

At the Corner of Forgiveness and God Part One

This morning we continue our series *At the Corner of Life and God* and I'd like us to turn together to Matthew 18:21-35. We are going to spend the next two weeks at the corner of forgiveness and God.

Nothing is more central to the Christian faith than forgiveness. As Christians, we owe our entrance into Christ's eternal kingdom entirely to the forgiveness of God. But can a Christian be forgiven by God and live with unforgiveness towards others in their heart? I think most of us struggle on one level or another with offenses towards others, but God's word makes it clear that just as *being* forgiven is central to our Christian faith, *giving* forgiveness is just as essential to our Christian walk. Jesus makes that clear in a parable he tells in Matt. 18.

Matt. 18:21-22

Rabbinic writings in Jesus' day taught "if a man sins once, twice, or three times, they forgive him; if he sins a fourth time, they do not forgive him." So Peter thought he was being magnanimous when he suggested they go nearly twice as far as the Rabbis and forgive up to seven times. Jesus answered, not up to seven times, but up to seventy seven times, or, as in some translations, up to "seventy times seven". The reason the number has been translated seventy seven times in some modern versions is 1) it is the most natural reading of the Greek. And 2) Jesus is almost certainly echoing a fascinating reference found in Genesis 4. Most of us are familiar with the story of Cain and Abel, where Cain murdered his brother Abel and God then condemned Cain to the life of a fugitive. When Cain objects that whoever sees him will try to kill him, God protects Cain with a curse: *if anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold* (or seven times).

The story continues and Cain has a grandson, Lamech, who is an arrogant and violent man and he calls his two wives to him to tell them that he killed a young man for striking him. In his own mind he is so justified for killing this man that he pronounces his own curse, saying, *If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold*.

Jesus is taking this twisted formula for vengeance and turning it into a formula for unlimited forgiveness. In the end, whether you prefer seventy seven or seventy times seven it doesn't change the meaning, because Jesus isn't asking us to forgive 77 times or 490 times, he's calling his disciples to offer unlimited forgiveness. And then he tells a parable to teach us why we should offer – and need to offer – unlimited forgiveness to those who sin against us.

Vv. 23-35

Jesus says there is a servant who owes ten thousand talents. This is an outrageously high debt. It reminds me of when I was a kid, we used to play with these action figures that you could dress up as different superheroes. And invariably these action figures would be fighting an arch-enemy on the edge of a cliff. But these cliffs were never the garden variety cliffs that you and I are used to seeing. No, these cliffs were always "a million miles high". Now, in case you're not familiar with topography of the earth, there are no million mile high cliffs on earth. That would be more than four times higher than the moon. A person falling off a cliff that is a million miles high would fall for 347 days, just a couple weeks short of a year. By the time they hit the ground they would have been dead for over 11 months from thirst and starvation. The point is, a million mile high cliff is ridiculously high. In this parable, Jesus didn't make the debt this servant owed high, he made it ridiculously high. Outrageously high.

In Jesus' day, one talent was worth about 20 years wages. To put this into context, in today's currency, if someone made \$50,000 a year, one talent was worth about a million dollars. But Jesus didn't say he owed one talent, or two, or even a hundred. He owed ten thousand talents. That would be a person who makes \$50,000yr owing ten billion dollars. If they gave every cent of their \$50,000 to their debt (which would be impossible, since they need to live) it would take them 200,000 years to pay it off. It is an outrageous debt – and it's meant to be in order to get our attention.

The master then orders this servant and his entire family to be sold into slavery to repay the debt but when the servant asks for patience and he will pay back everything – clearly an empty promise - the master takes mercy on the servant and forgives him the entire debt. Forgiving meant the master absorbed the cost of the debt and released the servant from the obligation and penalties attached to the debt. He was set free from a debt he could never, ever repay by the forgiveness of the Master!

