

Practicing Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

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21 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.

23 "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."

When you travel to a country dominated by oppression it is not hard to find images of tragedy and pain. Last week I was in Kiev, Ukraine, and in a grassy knoll there is a bowl shaped field with a monument that looks as if the statues are climbing on top of each other, springing from the ground. It is a memorial to 34,000 Jews who were rounded up, shot, and buried in mass graves by the Germans in World War II. The soldiers after emptying their weapons and not wanting to waste any more bullets, buried all of them in this field where many of them were wounded and still alive. The people of Kiev who were alive said that the ground moved for three days. It is stunning memorial to cruelty of our world.

Our world groans under the weight of the brokenness and the effects of sin. Mass graves, social injustice, rampant abuse, fractured relationships, and deep personal wounds are part of the human condition. We live in a very fallen world.

Today we turn our attention toward the subject of forgiveness. There are few things that would be more practical than to talk about than practicing forgiveness because knowing what

God says about forgiveness is a matter of spiritual survival in a world with so much possibility for conflict and pain. We all know people who have created self-made prisons of bitterness, unforgiveness, and resentment. Therefore, understanding biblical forgiveness is important. But there's more at stake here than just one's emotional health.

Forgiveness as Jesus defines it here would make his followers very, very different than the surrounding world and culture. That is his aim. Consistently embracing the depth and breadth of forgiveness would make an individual so unique and radical that a watching world would have to wonder about the motivation behind it. For someone to forgive like Jesus suggests, the person would have to be overwhelmed by something beyond the personal benefits of granting forgiveness. And that "something" is the overwhelming forgiveness that God has granted to his followers.

In other words, it is only the forgiven that can really forgive. Life in the kingdom is to be marked by an eye-popping, heaven-gazing, grace-exalting forgiveness, and Jesus goes to great lengths to make this point. Further, if earthly forgiveness is not a part of a person's life, then their understanding and receiving of divine forgiveness is in doubt. Forgiveness is that important and that radical.

So let's take a look at the passage to see what we can learn and to discover what Jesus wants us to feel about forgiveness.

A Genuine Question

Our passage begins with an honest question from Peter. He has just heard Jesus' teaching on how to respond to situations where someone does us wrong (vv 15-20). This section of Matthew (chapters 18-20) is all about what Jesus would do if he were me. Two weeks ago we learned about his definition of greatness as we saw the supreme value that God puts on dependent faith (vv. 1-14). Jesus is clearly on a theme of practical living with a particular focus on relationships, and Peter has a question about how far to apply Jesus' teaching. In other words Peter wants to take Jesus literally but he is not sure how far he should go.

Therefore, Peter sets up a question for Jesus. He asks it in such a way that it almost comes across as if he says, "Jesus, I have this friend and he needs some help learning how to apply this." Peter asks a hypothetical question: "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Now we have no reason to doubt Peter's genuineness, and he is to be commended for his suggestion because to suggest forgiveness seven times is going far beyond the norm.

To fully grasp what Peter is saying here you have to understand two key points:

1. It is assumed that the person that Peter is talking about has acknowledged that they've done something wrong and repented. Luke 17:3 records a parallel account to our text in Matthew:

Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, 4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (Luke 17:3-4).

This is important because the Bible tells us that forgiveness is conditional. It is conditional upon the death of Christ (Rom 3:26); it is conditional on the confession of sin (1 John 1:9); and it is conditional on repentance (Acts 2:38). So Peter is not just talking about someone who hurts you, but someone who hurts you, repents, and then hurts you again.¹ This makes the seven-time forgiveness, at face-value, extraordinary. Even more so if you consider that Luke said, "seven times in the day." To understand the power of this question you must know that forgiveness was and is always conditional.

2. The other element that increases the power of Peter's question is the fact that he suggested seven times. In Jesus' day and according to the scribes, a person was obligated to forgive another person up to three times. Therefore, Peter's suggestion of seven was a doubling plus an additional time. Peter was suggesting that Jesus' disciples should forgive twice as much as everyone else.

Peter's question was a good one, and I would suspect that if you were nearby and heard him ask the question you would have been shocked or impressed at how far Peter was suggesting one should go in forgiveness. Seven times was quite generous.

Jesus' Stunning Answer

What Jesus said next must have rocked their world! While Peter's suggestion was generous, Jesus' generosity in forgiveness is almost unthinkable. It is revolutionary. Jesus said, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." He eclipsed Peter's generosity with a mind-blowing standard.

The phrase "seventy times seven" was first made famous by Lamech, the father of Noah and a descendant of Cain, who bragged "if Cain's revenge is seven-fold, then Lamech's is seventy-fold" (Gen 4:24). His statement was as arrogant as it was outrageous. Lamech was suggesting

¹ Obviously the next question that some might ask would be, "If the person continues to commit a particular sin, is that person truly repentant?" That is a good question but it is beyond the scope this verse. Peter's question is not designed to give a full answer to that kind of exception case. His question is focused on the heart and disposition of the forger, not the validity of the repentance on the part of the offender.

that his revenge would be unending or without limit. And that is exactly what Jesus says in Matthew 18 but he doesn't say it about revenge; he says it about forgiveness.

