

Heaven's Secrets: Forgiveness

“The kingdom of heaven is like....”

Talk about a sentence that we want Jesus to finish, right? ‘Yes, yes, tell us Jesus, what is the kingdom of heaven like?’



To understand what the kingdom of heaven is like we might begin by understanding what it is not like. It is not like the kingdom of this earth. This sermon series is not about politics nor candidates for any office, even president. All of that is tied into the kingdom of earth, and while that is important for Christians to understand and participate in, Jesus is trying to teach us about something far more important than who will be president or what legislation passes Congress.

So, ‘the kingdom of heaven’ is not the kingdom of earth, but what then is it? Where is it? Who is in it? Look, I have eleven weeks to cover this, so stop asking all of the hard questions right off the bat!

In the Bible the phrase kingdom of heaven is interchangeable with the phrase kingdom of God. They refer to the hearts where Jesus reigns as king, because, after all, you cannot have a kingdom without a king! Where does Jesus

reign? Like the hymn says, 'Jesus shall reign where'er the sun does his successive courses run'. As in here and everywhere and beyond.

So, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth are both 'here'? Yes!
Didn't you just say...uhhh! My friends, 10 more weeks! Stay tuned!

Let me just tell you this much today: when Jesus is describing the Kingdom of Heaven it applies to both the *world* in which we live and the *world* in which we hope to live.

So, tell us, this mysterious place that is not really a place, this place that is here and not here, that is now and not yet, what is it like?

Okay. Let me try this instead. Let me tell you a story.

The kingdom of heaven is like a borrower who owes a gazillion million dollars to a lender. It is like the bank forgot to put a credit limit on this clown's credit cards and he bought houses and cars and boats for everyone he knew and met. And then the bill came due. The fun was over.

-Pay me now, the lender says.

-I cannot, says the borrower.

-Well then, I guess your whole family will need to be sold along with your stuff.

-Can you give me a little more time?

-More time?! You couldn't pay this debt in five lifetimes! What were you thinking? No, I will not give you more time. Instead, I forgive the entire debt.

-Oh, please give me more...what did you say? You forgive the entire debt? Uh.

Thank you?!

The kingdom of heaven is like that, my friends. God is the lender. We are the foolish borrowers, who know that what we are doing is wrong, but we do it anyway. And God has every right to require that we pay the debt our sin creates, but God is merciful, so he forgives us our debt.

The kingdom of heaven is like that: overflowing and never-ending mercy and grace, forgiveness that is underserved poured out on the King's servants in buckets and buckets of love.

Michael Wilkins defines these gifts of God:

“‘Mercy’ is not giving to a person what he deserves, while ‘grace’ is giving to a person what he does not deserve.”

Sounds great, right? And it is. But that is just Act I. In Act II the borrower, fresh off being forgiven, is celebrating at dinner with his family and he sees an old high school buddy who owes him \$500.



-Hey, good to see you, old friend. Where's my \$500 bucks?

-Oh, I don't have it! Can you give me more time?

-More time? What do you think I am, a Christian? He grabs him by the throat and shouts in front of the whole restaurant, 'I am taking you to court and having you sent to prison until you pay up, you, you, *(insert words I cannot say in church.)*

Ah, is that what the kingdom of heaven is like? We can exact revenge in the earth's terms because, hey, the guy owes me, fair and square! How about it, Jesus? We can get mad, get even with people who hurt and offend us, who take our stuff and ruin our lives, right, Jesus? That is what the Kingdom of heaven is like?

Well, consider Act III:

Another person in the restaurant, someone from the borrower's church, reports back to the lender about the man's angry demands on his old buddy. So, the lender calls in the borrower and tells him,

-Look here, young man. I forgave you everything, the gazillion million dollars you owed me. You refuse to forgive some decades old debt of \$500? OK. If that is how you feel about forgiving debt, I will use your standard too. Off to the jailers with you until you pay back what you owe...which will be never!

5

Oops. Maybe this story is not so much fun after all. That is what the kingdom of God is like? Well now, isn't this a fine mess you've gotten us into, Ollie?

I cannot tell you otherwise and be faithful to the gospel truth. God is overflowing with amazing grace and buckets of forgiveness to everyone who seeks his love. But the King has every expectation that we, his subjects will be changed into the same type of grace-filled, pouring out bucket of love friends.

The thing about the kingdom of heaven that we like is that God is there, full of grace and mercy. And, of course we like even more that we are promised a place there, with God, both now and not yet. What we are not so sure is whether we are up to the transformation being a citizen of heaven requires.

So, let me give you some good news. The transformation is not in your power, not entirely anyway. Your ability to forgive as you have been forgiven is a matter of connecting to the power of God in Christ through the Spirit in prayer. As

in: 'forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.' Sound familiar? Ever said those words?

Did you realize what you were saying? 'As I forgive people who have hurt me, that's the same way I want you to forgive me God.' Oooh.

Being made holy enough to live into this transforming power of prayer is a lifetime of work. But you want to be a citizen in the kingdom of heaven, right? We are in a dress rehearsal friends, for the best and biggest opening night the universe has ever known. The night the curtain is pulled back on the stage where, appearing tonight and forever, is the King and his servants.

So, keep on praying. Keep on studying God's Word. Keep on connecting with other believers. Because we need to do this together. Why bother being a part of a church? Because, dear friends, we need to help each other learn how to be citizens of the Kingdom, servants of the King.

Learning to forgive is something we can do together starting today. And it is for our good. There are myriad studies which show that the power of forgiveness is enough to set us free from the weight that harboring anger and resentment creates in us.

I have lots of stories I could tell you about this, but my favorite one comes from another Rabbi, the famous author and therapist Harold Kushner, as related to me by Charlotte Kleghorn:

7

(A woman is counseling with Rabbi Kushner.) “She is a single mother, divorced, working to support herself and three young children. She says to me, “Since my husband walked out on us every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?” I answer her, “I am not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't. It was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter angry woman. I'd like to see him out of your life emotionally as completely as he is out of it physically, but you keep holding on to him. You're not hurting him by holding on to that resentment, but you're hurting yourself.”

Author Anne Lamott captures the idea, “Forgiveness means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back.”

Forgiveness means offering the same mercy and grace we receive from God in Christ to others. Let me make clear though that this doesn't mean people

suffering in abusive relationships need to stay in them. Abusive relationships are not a required part of living in the kingdom of heaven. John Calvin helpfully teaches, “God desires not that we approve in them what he condemns, but only desires that our minds shall be purified from all hatred.”; and again, “(T)hough I entertain an unfavorable opinion of him, as he deserves, still I am said to forgive him.”

Forgiveness sets us free to be the person God created us to be, a person who can pour over buckets of love because the buckets of love God poured out on our heads at the cross have that much extra in them. There is enough for everyone. But we won't have the power to pour out buckets of underserved love on others until we release the weight of resentment and anger and hate and revenge off our backs.

What is the first secret to living in the Kingdom of Heaven? Accepting the forgiveness that comes from God's love and pouring over that same forgiving love to our enemies, our friends, our families. What kind of people serve in the kingdom of heaven, both now and not yet? People who forgive as they have been forgiven. And here is the good news: that group of servants can include you and me. *God, teach us the secret of forgiving others as you have forgiven us.*