**Sermon Series: The 12 Marks of Christian Maturity**
**Sermon Title: You Stop Holding Grudges**

**Opening**: The passage we're going to be looking at this morning comes on the heels of our Lord's instruction about restoring a believer living in sin to fellowship with God and the body. Of course, this raised some questions on the part of the disciples about the whole subject of forgiveness, particularly as it related to their relationships with one another. And so, Jesus gave this instruction about forgiving one another.

**Text: Matthew 18:21-35 -- 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?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 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. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 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. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."**

We are now in the third week of a preaching series entitled, "***12 Marks of Christian Maturity***" (***Review***-- *We Exercise Freedom Responsibly; We Stop Making Excuses for our Failures*) Today as the text suggests, we're going to look at another evidence of maturity… the ability to forgive and forget. **I came across a story not too long ago about a pastor who, toward the end of Sunday service, asked his congregation, "*How many of you have forgiven your enemies*?"** Eighty percent of the people held up their hands. The Minister then repeated his question, "**How many of you have forgiven your enemies**?" This time, all responded, except one small elderly lady. "**Mrs. Neely, are you not willing to forgive your enemies**?" "**I don't have any**," She replied, smiling sweetly. "**Mrs. Neely, that is both wonderful and very unusual. Do you mind if I ask how old you are**?" "**Not at all, pastor. I'm ninety-eight**," she replied. The congregation was so impressed that they stood up and clapped their hands. "**Oh, Mrs. Neely, this is truly remarkable! Would you please come down to the front and, in our time remaining, tell us all how a person can live ninety-eight years and not have an enemy in the world**?" With that, the sweetheart of a lady tottered down the aisle, faced the congregation, and said, "**It's very simple, really. I outlived the little cretins!**" I suspect there are better ways to deal with those who introduce pain into our lives than to outlive them, unless, of course, by 'outliving' we mean that we're relating to them in a manner worthy of our Lord. If this is your ambition, then join me as we look at what Jesus taught about the subject of forgiveness.

**To Forgive is to Obey** (**Matthew 18:21-22a -- 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?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven**). Note that Jesus assumes we will forgive someone. The phrase "***I tell you***" is important here. It is used well over fifty times in the Gospel of Matthew (**For example: Matthew 5:20 -- For I tell you, unless your**

**righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven; Matthew 10:42 -- And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward).** On every single occasion that Jesus speaks these words, He is teaching about the way things are meant to work in the kingdom of God. Here He makes it clear that **forgiving each other is not an option, but a requirement for all those who come under His rule and reign**. As you know, this is not an easy task at times. **Nonetheless, this is what it looks like when we forgive others out of obedience to the Lord**.

- **To obey when we forgive continually** (**Matthew 18:22b** -- **Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven**). **In saying this, Jesus was implying that there should be no limit to forgiveness. Christians are expected to forgive as often as necessary**. No matter how many times someone offends us and then repents, Christians must be ready and willing to forgive that person and reconcile with him. ***Peter knew that some of the leading rabbis taught it was the responsibility of a Jew to forgive a repeated sin committed by the same offender three times; however, on the fourth, there was to be no forgiveness***. In suggesting seven, he probably thought he was being pretty gracious. Imagine then his surprise when Jesus responded with such a high number. **In all likelihood, He chose it in light of Lamech's declaration to his wives in the book of Genesis that if anyone took his life for killing a man in self defense, then he would be avenged seventy-seven times** (**See Genesis 4:24**). Our Lord was teaching that kingdom forgiveness is continual and limitless to those who earnestly seek it.
- **We obey when we forgive completely** (**Matthew 18:23-27 -- "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 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. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt**). The text tells us that the man who pleaded for mercy from the king was "***loosed***" from his debt. The word means "***to free fully***." To help us grasp just how much debt was cancelled, **Jesus used a number that would have equaled eleven years of taxes paid by the four provinces of Idumea, Judea, Samaria and Galilee to the Roman Government**. In today's economy, the man would have been forgiven of a debt that totaled in the billions of dollars. Why did our Lord use such a large number? He wanted people to understand the magnitude of the debt caused by our sin that every man owes God. **Every time we fail to live righteously, we rob God of the glory that is due Him in our obedience**. Because we sin over and over again, our debt continues to grow. Ezra, the Old Testament priest who led Israel to rebuild the temple after the Babylonian exile grasped the magnitude of his people's sin (**Ezra 9:6 NASB – Ezra prayed -- "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens**). It is no small thing then when God forgives us in Christ, because we have not sinned only a little, but so much that it has become a way of life for us. Yet Jesus explains that our debt is completely forgiven according to the grace and mercy of the King of Kings – **1 Peter 3:18 -- For Christ died for sins once for all. (Review: To forgive is to obey – we forgive continually and completely.)**