Jesus' point is not to up the ante on the number of times that a person should practice forgiveness from three to seven to 490 times. His point is that the disciples should not be Lamech-like in their lust for revenge when people do them wrong, but to have a Lamech-like passion for forgiveness. In other words, the followers of Jesus are to practice an unending forgiveness. No counting. No limits. So while our culture is hell-bent on revenge, the followers of Jesus are radically different. The world brags about unending revenge; followers of Jesus practice unending forgiveness.

Now if you understand and feel what Jesus is saying here you will immediately say, "Wait a minute. How is that even possible?" If you hear him correctly Jesus' words should generate tension, questions, and "well, what about?" scenarios. If his teaching doesn't, then you probably have not pushed the envelope far enough on what he is saying. Jesus anticipates and wants that kind of response. He wants forgiveness to be shocking.

Now before we go further, I want you to do something. Without giving you all kinds of qualifications and exceptions, can you just embrace the tension that Jesus wants us to feel here? Can you just simply feel the gut-wrenching dissonance and the culture-shocking statement that forgiveness like this produces? For just a moment put away all the excuses, the justifications, the rationalizations as to why this kind of forgiveness is impractical and impossible. For a moment, I just want you to tip the scales of justice way over to the mercy side. Here's why: Because I think that it is only when you allow yourself to go that far that you are able to really understand what Jesus is saying. And I think that is only when you go that far that you can really see the qualifications and conditions clearly.

In other words, as it relates to offenses to us, Jesus wants us to err not on the side of personal justice and revenge but on mercy and forgiveness. And my question is very simple: Do you live with that kind of orientation? What is your bent? Is it justice or mercy? Where do you lean? Toward retaliation or forgiveness?

Driving Home the Point with a Parable

Jesus obviously anticipated that his teaching would carry with it a significant level of tension. So he offered a parable to do two things: first, he wanted to illustrate what he is teaching, and secondly he wanted to motivate his hearers to put this into practice. His story was designed to draw them into story which has an obvious point.

Now as we look at this parable I need you to keep in mind an important back story. What you hear and what the disciples hear are the same parable, but if you've read the New Testament you should notice something more. In the New Testament we understand the scope and

depth of forgiveness given to us based upon the sacrifice of Christ. We understand that God has forgiven our past, present and future sin-debt. The disciples did not understand the beauty of this while they were with Jesus. But we do; at least I hope you do. So as we look at this parable of the principle of forgiveness keep in mind the looming, grace-filled shadow of the cross that is cast over this parable. This is really important or the parable will become merely a moralistic story (i.e, "be more forgiving"). Look for the looming shadow of the cross here.

An Unbelievable Debt

Verse 23 begins by telling us that that kingdom of heaven "may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants." This "slave" was probably some kind of official since he was entrusted with so much money, and the king was calling in his debts.²

There was one servant who owed a substantial debt. The text tells us that he owed ten thousand talents. A typical worker was paid one denarius a day and a talent was worth about 6,000 denarii. Therefore, this man would have to work approximately 60 million days or 193,000 years to earn this amount of money.³ However, the point is not the number of days but the overwhelmingly impossible amount. Jesus is talking in hyperbole here. In our culture we would say, "I'm not going to forgive him in a million years!" or "he's done that to me thousands of times." The point is not the accuracy of the number, but emotions of the accounting.

The man could not pay the debt (of course not!). Therefore, the king ordered that he and his family to be sold into slavery. The point to be made here was not that the man would then be able to settle the debt. Rather, the point here is that everything the man had, including his family, was on the line here. He had an insurmountable debt, and it had now cost him everything. The man was not just broke or bankrupt; he and his family were ruined!

May I remind you again about the shadow that looms over this story? This man had a debt so great that it is impossible to be paid, and it cost him everything – including his freedom. Sound familiar?

An Undeserved Pardon

The man had no options but to throw himself at the mercy of the king. According to verse 26, the servant fell on his knees and asked for the king to be patient with him, telling him that he would pay him everything that he owed. The king and the servant both knew that it was a ridiculous promise. There is no way that this man could pay this debt. But it is his only chance.

² David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2008), 450.

³ Ibid.

Amazingly, the king is moved by the man's pleading. And even more remarkable is the fact that he rejects the man's offer of repayment, and he does something else. Actually he does two things: he releases him of the consequences and he grants him pardon for future payment. No consequences and no future jeopardy. He forgives the debt completely.

Just stop here and savor what this means. In one moment this man went from being completely ruined and absolutely hopeless to entirely debt-free. He went from being in total bondage to complete freedom. He went from having an insurmountable debt that ruined his life to having a life-changing pardon that was completely undeserved.

