

Forgiven People Forgive

Poet and author Elizabeth Barrett Browning is probably best known for the words she wrote in a letter to her future husband, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." Her father Edward was a controlling man who forbid any of his 12 children to marry, and when Elizabeth married Robert Browning, her father never spoke to her again.

Elizabeth wrote weekly letters to her father in the hope they might be reconciled but for ten years there was no response. Then one day, after a decade of silence, a box came in the mail from her father. Her excitement quickly turned to anguish however when she opened it and found it contained all of her letters – unopened. Edward Barrett's heart was so hardened towards his daughter that he didn't open a single one of the hundreds of letters she wrote to him.

Unforgiveness does that. It hardens the heart. It closes the heart. It enlarges the perceived offense to the point we can't see a person's value because all we see is their violation. If forgiveness is one of the most powerful forces for redemption in the Christian faith, unforgiveness is one of the most powerful forces for destruction. As we continue going through the parables of Jesus this morning we come to what may be the most powerful parable of all the parables and it's all about forgiveness and unforgiveness.

Matt. 18:21-35

Peter thinks he is being generous. Rabbi's of that day taught that you were obliged to forgive 3 times and Peter has more than doubled the number so he probably thinks he's being pretty awesome. But Jesus doesn't commend Peter, he corrects him: *"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times (some translations say seventy times seven – either way it means indefinitely)."*

Then Jesus tells a parable. Like all parables, it contains an important principle of the kingdom of heaven: ²³ *"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. This king is a picture of God, settling accounts. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. The first principle of the kingdom is...*

I. The crazy high debt we owe to God

Jesus uses a ridiculously high, impossibly high number in this parable. Remember the parable of the talents, and the guy who received 5 talents was given the equivalent of 3,000,000 dollars? This servant owes ten thousand talents. Ten thousand was the highest Greek numeral, and the talent was the highest currency they had, so Jesus is conveying the highest debt possible. Somehow this servant accumulated a debt of approximately 6 billion dollars! Accumulated AND squandered – he has nothing of it left. And there is no way he can ever pay it back - if he devoted 100% of his salary towards the debt it would take him about 200,000 years to pay it back. This is a crazy high debt that he can never hope to repay.

How did this servant come to owe such a crazy high debt? The numbers don't even make sense, until we start to see the spiritual point Jesus is making.

When WWI began, Germany suspended the gold standard to help them pay for the ongoing costs of the war, and before long their currency escalated into runaway hyperinflation. Before WWI a mark was valued at 4 marks per dollar. In December 1918 it took 8 marks to buy a dollar. A year later it took 47 marks to buy a dollar. Two years later in Nov. 1921 it took 263 marks, and by July 1922 it took 493 marks per dollar. A month later it took over 1000 marks and by Oct. 1922 it was 3000 marks per dollar. Two months later it was 7000. Imagine driving up to order from the McDonald's dollar menu only to find it's now the \$7000 menu. But hyperinflation isn't done with Germany.

One month later, in January 1923 it took 17000 marks per dollar and in April it was 24000 marks to the dollar. You might think that it's hit its ceiling, but this is where things really start to escalate. Three months later the mark's value fell from 24K to 353,000 marks per dollar. By August it took over 4 million marks to make a dollar and a month later in September over 98 million marks per dollar. But we haven't hit the ceiling yet. In Oct it was over 25 billion marks per dollar and in Nov. 2 trillion (I kid you not) marks per dollar. By December, 1923, it took more than 4 trillion marks to buy one dollar. At this point the German mark is meaningless.

Hyperinflation escalated so quickly the German people had no idea how to respond. During this time a man was tipped one US dollar and hired an investment firm to guide him in how to invest it. Wages were paid twice a day to give people a chance to spend them before the notes lost their value. A student bought a cup of coffee at 5000 marks, drank two cups, and was given a bill of 14000 marks. He was told, if you want to save money, order both cups of coffee at the same time.

