

A Lesson of Forgiveness Matthew 18:21-35

Today we pause to remember the Terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 or as we call it, 9-11. We are in the midst of an armed conflict that has been going on the 10 years. Our young men and women of the military have been risking their lives, and some have paid the ultimate price, for our way of life. In light of this anniversary I have struggled with the meaning of our scripture. You may think that I have been trying to mix apples and oranges, after all, Jesus was giving instructions on how individual Christians are to relate to their brothers and sisters within the fellowship of the church, rather than whether countries engage in war when aggression has been perpetrated on our homeland. But deep down inside I believe there is a connect and I will struggle with in my study and prayer time over the next days, months and years.

Meanwhile let's go to our scripture. We owe a very great deal to the fact that Peter had a quick tongue. Again and again he made statements that gave Jesus an opening to teach immortal truths. Jesus had just taught the disciples about how to relate to members of the church when a brother or sister had done them wrong. Jesus had given a step-by-step process which included:

1. Keep the matter private; as you may be able to settle the matter between the two of you. When that does not work...
2. Ask for help from others mature, wise and trusted Christians. Maybe they can get through to the offending member when you were not. When that does not work....
3. Ask the church for help. Maybe the church can help the offender understand their error and change their ways.

4. Finally the church has a responsibility to make sure it is in obedience to the will of God, and making every effort to bring that brother or sister into that same obedience.

Now Peter recognized the risks involved and asked Jesus how he should handle them in the future. Peter thought that he was being very generous. He asked Jesus how often he ought to forgive his brother, and then answered his own question by suggesting that he should forgive seven times.

Peter was not without warrant for this suggestion. It was Rabbinic teaching that a man must forgive his brother *three* times. Rabbi Jose ben Hanina said, “He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times.” Rabbi Jose ben Jehuda said, “If a man commits an offence once, they forgive him; if he commits an offence a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offence a third time, they forgive him; the fourth time they do not forgive.” The rabbis gleaned from the book of Amos that God forgave the nations three (3) times only, so it was not thought that a man could be more gracious than God, so forgiveness was limited to three times.

Peter thought that he was being good and showing how much he had learned from Jesus by taking the Rabbinic three times, multiplying it by two and for good measure adding one, and suggesting, with self-satisfaction, that it will be enough if he forgives seven times. Peter expected to be commended. But Peter made some serious mistakes. To begin with, he didn't show humility himself. He was sure his brother would sin against him, but not that he would sins against his brother! Peter's second mistake was in asking for limits and measures. Where there is love, there can be no limits or dimensions (Eph. 3:17–19). Peter thought he was showing great faith and love when he offered to forgive at least seven times.

Jesus' answer, “Until seventy times seven” or 490 times must have startled Peter. Who could keep count for that many offenses? But that was exactly the point

Jesus was making: Love “keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:5, NIV). By the time we have forgiven a brother that many times, we are in the habit of forgiving.

But Jesus was not advising careless or shallow forgiveness. Christian love is not blind (Phil. 1:9–10). The forgiveness Jesus requires is on the basis of the instructions He gave in those step-by-step instructions (Matthew 18:15–20). If a member is guilty of a repeated sin, no doubt they would find strength and power to conquer that sin through the encouragement of their loving and forgiving congregation. If we condemn a member, we bring out the worst in them. But if we create an atmosphere of love and forgiveness, we can help God bring out the best in them.

Jesus then told the story of the servant or slave forgiven a great debt who went out and dealt mercilessly with a fellow-servant who owed him a debt that was an infinitesimal fraction of what he himself had owed; and who for his mercilessness was utterly condemned. Remember the parable illustrates the power of forgiveness. It is important to note that this parable is not about salvation, because salvation is wholly of grace and is unconditionally given. The parable deals with forgiveness between church member, not between lost sinners and God. The emphasis in Matthew 18 is on member forgiving member (Matt. 18:15, 21).

So what do we learn from the main character in this parable who went through three stages in his experience of forgiveness.

This servant was a debtor (vv. 23–27). The first servant owed his master 10,000 talents; about three billion dollars in today’s currency. That is an incredible debt. This debt was more than a king’s ransom.

