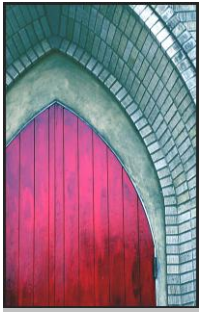


# "... As We Forgive Our Debtors"

TEXT: MATTHEW 18.21-35



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## ONE THING

There is an old Charlie Peacock song that says: "I believe there is one thing we need // more than to be understood or be known // It's our need, a true undeniable need // For me and for you // This is our need // It's forgiveness." Do you agree? For the Christian there is great comfort in the God's forgiveness—we could not bear the name 'Christian' without such hope. Honest reflection tells some of us that it's a wonder that people put up with us at all. There is enough wrong with us that without forgiveness, we would have nothing. Some of us live with impressions.

Others have specific memories of wronging and of being wronged. In some cases asking for forgiveness has been unnecessary and we have moved on. In others, forgiveness appears impossible. Too often forgiveness is beyond us. At the end of a summer in which we have talked often about reconciliation, we turn to consider our need to forgive.

## MATTHEW 18.21-35

<sup>21</sup>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?" <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."

<sup>23</sup>"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup>When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>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.' <sup>29</sup>So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup>He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup>And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup>So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

## HOW OFTEN?

This passage begins with an honest question by one of Jesus' disciples: "How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"<sup>18.21</sup> Throughout Matthew 18,

Jesus teaches on the need that everyone has for God's grace in their lives. He begins by calling His followers child-like dependence and humility,<sup>18.1-4</sup> and then transitions to talking about the danger of sin and our need to take drastic measures to run from it.<sup>18.5-9</sup> In the face of such strong language, Jesus points us to the pursuing forgiveness of God the Father.<sup>18.10-14</sup> Jesus is quick to put into words how we are to live this out in community by describing how to face sin and help one another move toward forgiveness.<sup>18.15-20</sup> And then comes Peter's question.<sup>18.21</sup> He's not talking about concepts; he's concerned about one who would sin against him repeatedly. In essence, Peter is saying, "If sin is as potentially disastrous as it is, and we are to take it seriously both individually and corporately, what is the limit on how much we should forgive one another? Surely it isn't right to continue to forgive, is it?" The underlying question is that if there is no limit to forgiveness, don't we then risk down-playing the seriousness of sin?

Jesus' response to Peter must have been confusing: "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."<sup>18.22</sup> Peter thought he was being generous (by our standards he was – 'three strikes and you're out'). Jesus' answer is a declaration that we are to never stop forgiving—that forgiveness must mark the whole of our interactions with one another. And to make this point clear, Jesus tells a parable.

This should cause us to pause. We have asked Peter's question over and over again. And that question has been asked about us. We see the need to set a limit—not ruling out generosity, of course. Where Jesus takes us through this parable is to the place where we need to face our need to forgive others in light of our forgiveness before God. The two are intertwined, and when we lose one, we risk losing both. How, then, can we understand the connection, and what do we need to see about ourselves as we learn to forgive?

## A PEOPLE IN DEBT

Our starting place for understanding Jesus' call to forgiveness as a way of life is to understand that, spiritually speaking, we are a people in debt. Jesus describes our need before God specifically in terms of money. He begins the parable with a king seeking to "settle accounts" with his servants,<sup>18.23</sup> presumably collecting money he has invested or loaned out. A servant is brought before this king who owes 10,000 talents (a unit of weight, probably silver).<sup>18.24</sup> One talent is roughly equivalent to 20 years worth of wages. It would have taken him 200,000 years to pay off this debt. In our terms, for somebody making \$50,000, that's about \$10 billion. The point is that contrary to his plea, there is no way this servant would have been able to make this payment.<sup>18.26</sup> The servant doesn't seem to understand this, but nevertheless pleads for freedom for him and his family and for patience in his payment. In an act of sheer compassion, the King not only releases the man from being sold, but goes farther by completely forgiving his debt.<sup>18.27</sup>

Jesus tells us at the end of this passage that, in this parable, the King represents God the Father,<sup>18.35</sup> and the implication is that we are the servant who owes the debt he could never pay off.

This is the language Jesus uses in the Lord's Prayer,<sup>Mt 6.12</sup> which Paul also uses in describing our sinfulness.<sup>Col 2.14</sup> We owe something we can't pay-back; and we stand guilty, apart from Grace. Do you see yourself as someone in spiritual debt? Like the servant, you may have a sense that you owe God something, but are you living as if you're convinced that you will be able to pay it back sometime soon? I suspect that without knowing it, as you attempt to pay it back, you find that it increases with time. If it is on you to pay off this debt, what hope do you have?