This parable is about the hyperinflation accumulation of our debt to God. Just as the pre-war German mark was valued at 4 marks per dollar, we might see ourselves as a "4 sins per week" kind of person. Maybe if we think we're doing really good we're a "4 sins per month" person. The more humble among us might admit to being a "4 sins per day" person. This parable tells us a different story. This servant wasn't an old man, he was young to middle aged with a wife and children, and he has wracked up astronomical debt. I took the trouble to figure it out, and if he was 35 in this parable, he has accumulated 171 million dollars of debt for every year of his life. His debt grew at over 3 million dollars a week, or 171K dollars a day every day of his life.

This hits me in the face with the truth that I am not a "4 sins per week" person, or even a "4 sins per day" person. I'm a 171K sins per day person. Sins of commission, sins of omission. Sins I'm aware of, sins I'm not aware of. Sinful impulses of the heart, motives, thoughts, actions; absence of godly impulses, motives, thoughts, and actions. It's overwhelming, but it's an essential truth of the kingdom of heaven that we need to know. We are sinners who owe God a crazy high, astronomical debt due to sin. But thank God the story doesn't stop there.

II. In Christ, God has forgiven us of our crazy high debt

The servant can't pay back his debt so the king orders him and his wife and his children and all his property to be sold into slavery. It's over for this servant. He has no hope at all. But in desperation he falls on his knees and begs for more time to repay his debt. We know – and the king knew – he could never even come close to repaying the debt. He's just stalling. But then something unexpected happens. The King has mercy on him. He forgives him his debt and releases him from prison.

Christian, God has had mercy on you. As crazy high as our debt was, Jesus paid it all on Calvary. His blood was precious enough to repay every "dollar" so to speak of our debt. My 171K sins today (maybe only 70-80K at this point, it's still early) were ALL paid for by Jesus. God has had mercy on us and forgiven us of all our sin and all our debt. Forgiveness has released us from our debt.

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸that he lavished on us. Eph. 1:7-8 Our sins were lavish, God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness was MORE lavish! Forgiving others becomes easier when we remember the great debt we have been forgiven of.

III. Forgiven people must not choose to be unforgiving

This servant is shown such mercy and forgiveness, and yet, when he runs into a servant who owes him a

debt, he has no mercy or forgiveness in his heart towards him. The debt isn't insignificant – about 3 months salary – but it's insignificant compared to what the first servant was forgiven of. But his heart isn't filled with the wonder of all he has been forgiven of, his heart is consumed by what this second servant owes him. He probably turned the servant's debt over and over again in his mind, obsessed with getting back what was his. This is what unforgiveness does to us: it becomes all we can think about, dwarfing everything else as that person's debt and what they owe consumes our thoughts.

He refuses to give back even a little of the forgiveness and mercy he has received and deliberately chooses to hold this servant in unforgiveness. Not surprisingly when the king hears how this wicked servant didn't show mercy after all the mercy he had been shown, he is furious and throws him into prison and into the hands of tormentors until all his debt is repaid. And it never will be.

Jesus closes by saying God is going to deal with us in this way if we do not forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts. We've been forgiven so much, not forgiving others isn't an option.

We live in a fallen world full of sinners and it's inevitable that we will be sinned against. The Bible doesn't diminish the pain and damage that someone's sin against us inflicts. Some sins really hurt and hurt bad. And it's hard to let go of offense and forgive the wrong. We need God to help us work through anger and bitterness and unforgiveness and get to the other side of forgiveness. But we need to do that – it's not an option not to. Unforgiveness lands us in a prison of torment. It hardens our heart and breaks up relationships and messes up our lives. It breaks our fellowship with God. He still loves us, we're still saved, but our fellowship with Him is broken when we hold unforgiveness towards someone.

