

“The Heart of Forgiveness”
Matthew 18:21-35
January 13, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

The last phrase of our text reveals the theme of this passage—forgiveness from the heart. Peter had asked Jesus about how many times forgiveness should be extended to an offending party. Peter proposed what he thought was a generous answer: seven times. The conventional teaching of Judaism at this period of time was that forgiveness was required for three times and would not be required if a fourth offense occurred. So Peter, having been around Jesus long enough to absorb some of his teaching on the grace of God, doubled that and then added one more for good measure.

Jesus responds with a parable in which he teaches that forgiveness is more a matter of quality than of quantity. Peter had asked for a number, and Jesus gives him a number. But the number Jesus gives, “seventy times seven,” makes it clear that forgiveness is not a matter of how many times one is to forgive. We don’t imagine someone actually counting offenses all the way to the pivotal number of 491 when our forgiveness is to reach its limit. Jesus’ point is made clear in the parable, and his point is that the hard thing is not forgiving 490 times, but forgiving just one time in the right way, from the heart. If it were a matter of quantity, it’s easy to imagine someone counting offenses and even hoping for more offenses so vengeance could be taken. I’m reminded of the famous Clint Eastwood line, “Make my day,” a line expressing a similar thought. So Jesus’ parable refocuses attention away from quantity and onto quality, forgiving from the heart.

Instead of forgiving from the heart, our instinct is to make the offender pay. A mother heard her 7-year-old son screaming in the bedroom. When she went to investigate, she saw his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. So the mother walked over and managed to release the little girl’s grip on her brother’s hair, and says to him, “There, there; she didn’t mean it. She doesn’t know that hurts.” He nodded his acknowledgement, and the mother left the room. She had not made it more than a few steps down the hallway before she heard the screams of her two-year-old daughter from the same room. So she turned around and rushed back into the room and asked her son, “What happened?” The little boy replied, “She knows now.” Our natural tendency is to make offenders pay for their offense. We want them to experience the same pain they have caused us.

This parable from the lips of Jesus shows us that the heart of forgiveness is found in God’s heart for forgiveness. The point is developed over the three scenes of the parable.

I. Scene 1 – A Debtor and His King

The servant in this parable is more like a steward who has been given great freedom to administer the affairs of the king. In time, he begins to take liberties with the king's money, viewing it as his own rather than the king's. It appears that this theft of funds went on for years until one day the king asks for an accounting. When that happens, it is revealed that the servant owed his king the astronomical sum of ten thousand talents. The talent was the largest monetary unit in this day, and, as our footnote indicates, was equivalent to about twenty years of wages for a laborer.

Equivalencies into modern currencies are difficult. But we can get an idea of the vast sum involved here if we use as a reference point the average annual household income in America, which is currently \$62,000. Twenty years of that would be \$1,240,000, which would then be the value of one talent. But this man owed 10,000 talents, which would be over \$12 billion. It's difficult to comprehend how much money that is? If you had fifty years to spend that kind of money, you would have to spend \$680,000 every single day of the year for all fifty years. That's more money spent in a day than most Americans accumulate over a lifetime. This debt is more what a nation might accumulate than a person.

As we know, Jesus isn't talking about money in this parable. Rather, he is using money to talk about the debt we all owe to God because of our sin. As we acknowledge in the Lord's Prayer, sin puts us in God's debt. And the sum we owe to God is unimaginably large. Notice, too, that the effects of our sin are not limited to the individual sinner. His family is caught up in this servant's sin when the king orders that the man, his wife and children and all his possessions be sold to pay at least some of this debt. Our sin puts us in God's debt and brings harm to those closest to us.

The servant is devastated by this and begs the king for mercy. **“Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything”** (v. 26). The king doesn't grant his request, but gives him much more than he asked. **“And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt”** (v. 27). This is how Jesus describes God's forgiveness of us. We all owe a vast debt to God because of our sin, and none of us is able to repay such a debt. In his great mercy, God wipes it out completely. What happened to the debt? It was paid, because debts always have to be paid. If the debtor doesn't pay, then the lender must take the loss. In this case, the king took the loss and essentially paid the debt himself. I wonder what it felt like for Jesus to speak this parable, knowing that he would be the one to take this loss as he faced the cruel cross. It would be on that cross that this immense debt would be paid in full and debtors like us would go free.

II. Scene 2 - A Debtor and His Debtor

How did this debtor leave the presence of the king? We would expect him to leave with a joy and lightness in his heart. By the immense kindness and generosity of this king, he had been released from all the consequences of his own fraud and mismanagement. His family was intact and he no longer needed fear the day of accounting with a king to whom he owed so much. The accounting was behind him, and he had survived it. We might expect him to do something like throwing a party in honor of the king.

What he did instead was to find a debtor owing him money. **“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’”** (v. 28). The fact that the parable lists the amount of the debt is significant. It is one-hundred denarii, or roughly equivalent to one-hundred days of wages for a laborer. Using the same standard we used earlier of the median American household income, this would be roughly equivalent to \$24,000 in our day. It’s not an insignificant amount of money, but it pales by comparison with the first servant’s debt of over \$12 billion.