Further think of what this means regarding the king. Releasing the man and his family from jail to allow him to work for the rest of his life to pay a debt he'd never be able to pay would have been very generous. After all everyone who heard this story knew that it would be impossible for this man to actually do this. But the king goes even further! He releases the slave and forgives him of the debt in the future. And that means yet another thing. When a debt is forgiven, the person who forgives the debt actually pays the debt since they suffer the loss of what was rightfully theirs. So the king by forgiving this man pays the debt himself. This is generosity that is even more unbelievable than the size of the man's debt. The generosity of the king is infinitely greater than the man's debt since he has forgiven something that is enormous and rightfully his. This moment is meant to take your breath away.

Again, remember the shadow. All human beings have an insurmountable sin-debt that God is just in collecting through punishment, and the beauty of the gospel is the fact that God releases us of the consequences of our sin, pays the debt himself through the death of his own Son, and then releases us of all future consequences. In Ephesians 2:7 Paul describes our forgiveness this way: "to show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." This is divine generosity that takes your breath away.

An Unthinkable Act

All of this, however, is just the set up. The text tells us that "this same servant" went out and found a fellow servant who owed him some money. The man apparently owed a hundred denarii which was about four months wages, and he demanded that the debt be paid. He does this even though he has just been forgiven 579 times that amount.

In an ironic twist the indebted man pleads with the king's servant using the identical words that we just heard: "have patience with me, and I will pay you." Now this man could have repaid his debt. It actually was possible and within reason that he could do so. But the king's servant was not moved. He refused. Then he does something that is unthinkable: he put the man in prison. Despite having himself and his family released from prison, he treats this man with contempt and ungrateful cruelty.

The injustice of this moment is very clear to those who observed this behavior. The fellow servants who saw the actions of the previously forgiven man were "greatly distressed" (v 31). The word means that they were very grieved. The forgiven man's callousness was just so wrong! His actions were the epitome of ingratitude and injustice.

The tragic irony is obvious! A king was generous when he could have been just; a servant was forgiven when he should have been punished; and the same servant refuses to forgive, creating a great injustice.

An Unrelenting Punishment

The king heard of this great injustice and brought the formerly forgiven servant back into his court and rebuked him: "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Matt 18:32-33). The answer is assumed. Of course he should. That would be the right response to the scope of the mercy that came his way.

The parable ends with a fearful finish: "And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt" (Matt 18:34). In other words he would be in prison forever. He would never be able to repay his debt.

The Warning

The parable has finished, but Jesus makes absolutely sure that no one misses his stunning point. His original teaching was sweeping, the forgiveness was incredible, the injustice of servant was unbelievable, and the punishment was devastating. But Jesus wasn't finished. He makes one last statement that should make every grace-comprehending person shudder:

"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matt 18:35).

What is Jesus saying here? It actually is pretty simple. First let me put it negatively: If you fail to forgive others, you are not really forgiven. Now positively: Those who really understand the beauty, scope, depth, and power of God's forgiveness through Christ are forgiving people.

Remember the shadow of the cross that I've talked about before? Well it is really important here because the kind of forgiveness that Jesus is talking about here is truly miraculous; it is not normal. The reason is that it comes from another world, another realm. It comes by the conquering of your heart as you see you sin and receive the complete forgiveness which comes through Christ. This doesn't come from you alone.

It is tragically true that human beings do not often learn from how we are treated or how they are mistreated. All it takes is time or the right dynamics and the human heart is quick to act hypocritically and unjustly. One of strategic partners in foreign missions is a man named Leaid, and he is from the country of Liberia, a nation devastated by civil war a number of years ago. Recently I was having lunch with him, and he told me the unbelievable source of the civil war. Liberia was founded by freed American slaves. But tragically when they arrived in Liberia, they built their own plantations and put the indigenous Liberians to work as their slaves. Freedom alone did not make them grateful or compassionate. And it is even more tragic because it is so familiar all over the world. Abusers abuse; oppressed people oppress; the wounded wound; the hurt hurt others. And it takes a miracle of grace to turn that around.

So Jesus calls his followers to do something radical: to forgive your brother from your heart. He calls us to think about the gracious and looming shadow of the cross over our lives. He calls us to be cross-people. In other words, to be so amazed by the beauty and scale of our own forgiveness that we see people, personal hurt, and pain differently.

And that may be the problem for some of you today. You cannot process the pain that happened to you nor can you see it any other way except than stomach-turning bitterness because you have never really tasted of the beauty of God's grace. You've never really received Christ, and therefore you have no power to see you heart open to the possibility of forgiveness. And wouldn't it be incredible if God used the pain in your life to lead you to himself?

For those of you who have tasted of God's graciousness, our calling here is very simple. It is not that you must somehow create love for people who have hurt you or muster up some mercy from within you. Your calling is not to try harder. That will never work. Your calling is to meditate on, think about, sing about, and talk about the immense mercy of God given to you through Christ so that you will see the offenses of others through a different lens.

Or better and here is the point of our text this morning: to see the offenses, hurts, and injustices in your life under the looming and life-giving shadow of the cross.

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