God knows that sometimes it's a process. There are some sins that wound deeply, and we can't just say, "OK, I'm good. I forgive." God wants to help us work towards forgiveness, but we want to be heading towards forgiveness, not towards unforgiveness. Don't become like Elizabeth Browning's dad who hardened his heart and returned all her letters unopened. As if ten years of silence weren't painful enough, his last act before he died was to try to hurt her even more deeply by returning her letters.

When someone sins against us, what helps us forgive is to remember how much Jesus has forgiven us of. How deep our debt to God was. How much pain it took for Jesus to absorb and pay for our debt. When we know – really know – that we aren't "4 sins per day" people, we are 171K sins per day people, and God has forgiven us of our crazy high debt, we will find our hearts moved towards mercy and forgiveness towards those who have sinned against us. Forgiven people forgive.

Eph. 4:32 says: *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.* We can forgive because we've been forgiven SO much.

IV. Forgiveness releases the debtor from their debt

So what does forgiveness look like? How do we forgive? What if the person refuses to repent and continues to sin against us? To forgive someone means to release them from the liability to suffer punishment or penalty. It means to release them from debt. It's not denying there is a debt, it's choosing to release them from that debt. And it flows from our awareness that we've been released from such a debt. Let's close by considering a few practical thoughts about forgiveness taken from Ken Sande's book *The Peacemaker*.

1. Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling

It's a choice *not* to keep a record of wrongs. Ken Sande writes that forgiveness can be described as a decision to make four promises:

- I will not think about this incident
- I will not bring up this incident again to use against you
- I will not talk to others about this incident
- I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our relationship

2. *Forgiveness isn't excusing.* In fact, it's the opposite of excusing. The fact that forgiveness is needed says that what the person did was wrong.

3. *When do we forgive?* Ideally repentance will precede forgiveness. There are times when a minor offense can be overlooked and forgiven even if the offender has not expressed repentance.

If the offense is too serious to overlook, and the offender will not repent, you may need to approach forgiveness as a two-stage process. The first stage is to maintain a "position of forgiveness" – that is, a loving and merciful attitude toward the offender, praying for them, and ready to pursue complete reconciliation as soon as the offender is ready to repent. If their heart is closed to you, unwilling to repent or work through the offense, that may be where it stays. Being a forgiving person doesn't mean we allow ourselves to be perpetual victims to someone who isn't repentant and wants to keep hurting us.

In this case, relationship may be broken by the unrepentant sinner, but by keeping a position of forgiveness you protect your heart from becoming hard and unforgiving. If the offender is not willing to repent, you may need to confront them or seek the involvement of others to resolve the matter. In that case, reconciliation and restoration of the relationship should always be the goal.

The second stage of "transactional forgiveness" takes place when the offender truly repents for their sin. This is when the debt is forgiven and the relationship restored.

4. *Forgiveness doesn't always mean removing the consequences of the sin*

In fact there are times when it wouldn't be right or in the best interests of the offending party to remove all the consequences of their sin. Some consequences need to remain. Many years ago I was involved in a situation where a youth pastor was committing such serious sin that when it was found out, they needed to be removed from ministry. The church forgave him, but the consequence is that he lost his ministry and job. And that was the right call.

Conclusion

Though by God's grace we make the choice to forgive, don't be surprised if your thoughts try to resurrect that old hurt. Refuse to dwell on the offense, refuse to play the tape over again in your mind and it will eventually diminish. Corrie Ten Boom, the woman who suffered for years in a Nazi concentration camp and whose entire family died at the hands of the Nazis tells of her own struggle with unforgiveness. She had forgiven a person the wrong they had done to her, but she couldn't seem to forget. She kept rehashing the incident and couldn't sleep. Crying out to god for help, she confessed her failure to a kindly Lutheran pastor and he shared this truth with her. *"Up in the church tower," he said, nodding out the window, "is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First ding, then dong. Slower and slower until there's a final dong and it stops. I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down."* *"And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversations, but the force...had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at the last stopped altogether: we can trust God not only above our emotions, but also above our thoughts."*