The second debtor makes a request that is identical to the request the first debtor made to the king. **“Have patience with me, and I will pay you”** (v. 29). The response he gives, however, is nothing like the response of the king who forgave the debt. **“He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt”** (v. 30). Obviously, his heart remained hard. It had not been softened by the great kindness shown to him.

Jesus makes it clear at the end of the parable that he intends this parable to be about having a heart of forgiveness, and he has told a story about a man who lacked such a heart. What was his problem? We get a hint of it in his plea to the king, when he said, **“Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.”** If he thought he could pay everything he owed, he made it clear that he had little grasp of the size of his debt. The result of that is that he had little grasp of the size of the king’s generosity.

The practical lesson is clear. If you lack a heart of forgiveness for others, it is because you lack an appreciation of the immensity of your debt of sin and the immensity of the forgiveness God offers to you through Christ. You think your sin is able to be paid back by your meager payments. What are some of these meager payments we offer? One of the most common is self-pity. We think that if we can beat ourselves up enough and feel sad enough, then that ought to be adequate payment for our sin. Others try paying their debt down through making promises to God. They feel bad about their sin and think they can make up for it if they give a little more money to the church, or if they are

more faithful in Bible reading or church attendance. Such efforts are exactly what this hard-hearted servant proposed. Instead of providing payment for your sin, these efforts only add to your sin because they judge as inadequate the generous provision of God's forgiveness through Christ. They are on the debit side of the ledger, not the credit side.

In developing a heart of forgiveness, I have found it helpful to pray Psalm 139:23-24 every day. **“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”** As God answers that prayer and you begin to see something of the greatness of your sin, always let your sin take you back to your full forgiveness in Christ. Hear and experience afresh the truth of verse 27: **“And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.”** That word “pity” means to have compassion. One translation words it, “And the heart of that servant's lord went out to him.” God's heart goes out to you as he offers you full forgiveness.

Two questions often come up in this area of forgiving others. The first question is this: Do we forgive if there's no repentance? I think the clear answer of the Bible is “Yes.” Jesus taught elsewhere that we are to bless our enemies, and I don't know how you can bless someone, which essentially means to pray God's blessings upon them, if you are harboring a bitter heart towards them. I would go on to add that there is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. While you can forgive someone who has sinned against you even without their repentance, I don't think you can experience the reconciliation of the relationship without repentance.

The second question deals with uncertain repentance. Should you forgive someone who says they are sorry, but perhaps they are saying it for the four-hundredth time and the previous 399 times all resulted in a repetition of the sin. Or maybe there just hasn't been enough time to confirm the sincerity of their repentance. Again, I think it is clear in the Bible that we are to forgive the offender. But it needs to be added that forgiveness is different than a restoration of trust. If someone borrows money from you and fails to keep their promise to pay it back, you are obligated to forgive them. But you are not obligated to lend them money again. A pastor commits adultery. While the members of his congregation are obligated to forgive him, they are not obligated to restore him to his pastoral office.

III. Scene 3 – A Debtor and His Torturers

The king hears of the first debtor's lack of forgiveness and for a second time summons him to appear before him. This appearance will not end so well for the debtor. **“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?” (v. 32-33). While the king’s first response at the servant’s first appearance was marked by compassion, this one was marked by anger. **“And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.”** The word translated “jailers” is literally “torturers.” This man’s constant companions would be these torturers until his debt was paid in full. That means that he would never escape his torturers, since his debt was far too massive ever to be paid.

Jesus concludes the parable with a warning. **“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”** Does this mean that our forgiveness of others is a condition to our forgiveness by God? No, but it does mean that our forgiveness of others is an indication that we have truly received God’s forgiveness. Forgiving others is like a litmus test for true faith.

Let me say this differently. To forgive those who have wronged you is a very difficult thing to do. It is actually beyond our ability. We are all like that little boy who wanted to make his little sister pay for pulling his hair. We are by nature like Lamech. Do you remember him from the early chapters of the Bible? He said to his wives, **“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold”** (Gen. 4:23-24). It’s interesting that he spoke that to his wives. I think marriage is one of the primary arenas to show forgiveness instead of vengeance. There is only one power in the universe strong enough to change our hard hearts into hearts able to forgive others, and that is an experience of God’s forgiveness of us through Christ.

CONCLUSION:

Corrie ten Boom tells the story of meeting one of her concentration camp guards years after the war ended. He had acted very cruelly toward her and her sister, humiliating and degrading them every chance he had. He had jeered and visually raped them as they stood in the delousing shower. Now he stood before her with hand outstretched and said, “Will you forgive me?” She writes: “I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed, Jesus, help me! Woodenly, mechanically I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms and sprang into our clutched hands. Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. ‘I forgive you, brother,’ I cried with my whole heart. For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard, the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so intensely as I did in that moment!” To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.