

Forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35)
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Introduction

On a recent overnight stay at McMenamins Edgefield Hotel, Wanda, my wife, and I received a complimentary copy of The Oregonian newspaper. In the Living section we noticed the bold headline, FORGIVE: BUT DON'T FORGET. The article, written by Oregonian staff writer Nancy Haught, stressed the importance for Jews, during Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) "to make amends, to ask forgiveness and to forgive." She went on to say how the world's great religions require "that all of us seek forgiveness and be prepared to extend it to others." However, Ms. Haught seemed to lament that "for most of us, the second part of that requirement is the hardest."

Are we really expected to forgive that little brother or sister who broke or otherwise destroyed my precious toy? Can we possibly forgive that unfaithful spouse who took off with your best friend's mate? How can I forgive that lousy drunk who ran over my child and killed him? Can I really forgive that unruly son or daughter who has denied everything I taught him or her about the faith? Does God really want me to forgive my fellow Christian who spread gossip and lies about me throughout the church? Should we be expected to forgive our priest/pastor for fraudulently dealing with church funds? The list of so called "unpardonable sins" goes on and on *infinitum*.

In our text for today we will first examine Peter's question about forgiveness. Secondly, we will ponder our Lord's parable of the unforgiving servant and finally we will draw some application from our Lord's teaching.

Peter's Question About Forgiveness

In the immediate context of Matthew chapter 18 the Lord Jesus has just instructed his disciples regarding reproving a brother who sins against you. Proper details are given on how to confront this brother and bring him to confession and repentance. The matters at hand are serious enough offenses to bring in the judgement of the church if need be. So what if a certain brother sins against me. How many times should he do this and be forgiven. This is the question Peter puts to Jesus. "Lord, how often shall by brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Apparently Jewish rabbinic tradition allowed the extension of forgiveness to three times. "If a man commits a transgression, the first, second and third time he is forgiven, the fourth time he is not forgiven." Peter seems to be making progress under the teaching of Christ and is willing to extend forgiveness to seven times. Certainly forgiving a brother seven times should be sufficient.

Our Lord's response is both instructive and precedential. He rejects even Peter's generous extension of forgiveness to seven times and with a strong adversative, "but" insists that forgiveness reach phenomenal proportions of "seventy-seven or seventy times seven." Either way one interprets the words, we must conclude that our Lord has in mind here a whole lot of forgiveness. It is our Lord's way of instructing his disciples that forgiveness is unlimited setting a high and lofty precedent for His followers.

Jesus's Parable About Forgiveness

In response to Peter's question the Lord Jesus introduces kingdom instruction regarding the forgiveness of sin and offenses. While all may find it desirable to seek and receive forgiveness few have power and willingness to extend it. The reason why we find it so hard to forgive stems from the fact that we all constitute part of sinful humanity. Mankind seeks vengeance and strict justice, that is unless one is the offender or lawbreaker. Forgiveness is simply not part of the makeup of fallen human nature. Forgiveness and mercy are attributes and virtues of the kingdom of heaven and are not of this earthly realm.

What is the kingdom of heaven? It is a kingdom not of this world. It is a kingdom of which most of the rulers of this world know nothing about. It is God's rule of grace on earth through the Lord Jesus Christ. The kingdom of heaven manifests itself through Christ's catholic or universal church. It is a spiritual rule whose law and teachings are foreign to this world. Forgiveness and mercy are mandated laws handed down upon the citizens of the kingdom from its heavenly king because He, Himself is a forgiving and merciful Lord.

This kingdom parable begins with the king desiring to settle the accounts of all his servants. These servants undoubtedly served the king in some kind of official capacity as money handlers or tax collectors of the kingdom. It was now time to give an account before the king of all their financial dealings. A certain servant was brought to the king who owed "ten thousand talents." A footnote in my Bible says that "this talent was more than fifteen years wages for a laborer." This man owed 10,000 of these 15 year talents. The important thing to consider is the fact that this servant's debt was astronomical. One which could not be paid.

The lord and master of the servant demanded payment and as the servant could not pay he was ordered to be sold along with his entire family and all his property. Note how our sins and debts can affect others. This man's irresponsibility resulted in his and his wife and children's being sold into bondage, a common practice at the time in the Greco-Roman world. How grievous to think that we can sin with impunity but oh how often we bring family and friends into grief and shame because of our transgressions, debts and offenses. This man was being punished for his debt along with his entire household because he obviously could not pay what he owed.

The servant had but one thing he could do. Beg and plead for mercy. So he fell on his knees imploring his master over and over, "Lord have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."

