowship that's different from any other PCA church, another church in our city.
- You know, the music, the ministries that are important, the history of the church, the values and the goals, these all make up part of the church culture. But how does a church develop and maintain a culture of peace?
- [7 : 02] New City is coming up next year on 50 years. Did you know that? We're going to celebrate all of 2006, the 50th year of New City. We have this wonderful committee of people that's been meeting and thinking about ways that we can plug that in throughout the whole year.
- And they're asking for your input, actually, if you have some ideas you can on how to celebrate 50 years at New City. You can put it on one of those connect cards or a piece of paper and drop it in this little box over here.
- That's for offering. I think we're going to put another box in the foyer. But that's exciting, you know, that we have gone through 50 years, 1976 to 2026.

What's the recipe for a peace-loving church over the next 50 years? How do we maintain that culture of peace? You know, just as in a marriage or a family, it won't come naturally.

It'll take commitment, take knowledge of scriptural principles and dependence on Christ. And the Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesian church with some instruction for them on how to be a peace-loving church.

[8 : 18] He says in Ephesians 4, As a prisoner for the Lord, then I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle.

Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There's one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Paul is saying to the Ephesians that they were to make every effort, to hold nothing back.

Give it your all. Spend your time. Pay the price. labor well with humility and gentleness and patience as we bear with one another in love, as we seek the unity through peace, which really binds us all together.

It's the peace of Christ that ties us up together in the church. You know, we need a great big helping of humility and gentleness and patience.

[9 : 28] Why? Because wherever two or three are gathered together, we know that conflict will always be present. Right? Because of the fall, conflict's going to be there.

It's just part of our lives under the fall. And trying to run away from conflict is unsustainable. Conflict's going to follow you. Wherever you try to run, you can run, but you can't hide.

Right? And it takes humility and gentleness and patience to forgive others at a deep heart level. Jesus says, from the heart. Not just the surface thing.

Right? He wants heart level forgiveness. And Jesus gives this stern warning to Peter and to the disciples and to us at the end of his parable. He says, So also my heavenly Father will deliver to the jailers every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.

It can also be translated the torturers, the jailers, the torturers. He's going to deliver Peter and the disciples if they don't forgive from their heart.

[10 : 35] You know, there's a ton of books written on the subject of conflict resolution. And many of them focus on what to do after a meltdown. You know, a few years ago, a pastor in Orlando who had been through a huge church conflict, he wrote this book, The Peacemaking Church, Eight Biblical Keys to Resolve Conflict and Preserve Unity.

And he's writing as somebody who's been through it, a practitioner. It's not just theory. He wanted to write a book to help other Christians and other churches avoid some of the pitfalls of destructive conflict.

And Pastor Curtis Heffelfinger, he says, What if the best fight your congregation ever experiences is the one you never get into in the first place? You know, what a great question.

What if the best fight you as a married couple or as a family or in a business, the best fight you ever experience is that one that you're able to avoid?

You know, that applies in any relationship. The best conflict is the one that can be constructive and can turn out to be a help toward unity rather than a hindrance.

[11 : 54] And this pastor in Florida, he's writing from his experience having gone through an awful church storm. He says, That conflict rocked the church like one of Florida's infamous Category 5 hurricanes.

And he doesn't give all the messy details of what the conflict was about. He's just writing his book. And he's writing the book 15 years after the great trouble that they had.

And he says, After much reflection and study as a church on biblical peacemaking principles, by God's grace and with a great deal of informed effort on the church's part, we're enjoying a culture of peace today.

Amen. Amen. That's what every church wants, right? It's what every couple wants, every family, every relationship. A general sense of gospel informed peace in spite of whatever troubles may come your way.

You want to hear somebody come to your home and say, I just sense there's peace in this home. Or somebody who meets you as a couple and says, You guys just seem to have a peaceful relationship.

[13 : 08] Or they come to your church, you know? And sometimes it takes a little while to be in a church to understand if there's peace or conflict, right? You can't see it on the first visit.

But to recognize that this is a church that has a commitment to loving one another, to being gentle toward one another, to forgiving.

Jesus in this parable, he's teaching about the crucial ingredient in developing this culture of peace. And it's practicing the grace of forgiveness.

And we call it the grace of forgiveness because it's really by his grace, as we depend on him as our power source, that we have any desire even to be a forgiving person.

The question for each and every church member is, What part do you play? How will you help in developing and maintaining a culture of peace in the church?

[14 : 08] How can you keep from hindering the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? Because showing mercy to one who has wronged us, it doesn't come naturally.

