

The King Who Forgives

Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction

We've talked about Matthew 18 as our "How to" chapter. How to be great (be teachable, simple humble, dependent); how to escape hell (vv.7-9); how to exercise church discipline (vv.15-20); how to forgive (vv.21-35). Matthew recalls a question by Peter and a parable by Jesus that illustrates God's great grace and incomparable mercy and profound forgiveness. Part of the point of the passage is the absurdity of withholding forgiveness from those who have sinned against us.

The Problem Of Forgiveness (vv.21-22)

Matthew 18:21–35 (NKJV) 21 Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Peter comes to Jesus with a problem; Peter knows he should forgive, but how much and how often? The Rabbi's were no stranger's to the issue of forgiveness—and suggested a kind of ancient version of three strikes and you are out. Peter may have generously thought he would double the Rabbinic standard and throw one more in for good measure.

The problem of forgiveness is rooted in the reality of human injury. But Peter at first misses both the meaning and purpose of forgiveness. And we are immediately reminded of the fact by Peter's pressing question; "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" **"He was sure his brother would sin against him, but not he against his brother. Peter's second mistake was asking for limits and measures" (Wiersbe p. 67).**

In Luke 17:3-4 Jesus said, "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."

Forgiveness begins with honesty about injury and takes place in the context of relationship.

Peter uses the term 'my brother' and Jesus 'if your brother sins against you' (Luke 17:3).

22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

Math is not the answer—even though Jesus uses math to illustrate His answer. **Jesus is not suggesting we count—or keep track of the numbers. This statement means don't keep track at all.** There should be no limit to a believer's willingness to forgive another believer (in the context of what has already been given verses 15-20). All believers should approach the subject of forgiveness on the basis of the forgiveness offered by God through Christ. Clearly the forgiveness God gives in Christ is beyond our comprehension—but it is a forgiveness rooted in recognition—we have offended God—rooted in repentance—a willingness to turn from that sin.

The King Who Forgives

Matthew 18:21-35

We have all faced the problem of forgiveness at one time or another—whether offended or offender. Someone injured you. Someone said something or did something. They did it on purpose or by design or even by accident. The actions caused harm—insignificant harm—or significant harm. The injury or harm cut like a knife or burned like fire. Something happened and it changed what you think about that person or feel towards that person. Perhaps they privately or publicly offered some criticism or thought you should be the object of their cruel calculations. People have conflict, in the home, in the church, in public in private. Maybe the person was a stranger—or worse a friend—or even worse—a family member. Mothers and Fathers are tasked with protection and love and the greatest injuries come from the people closest to us.

We have all been hurt in some way. The moment we come into this world someone slaps us or pinches us—they think they are doing us a favor—but we feel the pain. The problem of forgiveness is everyone’s problem because everyone injures or experiences injury. I read recently that researchers have devoted a great deal of time to the subject of forgiveness. “Unforgiven and unforgiving people have higher rates of stress-related disorders, cardiovascular disease, and clinical depression, as well as lower immune system function and higher divorce rates. Forgiveness contributes to a healthy life” (see *The Risk of Forgiveness; Gary Inrig p.9*).

The Parable Of Forgiveness (vv.23-30)

23Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

24And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

25But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made.

This parable is only found here and again illustrates the need within the Body of Christ to exercise forgiveness on a regular basis. Part of the point of the passage is that we need not retain reason **to hold on to grudges**. We might even more accurately call this the parable of unforgiveness. Remember a parable is an earthly story that illustrates some heavenly truth.

There are three main characters in our story. A king, a con man, and a bad credit customer. In ancient days, just like now, it was not unusual for the king to order an internal audit.

Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to a certain king who wants to go over the books with the chief steward or book-keeper. This is the day of reckoning or accountability. The books are opened. One was brought to him who owned him 10,000 talents. The person is possibly a governor or ruler of a province or the person tasked with obtaining the revenues from that province. We are hard pressed to imagine the huge sums of money that must have passed through this steward’s hands to be able to embezzle 10,000 talents. King David donated that

The King Who Forgives

Matthew 18:21-35

much money for the building of the Temple (1 Chronicles 29:4). Human offered the King of Persia 10,000 talents to wipe out the Jew's (Esther 3:9).