The servant was desperate and promised anything even when he had nothing with which to pay. Martin Luther once wrote about this parable in these words:

“Before the king drew him to account, he had no conscience, does not feel the debt, and would have gone right along, made more debt, and cared nothing about it. But now that the king reckons with him, he begins to feel the debt. So it is with us. The greater part does not concern itself about sin, goes on securely, fears not the wrath of God. Such people cannot come to forgiveness of sin, for they do not come to realize that they have sins. They say, indeed, with the mouth that they have sin; but if they were serious about it they would speak far otherwise. This servant, too, says, before the king reckons with him, so much I owe to my lord, namely ten thousand talents; but he goes ahead and laughs. But now that the reckoning is held, and his lord orders him, his wife, his children, and everything to be sold, now he feels it. So, too, we feel in earnest when our sins are revealed in the heart, when the record of our debts is held before us, then the laughter stops. Then we exclaim: I am the most miserable man, there is none as unfortunate as I on the earth! Such knowledge makes a real humble man, works contrition, so that one can come to the forgiveness of sins.”

But alas, this servant, instead of being humbled, reflects the common belief of mankind, “I will pay you everything,” as though by our own deeds and effort we can pay our own redemption to a righteous king for the unpayable debt we owe him. Luther’s experience was similar.

“As we have been taught hitherto; from which also have come so many pilgrimages, charitable foundations, cloisters, masses and other nonsense; so we fasted and scourged ourselves, and became monks and nuns. And all this came because we undertook to begin a life and to do many works of which God should take account and allow himself to be paid by them, and had thought to quiet and put the conscience at peace with God; and so we have acted just like this fool in today’s lesson.”

The Lord of that servant heard his plea and had pity upon him. He then released him from bondage and forgave him his entire debt. What a glorious picture of our merciful father in heaven who forgives us an insurmountable debt through our Lord Jesus Christ. Our debt of sin is similar to this servant’s obligation. He cannot pay so he pleads to his Lord for mercy. Because of our sins we too owe God a debt that cannot be paid. We plead for His mercy. Through faith He graciously forgives us the entire amount and sets us free from sin’s bondage for Christ’s sake.

However, we soon discover that this wicked servant reveals an unrepentant, unforgiving heart. As he goes out from the presence of his lord he comes upon a fellow servant who owes him a hundred denarii (a mere pittance), grabs him by the throat, starts choking him demanding that he pay him what he owed. His fellow servant pleads with him for mercy just as he did with his

master. But this wicked servant refused to listen, showed no mercy nor forgiveness, threw the man in prison and made him pay the debt. The action of this wicked servant “is the height of ingratitude and injustice.”

After being released from a huge debt that could not be paid, this man became cold hearted and greedy and refused to forgive a paltry amount from a fellow debtor. How inconsistent with the mercy of his lord and master. But the parallel should be clear to us all. “Compared with our sins against God, our sins against each other are mere trifles; the one sum is absolutely unpayable, the other is easily payable” (Lenski). If this wicked servant had truly tasted the forgiveness of his master he should have done likewise to his fellow servant.

When the other servants heard and saw what happened they immediately reported it to the king. The king was livid. “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” The obvious answer is yes, but this wicked servant refused to act according to grace received. In his anger the king delivered him over to the torturers until his debt should be paid. The Lord Jesus summed up the parable with a solemn warning, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

An obvious question arises as we ponder the king’s action. What are we to make of his revocation of forgiveness? Does this imply that God the Father forgives sin and then reneges on His promise? Perhaps the best way to understand the parable is to keep in mind that our Lord speaks here in an earthly manner so we can understand kingdom truth. In the story the king is simply doing what a ruler here on earth might do. It is incompatible to treat a fellow servant so harshly after receiving untold grace and mercy from the king. In an earthly kingdom a lord would be justified in revoking a pardon upon that pardoned servant’s subsequent mercilessness. In the spiritual or heavenly equivalent it would be “a moral monstrosity for one of us to receive God’s remission of all our sins and yet refuse remission of the little wrongs done against us. If any one of us is still blind to that fact, his blindness will turn to terrified sight when he faces God in his heavenly court” (Lenski). Bishop Ryle put it this way.

“Another motive for forgiving others ought to be the recollection of the day of judgement, and the standard by which we shall be tried in that day. There will be no forgiveness in that day for unforgiving people. Such people would be unfit for heaven: they would not be able to value a dwelling place to which ‘mercy’ is the only title, and in which ‘mercy’ is the eternal subject of song. Surely if we mean to stand at the right hand, when Jesus sits on the throne of His glory, we must learn, while we are on earth, to forgive.”

