

“The Forgiveness Imperative” – Matthew 18:21-35

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Three Things

1. A little boy came to the Washington Monument and noticed a guard standing by it.
2. He looked up at the guard and said, “I want to buy it.”
3. The guard smiled, stooped down and said, “Well, how much do you have?”
4. The boy reached into his pocket and pulled out a quarter.
5. The guard said, “Sorry son, that's not enough.”
6. The boy stuck his hand back into his pocket and brought out 9 cents more.
7. The guard said, “You need to understand 3 things.”
 - a. “First, 34 cents is not enough to buy the Washington Monument. In fact, \$34 *million* is not enough.”
 - b. “Second, the Washington Monument is *not for sale.*”
 - c. “And third, if you're an American citizen, the Washington Monument *already belongs to you.*”
8. We need to understand three things about *forgiveness*.
 - a. 1st - we can't earn it.
 - b. 2nd – it's not for sale.
 - c. & 3rd – if we've received Christ, we *already have it.*

B. One More Thing

1. And to that we must add one *more* thing; one more important truth that was often on the lips of Jesus as He taught the disciples –
2. If we have truly been forgiven by God, we *will be* forgiving of others.
3. If we have grasped the reality of & stand in God's grace, then we *will be* gracious.
4. To receive mercy means we're merciful.
5. Our study today is centered on a story Jesus told that was meant to make this crystal clear.

II. TEXT

A. V. 21

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?”

1. As Peter had been following Jesus, he'd begun to start putting the pieces together on the radically new way of living Jesus was calling His followers to.
2. One of the major themes of Jesus' teaching was on mercy and compassion.
3. Peter could see that Jesus just did not hold a grudge and that there wasn't one shred of bitterness toward a single soul.
4. So, thinking he'd grasped a central theme of Jesus' teaching and what it meant to be one of His disciples, he comes with this question about forgiveness.

5. Now, Peter thought he was being very generous here.
 - a. the rabbis taught that you were to forgive someone who offended you 3 times, but on the 4th time, you could go after them.
 - b. Peter, knowing how Jesus took the letter of the law and far surpassed it by applying it to the heart --
 - c. took the rabbis 3 times to forgive, **doubled** it, and then added one for good measure and came up with 7, the number of perfection.
6. Peter was surely expecting that Jesus would say to him as He had at Peter's great confession He was the Christ in ch. 16, "At a boy Peter! Once again you've received enlightenment from above!"
7. If that was Peter's expectation, he was disappointed.

B. V. 22

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

1. It's clear Jesus does not mean 490 times for who would or could keep such a tally?
2. By taking Peter's suggested 7 and multiplying it by 10 **times** 7, He means that forgiveness is **not something** he's to measure out offence by offence, hurt by hurt, and insult by insult.
3. Rather, Peter is **NOT** to count up or measure out forgiveness; he's to stand in it!
4. His relationship with others is to be **characterized** by forgiveness.
5. He's not to walk through life keeping a record of the wrongs done him and then drawing a line when those wrongs have reached some magic number.
6. He's to keep no record of wrongs, no inventory of hurt, no list of relationship accounts payable.
7. To make this clear, Jesus told a parable.

C. Vs. 23-34

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

1. Before we get deeper in to this, we need to understand something about parables.
 - a. when Jesus told one, it was always to illustrate a **single truth** or principle about life in Him.
 - b. parables are not elaborate stories meant to communicate **all kinds** of deep theological things.
 - c. they're simple, true to life illustrations of **one thing**, one point Jesus wants to get across to His followers.
 - d. we err in our study of the parables when we make all the various parts of the story stand for different things and then go running off after them on a rabbit hunt.
 - e. the parables were told by Jesus in a specific context, and were meant to illustrate a specific lesson – to get across a singular truth.
2. Such is the case here. And that's why Jesus begins this parable, as He does so

many, with the words, “the kingdom of heaven is like . . . ”

- a. the Kingdom of heaven refers to the reign, the rule of God.
- b. it speaks, not of a geographical *location* with physical borders, but of a *people* over whom God rules as Sovereign Master & King.
- c. Jesus begins the parable this way because He wants the disciples to understand that to be ruled by God means to live with forgiveness as one of the primary operating principles of our lives.
- d. the kingdom of heaven is populated by a people who are not only forgiven, they are forgiving.
- e. forgiveness is to heaven what air is to earth.

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

3. As the setting for this parable, Jesus drew a story from one of the Gentile nations that bordered Israel.
 - a. though this setting is from a Gentile court, it's one the Jews would have well understood.
 - b. there's a king and the time has come for his court officials to come and give account.
 - c. using the traditions of the day, they were probably tax-collectors who were responsible for collecting taxes from the various regions of the kingdom.
 - d. it's been some time since they'd come to settle accounts and one of the collectors has neglected his duties.

