



# Hear the Word

from Pastor Paul E. Hoffman

Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

## Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 17, 2017

Matthew 18:21-35

This past Monday evening I landed in Baltimore, picked up a rental car, and began making my way up I-95 toward my destination of the day, Wilmington. It was a beautiful evening drive through the bucolic farmland of Maryland and Delaware and the lovely north reaches of the Chesapeake Bay. And it was just that dusky time of evening when colors begin to lose their clarity in the golden light of sunset and shapes are a bit fuzzy and undefined.

And sure enough, it happened. I found myself suddenly on the bumper of a smallish U-Haul rental truck with no lights on. I was hitting seventy and he was going about fifty-five, so I barely missed him by swerving into the right lane. Fortunately, the lane was empty and I didn't hit either the rental truck or anything on the left. Crisis averted.

But it is the sort of thing that gets your adrenaline pumping, and so I immediately swung into problem solving mode. (That's what pastors often do.) The voice in my head whispered, then shouted, "you gotta let this guy know he doesn't have any lights on before he kills somebody." I tried everything. I flashed my lights on his right. I swung around on his right. I got right up beside the driver's window and gestured for all I was worth. He made the same gesture back, with a quizzical look on his face. I finally got in front of him and slowed way down. Still nothing. I wound down my window stuck my arm over the roof of the car and pointed to the shoulder. We both pulled off. "You don't have any lights on," I shouted. "Thanks, man..." he replied. And I pulled back onto the Interstate with a totally inappropriate sense of superiority at my good deed. Crisis averted. At least *this* crisis averted. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

*For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves...*

Cruising down the highway of life, one day one of these king's slaves who owed a bundle was brought in before the king to pay up. There was no way it was going to happen. The debt was way too big. So the king and the slave pulled over to the side of the road together to see what could be worked out. The king was gracious and merciful. In the context of what Jesus is teaching this particular day, responding to Peter's question – he was forgiving. On the spot, right there on the shoulder of the Interstate, the king forgave the debt. The whole thing. Every last penny. It was Jesus' way of putting some flesh on the bones of what he was driving home to Peter and anyone else who was listening: *Oh, Peter. Forgiveness in God's economy is not about seven times. It's about seventy-seven times. It's more abundant and compassionate and bottomless than you could ever imagine.*

And that might have been the end of it, except that the slave who was now forgiven got part of the message, but not all of it. He got the part where he was forgiven and all was wonderful for him. What he didn't get was the part where you pass it on. And you know what happens next.

Instead of forgiving those who owed him a pittance, his humility before the forgiving king was soon forgotten and turned to bossy arrogance among those around him. Jesus says he even seized one of his fellow-slaves by the throat and threw him into prison, all because of a couple dollars worth of debt.

How disappointing this must have been for the king. He was trying to lean into a new way of living there with his people in his kingdom. Surely he thought that by forgiving this first slave so much, it would be easy for him to forgive others so a very little. He hoped his example would bring the others along...

But no. That's the trouble with us in the human race, isn't it? It's the trouble even with us in the family of God. We're slow learners. We get so focused on our own lives. On our own needs. On our own little construction of how the world is, and how it ought to operate, and what it owes me, and how I like to be in charge. We forget that pattern of selfless love and compassion that the ruler has set down for us. We forget. Or, we remember and choose to ignore. Or we just go bumping along down the highway, very glad to be in charge, and doing things our own way.

Monday evening I was very glad to be in charge. I leaned way into the feeling of superiority and control that led me to get that man in the U-Haul to pull over and turn his lights on. And then I drove off into the evening in a spirit of self-congratulations, enjoying the final dusky beauty of Delaware as the colors faded more and the shapes became less and less defined.

But wait! Why were people honking at me? Why was the guy behind me flashing his lights? Yep. I'm sure you have it figured out.

I didn't have my lights on. At first I blamed the rental car. And then I blamed the rental car company. Then I blamed the guy in the U-Haul by the side of the road for not telling me (completely ignoring the fact that I rushed off before he could ever have had the chance.) I mentally seized everyone by the throat that I could possibly seize and settled in to the old, tortured way of being, even though I knew all along that in the kingdom, there is a better way. There is a way of forgiving each other – of focusing on the other's needs. A way that allows us to forget our arrogant selves and for once, just once, to see things through the eyes of compassion and care for the other. For once, just once, to see things through the compassionate eyes of the one who is telling the story, the compassionate eyes of Jesus.

Out there in the world, where the colors are often fading fast and where I find more and more these days that the shapes I once knew as fixed and dependable seem to be changing every single day, I wonder... I wonder, will I be able to take this lesson of Jesus and bring it to the highway? Will I remember the next time somebody makes me angry, the incredible love and forgiveness that has first been poured out for me? To the degree that I can do that, I'm certain in my head that the world could be a better place. A kingdom place. A seventy-seven kind of place. And I know that is the life to which Jesus calls me. I get that in my head. But I wonder. I wonder about my heart, my life. Can I do it? Will I do it?

Will you?

In the name of the Father and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.