Here comes the next shocker in this parable. You'd think that this servant would be so grateful, so amazed, so overflowing with the forgiveness that he received that he would radiate that forgiveness to everyone he met, but he does not. Immediately he came across a servant who owed him a hundred denarii, which was the equivalent of about a hundred days wages. In the example of a person making \$50K yr, this would be the equivalent of owing \$14,000. Not an insignificant amount, but nothing compared to the debt he had been forgiven. So this forgiven servant seizes his fellow servant and begins to choke him demanding he pay back everything, and when he begs for mercy and more time, virtually echoing the words he had just cried out to the master, the servant who had received so much mercy and had been forgiven so much debt, has no mercy, and offers no forgiveness, but rather throws the other servant in prison.

Of course, some fellow servants see this and are greatly distressed and tell the master who calls this wicked servant and says, *"you wicked servant! I forgave you all the debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"* There is a moral absolute in this question: *should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?* Mercy was an obligation, not a option. In just anger the master throws this servant in jail until he pays all his debt back. Which he never will be able to do, so he is going to rot in jail.

Thou art the man!

This parable is meant to shock us and get a rise out of us. As we listen to it, and we hear how this servant who was forgiven so much then cruelly and mercilessly throws the other servant in prison, it makes us mad. It offends us. A sense of outrage at the injustice rises in us and we want to see this jerk get justice. What a terrible, horrible, ungrateful, evil, wicked, person!! We are happy that the master withdrew all mercy from him and that he is going to rot in a jail – our sense of justice and fair play would be offended by anything less.

Jesus wants us to get angry and ready to lower the boom on this wicked man. And then, while our blood is running hot and we're ready to pronounce judgment on this servant, Jesus says, in the words of Nathan the prophet, *thou art the man. You are this servant, if you do not also forgive your brother from the heart.*

I. We owe God an infinite debt

Every sin that we commit is ultimately against God. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband killed to cover up his sin, but when he was confronted by the prophet Nathan with his

sin, he rightly confessed to God, *against you, you only, have I sinned*. He wasn't downplaying the sin he had committed against Uriah and Bathsheba, but he recognized that ultimately all his sin was sin against God.

Our sin has charged up a ten thousand talent debt before God that we could never, ever repay. Trying to earn God's acceptance by being religious or doing good works is like trying to buy out Apple Inc. on a salary flipping hamburgers at McDonald's. Not gonna happen. Our only hope is to be forgiven of the debt we owe. God made that possible through the cross.

When Jesus died on the cross, he absorbed the debt that we owed. This is one of the mind-boggling things about the cross. How could one man in six hours pay for all the sin of the world, when we could spend eternity in prison for that debt and not begin to pay it off? It's a mystery, but two things need to be remembered: first, Jesus is God, and so he didn't bring a finite capacity to absorb debt, he brought an infinite capacity to absorb our debt. The second thing is conveyed in this parable: the servant had no ability to pay off the debt from prison – whatever little income he had would have stopped. We can't pay back our debt, we can only be imprisoned for our debt. Jesus actively absorbed and paid for the debt our sin had amassed. So when we trust in Christ's full payment on the cross, there is a very real transaction that takes place: he takes our debt of sin upon himself, and gives us his perfect righteousness.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. - 2 Corinthians 5:21

God is now able to freely and justly forgive us all our sin- not by overlooking it, but because it was really and truly paid for by His Son. God is able to extend the mercy He loves so much to the children He loves so much. It is a transaction of love, and mercy, and forgiveness. We owed God an infinite debt but in Christ God forgave us all of it.

II. If we live by forgiveness, we will give forgiveness

So as Christians, we live by forgiveness. We owe our eternal destiny to God's forgiveness to us because of Christ. The difference between heaven and hell is forgiveness. But here's the hard truth this parable is confronting us with: if we live by forgiveness, we will give forgiveness. If we receive God's forgiveness, we will – we must – give our own forgiveness to those who owe significant, but far smaller, debts to us.

