

Forgiveness

In Matthew the 18th chapter, Jesus addresses several issues that help us to better understand the nature of the heavenly kingdom. One of those issues deal with forgiveness. We have spent time looking at forgiveness before and I sincerely hope by now that we realize the importance of having a forgiving nature.

The world often seems to push us to the limit. How many times do we forgive? At what point is my duty to forgive set aside by the other person's behavior or their lack of change?

The religious leaders of Jesus' day had their ideas about forgiveness. From the teachings of the rabbis, a person must be forgiven for the same offense three times. After the fourth offense, there is no forgiveness.

Jesus, in the sermon on the mount, speaks of forgiveness and links our personal forgiveness to the forgiveness we want from God (Matthew 6:14-15). Peter, perhaps feels generous when he offers to forgive seven times. In the context of the rest of Matthew 18, the forgiveness is that of personal forgiveness for a wrong. We are not speaking of forgiveness of sin. That is God's prerogative and not a matter of personal forgiveness. Peter's question sets up the parable that teaches a valuable lesson on forgiveness.

Let's open our Bibles and read through this parable as we make notes along the way. We are reading in Matthew the 18th chapter beginning in verse 21.

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:21-22 NASB)

So, Peter takes the traditional number for forgiveness-3 and doubles it and adds one to arrive at 7 times. Peter may have felt smug that he was above and beyond the level of forgiveness. Peter was likely on the scene of the first recorded sermon of Jesus. He had to be aware that Jesus teaches the need to forgive others. Peter is trying to establish an upper limit. Somewhere there must be a limit to forgiving others.

Jesus crushes Peter's number seven by saying seventy times seven. Let me stop right here and interject a comment. There are some people who believe every word in the Bible is to be taken as literal. I believe we need to look at the context. Here, Jesus is clearly using hyperbole to illustrate a point. Jesus is not teaching that we forgive 490 times but withhold forgiveness after 491. I feel safe in that belief based on the scriptures that follow.

"For this reason, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle *them*, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So, the slave fell *to the ground* and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. (Matthew 18:23-27 NASB)

Jesus has taught and still teaches the need to forgive. Thus, He starts this parable connecting it to the discussion of forgiveness with the clause: **For this reason.**

The first account mentioned is one in which the slave owes 10,000 talents. We could dive off the deep end with discussions about how the slave came to owe such a large amount. We don't know and it really is immaterial. Again, this amount is used to show the burden of debt that is owed.

One talent is worth approximately 15 years wage a laborer. In this story, the slave owes an amount that would equal 150,000 years wages. There is absolutely no way the slave could have repaid this amount.

Nonetheless, the king forgave the debt. Pause for a moment and think about having that much debt forgiven. Could you sleep better? Would you feel the load lifted? Would you be in a better frame of mind as you meet others during your daily routines? I have read that the money equivalent depends on whether the talent is a gold talent or a silver talent. If gold, the money equivalent is nearly \$12 billion dollars. If silver, the money equivalent is more than \$161 million dollars. When we look at it in terms of annual wage, we understand the burden of debt the slave was under without having to keep up with the exchange rates for precious metals.

A tremendous load was lifted and the slave now has a freedom from the threat of being sold to satisfy the debt. He now may keep his family intact. There are many reasons why he should feel blessed. Jesus continues the parable as He turns His attention to the forgiven slave and his subsequent actions.

But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began to choke him*, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ So, his fellow slave fell to the ground and *began to plead with him*, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. (Matthew 18:28-30 NASB)

The debt owed is equal to 100 days wages. This amount could be repaid under normal circumstances. Yet, the forgiven slave is not willing to allow time for the repayment. It does not take a lot of mental acuity to see the lopsided debts presented in this parable. One person owed 150,000 years of wages and the other owed 100 days of wages.

We also see the disproportionate reaction of the two creditors. One is willing to forgive a staggering debt which could never be repaid and the other is unwilling to forgive or even to find ways to help the debtor to repay.

This inequity is noticed and reported.

So, when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. (Matthew 18:31 NASB)

The expectation to be treated in one manner while living in another is the ultimate hypocrisy. We may think that no one sees the disparity, but everyone sees it and sees the hypocrisy.

The parable does not end until we see the final action of the lord over the slaves.

Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. (Matthew 18:32-34 NASB)

As we remember, this parable was shared by Jesus when His disciples were discussing forgiveness. Primarily, Peter was concerned about how many times we need to forgive someone when they continue to offend. Jesus tells us the parable so that we see the king (or lord) forgives a debt that is beyond our ability to comprehend. Jesus also, within this parable, tells us how most of us tend to behave. We want and expect forgiveness while we hold others to a different standard than God uses for us.

Jesus wraps up His parable with the last verse of Matthew the 18th chapter.

My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35 NASB)

Jesus is consistent in His teachings. If we want forgiveness from God, we need to be forgiving in our dealing with others. It should be to the same degree that God has forgiven us. This concept meshes totally with what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount.

In a verse that is often misquoted to suggest that we are not to judge good from evil, Jesus actually says that the same standard we use will be used for us.

“Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. (Matthew 7:1-2 NASB)

In this parable, Jesus is pointing out the absurdity of our wanting forgiveness while withholding our forgiveness. Jesus also is using another of our misconceptions about big and little sins. All sin is an act of rebellion against God. Granted some sins have a more severe outcome (murder) than others (“little fib”) all sins are an act against God. There is a debt to be paid (Romans 6:23). For many Christians, our sins are small. We have never killed anyone. We tend to concentrate on the aspect of grace and forget the forgiveness that is coupled with grace. Our sins are forgiven. They are forgiven not because we could pay the debt but because we could not. God loves us and through the atonement of Jesus on the cross He accepted Jesus’ death as payment for our sins. That is grace. Something within many of us tends to minimize the idea our sins have ever separated us from God. It is an idea that is prevalent throughout our society today. We have even accepted that grace pays for the sins of those who are never repentant or who never come to Jesus to accept His grace.

In a previous sermon, we looked at the work of the Holy Spirit. As you may remember, one of the points mentioned was the Holy Spirit brings us to a point of decision. He brings us to a point where we realize that we are convicted of our sins and we are ready to commit ourselves to God. This is found in John 16:8.

And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; (John 16:8 NASB)

If we have never been convicted of our sins, then we certainly fail to see the magnitude of God’s grace in our salvation. Our ego still presents the picture that those who have wronged us bear a more grievous burden than we bear for our sins. Part of the message of this parable, is that we are in dangerous territory when we fail to forgive others while accepting and expecting God to forgive us.

Somehow, Satan has managed to convince us to rate sins based on a societal impact. Murder is a big sin. Murder is only a big sin if it involves a person of importance to society. See how this works? God is not the author of this “sin-rating” system. All sin is a rejection of God. Thus, all sin is equally evil in the sight of God.

Only when we begin to realize the magnitude of our sins (personal) do we begin to see the burden of debt that God forgives when He forgives us. Once we understand the magnitude, then we realize that we have an obligation to forgive. Remember the question for the parable? **Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’**

Jesus closes the parable out by telling us that God expects us to forgive. Have you forgiven others? Do you need to remove that barrier of unforgiveness?