We need God's grace and power every day to enjoy a culture of peace. We have to rely on him. It's not going to just come to us as we coast along.

There's some biblical principles that we have to know and understand and be committed to and apply to our individual lives if it's going to take hold in the corporate church.

Peter needed supernatural help to forgive. And some of the Jewish rabbis, they had come up with a rule that you were required to forgive someone up to three times.

So maybe Peter had this in mind and thought that he was being generous because he was willing to say up to seven times. Jesus' answer calls him for a far more costly sacrifice.

[15 : 13] He says not seven times, but 77 times. Or another way to translate that in the Greek is 70 times 7. So 490 times.

In other words, forget about a number. Don't try to quantify it. Our flesh tells us that unforgiveness is our friend so we can keep track.

At some point we reach our limit, then it's okay to cut the person off. I'm done. I'm done with forgiving those undeserving people. But Jesus, in this parable, he tells us that unforgiveness is not your friend.

It's actually your worst enemy. Unforgiveness can actually make you feel powerful because you hold something in your hands that another person desperately needs.

But when you withhold forgiveness, when you do that, it's like choking the life out of the other person. You know, just avoiding the person. You think, I'm not harming them, but I have this unforgiveness in my heart.

[16 : 25] I think Jesus is saying, no. There's an active choking of that person because you're unwilling to forgive from the heart. And it does damage to you as well.

You know, you've heard the saying that unforgiveness is what? Like drinking poison, hoping that the other person will die. You know? Or it's like my doctor sent me for a calcium scoring test a couple months ago, and it showed that the calcium around my heart had increased by some number of points since the last time I had that test.

So I was faced with either taking some medication or changing my diet and exercise more. So what did I do? I'm trying to exercise more and trying to eat well.

But, you know, unforgiveness is like that calcium that accumulates in your heart. And unless it's dealt with, it eventually can lead to cardiac arrest.

Unforgiveness is not your friend. Unforgiveness is your worst enemy. Unforgiveness is your worst enemy. And Jesus, the master storyteller, he introduces us to these three main characters in his parable.

[17 : 48] There's the wealthy king. He's a good steward of his business, and he wants to settle accounts with those that owe him money. And he calls in this unbelievable debt of the first servant of 10,000 talents.

And some who are listening, they probably go, that's crazy, 10,000 talents. But, you know, Jesus is telling the parable. He's in charge of the details. So he's free to say 10,000 talents.

He's trying to show a contrast here. And he calls in this unbelievable debt. It's impossible to pay. The servant's only hope is for mercy.

And the master takes pity on him and cancels the debt and lets him go. Out of compassion, he writes off the debt. The master absorbs the debt.

The debt is owed to him. He's at a loss because he absorbs the debt. Do you think that we as God's children will ever fully understand in this life how much debt has been absorbed by God for us?

[18 : 54] Do you think that we have the ability to fully grasp, understand that? Will we ever grasp what it actually cost him? Have you ever felt the weight of a great debt?

You know? Maybe your credit card debt got away from you. And in January, you realized, oops, you know, all that Christmas shopping.

How am I going to pay this credit card off? Or legitimately, you are underemployed and you had to rely on the credit card. And you knew at some point you were hopefully going to be able to pay it up.

But it just got out of control. Or maybe you felt a great weight of being in someone's debt because you had wronged them in some way.

I heard of a man who became a Christian and out of conviction and remorse for the way he had used and misused women in dating relationships.

[19 : 59] He sought out each one to ask for forgiveness for his sin that he had sinned against them. You know, if you ask for forgiveness from someone that you've wronged and they say, I forgive you, you know, then you know what it's like to feel the burden lifted.

It's a great thing when you can hear those four gospel promises of forgiveness that Peacemaker Ministries reminds us are biblical promises that we should make when we are asked to forgive someone.

First of all, I will not dwell on this incident. I will not bring this incident up and use it against you. I will not talk to others about this incident.

I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship. And a few reminders from Scripture, Matthew 6, 12, And forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.

1 Corinthians 13, 5, Love does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs.

[21 : 11] Ephesians 4, 32, Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. So in Jesus' parable about the kingdom of heaven, he's comparing the kingdom of heaven to this unmerciful servant, the gracious master.

The unmerciful servant, he didn't know anything about gospel forgiveness. He'd never heard of peacemaker ministries. He was not moved by the great act of mercy shown to him.

He took the master's kindness for granted. And what he did next was a great shock. He found another servant who owed him a relatively small amount and began to abuse him.

