

“Forgiveness from the Heart”
Matthew 18:21-35
March 21, 2010

INTRODUCTION:

In our series on the gospel-centered life, we’re looking at another practical result of believing the gospel—the ability to forgive others. Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness arose because of a question Peter asked. Following Jesus’ instruction about how to handle the situation where someone sins against you, Peter had noticed that Jesus had never answered a question he had about that topic. How many times should he forgive when someone sinned against him? After all, he likely reasoned, one had to be careful not to forgive so many times that it would encourage the other person just to keep on sinning. Peter knew that Jesus was always emphasizing mercy, so he proposed what must have seemed to him a generous number. “This thing about forgiving others when they sin against us—when that happens, how many times are you telling us to forgive? Are you suggesting as many as seven?” There was a Rabbinic saying in this day which said, “If a man transgresses once, forgive him; if a second time, forgive him; if a third time, forgive him; if a fourth time, *do not forgive him*” (Barclay, p. 86). So Peter must have thought he was being especially generous, more than doubling the number of times the leading Rabbis had taught. Jesus gave one of those jaw-dropping, eye-popping responses that he was known for. He told Peter, **“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”**

What did Jesus mean by giving this number? He is not asking us to count offenses against us, and when the count reaches 491 we are not to forgive. Rather, his point is to call us to forgiveness of others from the heart. I draw this conclusion for two reasons. First, Jesus’ words about forgiving seventy times seven are meant to refer to an Old Testament character famous for his unforgiving heart. Lamech was committed to revenge, the opposite of forgiveness. He once said, **“I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold”** (Gen. 4:23-24). Jesus is urging upon us a heart that is just as committed to forgiveness as Lamech was to revenge. The second reason I believe Jesus was referring to a heart of forgiveness when he told Peter to forgive seventy times seven is the conclusion of the parable he teaches. A common feature of parables is that they make their main point at the end of the parable. At the end of this parable Jesus makes his point. **“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart”** (Mat. 18:35). Jesus is telling Peter that he was asking the wrong question. Peter was asking about quantity, and he should have been asking about quality. The hard thing is not forgiving 490 times, it’s being able to forgive one time in the right way, from the heart. This parable instructs us about a forgiving heart by speaking of its opposite, the unforgiving heart. Notice three things we learn about such a heart.

I. The Issue at Stake with an Unforgiving Heart

The stakes could not be higher in this area of forgiveness of others. Jesus says that a lack of forgiveness from the heart results in a lack of forgiveness from our heavenly Father. To say it more clearly, eternal condemnation awaits those who have an unforgiving heart. Jesus taught this repeatedly and clearly. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, **“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 Father forgive your trespasses”** (Matt. 6:14-15). On another occasion, Jesus said, **“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses”** (Mark 11:25). He put it very simply in Luke 6:37: **“Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”**

This seems to say that we can earn entrance into heaven by paying the price of forgiving others. If it does say that, then these teachings are in conflict with the Bible’s clear teaching elsewhere, where forgiveness from God is given as a free gift. Let’s review the entire parable and see if that helps somewhat in clearing up this issue. The parable involves three scenes. In scene one, a great king is calling his nobles before him to settle their debts. One of the king’s subjects has managed to accumulate an incredibly large debt of ten thousand talents. A talent is a measure of weight, roughly equivalent to 75 pounds. Converting these amounts to modern currency is not easy, but we can get some idea of the vastness of this sum of ten thousand talents by considering the fact that Herod the Great’s annual revenue from his entire kingdom was about nine hundred talents. This is more than ten times that amount. The debtor has no way of paying this debt, so the king seeks the common remedy of his day, which was a type of foreclosure. He orders that the debtor, with his wife and children, be sold into slavery and that the proceeds be applied to the debt. The servant then falls to his knees and begs for more time and promises that he will pay it all. The king knows that he would never be able to pay such a sizable debt, no matter how much time he’s given. With a heart of pity, he cancels the entire debt.

Scene two follows this servant out of the king’s presence where the servant finds one of his debtors. This second debtor owed the much smaller amount of a hundred denarii. A denarius was equivalent to one day’s wages, so this is not an insignificant amount of money in itself. But when compared to the previous debt, it was about 750,000 times smaller. This servant grabs his debtor, chokes him and orders that he pay his debt. He begs for mercy in almost identical words as the first debtor, but his request is not met with equivalent pity. The order is given that he be thrown into prison until his family could come up with the money.

Scene three takes place back at the king’s palace, where several other of the king’s servants have gone to inform the king of the hard-hearted cruelty they have witnessed in this servant. For a second time he summons this servant to appear before him, with quite a different result than the first time. But notice his words

to the servant, because they help answer our question of how Jesus' words about the necessity of our forgiveness of others fit with the gospel message of salvation by grace. He says, **"You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servants, as I had mercy on you?"** (v. 32-33). At one level, this servant did nothing wrong. It was not wrong to require his debtor to repay the hundred denarii he owed. And his action of throwing the man into prison was one form of collateral on a loan that was utilized at this time. The debtor knew and agreed to these terms when he borrowed the money. The servant's wickedness was evident in his lack of appreciation for the king's forgiveness of his debt, as seen in his refusal to show the same type of mercy to the one who owed him far less.

When Jesus says that our heavenly Father won't forgive our sins unless we forgive the sins of others, he is not saying that we can earn forgiveness by our act of forgiving others. If that's what he meant, then our forgiveness of others would come first, followed by the Father's forgiveness of us. But that's not the order in the parable, where the king's forgiveness comes first. What Jesus is saying when he ties together our forgiveness of others with God's forgiveness of us is that an inevitable result of receiving God's forgiveness is a heart that will forgive others.