So, in other words one who does not understand grace and mercy and refuses to extend forgiveness to those who sin against him knows nothing of Christ and true forgiveness of sin. Remember the solemn words of James, “for judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no

mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment.” Do you want to triumph over judgment? Then show mercy to your brethren.

Application Drawn from Our Lord’s Teaching on Forgiveness

1. Forgiveness of sin is found in Christ alone. Because of our sins we are all debtors to God. The debt for each one of us is incalculable. We are all unable to pay or satisfy God for this insurmountable debt. Only by means of Christ’s substitutionary, sacrificial death on the cross can a sinner’s debt be paid in full. Through faith in Christ all believers obtain forgiveness of sin.
2. Forgiveness is a basic, fundamental kingdom teaching. One of the petitions in the Lord’s prayer states, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” The word ‘debt’ comes from *opheilema* which denotes ‘that which is owed or legally due.’ Metaphorically the word is used for sin as a debt or something owed. The forgiveness of our sins by God assumes that we, as His children and disciples, will in turn forgive those who sin against us. Any refusal to forgive on our part contradicts this basic teaching of God’s kingdom. Anyone who consciously, stubbornly, and consistently refuses to forgive his sinning brother denies the faith. “It should not be too difficult for we who have been forgiven to forgive in turn, for what we owe God is infinitely more than what men owe us.” (William Hendriksen) We are instructed to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave us.” Only as we forgive can we be assured that we too are forgiven.
3. Forgiveness also includes money matters. In Matthew 18:27 the king, out of pity for his servant, forgave him the debt. The word translated ‘debt’ actually comes from the Greek word *daneion* which means ‘loan.’ The king’s release included forgiveness for this great ‘loan’ or financial obligation. The Lord instructed us to “give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.” Our lending should be done “expecting nothing in return.” At times loans to our poor or less fortunate brothers will have to be forgiven. I can remember when we bought our house some twenty one years ago that we had to carry a second mortgage from the Christian family from whom we purchased it. We fell on tight financial times. We asked our Christian creditors if we could pay them a lesser amount than what we owed so we could clear the debt. They did better than we asked. They forgave the entire outstanding amount. Since then needy Christian families have come to us seeking loans for various legitimate reasons. To be consistent with our profession of faith we have loaned expecting nothing in return. At times we too have had to forgive our brothers the debt owed to us. This is simply kingdom teaching and we have sought to do the will of our Father in heaven.
4. Forgiveness is mandated upon repentance (Luke 17:4). If our brother sins we are to rebuke him and if he repents we are to forgive him, even if he sins against us seven times in one day and repents seven times. Here is a hypothetical scenario. A brother sins against you. You immediately forgive him from the heart although he has not yet repented. You go to him personally and tell him of your grievance and his sin. He subsequently repents and apologizes

and you personally extend forgiveness to him. The matter is ended and you forget it. The article referred to in our introduction, "FORGIVE BUT DON'T FORGET" says "we connect forgiveness to many things that it doesn't automatically imply. Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting." However, in the kingdom of heaven forgiving is forgetting. If you keep on reminding a forgiven brother of his sin and offense then you haven't really forgiven him. We must become like our master who assures us that, "blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered," and he adds, "I will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more."

But what if he does not repent? Then you take witnesses along with you and go to him a second time. If he still refuses to repent you take the matter to the church. If he remains obstinate and refuses to repent the church can treat him as a tax gatherer and heathen. In this case one should still forgive a sinning brother but a full settling of the matter cannot occur without repentance from the erring party. However, before imposing the corrective issued by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-20 we should first consider the magnitude of an offense. Most offenses between brethren are better left forgiven and forgotten because they simply fall into the category of minor grievances and misunderstandings. Instead we should readily embrace and follow Peter's injunction to "above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins."

Conclusion: In conclusion let me quote a pertinent passage from R.V.G. Tasker's Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew which stresses the place of forgiveness in the Christian community.

"The messianic community is first and foremost the community of the redeemed. It owes its very existence to the forgiveness made possible by the Messiah's death. It is the fellowship of the men and women for whom Christ died. There is therefore laid upon every member the paramount duty, of which he must be always conscious and never tire, of forgiving the personal wrong that may be done to him. Once the willingness to forgive is abandoned, the reason for the existence of the Christian fellowship is lost. The society of the forgiven has no meaning if those who are forgiven are themselves unforgiving."