How is it possible to generate a 10,000 talent debt? You would have to be a con man. A talent was the amount of wages you would pay someone over their lifetime. A good slave cost about a talent since the slave was expected to do a life-time of work. The total tax burden paid by the provinces of Judea and the Galilee to Rome was about 800 talents a year. We are overwhelmed at the amount owed.

How do you steal or embezzle that much money and not have anything to show for it? The man is unable to repay the debt. The King ordered the man and his family to be sold to recover some of the loss.

26The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'

The servant prostrates himself and begs for patience. He makes the statement; 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Does the servant really believe this? Could the servant really pay back the debt? He is either lying or deluded. He thinks he can repay the debt.

The servant's situation is hopeless. We are in the exact same situation in our relationship to God. The sin debt we owe God is incalculable. If we worked day and night for all eternity we still could not make our injury towards God—right.

If one sin disqualifies us from heaven and qualifies us for hell—can you imagine what a lifetime of sin and insult and injury towards God has accomplished?

27Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

What caused the master of that servant to be moved with compassion? Could we safely say the king believed the servant? Not likely. The king does not simply honor the servant's request—he does not simply give the man more time—the king cancels the debt and let's the man go!

This would not have been expected to either Peter or anyone else! What king would forgive such a debt? A debt rightfully owed. The God of the Universe moved with compassion sends His Son to satisfy our debt and forgive our sin.

We deserve to die. The wages of sin is death. We deserve to go to hell. Some people simply don't believe that's true. They are con men and con women.

And like the man in the story one day our true crimes will be revealed.

The King Who Forgives

Matthew 18:21-35

We are like the con-man. We have been busted, exposed, and God agrees to take the loss. He will forgive us in Christ. When someone has been forgiven an enormous debt you would think they would be overwhelmed with humility and gratitude. But not this guy.

The man is the recipient of enormous favor, amazing grace. He is released (from prison) and forgiven a debt impossible to repay.

Tragically this is not where the story ends.

In light of that grace and that favor and that forgiveness how will this man live his life?

*28“But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’
29So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’*

30And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

The servant finds a man who owes him a debt. The amount owed was 100 denarii or about 3 months wages. He doesn't simply demand repayment for the debt but acts violently. The fellow servant falls down at his feet and begs him to have patience and gives a promise of repayment. The difference of course in the debts is one was impossible to repay and the other quite possible.

In the ancient world there were serious consequences for those who could not repay their lawful debts. The money lender could seize the person or their family and require them to work until the payment was repaid. The debtor could be thrown into prison or sold into slavery.

In the parable the king exercises compassion on the man and his family. The man receives undeserved forgiveness. Compassion motivates to forgive all the debt. The forgiveness was not cheap but involved a king willing to bear substantial loss. **The servant did not earn the pardon and neither was there a realistic expectation of recovery of the loss.**

It is one thing to experience forgiveness and it is another thing to have it effect your heart. How is that the experience of forgiveness made this servant not better but bitter? **The experience of forgiveness did not make the man more loving and forgiving but rather more hardened and more likely to injure others.**

Warren Wiersbe writes; “A person who has been set free ought not to live as though he were still in prison. Certainly, there ought to be in our hearts a deep love for God who has forgiven us, and for His children as well. (It should not be difficult for the forgiven to love the forgiven!) **It is not enough to receive forgiveness—we must also experience forgiveness in our hearts**” (*Windows on the Parables; pp.126-127*).

The King Who Forgives

Matthew 18:21-35

The Prison Of Injury (vv.31-34)

31 So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.

32 Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.'

33 Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?'

34 And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

The fellow servants could not ignore or excuse the gross behavior on the part of the forgiven servant. They told their master everything that happened.