Is your heart like that of Lamech, who sought revenge when wronged, or has it been softened by the grace of your heavenly Father to extend forgiveness? Everything is at stake in the answer given to that question. Let me make two qualifications before we move to our next point. First, there is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation of the relationship. I believe God calls us to forgive everyone who wrongs us, whether or not the person confesses their wrong. But there cannot be reconciliation until such confession of wrongdoing occurs. Forgiveness can be one-sided, but reconciliation must be two-sided. The second qualification is seen in the context of the passage. You may have noticed that this section on forgiveness comes right after a section about church discipline. Many find these two to be contradictory, but Jesus did not.

II. The Signs of an Unforgiving Heart

Since so much is at stake in this area of forgiving others, it is important that we discern the condition of our own hearts regarding this. I notice four signs of the lack of forgiveness in the heart of this servant. I notice first his harshness toward the man who owes him money. Notice that as soon as he leaves the presence of the king who has forgiven him, he goes out and finds one of his own debtors. Even before speaking, he chokes the man. In doing so, he treats his debtor far more harshly than he had been treated as a debtor to the king. There is a stark contrast between the behavior of this man when in the presence of the king and when in the presence of his debtor. In scene 1 when he is before the king, he seems appropriately humble. He doesn't dispute the debt, but simply falls to his knees and begs for mercy. We see a completely different man in scene 2, as he chokes his debtor, demanding repayment and being unwilling to show

any mercy. Which scene portrays his true character? It's scene 2, isn't it? Our true character is more clearly revealed when we are with those over whom we have power rather than the other way around. When there is harshness with our children, with employees, or simply with those over whom we have power because of having more money, such harshness reveals an unforgiving heart.

The second sign of an unforgiving heart is impatience with others. The servant's debtor asked for patience, but his request was denied. The man wanted his money, and he wanted it now. Impatience with others is a form of unforgiveness. We want people to change, and we want them to change now. And if they don't change, we want to make them pay somehow. The servant made his debtor pay by throwing him into prison. We don't have that option open to us, so we make others pay in different ways. We give them the silent treatment, or write them off as being worthy of a continuing relationship with us.

The third sign of an unforgiving heart is the presence of a double standard. We have one standard we want applied to ourselves, and it's the standard of mercy. We have another standard we want applied to others, and it's the standard of justice. So the servant wants mercy from the king and justice for his debtor. Note his words to his debtor: **"Pay what you owe"** (v. 28). Some translations add the word "me" to the end of that, but it is not present in the original. The sense of this is that this servant is laying down a rule: "people ought to pay their debts." The shocking feature of this is that Jesus makes it clear that God applies to us the rules we would apply to others. The actions of the king are clearly intended by Jesus to show us the actions of God. The king initially shows mercy to this servant, but at the end of the parable applies to him his own rule. It is as if the king says to him, "So you think that people should pay what they owe. Very well, from your own lips you will be condemned. You have not paid what you owe, and now you will suffer the consequences." Have you ever noticed how your lack of forgiveness is often accompanied by implicit rules in your own heart that you would have applied to others but don't really want applied to yourself? Perhaps your rule is, "People should work hard," and you condemn in your heart those you judge to fall short of this standard. Or perhaps your rule is, "People should not judge others," but then you violate your own rule by judging harshly those who judge others. We don't want our rules applied to ourselves, only to others. But God says to us that it is our rules for others that he applies to us.

This brings us to our final sign of an unforgiving heart—blindness to our own sin. The servant set forth his own rule that people ought to pay what they owe. What is remarkable is that he had violated his own rule to a rather staggering degree, but didn't seem to be aware of it. He had not paid what he owed, and he owed about 750,000 times as much as his own debtor. His debt was great, while that of his debtor was small in comparison. But he reversed that and regarded in his own mind the debt owed him to be great. We do the same with our sin, regarding our own as minor, while viewing that of others as great.

III. The Transformation of an Unforgiving Heart

The central sin of this servant was not insisting on the repayment of the money owed him, but the fact that he remained unchanged by the mercy of the king. Our hearts ought to be transformed by the mercy of God, with the result that we forgive others from the heart. Our unforgiving hearts are transformed as we come to see the greatness of our own sin and receive God's forgiveness of us. These two must go together.

One of the ways we can see the greatness of both our sin and God's forgiveness is to consider this idea of sin as a debt. Jesus used this word for sin both here and in the Lord's Prayer, where he taught us to pray, **"Forgive us our debts"** (Matt. 6:12). Our sin is a debt because we owe God our love and obedience, and we are completely unable to pay. Consider again the size of this servant's debt. It's hard to imagine how someone could lose this much money. Such a loss would require complete failure of his plans. Yet that is exactly our condition before God, with all of our plans for our lives having failed to deliver the success for which we hoped. We have this massive debt, and someone must pay. There are only two options. Either the debtor pays or the one owed the debt forgives it, in which case he pays. How chilling are those words which describe the payment of the debt by the debtor. **"And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt"** (v. 34). The word for jailer is literally "torturers." Since he would never have been able to pay his debt, he was faced with never-ending torture. I like what D. A. Carson says about this. "Jesus sees no incongruity in the actions of a heavenly Father who forgives so bountifully and punishes so ruthlessly, and neither should we." The wonderful news of the gospel is that Jesus has paid our debt, leaving us completely free. When we receive this forgiveness, we are transformed to be able to forgive from the heart.

CONCLUSION:

Corrie ten Boom tells the story of meeting one of her concentration camp guards years after the war ended. He had acted very cruelly toward her and her sister, humiliating and degrading them every chance he had. Now he stood before her with hand outstretched and said, "Will you forgive me?" She writes: "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 clasped 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!"