



SIN AND FORGIVENESS FORGIVE SIN ENDLESSLY

Matthew 18:21-35

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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."

Introduction

On July 15, 1838, General Andrew Jackson, the seventh President of the United States, was formally admitted into the Presbyterian Church. He was 70 years old and there knelt to receive communion for the first time, "while tears of penitence and joy, trickled down his careworn cheeks."

The previous Sunday, General Jackson had indicated he'd been genuinely converted to faith in Christ. Dr. John Edgar, the minister, therefore wanted to ask him questions about his faith. And to most of Jackson's answers, Edgar gave an approving nod of the head.

But then the minister asked him this: “General, there is one more question which it is my duty to ask you. Can you forgive all your enemies?” The General paused and gazed at his questioner for a while. He then broke the silence: “My political enemies, I can freely forgive; but as for those who abused me when I was serving my country in the field, and those who attacked me for serving my country—Doctor, that is a different case.”

It wasn’t, however, a different case for this godly minister. “Christians must forgive all.” Dr. Edgar insisted, “This was absolute.” This was, no doubt, not the response General and President Jackson was anticipating; and yet he knew he had to confront the reality of the gospel and its claim upon his life. Jackson’s biographer describes his response:

The stricken man sighed. There was a ‘considerable pause.’ Then Jackson spoke again. Upon reflection, he began; he thought he could forgive all who had injured him, even those who reviled him for his services to his country on the battlefield. He was at long last prepared to grant amnesty to all the scoundrels and poltroons who had ever crossed his path.

Forgiveness Isn’t Easy

This is a moving story, with two powerful lessons. First, for the Christian, forgiveness isn’t optional. It’s absolute. You cannot genuinely follow Jesus and be unforgiving toward others.

But, secondly, forgiveness isn’t easy. It’s certainly not easy to forgive those who have wronged us in really serious ways. But, as C. S. Lewis says, it’s not very easy to forgive all those “incessant provocations of daily life: the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son—how can we do it?”¹

Perhaps this is why we’ve devised ways to cheapen forgiveness, so that it doesn’t cost us so much. One of the most frequently used methods to cheapen forgiveness is to think that ‘moving on’ counts as forgiving. Another is to excuse sin, and yet call it forgiveness. But there’s a huge difference between excusing sin and forgiving sin. To excuse sin is to explain why someone really isn’t to blame. But this turns out to be the very opposite of forgiving sin.² But perhaps the most widespread method is to apologize for sin, when what we should be doing is asking and granting forgiveness for sin. Instead of the very difficult words, “I was wrong. Please forgive me,” to which the other person says, “I forgive you,” we nowadays tend almost exclusively to say this, “I’m sorry,” and the reply, “It’s okay,” as though you accidentally spilled coffee on someone.

You see, we realize how hard forgiveness is, so we find ways to cheapen it. One of Jesus’ closest followers, the apostle Peter, he understood the challenge of forgiveness. He’d been listening to Jesus teach on sin and forgiveness and he was starting to connect a few of the dots.

¹ Lewis, “On Forgiveness,” p. 182.

² This is indebted to insights from C. S. Lewis, “On Forgiveness,” in *Weight of Glory*.

And it was making him nervous. Jesus' insistence of forgiveness seemed radical and far-reaching.³

And so Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (v. 21). Surely, Peter figured, there must be some limits on this difficult thing called forgiveness; and surely, forgiveness up to seven times is more than sufficient, right Jesus?

Jesus' response was as succinct as it was blunt: "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven" (v. 22). In other words, Peter, Jesus is saying, if you are going to claim to be a follower of mine, then you must *forgive sin endlessly*.

Forgiveness Isn't Cheap

You see, forgiveness isn't easy, because forgiveness isn't cheap. In fact, to forgive someone who's wronged you is often quite costly; it's certainly never free, and often very expensive.

The Bible conceives of sin in different ways. But one of those ways is to view sin as *a debt you owe to the one you've wronged*. There is a long tradition of thinking and talking about sin as a debt, and forgiveness as the cancellation of debt. This goes all the way back to the Bible; in fact, we can trace this tendency directly to the teaching of Jesus himself. Perhaps the most famous prayer in the world, the Lord's Prayer, contains this request: "Forgive us our *debts*, as we also have forgiven our *debtors*" (Matt. 6:12). Throughout the New Testament we see sin conceived of as a debt; and forgiveness as the cancellation of that debt.

When you see sin as debt and forgiveness as a cancellation of debt, you suddenly realize why we find it so hard to forgive. Forgiveness is hard because forgiveness is costly. To forgive someone means to cancel that person's debt to you; to wipe away the debt that person owes you for the wrong that's been done to you. Forgiveness means "the forgiver pays the cost of forgiveness, even when the forgiven is unaware of the price."⁴ It's a radical kind of generosity that can even let go of what you have a rightful claim to have!