In this parable, Jesus describes presents 'forgiveness' in the simple terms of the canceling of a debt—the releasing of another from what is owed. The point behind this image, though, is that Jesus is illustrating the forgiving grace of the Father. For the king to forgive the debt, he 'eats' it as a loss. In effect, this servant was simply given \$10 billion. The Bible describes God as one who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . . forgiving iniquity and sin"<sup>Ex 34.6-7; cf. Ps 86.5, 15; Ps 103.8</sup> and with Him there is forgiveness.<sup>Ps</sup>

<sup>130.4; Ps 32.1-5; Ps 51.1-12</sup> God's forgiveness points forward to something. His eternal perfection and patience yet point to justice being accomplished, to a payment being made—which happened at the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>Rom 3.21-26</sup> God's forgiveness and righteousness meet at the cross; for Him to simply ignore our sin would either make our sin unimportant, or Him somehow less than perfect. This teaching in Matthew 18 comes in the context of Jesus telling His disciples that He is steadily moving toward His own death on the Cross.<sup>Mt 16.21-23, 17.22-23, 20.17-19</sup>

At the end of chapter 20, Jesus gives light onto the purpose of this event: "to give his life as a ransom for many."<sup>Mt 20.28</sup> By dying on the cross, Jesus makes payment for His people.

## UNFORGIVING

The absurdity of this parable comes with the servant's response. His debt has been absorbed by the king, and somehow he sees it necessary to follow-up with his own debtors. When this servant goes and find someone who owes him money, the sum is far more reasonable – roughly 4 months worth of work.<sup>18.28</sup> Not only is this significantly less, but it would have been entirely feasible for the second man to pay it off. What does his response to grace display about us?

Notice specifically what he does: "seizing him, he began to choke him."<sup>28</sup> This man stands with the life of his debtor literally within his grasp; it is an act of violence in which the servant is playing god over his debtor's life. He has put himself in the place of absolute judgment. The debtor in this second scene false down and pleads for his life, using words nearly identical to those the first servant had spoken not long before. He has forgotten his own plight even now as he is taking away the life of another debtor.

This unforgiving servant is one of two key focal points of this parable (the other being the King) and as such he stands as a mirror for us. Do you see yourself in this man? How do you treat those who legitimately stand as your debtors? How do you treat employees on whose work you depend, who report directly to you? Let's be clear—this does not mean that you should never let anyone go from a job due to poor performance. It does call us to treat one another with equity, though, and to acknowledge that we are not in the place of God over them. The key way we do this is to consider with honesty and clarity the debt from which we have been forgiven—we must face our sin.

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

The final 'scene' of this parable<sup>31-34</sup> brings these ideas together. The king makes it clear that the first servant has his life only as an act of mercy.<sup>32-33</sup> The king made a decision concerning the life of this servant—and the king himself sees the absurdity in the servant's response. For him, there is a direct connection between having been shown mercy, and showing mercy to others, and the king's rightful response is anger toward the unforgiving servant.<sup>34</sup>

This is a parable—and therefore we must be careful not to push imagery too far. But note that the king's response in these final verses guards against 'absolutizing' forgiveness. The servant's debt is forgiven, and at the very same time he is held accountable for future behavior based on this act of forgiveness. In our terms, our sin is dealt with fully and finally, and yet as Scripture demonstrates, we are called to seek forgiveness in an ongoing manner.<sup>cf. Ps 32, 51, 130; Mt 6.12; 2 Cor 7.10-12</sup> In relating to one another, this guards us from shallow expressions of and demands for forgiveness.

Aside from the obvious display of hypocrisy and ingratitude, why is the connection so strong between our forgiveness of each other and God's forgiveness of us? Living this way—accepting what we refuse to grant to others—is a disturbing act of presumption upon God. It is the declaration that we somehow deserve His forgiveness, while no one deserves ours. This is founded on something other than an honest view of our sin, and a warped understanding of forgiveness. Jesus' final point is not to imply that we earn God's forgiveness by doing it right ourselves first. Nor is He implying that God will somehow take away eternity with Him if we mess up. It is instead a challenge as those truly and surely forgiven, the only consistent response is to forgive others.

## THE FORGIVING COMMUNITY

What does all of this say about how we do this together? If reconciling with one another is a priority for a church, how do we do this? And how do we honestly and faithfully shape our lives so that we are at the same time running from sin, and living in the freedom of forgiveness?

- **We talk about our sins.** When we wrong each other, we must be honest about what we've done. Each of us is as a debtor before God of an amount that we could never pay back. Even more than acknowledging our sinfulness to one another, we must ask God in His grace to help us see more clearly specific ways in which we hurt others. This does not mean that everybody knows everything about us. But it does mean that we must acknowledge our sin and our sins.
- **We ask for forgiveness.** It is implied behind Jesus' words here, but when we see our sins toward each other, we must live together in such a way that this is welcomed. We cannot assume this will be easy or even that living out forgiveness won't cost all of us much.
- **We grant forgiveness.** At the beginning and end of this passage, this is exactly what Jesus says: as often as we are sinned against, we must forgive.

Forgiveness is the sacrificial canceling of the debt of another. We cannot and should not pursue this out of mere good intention, and in our own power. The only thing that sets us free to face our own sin and to allow others to face their sin is the grace of God. Only in the through the victory of the Cross can we forgive "seventy times seven."