The fact is we live in a world of hurt and there's no way to get through life without being seriously sinned against. In this parable Jesus is affirming that there is a very real pain and debt that occurs when we're sinned against. The second servant owed a hundred days worth of pay. That would be significant amount for any of us. When people sin against us, there is a real debt incurred. There is a real cost, a real pain.

It's no small thing to have a friend betray you. It hurts. It costs. It's no small thing to be gossiped against. It hurts. It costs. It's no small thing to have a business partner deliberately cheat you out of your share of the business. When a wife finds out her husband has been unfaithful to her, it leaves a deep, deep wound. These kinds of sins can pierce the soul with pain and anger and a feeling of, "you owe me" that goes very deep.

But we don't just struggle with unforgiveness towards the "big things". There is also something known as death by a thousand paper cuts. No one cut is all that painful but it adds up. We've all done this, and we've all had it done to us. Cutting words spoken in anger. A friend forgetting you at a time when you really needed a friend to care. Sarcastic put downs that make you feel small and disrespected. The wear

and tear of sinners living in a sinful world. We live in a world of hurt. It's pretty likely there are some here that are nursing a recent grudge against someone who hurt you. And there's also a pretty good chance that some here have bitterness against someone.

When someone sins against us, it hurts us. But if that hurt isn't properly dealt with over time it becomes bitterness. There are people who say, "I'm still hurt from what that person did to me ten years ago and I can never forgive them." You're not hurt anymore. You're bitter.

Here's what this parable is teaching us: we can't have our front door open to God's forgiveness and our back door open to our own personal bitterness against other people. The corner of forgiveness isn't in the same zip code as the corner of bitterness. If we live by forgiveness, we will give forgiveness. One of the evidences of God's grace at work in us is that we forgive. Paul put it this way: *forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you.* (Eph. 4:32)

The wicked servant was guilty of more than unforgiveness. He was guilty of having a heart that was unmoved, untouched, unaffected by his master's forgiveness. The pity the master had on him, had no place in his heart. He had no such pity, no such forgiveness in him. He used it for his benefit but had no intention of extending it to anyone else. His heart didn't live at the corner of forgiveness, his heart lived at the corner of bitterness and vengeance. He seized the fellow servant and began to choke him. The body language tells us he was angry and bitter about the debt this fellow servant owed him. Forgiveness to him wasn't something he was amazed by and grateful for. Forgiveness to him was just something that got him off the hook.

Christians don't see God's amazing grace and forgiveness to us as something that gets us off the hook to live any way we want. We recognize how much God has forgiven us of, and it claims our lives completely. When we lose sight of what we've been forgiven of, we need to go back and reflect on our infinite debt and Jesus' infinite payment. We need to remember that God has washed us clean of every sin, completely forgiven us, so we will spend eternity with Him and in His kingdom. That should blow us away! The smaller cuts and wounds we receive in this life should be washed over with the assurance that they really are nothing *when compared to the gift God has given us!!* As one person put it, to refuse to forgive someone's sins against us is to cut off the limb we're sitting on.

Next week we'll look at some of the practicals of forgiveness, but this morning let's allow the authority of God's word to confront us with this truth (and I don't want to soften it to make it easier to hear): if we are followers of Christ, we must forgive. We do not have the option to hold someone in unforgiveness. Now, that does need to be walked out and God wants to help us walk it out, but God's word doesn't allow us to have a house at the corner of the forgiveness of God, and a summer home at the corner of bitterness towards others.

If God has touched our hearts with His outrageous forgiveness, then that forgiveness fills our hearts and overflows to those around us who sin against us. I want to close by giving us a few moments of silence for us to consider, is there anyone against whom I hold an offense? Is there anyone that I am bitter towards? Are there small wounds of unforgiveness that I am holding onto? And let's ask the Spirit to not only reveal them to us, but to fill those wounds with His forgiveness. To overflow our hearts with His mercy towards us, so that it spills out in mercy to those who owe us a debt.