**To Forgive is to Forget** (**Matthew 18:28-35 -- But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 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. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart). Because we have been forgiven and God remembers our sins no more against us, so we are expected to do the same for others**. In this story, the man who had been forgiven should have been transformed by the grace he had received. ***Christ's audience no doubt marveled to learn that the experience did not in any way transform the man's character.*** In fact, he no sooner picked himself up off the ground and walked away when he encountered a fellow servant who owed him about **100 days wages, a paltry sum in comparison to his debt**. But instead of showering the man with grace and mercy, he treated him gruffly and demanded repayment. When the fellow servant fell to his knees and begged for patience, he received none. Instead, the man was thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. Word about what had happened quickly made its way back to the king who was furious with his servant. "**You wicked servant**," he said, "**I forgave you *(i.e., canceled* -- *the word means 'to loose' or 'to free fully'*) all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?**" In anger, his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed (**which, of course, because it was such a large amount, he would never be able to do**). **Why did this happen to him? Because he continued to hold a debt against another even though he had been forgiven of much more**.

The Bible tells us that we are to forgive as the Lord has forgiven us (**Colossians 3:12-13 -- Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive).** It is clear from the Scriptures that God forgives, not only CONTINUALLY AND COMPLETELY, BUT CONCLUSIVELY (i.e., terminating the offense). The fact that we are forgiven the moment we put our trust in Christ's sacrifice on the cross is beyond question. It is because we have been forgiven completely that God FORGETS our sin as well. The writer of Hebrews says it like this: **"There sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." (Hebrews 10:17**). This does not imply that God '***forgets***' them like we forget the details of a story we've told a hundred times. **Rather, it simply means that He elects never to bring up the offense again**. **One commentator** calls this "**the irrevocable erasing of sin from the divine record**." If that's what God does for our offenses, HOW COULD WE DO ANY LESS FOR SOMEONE ELSE?

***Corrie ten Boom***, who rescued Jews from the Nazis during WWII by hiding them in her home, told of not being able to forget a wrong that had been done to her. Even though she wanted to forgive the person, she kept rehashing the incident and so couldn't sleep. Finally, Corrie cried out to God for help in putting the problem to rest. "**His help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor**," Corrie wrote, "**to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks**." "**Up in the church tower**," he said, nodding out the window, "**is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower (ding) until there's a final dong and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down.**" **And so, it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversations, but the force -- which was my willingness in the matter -- had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at the last stopped altogether. She concludes, *"We can trust God not only above our emotions, but also above our thoughts***." Corrie Ten Boom learned an important truth about

forgiveness. **We have never fully forgiven until we've committed ourselves to forgetting**.

***Here are three concluding questions about forgiveness that might be floating around in your mind as we bring this message to a close:***

- **How can I forgive someone who isn't asking for it?** Forgiving others can be a one-sided affair (**Matthew 5:44-45 -- But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust**). It is Christ-like to forgive others who have wronged us, even if they don't acknowledge their offenses. We can do this because we are new creatures in Christ. In the Gospel of Matthew, we are told that ***those who are a part of God's kingdom are so humbled by His grace and mercy in that He forgives us, that forgiving others becomes standard protocol***. (**Matthew 6:14-15 -- For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses**). However, those who continually harbor bitterness and refuse to forgive are captive to their own sin**.** Their lack of humility prevents them, not only from forgiving others, but from seeking forgiveness from God. Not so with believers, however. It is in our nature to forgive.
- **How can I receive forgiveness from someone who isn't offering it**? The simple answer is that you can't. As a believer, know that you have been forgiven by Christ for every offense, but if another person refuses to accept your sincere apology, there is little you can do except continue to humble yourself and pray. Make it your habit to offer the right hand of fellowship and seek reconciliation because that is what the Lord expects of you (**Matthew 5:23-24 -- So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift**).
- **How can I forgive someone who has hurt me deeply and profoundly**? The only way this is possible is through Christ. The Bible exhorts us to **consider Him who endured such hostility against Himself that you may not grow weary and lose heart** (**Hebrews 12:3**). When we follow Christ's perfect example, we are able to run with endurance the race set before us. And no one modeled forgiveness better than He did (**See Luke 23:34**).

**Conclusion**: **Are you in need of forgiveness this morning? Or perhaps you need to forgive someone else. As your pastor, may I encourage you to forgive and forget? Do not permit the enemy to hold your heart captive to sin. If you do, you will bear a burden that God never intended that will rob you of life.** In the early 1980s, **Stephen Watt** was a sheriff's officer with the misfortune of pulling **Mark Farnham** over in a routine traffic stop. What he didn't know is that Farnham was speeding for a reason—he'd just robbed a bank. Farnham shot Watt five times and left him for dead. Watt recovered, but lost the sight in one eye, and still carries a bullet near his spine. As you might expect, Watt became bitter towards Farnham. His anger grew until his wife intervened. She encouraged him to forgive his assailant, if he was ever going to be a true Christian. Several years later, Watt attended a revival service at the prison and spotted Farnham across the room. He walked over to Farnham and hugged him. Watt says, "**I had basically been dead from the time I got shot until that moment**." When he forgave Farnham, Watt says, "**It was just like God picked up a semi-truck right off me and I actually started living**."