Holding onto Another's Debt Is Horribly Costly

You see, this is why we fail to forgive. We want to hold onto another's debt because we think we're protecting our wealth, even making ourselves rich. But what we don't realize is that holding onto another person's debt is horribly expensive. When we fail to forgive, we turn ourselves into Collection Agents, who spends our time chasing after other people to get them to pay what they owe us.

That's what the unforgiving servant in Jesus' parable was like, a sad, miserly and embittered Collection Agent. Even though he was forgiven a mountain of debt, still he found a man who owed him a little ant hill of money, and yet seized him, choked him, demanded payment, and despite the poor man's pleading for mercy, he threw him in prison, "until he should pay the debt" (v. 30). Miserly and merciless is the one who cannot forgive others.

³ See parallel in Luke, where he records that "the apostles said, 'Increase our faith!'" in response to call to forgive. If we understood the half of it, we'd have the same response.

⁴ *Forgiving As We've Been Forgiven*, p. 23.

That's what you're like, if you harbor an unforgiving spirit. By your actions, if not with your words, you relay your ultimatum to everyone who's ever wronged you: *Pay what you owe!* And if you're persistence, you choke the people around you with your unrelenting demands; you may even throw them in the prison of your own bitterness and resentment, until you feel you've extracted sufficient payment.

But that's a miserable existence. And if left unchecked, that unforgiving spirit can turn toxic, souring your soul and, eventually, over time, plunge you into a swamp of anger and depression. Indeed, could it be that so many people in the United States today suffer from depression because we as a culture no longer know how to forgive one another?

As ugly as an unforgiving spirit is, however, we need to realize there's an even higher price to pay if you will not forgive. It's a price, a payment that only comes later on, not in this life, but on the border to the next one. Jesus couldn't be clearer on the occupational hazard of being an unforgiving servant: If you don't forgive others now, your heavenly Father won't forgive you on the Last Day. This is the sobering punch-line of this parable, and indeed of this entire chapter of Matthew: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (v. 35).

And these tough words aren't unique to this parable. Jesus says precisely the same thing in very different contexts. You'll recall how the Lord taught us to pray: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). But do remember the incentive he gives in the very next verses, to help motivate us to pray this way? "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, *but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses*" (vv. 14-15).

"If you don't forgive," writes C. S. Lewis, "you will not be forgiven. No part of His teaching is clearer, and there are no exceptions to it. He doesn't say that we are to forgive other people's sins provided they are not too frightful, or provided there are extenuating circumstances, or anything of that sort. We are to forgive them all, however spiteful, however mean, however often they are repeated. If we don't, we shall be forgiven none of our own."⁵

Cancelled Debt Leads To Cancelling Debts

Now, if that sounds to you like a threat, then I must tell you: it is. But, of course, it's not *my* threat; it's the Lord's own. He threatens terrible things for those who refuse to forgive others.

And yet there's more to motivate our forgiving others than the fear of not being forgiven ourselves. There's the breathtaking realization that we have already been forgiven the enormous debt we ourselves owe God. And when you truly embrace the fact that your debt to God has been cancelled, you can't help but want to cancel the debts that others owe you.

I have a good friend who was invited to co-author of book with a very famous pastor in the United States. And because of the publisher's confidence in the sales of this book, they offered my friend what's called an advance on the royalties of the book. But my friend had no idea what kind of an advance he'd receive. What he did know was that he'd racked up a pretty hefty load of debt going through graduate school; in fact, he'd assumed \$150,000 worth of debt. He was more than pleasantly surprised, then, one day last spring when he received in the mail not one,

⁵ Lewis, "On Forgiveness," p. 178.

but two checks from the publisher, each for \$75,000. And in one fell-swoop he was able to retire all of his student debt. Instantly, he was free from a burden that would have otherwise taken him his whole working life to repay.

It was pretty energizing for my friend to be freed from \$150,000 worth of debt. How much more energizing, though, for you and me to be freed from the debt we owe God because of our sin. You'll notice that Jesus tells this story in a way that is intended to help us appreciate the extent of our debt to God because of our sin. The servant of this parable, Jesus says, owes the master ten thousand talents. Now, a talent is worth about twenty years' worth of wages. So, in effect, Jesus is saying this man owes the master 200,000 years' worth of wages, or 73,000,000 days' worth of wages. Obviously, this is a completely ludicrous number, meant for its shock value.

