

As We Forgive Our Debtors

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September 17, 2017

Matthew 18:21-34 — Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to the king all that had taken place. Then the king summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger the king handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

Our passage this morning is all about forgiveness. It does not tell us what exactly forgiveness *is*—there is no definition for us here—and it does not tell us *how* to forgive—there are no steps here for us to follow. What our passage *does* tell us is that we *must* forgive, and it tells us *why* we must. But before we get to that, let me share with you my own definition of forgiveness. And I'll start by saying what forgiveness is *not*. Forgiveness is not about ignoring anger or downplaying abuse. Forgiveness is not about re-entering into a relationship that has been damaging for you. Forgiveness is not about just letting someone off the hook. Or, as theologian Kelly Brown Douglas puts it, the only person who forgiveness lets off the hook is you, the one who is forgiving.¹ Forgiveness means striving to let go of resentment and hatred, so that you can move forward with your life and flourish. And forgiveness also means—here's the really hard part, friends—hoping that those who have wronged you will eventually flourish as well. Forgiveness means working to get to a place where you can genuinely wish that those who have wronged you would repent of their sins, make peace with God, and come to live faithfully and joyfully as God's child, as you have.

So, why must we forgive, or at least try? Jesus answers this question, as he often does, by telling a story. A king summons one of his slaves to settle a debt in the amount of 10,000 talents. Now, of course, you don't have a bunch of talents in your wallet or purse, so before we go any further,

¹ Spoken in an interview with journalist Jeff Chu

we need to ask, “How much are we talking about here?” Well, in the ancient world, one talent was roughly equal to about 15 years’ worth of wages for a typical worker. And this slave, we’re told, owes 10,000 of these things. You could do the math any number of ways, but the point is we’re talking billions upon billions of dollars. A *slave* supposedly has billions of dollars in debt to this king. Of course, this is incredible, unbelievable. Often, Jesus exaggerates the details of his stories to catch our attention.

Now, since the slave is stuck, with absolutely no means of getting out of this absurd debt, the king is planning to sell him off, along with his family and everything he owns. In a final act of desperation, the slave pleads with the king: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you *everything*.” Jesus’s audience laughs at the thought of repaying 10,000 talents. But we have a shocking turn of events: for whatever reason, the king has pity on the slave and decides not just to give him more time to pay off some of the debt, but actually decides to *forgive* the debt. All of it. Billions and billions of dollars, just like that. The slave is dismissed, and his unfathomable burden lifted forever.

That would be a remarkable story by itself, but Jesus takes it a step further. Literally, as that slave is leaving the king’s house, he runs into another slave who owes him a hundred denarii. Now, a denarius was a small silver coin that, in Jesus’s day, was roughly the daily wage for a typical worker. So, to translate that into our terms, say you make \$15 an hour, your daily wage is \$120, and 100 of those equals \$12,000—so, not a small sum, to be sure. But compared to the billions of dollars that the first slave owned, this second slave has a modest debt to pay.

Even so, when the recently-forgiven slave runs into this other slave, he seizes him by the throat and demands, “Pay me what you owe!” The second slave falls on his knees and pleads, using almost the exact same words we just heard before the king: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But the recently-forgiven slave will have none of it and gets the slave who is still indebted thrown into prison. As it turns out, the king gets word of this. He summons the man who he forgave back to his house and says, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?” Then, to give us a dramatic ending, Jesus says that the king orders the slave to be tortured until he could pay his entire debt.

It’s an unsettling parable—which is fitting, I think, because forgiveness is an unsettling thing. Who here finds it easy to let go of our resentment and hatred towards those who have wronged us? Who here finds it easy to want those people to find peace with God? I don’t know about you, but there are times when I’d much rather just see those people punished, not just because they have wounded me, but because it seems right to me that bad things would happen to people who have done bad things. And friends, that attitude is absolutely understandable. But that’s not what Jesus is calling us to. In this parable, Jesus is telling us that we must forgive—not because any of those people deserve forgiveness, but because God has forgiven us. If we believe that, over the course of our lives, we have done things that hurt ourselves, hurt others, and hurt God, and if we believe that God still sustains us, still wills for us to flourish, still welcomes us as children of

God, in spite of our wrongdoing, then how can we turn around and deny that forgiveness to others, withhold that welcome from others?

This idea was not new to the crowds listening to Jesus. They understood that they were called to love others because God had loved them, and they understood this because of their Bibles. Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelites are commanded to care for the foreigners in their midst, and the most common reason given for this commandment is that the Israelites themselves were once foreigners, were once slaves in Egypt, and God cared for *them* in that foreign land. Hear these words from Leviticus 19:33-34: “When a foreigner resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the foreigner. The foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the foreigner as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

Keep in mind that this command remains with the Israelites for hundreds of years after the exodus, up to Jesus’s day. Even when the Hebrew people have been out of Egypt and in Canaan or Palestine for hundreds of years, God still expects them to remember that their ancestors were once foreigners, and still expects them, because of that, to be welcoming to foreigners. Friends, for those of us whose family history includes people who were Irish, or Italian, or German, or Catholic, or any number of other groups, we don’t have to go back hundreds of years. If we go back just 3-5 generations, it was our people who were the outsiders in this country. Our people were the foreigners who the long-time residents didn’t want around. Our people were the immigrants they were complaining about. And if you, who used to be a foreigner residing in this land, have now been welcomed, how can you not extend that same welcome to the foreigner today? That’s the biblical idea of caring for others because God has cared for us.

In closing, friends, let’s turn our attention to The Lord’s Prayer. Every Sunday, we pray together: “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Actually, a more accurate translation from the Greek New Testament would be “Forgive us our debts, as we *have forgiven* our debtors.” In Greek, that second verb “forgive” is a past tense verb. It’s not that we’re asking God to forgive us, and then we will try to forgive others, too. No, the wording of the prayer *assumes* that by the time we are praying, asking God for forgiveness, we have *already forgiven* those others—because how audacious would it be of us to ask God for forgiveness while we refuse to forgive our neighbor? Friends, we are compelled to forgive, to strive to become more and more forgiving, because God has given us a perfectly-forgiving love in Christ. It is hard. In some cases, it is unsettling. But friends, that is our calling, that is what we are meant to strive for, if we are going to receive God’s forgiveness. Only by the power of the Holy Spirit can we grow more and more into the forgiving love of God. Help us, Holy Spirit. Amen.