And everyone listening to Jesus tell this parable would have had a sense of justice when the master calls the unmerciful servant in and says, you wicked servant. You know what it's like to experience mercy, yet you don't know what it's like to show mercy.

Everybody understands. That's a justice. If he gets thrown out into jail because he's such an ingrate, so ungrateful for what has just been done for him.

[22 : 30] But which of the characters in the parable do you believe Jesus wants you to most identify with? You know, the gracious king or the servant who owed a little amount or the unmerciful and unforgiving servant.

I think he wants us to identify most with the one we detest the most, the one we dislike the most. Unfortunately, we have some things in common with him, with the unmerciful servant.

Peter had some things in common with him in asking that question of Jesus. In her book, Moving On, Ruth Batstone, Sherry and I got to hear her speak a few years ago and got her book.

She reminds us of some heart-level indicators that show that we're often like the unmerciful servant. She asked some pretty pointed questions to get to the heart. She says, Do you have what was once a warm relationship with someone you know that has become chilly or maybe even as cold as ice?

Do you sometimes find your heart overflowing with criticism and complaint? In your heart, have you ever rooted for a person to fail? Or have you ever spread gossip to others in a way that sets the person up for failure?

[23 : 49] And when she or he experienced failure, do you internally throw a party? Do you celebrate how much they deserved to fail?

Do you spend a lot of time remembering past wrongs? These are just questions of her way to get us to maybe be honest with ourselves that we have this struggle of forgiveness from the heart.

It shouldn't shock us that we sometimes act in this way toward others or that others may act in this way toward us because sadly, this type of heart attitude is an inescapable reality for human beings because of the fallen condition that we are in.

You know, even those of us who have been shown great mercy by God in Christ on the cross, let's be honest, we're a lot more like the unmerciful servant than we are like the gracious master.

We need God's help every day. So we pray every day, Lord, help us in our struggle to live in light of how much we've been forgiven. It's part of our lifestyle of repentance that we don't go to the priest once every three months or so and sit in the booth and say, Father, forgive me for I've sinned.

[25 : 16] It's been three months since my last confession. Maybe it's three minutes or it's three hours. It's a lifestyle of recognizing this sinful condition that we live with, the flesh and the world and the devil.

And so we need to always be aware of our heart, our heart attitudes, examining our heart. And as we've looked again at this familiar passage this morning, you know, where has the Holy Spirit revealing to you your own struggle?

Brian Chappell says that preaching is really applying truth to struggle. So we're all struggling with something, some aspect that the Holy Spirit is speaking to us.

In what situation do you need more peace, more power from God, more grace to forgive someone? Is there anybody that you're choking in your refusal to forgive their debt?

And Ruth Batstone, she argues that it's not contingent on the other person's repentance. So we can't use that as an excuse. Well, they've never asked for forgiveness. So it's okay for me to have these feelings in my heart.

[26 : 34] She argues that it's not contingent on that. It's about your heart before God. She wasn't given the opportunity to confront a man who had abused her as a middle schooler.

And he died before she ever had an opportunity to confront him. He never confessed. He never repented. And one of the hardest things she says for her is he was a Christian man and other people thought of him as just a wonderful, wonderful man.

And they would say things about him because they didn't know. They didn't understand the evil that he had done to her. But she was able, only by God's grace and enabling to forgive him.

She says it's not as easy as forgive and forget because God didn't just forget your debt. He paid a costly price for all of our sin in the death of his own son.

And so you're forgiving another person. Another person's debt is really a sacrifice for you. You absorb some of the shame when you, by God's help, you forgive a great debt or even a small debt.

[27 : 45] You know, you willingly take on a little suffering. You willingly, by God's grace, make a sacrifice to forgive and let go of an injustice that's been done to you rather than demanding payment.

That's our flesh. We want to demand justice. We want to demand payment. And we have a justice department that's important.

Justice is important. When someone has wronged us, it's not wrong for us to take them to court, to see that charges are filed against someone if they've done a great wrong to us.

But at the heart level, at some point, we have to not demand payment from them, but for the good of our own heart before God, by His power and His grace, recognize that He made a giant sacrifice for us.

His mercy and justice came together on the cross. And He suffered a loss of relationship with His Son that they have never had when He had to turn His face away from Jesus because of His sin for us, when He became sin for us.

[28 : 57] Never before had there been any distance between Father and Son and Holy Spirit. God the Father suffered in the death of Christ.