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

4. As soon as Jesus said this, the disciples' mouths would have dropped open -- this was an *astronomical* amount!
 - a. the annual tax collected in Galilee to support Herod was 200 talents!
 - b. in Judea and Samaria, regions that were far more wealthy than poor & humble Galilee, the annual revenue was only 600 talents!
5. The talent was a unit of weight and at this time would refer to silver because silver was the primary medium of monetary exchange.
 - a. a talent is 75 lbs., so this guy owed some 750,000 lbs. of silver!
 - b. that's \$4¾ million, and factoring in inflation, this guy's debt was in the billions in today's values!
6. That's the point Jesus was making – *there was no way* this man could pay what He owed – ever! So -

25 But 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.

7. This is the way debts were settled in Gentile nations.
 - a. if you fell into a debt you could not pay, all your possessions were confiscated and sold.
 - b. and if this didn't settle the debt, then you and your family were sold into slavery.
 - c. the price for a slave at this time was about 3 years of the average person's wage.

- d. so even if this man and his family were sold, they would mark hardly a dent in his debt.

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

- 8. At this point the debtor-servant speaks up and with the most pathetic appeal asks for patience.
- 9. If he's just given some time, he can make amends and pay the debt, he claims.
- 10. Could he? Of course not! The debt is bigger than he could ever pay.
- 11. But this is his last chance and says *anything* to keep from suffering the fate that's been decreed for him by the king.
- 12. This pathetic appeal brings forth a response of mercy on the part of his master.

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

- 13. Note that – the king didn't just *delay* the payment of the debt – he *discharged* it altogether. He counted it as paid off.
 - a. the words Jesus used here speak *sending something away*.
 - b. the king released this guy of his debt, his responsibility for having to pay it was over!
- 14. At this point in the story, as the disciples listened – they would be stunned with the generosity of the king.
 - a. if they were listening closely and had put themselves in the story as certainly they would,
 - b. for Jesus was a master story-teller and that's what a good story-teller does, he/she is able to make the story come alive so that you feel like you're a part of it;
 - c. then at this point, they would relate to the story *as* the forgiven servant,
 - d. and they would be simply overwhelmed by the grace and mercy of the king.
 - e. the sense of relief at being released from the debt, the sense of relief from the close call of judgment –
 - f. why, it would all combine to fill them with joy and celebration!
- 15. But Jesus is not done with His story. Everything so far has just been the preface, the *set up* for the *real point* of the parable.

28 "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii;

- 16. A denarius was a coin equal to about 16 cents and was the common man's daily wage.
 - a. a hundred denarii was about a hundred days worth of work,
 - b. and while not insignificant, it was still a paltry sum compared to the vast fortune he'd just been forgiven of.
 - c. in fact, that is the comparison Jesus wants the disciples to make – a hundred denarii was a pittance compared to 10,000 talents.
- 17. In light of the servant's being forgiven such a huge debt, he's going to look at this guy who owes him this little amount and take the guy by the hand and say, "Brother – forget it!" **RIGHT?** That is what the disciples are thinking!

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!’

18. This man, coming out of the king’s presence debt-free, doesn’t take this guy *who owes him* a pittance by the hand to extend the same mercy, he takes him by the *throat* and demands that he pay up!”

19. At this turn in the story, the disciples who’re listening are outraged!

20. This just ought not be – this guy is clearly messed up and isn’t acting in a manner at all appropriate for someone who’s just enjoyed such an incredibly wonderful turn of good fortune in being dismissed from his debt.

21. Jesus takes this outrage of the disciples and weaves it in to the story.

29 So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’³⁰ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.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.

22. This second debtor uses the *identical words* as the first man.

23. But there’s no compassion, no mercy this time.

24. Even though the payment of the debt was in fact *highly likely*, the man had the one who owed him thrown in to the debtor’s prison where he virtually *ensured* the debt would *not* be paid!

25. The other servants were stunned by this man’s actions and knew they were contrary to the king’s ways, so they told him what had happened.

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.

26. Which of course, was an impossible debt to pay, and certainly not going to be exacted by the tormentors over to whom he was turned.

27. As I said, a parable is meant to teach one lesson, one truth.

28. So now that we have a firm grasp on what’s taking place in the story itself – what **IS** the lesson Jesus wants the disciples to take away?

