

Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

What Jesus said about forgiveness was so radical and demanding the disciples immediately said, "You're going to have to increase our faith for this one." (Luke 17:5 my paraphrase).

In Mtt.18:21, Peter asked, "*Should I forgive my brother up to seven times?*" Jesus said, "*I do not say to you forgive your brother seven times seven but forgive him seventy times seven.*" Then Jesus told a story about a king who forgave his servant an enormous debt. But that same servant turned around and put his servants in prison for not paying a small debt they owed him. This morning I'm going to focus on the lessons of forgiveness and less on the parable. I'll do more work on the parable in the future. But, I want us to consider three questions Jesus' teaching on forgiveness raises: Why do we need to forgive? What does forgiveness look like? Where do you get the grace/power to forgive?¹

First, Why do we need to forgive?

First, we need to forgive is because as James says,

*"The anger of man or the wrath of man does not bring about the righteousness of God."*² James Ja.1:20

"Watch Yourselves..." When Peter asked about forgiving others, Jesus kept the focus on the victim not the offender. In Luke 17:3 Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you, *watch yourselves.*" But here's a great temptation. When someone offends or sins against you, your, focus can shift almost exclusively onto them and their offence. But, it's just at that point that you must look at yourself and your response and not be overly focused on the person who offended you. Watch your own response. Why? Because it's just easy to be blind to your own responses and reactions.

"See to it that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble for by it many become defiled." Heb.12:15

Look at the image. That unforgiven offense is like a root under the surface. Last fall when I cleared my front yard of the old grass, Rich brought his tractor over and dug up the yard. But there was more under the surface than grass roots and rocks. Just beneath the surface there were birch tree roots that had spread

¹ I first learned these lessons from Dr. Tim Keller in a sermon he preached on Luke 17 in 2003. However, Dr. Keller is not responsible for my adaptation of them.

² One must distinguish between the anger/wrath of man and the wrath of God. The wrath of God is always perfect righteous indignation and a thing of truth and beauty. The wrath of man is most often a distortion of God's wrath.

almost entirely across the yard sucking up the moisture from the ground. If I didn't tear out those roots they would have choked the life out of my new grass just as they did to my old lawn.

“See to it that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble for by it many become defiled.”

That image suggests that it's easy to deny the hidden bitterness that's in our hearts. Jesus says, “Watch yourself.” Because we tend to live in denial about the effect people's offenses have on us. Unless you're deliberate about this it can sneak up on you and defile without you even being aware. You can become a person of wrath without even knowing it. And the anger/wrath of men does not bring about the righteousness of God.

Wrath: Our English word *wrath* comes from an old Anglo Saxon word *wreath*. And the word *wreath* means to be bent and *twisted* like the twigs of a Christmas wreath. Human wrath means to be bent and twisted out of your normal shape. It twists you and distorts you. It can tie you up in knots and make your blood pressure rise or inflame your stomach ulcers.

Wraith: There's another word connected to our word wrath: *wraith*. A wraith is a ghost or a spirit that can't rest. Wraiths re-live the past. They stay in the place where something was done to them. They can't get over it. They can't stop thinking about it or stop living what was done to them. Their future is totally controlled by the past. In his trilogy, *The Lord of The Rings*, Tolkein writes about the nine Ringwraiths: ghosts who are stuck in the past.

Here's the point. If you don't intentionally and deliberately deal with past offenses your wrath will twist you into a wraith. Slowly, but surely it will turn you into a restless spirit, into someone who is controlled by the past, or someone who is haunted. If you don't deal with this well enough now, when you are old you will become a gnarled up, twisted entangled, ugly and haunted person. This week I saw that possibility in my life and it was terrifying. And it happens in stages: self-pity, cynicism (about people and life), and contempt for others. If you can't forgive that person who offended you or abused you it will turn you into a twisted and distorted person.

The Merchant of Venice: I suppose *The Merchant of Venice* may be one of the best stories ever written. It certainly contains one of the best human rights speeches of all time.³ Antonio is a wealthy merchant who lives in Venice. Like

³ Shylock cries out against the racism carried out against his Jewish brothers and sisters. Of the Gentile Christians of Venice he says, “He hath...laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, sense, affections, passion? Is not a Jew fed with the same food, hurt

