

Forgiven People Forgive

We were recently looking at Joseph's Christlike example of forgiveness, and before we leave the beautiful topic of forgiveness I want to share a message I shared at Grace back in March. If you have your Bibles turn with me to Matt. 18.

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 hardens the heart. It closes the heart. Unforgiveness can enlarge a person's violation until we can't see their value. One of the most powerful parables Jesus ever told was about unforgiveness and the need for the believer to forgive.

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

*²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.'" **Matt. 18:21-35***

Peter thinks he's being generous. The rabbi's of the day taught you were obliged to forgive 3 times so when Peter more than doubles that number he probably thinks he's being pretty awesome. But Jesus Surprises all of them by saying: "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times (or 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. ²⁴When 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 an impossibly, ridiculously high number in this parable. 1 talent was worth the equivalent of \$600,000. The servant who got five talents got the equivalent of 3,000,000 dollars. Somehow the servant in this parable accumulated a debt of ten thousand talents or approx. 6 billion dollars! Accumulated AND squandered – he has nothing of it left. 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 was valued at 8 marks per 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 was only beginning.

A month later, it took 17000 marks per dollar and in April it was 24000 marks to the dollar. This is where things really started 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. Still not the ceiling. In Oct it was over 25 billion marks per dollar and in Nov. it was 2 trillion 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.

The stories during that time are so interesting. 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 cup of coffee that cost 5000 marks when you ordered it, would cost 7000 marks by the time you finished it.

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. If we're doing really good maybe we're a “4 sins per month” person. The 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 with the truth 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 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.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace⁸ that 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 choose to forgive

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 this wicked servant isn't amazed at how much he has been forgiven, he's consumed by what is owed him.

So what he does is he refuses to extend even a little of the forgiveness he has received and chooses to hold his debtor in unforgiveness. 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.

God knows that sometimes forgiveness is a process. There are wounds that go deep, and we can't just say, "OK, I'm good. I forgive." God will help us work towards forgiveness, but we need to be pointing our hearts towards forgiveness, and make sure we're not point towards unforgiveness. We don't want to become like Elizabeth Browning's dad whose heart was so closed to his daughter he returned all her letters unopened.

When we are sinned against, 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 pastor was caught in a serious sin and needed to be removed from ministry. The church forgave him, but the consequence was that he had to step out of ministry. And that was the right call.

Unforgiveness can be a struggle, one of the ways we can move towards forgiveness is to stop pulling the rope. Let me explain:

Corrie Ten Boom suffered for years in a Nazi concentration camp and her entire family died at the hands of the Nazis. She 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. One day she confessed her failure to a kindly Lutheran pastor who shared this illustration with her. *"Up in the church tower 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."*

We've talked a lot about forgiveness that past several weeks. Let's close by remembering the crazy high debt that God has forgiven us of through Christ and stop pulling the rope on that person who owes us, who hurt us, who offended us. Christ has forgiven us so much, can we do anything less?