Jesus became sin for us so that this great transfer could take place that would mean that you would eternally benefit from His record. You would eternally benefit from His being the gracious Master who forgave the great debt that you had no chance of repaying.

So now you benefit from His record, His perfect sinless life being placed into your account. So when God sees you, it's like, you've done no wrong.

You haven't wronged me and you haven't wronged others. Even though the reality is we do. But because He's looking at the record of Christ that's been applied to you, that's how God sees you.

So He is smiling on Christ for His sacrifice. He's smiling on you. God is not angry with you if you are in Christ. And now there's, what does Paul say in Romans?

[30 : 09] There's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Amen? If you're in Christ, you're eternally blessed with every blessing that's His. And believing this gospel is the power available to you to freely offer forgiveness to others.

And Jesus honors us by inviting us to participate in the family business. If you go to a small family restaurant, you see that the whole family is involved oftentimes, right?

The teenage kids are bussing the tables or working in the kitchen or the younger kids might be sitting at a table doing their homework. Everybody's involved in the family business.

You know, but what's the family business for the church? God's family business. It's the business of forgiveness and reconciliation. That's what He's about. And no one in the family business is expected to just coast along.

But everybody's got to carry their weight. We all have to be involved in this business of forgiveness and reconciliation. Everyone is expected to be an active participant in forgiveness and reconciliation.

[31 : 23] No one gets a pass. It's not just the elders and the deacons and the ministry leaders, right? Every member is to be in the business of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Jesus expects that as Paul says to the Ephesian family members to make every effort. Hold nothing back. Give it your all. Spend the time. Pay the price. Labor well at making peace with humility and gentleness and patience as you bear with one another in love seeking unity in the Spirit through peace which binds us all together.

Amen? So that's the recipe for a peace-loving church, a culture of peace that's developed. Every one of us has a responsibility to promote that and not to hinder it.

You know, an exercise in self-reflection is always a good way to get us thinking about change. So I came up with a little quiz, if that's okay, for you this morning.

As we prepare for taking the Lord's Supper, as we, you know, we reflect on all the benefits we enjoy in union with Christ. We remember His suffering and death for paying the sin debt for us.

[32 : 45] Maybe a brief self-evaluation will help us think through our own hearts because Jesus wants us to, at the heart level, He wants us to be a forgiving people so if you have a scratch piece of paper, maybe the bulletin, there's a pen there in the pew, you could just write across the top four numbers.

You can number, you can evaluate yourself on a few questions. Number one would be almost never and number four would be quite often and in between two and three would be occasionally and here are the questions.

first of all, my heart leads me to quickly forgive others through repentant faith. One, two, three, or four.

Number two, I rely on God's Holy Spirit as the power source to enable forgiving another person. Holy Spirit is the power source that I rely on.

Don't overthink it, you know. Don't. The reason I did one through four and not one through five because we all like to just mark three, right? So, you've got to make a choice.

[34 : 18] Number three, the way I engage in conflict ends up being constructive, not destructive. Number four, I view conflict as inviting something better rather than avoiding something bad.

Number five, I recognize that conflict is a part of God's way of helping me grow more in Christ. number six, my goal in conflict is God's glory and the other person's good.

And number seven, the end result of conflicts I experience is reconciliation and healed relationships. Okay, so this is not pass-fail.

Okay? It's not. There are no wrong answers. It's just a way for us to think about doing a little exercise and just being honest with ourselves and with the Lord as we ask Him to continue to help us, right, in this gospel business, God's family business.

of forgiveness and reconciliation and peace. And that's what the Lord's Supper points to is the reconciliation that has been done for us that we have received not by doing anything to merit it but we receive it by His grace, by His favor, His mercy for us.

[36 : 12] Amen. So let me pray for us as we prepare for the Lord's Supper. Father, we depend on You for Your help in everything.

Your help in providing the foundation in our heart, the motivation that we need to be a peace-loving people, a peace-loving church.

we need Your strength and Your help. We are weak. We need You to give us the commitment to bear with one another, to be gentle toward others who have wronged us.

We rely on You to give us the right attitude about conflicts as something that can be constructive and not destructive, that You use these opportunities, that they're opportunities for us to glorify You and to serve another person.

So help us to have as our goal Your glory and others' good and may the end result of any conflicts that we face in personal relationships or as a church be reconciliation and healed relationships for Your sake and for the sake of reaching those who will look on us and say, wow, this is how God's people interact with one another.

[37 : 41] I want to be a part of that, that it will be attractive and winsome for the sake of the gospel. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.