many, he was filled with racism toward the Jews. In 16 c. Venice, Jews were not allowed to own property. They were forced into other professions like money lending. They lived in a separate section of the city, locked down at night. Antonio's nephew was getting married and he asked Antonio for a loan. However, Antonio had a cash flow problem. All of his money was tied up in three ships at sea, returning home from a profitable trade trip. Reluctantly, Antonio goes to Shylock - the Jew - for a loan. He hates the idea of doing business with a Jew. And, Shylock hates him for the racism he has perpetuated against him and his people. But, Shylock gives him the loan on one condition. If he doesn't pay the loan back in three months Antonio will have to give him *a pound of his flesh*. Antonio, says, "No problem." His ships loaded with profit were due back in two months. So, they make the deal and Antonio signs the contract. However, a storm at sea capsized all of Antonio's ships and they are destroyed along with all his wealth. He can't pay the note. Shylock takes him to court. A friend offers to pay Shylock ten times what Antonio owes him but Shylock won't take it. He wants his *pound of flesh*. Now the way Shakespeare solves this is incredibly clever and entertaining. So, I won't spoil it for you and tell you how it ends. But I will tell you this. Shylock becomes twisted, gnarled, haunted, ugly and full of revenge and rage. He becomes a wraith. He has been treated with ugly racism and injustice. He wants his pound of flesh. And, in the pursuit of it, he became the ugliness that remained in his soul.

So, Jesus says, "Watch yourselves and forgive...you don't want to become a horrible, terrible, embittered nazgul." If we don't forgive, the evil that remains in us will turn us into its own image. It will defile you. You don't want to become the twisted unforgiving man in Jesus' parable who ends up tormented. I'm not talking about righteous indignation. Jesus also said to rebuke those who sin against you. I'm talking about human anger and wrath that is not mitigated or redeemed by the gospel.

That's why we need forgiveness. You live in a world of many offenses if you don't forgive, you will become twisted, ugly, gnarled, a wraith.

Second, What does it mean to forgive? Three things come from our text

1. Look at your similarities.
2. Pay the debt of the offence.
3. Seek the offender's good.

Accept your similarities: Peter, "How often shall I forgive *my brother* ..." "If *your brother* sins against you..." And at the end of the parable: v.35, "if each of you does not forgive *his brother*." By saying, "your brother," Jesus doesn't mean to

with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"

say that your brother is the *only* one you forgive. (cf. Mk.11:25.) He's reminding us of our connection to one another *as brothers*. A brother who sins against you is still a brother/sister; you're connected.

Here's why this is important. When someone sins against you, you immediately focus on how that person is so very different than you. You say, "I would never do such a thing." We look at how primitive some of the hostilities are in other countries at war and we say, "I could never do that." O really? Beloved, if law and order broke down in your neighborhood and people were breaking into your home stealing your stuff and attacking your children, you can't image how primitive you would become in a heartbeat. When someone sins against us we immediately think of our dissimilarities.

My friend Bobby is a cartoonist. If he wants to make you look funny or foolish he will exaggerate one of your distinguishing features and make it much bigger than it is. If your chin is really large, like Jay Leno's, a cartoonist will make it humongous. If your nose is large, he will just make it enormous. My neck is small so Bobby makes it the size of a pencil.

Tim Keller tells says this is what our hearts automatically do when someone wrongs us. You'll think of them almost exclusively in terms of the offense. Someone said:

"Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans and I exclude myself from the community of sinners."

If you don't want to be twisted and distorted by un-forgiveness, you must first look at your similarities not your dissimilarities. This is the lesson of so many parables: Outside of the gospel all of us are far more like each other than we are dissimilar. I'm a mixture of good and evil and so are they. I have blind spots and they do. I have my sins and they do. I have weakness and they have weaknesses. I have selfish moments and so do they. I'm related to them. We share a common grace and fallenness. This is my brother. Identify with the offender.

Second, You decide to pay the debt! (This may be new to some.) When you forgive you must inwardly pay the debt of your offender rather than make him pay. The word forgive is an economic term to forgive a debt. To forgive a debt is to pay that debt. When there is a debt *someone always pays*. If someone owes you \$100, either the one who owes you pays the debt or you pay it by absorbing it. But the debt always gets paid. And Jesus uses this word, "to forgive," for all wrongs. To forgive means to pay the debt.

"Forgiveness is not living in disregard of past wrongs. Rather forgiveness emerges from a (painful) decision to overcome

resentment and vengefulness, mastering the anger and humiliation of those most poisonous of attitudes and states of mind.”

- Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*

Jesus said, pray this way, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”. Now, there may or may not be a literal debt, legal debt or wrong to be repaid as restitution. But, there is always an internal and emotional debt. Therefore, when someone has wronged you, you sense that they owe you. And here’s the currency: **The currency is pain.** We feel that they owe us suffering. So here’s what we do. We try to make them pay the debt. We do this in a number of ways. We’ll scream and yell at them, humiliate them or we try to ruin them professionally. We can destroy their reputation through gossip and slander. Of course we do it under the guise of warning people about them (This is how it shows up in me. As a minister I’m warning people about spiritual and thinking errors. So, under the rubric of *warning you*, I can slip in a dig and it sounds so spiritual. In reality I might be trying to even the score.) No wonder Isaiah said, “I am a man of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips.” We’re all implicated in this. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

When you haven’t forgiven, you want the offender to feel pain. You’re looking for life to blow up in their face. In your mind you put little pins in their doll (Not necessarily consciously). You have a sense that they owe you and the currency is pain...that same pain that you received. And if you see them suffer you start to feel better. Be honest. If you see them suffer, that sense that they owe you begins to diminish. You’re after justice. And if they get hurt, you start to feel better. Why? Because the debt is being paid down. So you get momentary relief. When Paul Tillich wrote, “There’s something about the pain of others that doesn’t displease us.” he was identifying this very thing. But, beloved, to nurture this will twist you and distort and turn you into a horrible ugly creature.

