

“I Have Red in My Ledger”

Mt. 18:21-35

Last week, we heard the first half of Matthew 18. You must be like a little child. You must think differently. You must see yourself as the small child in need of constant care from your heavenly Father. As I said last week, this entire section of Matthew focuses on what is greatness in the kingdom of God, which He says is receiving the kingdom as a little child – for the kingdom belongs to such as these.

However, these are not “rules for Christian living.” Jesus is not telling you that if you are humble and innocent and childlike enough, then you are worthy of the kingdom of God. Far from it. This entire section of Matthew speaks of repentance and forgiveness.

The verses just prior to our reading today were Jesus’ famous words which we heard last week, “If your brother sins against you (and Matthew uses ‘brother’ as anyone who might cross your path in life), go and tell him his fault just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. If he will not listen, take one or two witnesses. If he still refuses to listen, then tell it to the church. . . If they still will not repent, then treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” In all of this, the goal of calling someone to repentance and being ready to offer forgiveness is for the benefit of that other person. Even treating them as a pagan or a tax collector is for the purpose of waking them up.

It is important to recognize that if you have issues in your relationships; if you have any negative thoughts or feelings about your brother or sister, that is, any friend or neighbor, this is caused by sin. If you talk about it to others instead of the one with whom you have the difficulty, then you are the problem – even if the conflict did not originate with you. Go and tell him his fault, just between the two of you. Win back your brother. If you are unwilling to do that, or deem the offence against you something that isn't that big of a deal, then you forgive, forget, and move on.

We live in this complicated paradigm. There is a need to recognize sin as being “sin.” And we need to recognize the value of all sinners as people whom God has created and whom He has purchased with the blood of Christ. There is no one who you can write off as being unimportant or unworthy of God's grace. In fact, it could be said that the most unloving thing a Christian could do is to see someone wallowing in their sin, or rejecting God's grace, or living in the ignorance of false beliefs about God and not doing anything to share the truth of God's Word of Law and Gospel. When the door of opportunity opens, be ready to walk through that door.

The entire Christian community is meant to live and breathe and dwell around the mutual forgiveness being given by Christ through His church, loving each other from the heart as God first loved you. How many times have you sinned, yet God did not abandon you? How many times has He called you to repent and promises to remember your sin no more?

Peter, having heard Jesus speak of the call to repentance and the steps you are to take in resolving conflict, asks an interesting question, and one that seems rather “holy” and reasonable, “How often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Seven is a number which symbolizes holiness.

If my brother committed the same offense seven times, and asked for my forgiveness seven times, and I forgive him seven times, but on the eighth time I said, “Enough! I don’t care if I ever see you again.” The world would commend me for my patience and long-suffering. When Jesus says “not 7, but 70 x 7,” it seems beyond anything reasonable. The point is, God does not want you keeping track of strikes against your neighbor. If he comes in repentance, remember that sin no more.

This is not promoting a blanket of forgiveness for all saying, “Whatever you do to me or do against God’s will is fine.” No, sin must be recognized. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that pointing out the speck in your brother’s eye is a good thing, so long as you can see clearly and don’t have a plank in your own eye.

Jesus is talking about your brother coming to you in repentance asking for your forgiveness. There is no number of times large enough for when it is OK for you to cast him aside forever. This also is not a license for you to spew hatred upon anyone who does not repent (or who you think has not repented “enough” – whatever that would mean). Repentance and grace go together. Yet, grace is not a response to anything as if it were a payment for proper action. Grace is mercy, compassion shown to those who are undeserving. We talked about this in Bible class a couple of weeks ago.

This brings us to the parable Jesus uses to explain what He is talking about. A man was brought before the king who owed the king 10,000 talents. This is the sort of debt a common man could not work to pay off in a 100 lifetimes. Yet, he says to the king, “Have patience with me and I will pay you everything.” He is trying to pay back something that can’t be paid. He is helpless.

Rather than challenging this rather bold, false claim that he can pay it back, rather than calling him out for the liar and the thief that he is, the king simply has mercy on him and releases him from the debt. He doesn’t even ask him to pay back a little. This is grace; this is the kind of mercy poured out upon the world in the death and resurrection of Jesus, where the Lord has set aside the legal demands of creation. The Law says Adam and his children deserve to die, deserve to be eternally separated from God, and be eternally banned from the Tree of Life.

He set all of this aside nailing it to the cross in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. I owe a debt of sin. You owe a debt of sin. We have red in our ledger. This is a debt we could not repay in a 1000 lifetimes or an eternity in purgatory – if there were such a place. God has declared that you and I owe Him nothing, because He has put a different kind of “red” in our ledger. Through the blood of His Son, He has given us life when everything that speaks of justice says I deserve death and hell.

Receive this mercy. Receive this grace. Receive this with the faith of a little child. As we heard Jesus say last week, “The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Amen.