How could this person—this servant—the object of compassion, recipient of mercy and grace and forgiveness have so little to give to others. How could someone forgiven so much injury refuse forgiveness to someone else? We know the answer. **The man who received forgiveness never experienced forgiveness—truly—or he took it for granted—or refused to allow it to change his life. We not only receive forgiveness and experience it in our hearts—we must be willing to share it with others.**

Peter was willing to forgive his brother seven times and this wicked servant would not even extend forgiveness one time! The consequence—he returns to prison, his family returns to prison, all will suffer.

Why is that small hurts become large grudges? The king in his anger turns the man over to the jailers. Among the Jews torture was forbidden by law. But not so in the Roman world—and it was not unusual to hand people over to experts in finding hidden assets.

We are the losers if we fail to practice forgiveness. No wonder Paul wrote (Eph.4:32); “Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

We have nothing to lose and everything to gain if we practice forgiveness. The servant in the parable refused to share forgiveness; but he is more than willing to share his anger, his outrage, violence and condemnation. **Because he never experienced true forgiveness in his heart—he could only share—what was really there.**

In some sick since—the wicked servant never truly conceded the depth of his sin and injury. He wasn’t convinced he was a sinner. He was caught and sorry he was caught; willing to admit transgression to his Lord. **There can be no deep experience of forgiveness without a deep sense of sin and need and the harm that the sin caused.**

The King Who Forgives

Matthew 18:21-35

We sometimes ask our children to say “sorry” but they truly do not have awareness of the severity of the offense. The servant was living in a world of justice and not mercy. He was quite content to make a provision of mercy for himself and his family but not for someone else.

When we fail to forgive we place ourselves in prison and take our loved ones with us.

The Power Of Forgiveness (v.35)

35 “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”

The Father will honor our choices. The Father has already made the decision that we cannot hold on to pride and humility; forgiveness and unforgiveness.

Do not hurt the fellowship of the church by harboring grudges, or refusing to forgive each other.

Does this mean the believer forfeits salvation when he or she refuses to forgive his or her brother from the heart? That is not the point of the passage! This is a serious warning. The theme of the chapter is recognition of sin and reconciliation of brothers and sisters to one another. Clearly it is a warning that God cannot forgive us if we do not have a repentant and humble heart.

The servant in our story was neither humble or repentant. He was simply happy to be off the hook. Clearly he was grateful for the king’s mercy and forgiveness but that did not keep him from refusing similar mercy and grace to others.

Conclusion

How in the world do we best apply Peter’s question and Jesus’ parable to our lives?

Perhaps an inventory is in order.

Have you received forgiveness? Did you experience it in your heart and then share it with others?

It is hard to give something that you yourself have never received. Have you experienced what it means to be forgiven by the Lord Jesus Christ? Forgiveness is neither earned or deserved.

Do you harbor grudges or find reasons to remain estranged from people who are your brothers and sisters?

The King Who Forgives

Matthew 18:21-35

One of the evidences of grace and forgiveness in your life—is the constant state of wonder—and the question “Why should He save me!?” Another is ever increasing tenderness and compassion toward others in spite of their sins.

One of the evidences of difficulty is an ever increasing hardness and judgment and a stubborn and determined commitment to withhold forgiveness. Are you sharing forgiveness? It might come as a surprise to you—but we need to forgive each other from the heart all day long!

We may not be able to forgive them—to their face—but we must forgive them from our heart.

And of course the test of forgiveness is freedom! The person who bears grudges and hoards resentment and builds a fortress of bitterness is never really free. They live in a prison—where fear stands guard and their own feelings and frustrations forge the walls, barbed wire and steel doors. Your cell mate is torment. The torture is real—physical and mental and emotional.

And all the resources that could have been spent on furthering the gospel are now dedicated to a useless cause—revenge on those who have wronged us!

Forgiveness means we get to live by grace. Revenge means we are willing to place ourselves under the Law.

What happens if we seek out and forgive others and they refuse or reject our attempts to offer grace and peace and the cessation of hostilities? We will still experience the blessings of God in our lives.

Is there anybody you need to forgive?