“Pastor Jim, What’s the alternative?” You pay it! You make a distinction between going after justice on the outside (at times that’s appropriate) but on the inside you must destroy that debt of pain by paying it yourself. And few things are more painful. How can I do that?

When you want to hurt them you don’t. And that will pain you to make that decision. When you want to gossip, slander and slice them to pieces, you don’t. And that will hurt you. When you see them prospering and you think, “They don’t deserve that.”, you pray for them and their good. Why does it hurt so much? Because, you are paying the debt of pain. But sooner or later - because you aren’t fueling the fire of your anger, your anger will diminish and you will be free. And you won’t become twisted and ugly demanding your pound of flesh.
Forgiveness is not disregarding someone sins; It’s paying the emotional currency of it in your own soul.

Jesus says forgive a brother even if he sins against you seventy times seven forgive him. You don't want to be made in the image of that offence.

Third, you seek their good:

“But I say unto you, Love your **enemies**, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;”

“Do not returning **evil** for **evil** or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.” 1Pe.3:9

In Jesus' parable the king forgives the man who owes him \$10 mil. Initially, he makes him an indentured slave. However, when he asked for mercy the king completely forgave that enormous debt of millions and millions of dollars. All the man asked for was patience: for time to pay the debt back. But, out of compassion, the king forgave it all! He sought the man's good and canceled what he was owed. The king paid the debt.⁴

So, we need forgiveness so that we don't become the evil that remains in us because of an offence. We need it so that we don't become all twisted and gnarled up and defiled like this unforgiving servant in the parable. To forgive means to identify with the offender as a brother or sister. It means to pay the inward debt in the currency of pain and it means to seek that person's well being.

Finally, Where do you get the grace to do such a thing? If you understand an ounce of what Jesus has forgiven you, you will begin to discover the grace and power to forgive others.

In His parable, the king offers the man forgiveness for over \$10 million dollars. But here's a strange thing. The debtor seems to be totally unaware that he has been forgiven! If he knew that he was forgiven of such a great debt, why would he immediately demand others pay him back? This man's thinking is incredibly convoluted.

The compassion he has been offered has absolutely no bearing on his life! He has no compassion when his servants plead for patience. It's as if the mercy he received went right over his head. Why is this such a perplexing story? Because, if you had really been forgiven \$10,000,000 and released by such extravagant mercy, you couldn't possibly throw those in prison who owed you a few bucks!

⁴ By the way, *withdrawal* is not seeking their good. Too often this is my strategy. You hurt me and I'll say, "OK. Be that way and then I'll pull away." That can be, every bit as much, the sign of an unforgiving heart.

Something didn't happen in this man's heart. He's grossly unaware of the compassion, mercy and love he has been offered. There is no way his heart could have received and been melted by that grace and still do what he did...No way.

Why doesn't he get it? Well, he copies the king's authority but not the king's mercy. He puts himself in place of the king's authority but not his mercy. In mercy, the king acted like a servant and served up forgiveness. He abstained from using his authority to exact justice. He served his servant's great need. The king paid the servant's debt by absorbing it. Remember \$10 mil dollars. That hurt. He served his servant. But the servant turned around and exercised his authority to hurt his servants and not serve them.

Where do you get the power to forgive? Two places: One, you need to remember **you are not the ultimate lord or king of anything**. You are only a servant (read Luke 17:10). God is the Lord of all. Every good gift comes from God above. When your brother sins against you, God calls you to be his servant. So, you ask, "How can I serve him?" Well, how has God the King served you?" He forgave all your sins!

The power to forgive comes only when you see the King become a servant. The power to forgive comes from the gospel.

Here's the gospel...King Jesus came to earth. We all owe Him a terrible debt. To sin against God is to go into God's debt. As our Creator and Sustainer, we owe him absolute obedience. When we withhold that obedience we go into His debt. And on the cross, Jesus the King, paid that debt for us! When He died, his last words were, "It is finished." In Greek the word is *teltelisti*. It means, "I paid it!" and "Paid in full."

Our king became our servant. Our king paid our debt with a price unimaginable to us. Our King found His joy in pursuing our joy. Where do you get the power to forgive like this? You can only get it by laying hold of the forgiveness or the debt paid for you by the King. Have you laid hold of this? Have you received this extravagant gift? Believe on the Lord Jesus and be saved from the debts of your sins. And in turn, by the power of the gospel, forgive others. Don't become a twisted and haunted mess. Trust in Jesus and be free.

Father. forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Amen.