He and we owe God more than we can ever repay. But this man actually thought he could get out of the debt. He told the king that, given enough time, he could pay it back. When we think this way we commit two sins: pride and a lack of sincere repentance. The man was not ashamed because he stole the money; he was

ashamed because he got caught. And he actually thought he was big enough to earn the money to repay the king's account. In the economy of that day, a man would have had to work twenty years to earn one talent. So he would have to work 200,000 years to repay what he owed.

His case was hopeless, except for one thing: The king was a man of compassion. He assumed the loss and forgave the servant. This meant that the man was free and that he and his family would not be thrown into a debtor's prison. The servant did not deserve this forgiveness; it was purely an act of love and mercy on the part of the master. We are forgiven only because of God's compassion, love and mercy.

This servant was a creditor (vv. 28–30). The servant left the presence of the king and went and found a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii. This debt was insignificant compared to what the servant had owed the king. The debt that a fellow-servant owed him was a trifling thing; about six thousand dollars (\$6,000) in today's currency if the person was working 40 hours per day at minimum wage. It was approximately one five-hundred-thousandth of his own debt. Instead of sharing with his friend the joy of his own release, the servant mistreated his friend and demanded that he pay the debt. The debtor used the same approach as the servant: "Have patience with me and I will pay you all of it!" But the unjust servant was unwilling to grant to others what he wanted others to grant to him.

Maybe he had the *legal* right to throw the man in prison, but he did not have the *moral* right. He had been forgiven himself—he should forgive his fellow servant. He and his family had been spared the shame and suffering of prison. He should have spared his friend.

The servant became a prisoner (vv. 31–34). The king originally delivered him from prison, but the servant put himself back in. The servant exercised justice and cast his friend into prison. "So you want to live by justice?" asked the king. "Then

you shall have justice! Throw the wicked servant in prison and torment him! I will do to him as he has done to others.” This time it is only the unforgiving servant, not his entire family, that was sentenced.

If we refuse to forgive others, then we are only imprisoning ourselves and causing our own torment. Some of the most miserable people are ones who will not forgive others. They lived only to imagine ways to punish these people who had wronged them. But they are really only punishing themselves.

What was wrong with this man is the same thing that is wrong with many professing Christians: They have received forgiveness, but they have not really experienced forgiveness deep in their hearts. So they are unable to share forgiveness with those who have wronged them. If we live only according to justice, always seeking to get what is ours, we will put ourselves into prison. But if we live according to forgiveness, sharing with others what God has shared with us, then we will enjoy freedom and joy. Peter asked for a just measuring rod; Jesus told him to practice forgiveness and forget the measuring rod.

Jesus’ warning is serious. He did not say that God saves only those who forgive others. The theme of this parable is forgiveness between brothers and sister, not salvation for lost sinners. Jesus warned us that God will not forgive us if we do not have humble, repentant and forgiving hearts. We show the true condition of our hearts by the way we treat others. When our hearts are humble and repentant, we will gladly forgive our brothers and sisters. But where there is pride and a desire for revenge, there can be no true repentance; and this means God cannot forgive.

In other words, it is not enough to receive God’s forgiveness, or even the forgiveness of others. We must experience that forgiveness in our hearts so that it humbles us and makes us gentle and forgiving toward others. The servant in the parable did not have a deep experience of forgiveness and humility. He was simply glad to be “off the hook.” He had never really repented.

This parable teaches lessons which Jesus never got tired of teaching.

First it teaches the lesson that repeats through all the New Testament—a person must forgive in order to be forgiven. One who will not forgive their fellow Christian cannot hope that God will forgive their misbehaving. “Blessed are the merciful,” said Jesus, “for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7). No sooner had Jesus taught his disciples his own prayer, than he went on to expand and explain one petition in it: “For if you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their sins, neither will your Father forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14, 15). As James said it, “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy” (James 2:13). Divine and human forgiveness go hand in hand.

Second, we learn, nothing another can do to us can in any way compares with what we continue to do God; and if God continuously forgives us the debt we owe to God, we must forgive our fellow member the debts they owe to us. Nothing that we have to forgive can even faintly or remotely compare with what we have been forgiven.

“And be you kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32). “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any one have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do you” (Col. 3:13).^{1 2 3} It is our responsibility to forgive as we want to be forgiven. Amen.

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mt 18:21

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:62

³Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume 2*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible, Rev. Ed), S. 192