29. What does this parable teach us about what it means to live in the Rule of God and Reign of Christ?

30. Jesus makes it crystal clear in v. 35 . . .

D. 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.”

1. It was a common practice among the Jews to refer to sin as a debt owed to God.

2. Jesus taught us to prayer, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;” He was referring not to monetary debts but to moral and spiritual debts.
3. In this parable, Jesus draws both a comparison and a contrast between the debt we owe to God, and the debts others owe us.
4. God has forgiven us a debt we could never repay – our sins are a dark, ugly, heinous blot that could never be expunged by our own effort.
 - a. any good deed we could ever do could never compensate for even the smallest sin,
 - b. because any good thing we could do, would really be required of us anyway.
 - c. as the James 4:17 says,
To him who knows to do good and does not do *it*, to him it is sin.
 - d. so we could never make up for the sins we’ve committed by doing some good work.
 - e. sin incurs a debt that must be paid, but we cannot pay it!
 - f. there is only One who can – Jesus Christ. That’s what the Cross is all about – it’s the place where our massive sin-debt was paid.
5. Like the first man in the story, there comes a point at which we realize a reckoning is coming and we have a debt that has to be paid.
 - a. we’re pained with the sudden revelation we cannot pay it, so we cry out to God for mercy.
 - b. and mercy is what He shows – moved with compassion, He sends our debt away from us, just as the king did in this story.
 - c. Psalm 103:12 • As far as the east is from the west, *So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*
 - d. Micah 7:19 • He will again have compassion on us, And will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins Into the depths of the sea.
 - e. then He posts a sign, “**No Fishing Allowed!**”
6. But Jesus wants His followers to understand that there’s a necessary *follow through* to the forgiveness we receive from God.
7. It isn’t just something we *receive*, it’s something we must also *extend*.
8. If we have **TRULY** entered the place of forgiveness before God, then it will be the ground we stand on before others as well.
9. Like the first man in the parable – we must come to see things in the right perspective:
 - a. our sins before God are of far greater seriousness and scope than any sin, hurt, offense or crime that has been committed against us.
 - b. and if God could discharge our debt, then certainly we can discharge the debts owed us!
10. Years after her concentration camp experiences in Nazi Germany, Corrie ten Boom met one of the cruelest German guards she had ever known in prison.
 - a. he had humiliated and degraded her and her sister.
 - b. he had jeered & visually raped them as they stood in the delousing showers.
 - c. now, years later, he stood before her with his hand outstretched and said, “Will you forgive me?”

- d. Corrie's sister had died in the camp at the hands of men just like this.
 - e. she said: "I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the *will* can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed, Jesus, help me! Woodenly, mechanically I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms and sprang into our clutched hands. Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother,' I cried with my whole heart. For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard, the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so intensely as I did in that moment!"
 - f. to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.
11. Jesus calls for us to forgive for the simple reason that He wants to destroy the works of the devil. [1 John 3:8]
 12. As the Savior, He wants to deliver us from sin, not just *our* sins, but the sins of others.
 13. As long as we hold on to our hurts, as long as we cling to the offences committed against us and claim a right to exact revenge, the *effect* of the sin lives on!
 14. Sin is defeated, not by getting even, but by forgiving.
 15. Freedom is the birthright of every born again believer. But unforgiveness is a self-imposed prison only we have the key to.

III. CONCLUSION

A. *From The Heart*

1. As we close, look at v. 35 once more
"So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."
2. This whole section began with Peter asking how many times he should forgive someone.
3. Jesus' answer was, "Peter, it's not a matter of how many times, but simply how."
4. We're to forgive from the heart! Forgiveness is to frame our hearts, our lives, our will!
5. It's not something we dole out, offense by offense, counting up the total and saying, "Okay, that's the end," when some magic number rolls round.
6. Forgiveness is not an item we hand out like pieces of candy.
7. It's a posture of our heart and will that says, no matter what you do, I will not hold it against you!
8. Monday we celebrate Martin Luther King's BD. He said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a permanent attitude."
9. Because we're fallen and not yet perfect, we're going to fail, hurt, offend, & insult one another;
 - a. & while for **one another's good**, we ought to call attention to what's offended, and maybe at some points even have to insist on some drastic action so that we can overcome the tendency to sin,

- b. we must not hold it against one another, despise each other for it, hate, misuse or abuse one another, or in any way exact revenge.
10. We must adopt this attitude: Even *before* you hurt me, *I forgive you!*
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11. In dealing with forgiveness, it's one of those topics all Christians realize the need of.
12. As CS Lewis once said, "We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it."
13. The problem with seeing forgiveness as something we pass out one offense at a time is that it's *reactive*, and really tough to do once an offense has been given!
- a. it's human nature to react to hurt,
 - b. it almost a reflex of the soul to strike back.
14. And this is why we must see forgiveness not as reactive, but *pro-active*, and why it needs to be in place **BEFORE THE HURTS COME**.
15. Erwin Lutzer has said it well – "You must *choose to forgive* whoever has wronged you. Forgiveness is not an emotion, it is a decision of the will."

B. The Key

- 1. The key to being able to do this is made clear in this parable –
 - 2. We must keep things in the proper perspective and see *our forgiveness* by God as so amazing, so wonderful, it shapes our hearts toward a gratitude that overflows in forgiveness.
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