And yet, isn't this the extent of debt we owe God? What sort of debt do we incur with even one sin against an infinitely holy God, who not only demands but deserves perfect obedience from his creatures? And yet, as Paul says, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, *not counting* their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19). Because of the death of Jesus Christ, and the payment he made to the Father through the shedding of his blood, we by faith can receive his payment, and become entirely debt-free before God.

Whatever the record is for your sin, from the very first moment you trust Christ Jesus, God burns that record. When God forgives us, he cancels "the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14).

You see, for citizens of the kingdom of heaven, those who have had all of their sins forgiven through the shed blood of the Lamb of God, the cancellation of their debt compels them to cancel the debt of others. This is why the forgiven servant who in turn is unforgiving is such an outrage to the master: "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (vv. 32-33). Anything less than forgiveness from a forgiven servant is simply inexcusable.

If you have truly embraced Jesus Christ by faith, then you are like the servant who found mercy from the heavenly Father. Even though you were in way over your head in debt—the debt of sin—you cried out to God for grace and mercy. And out of pity for you, the Master released you and forgave you your entire debt (v. 27).

The Infinitely Rich Can Be Endlessly Forgiving

But we've still not yet arrived at the core motivation for extending forgiveness. It rests not ultimately in the fear of consequences, or in our responsibility to do unto others as has been done to us. But, instead, the driving force behind forgiveness must be found in faith.

Faith in what? Faith in Christ, of course. But faith in Christ, which is confidence in the fact that because you are in Christ, you've become *infinitely rich* in Him.

Scripture says that "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... has blessed us in Christ with *every spiritual blessing* in the heavenly places" (Eph. 1:3). The Bible says that "because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus ... you were *enriched in him* ... so that you are *not lacking in any spiritual gift*" (1 Cor. 1:4-7).

But Scripture not only says you have been enriched by faith in Christ, but you *will continue* to be enriched by that same faith into the future, indeed into eternity! "You will be enriched,"

Paul tells the Christians in Corinth, “in every way to be generous in every way” (2 Cor. 9:11). “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

You see, when by faith in Christ you’ve become infinitely rich, you can in turn be endlessly forgiving of others. When you have every resource imaginable, you don’t need to hang on to the debts other people owe you. You can easily part with them, knowing that you have more than enough remaining. Even when it means cancelling another’s debt by forgiving them of their sin against you. “As many as seven times?” you ask. No, Jesus says, “seventy times seven times” (v. 22). Forgive sin endlessly.

Cancel The Debts & Live Debt Free!

Jesus wants you and me to live debt-free. And so he calls us to come to him in repentance and faith, to have our own debts cancelled. But, then, he calls us, in turn, to forgive the debts of others, whether they ask for it or not.

This is the call of today’s passage and sermon: *Forgive Sin Endlessly*. And our aim has been to help us pray with integrity that all important petition in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12).

Some of you, however, can’t pray that. Because you still are holding onto another person’s debt.

How do you know if you’ve not forgiven someone? The indicators are these. First, on the surface of your life there will be bitterness. But underneath that you will find resentment toward the person who’s wronged you. And if you probe beneath the resentment, there you will find a pool of anger because of the harm that’s been done to you. Yet there’s something underneath even the anger: fear. We fail to forgive because deep-down we fear not receiving what’s our due, what another owes me, which causes me to worry whether I’ll have enough to live on. And underneath every instance of fear is the root of all sin, the sin of unbelief.

But Jesus wants you to be free. He’s freely cancelled all your debt, and now he invites you to enjoy freedom by cancelling the debts of others, forgiving others.

Sometimes we need help forgiving others, releasing them from the debt we feel they owe us.

That’s why we’re going to have a cancel the debt service here at the church. Here’s what we’re going to do. I’m inviting you to come to church tomorrow night, Monday, at 7:00PM. We will gather in the dining room. We’ll sing and worship, I’ll say a few things, and then you’ll have opportunity to write on a piece of paper the person or persons you believe you need to forgive. Then, we’re going to give you the opportunity to throw that piece of paper in the fire.

In preparation, I’d like to ask you to fast tomorrow, devote extra time to prayer, in particular, to the Lord’s Prayer, so that you can linger over that all important petition: “and forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12).

Conclusion

Practicing forgiveness, you see, is more than uttering words, or trying to ‘move on,’ or even seek a certain set of feelings. Instead, forgiveness is a way of life.

But it's a costly way of life. Forgiveness isn't easy because it isn't cheap. In fact, living a life of forgiveness will force you, each and every day, to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Jesus.

And yet there's no better path to trod, than to follow Jesus wherever He goes. For, as we will sing at the close of our service, we are complete in Him.

Complete in Thee! No work of mine
May take, dear Lord, the place of Thine;
Thy blood hath pardon bought for me,
And I am now complete in Thee.

Amen.

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