

July 22, 2018

“The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant”

Matthew 18:21-35

FCF: How should we respond when we are wronged?

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Our forgiveness of each other must be without limit.
(magnet) For God’s forgiveness of us is without limit.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

How should we respond when we are wronged? You’ve been waiting your turn for that coveted parking spot. And, just as you’re about to pull in, another car zips in ahead. Worse, what about when your friend breaks their promise? Or another friend shares a painful secret?

How do you take unfair, harsh, insensitive criticism? What do you do when your opinion is belittled or your contribution goes ignored? All of that happens in families. Or in the church.

This is not a matter of “if” but “when”. How should we respond? What does Jesus say?

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 18:21-35](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

The Milky Way galaxy measures about 100,000 light years across and is packed with 100 billion stars. So that’s 14 stars in our galaxy for each person on Earth. Extrapolating from recent images, astronomers say the universe contains 10 to 20 times more galaxies than previously thought - between one and two trillion. That’s the observable universe. Anything beyond that, we can’t see. The point being “out there” just goes on and on. It’s seemingly without limit.

Believe it or not, there’s something like that down here on Earth - our call to forgive one another. It too is to go on without limit. Peter asks a question ([READ Matthew 18:21](#)). The context is important. Jesus was teaching on the nature of His community. It is revolutionary. Part of that is how we deal with sin - both within us and between us. “What is our posture to this other person? How many times should I forgive them?” Peter thinks he’s generous in saying seven for the rabbis of the day said three. ([READ Matthew 18:22](#)) Jesus does not mean literally 77 or even 490 times. He is saying, “How many? More times than you can possibly imagine.”

Our forgiveness of each other must be without limit. For God’s forgiveness of us is without limit. This concept is so vital that Jesus then tells this story to press it home. Yes, there are other things to consider and we’ll get to those next week. But listen to what Jesus is saying.

I. ACT ONE - THE KING AND THE FIRST SERVANT

Act One - this is the king’s lavish grace in forgiving debts ([READ Matthew 18:23-27](#)).

A) *The Dilemma of the First Servant*

Let’s start with the dilemma of the king’s servant, likely the vassal of a provincial ruler.

1. A debt incalculable

His is a debt incalculable. A talent was about 20 years wages. Doing the math, this then comes to about \$6 billion. Another way to think of it - a talent was the highest increment of currency at the time. Ten thousand was the highest named numeral. Together, this is an enormous sum.

2. A debt unpayable

It's a debt incalculable - greater than the annual income of kings or the coinage circulation of nations. It's unimaginable. And so, even as the man begs for time, it's clearly a debt unpayable.

B) The Mercy of the King

This debt incalculable is unpayable. The servant's only hope is the mercy of the king.

1. Sentence looming

There is a sentence looming over him. He and his family are to be sold into slavery. Which was a heartless but common practice by creditors trying to recoup at least some of the money owed.

2. Debt cancelled

(**READ Matthew 18:26-27**) The debt is cancelled and he is freed. Why? Out of compassion and pity - the very word used to describe Jesus' feeling as He looked out upon the helpless crowds.

This is Act One - the king's lavish grace in forgiving our debts.

Illustration:

What does it take for a marathon runner to power through the last miles? Yes, willpower, grit, and determination. But don't miss the obvious - oxygen. And, in order to take in oxygen, runners simply open their mouths. Oxygen is not something they manufacture. No amount of effort can do that. They are but opening their mouths to take in what is already around them.

The point? Ours is not to manufacture God's grace. It is simply to breathe it in.

Application:

Back to the story. Here we see the debt we owe God - incalculable and unpayable. That debt is paid but only by His mercy. That is tremendous. But there's something else. It is paid at great cost to Him. Think with me. The king is writing this off. These are funds that can never be recovered which will be a tremendous loss to the royal treasury. Great mercy at great cost.

This parable is something of a prophecy, told under the looming shadow of the cross where the greatest mercy will come at the greatest cost imaginable. God's forgiveness of us is without limit. Which, again, is why our forgiveness of each other must be without limit as well.

II. ACT TWO - THE FIRST SERVANT AND HIS SERVANT

On now to Act Two - the absurdity of spurning such grace (**READ Matthew 18:28-31**).

A) The Dilemma of the Second Servant

Let's look now at the dilemma of the second servant, one who served along with the first.

1. A reasonable amount

He owes a reasonable amount. One hundred denarii was about one hundred days wages for a foot soldier or a common laborer. So it's a reasonable imaginable amount. It's not nothing.

2. But relatively insignificant

But, compared to the first servant's debt, it is relatively insignificant. It is so much smaller, one six hundred thousandths. Fix that in your mind - a reasonable but relatively insignificant sum.

B) The Ingratitude of the First Servant

Which takes us then from the dilemma of the second servant to the ingratitude of the first.

1. A warning sign

We've seen warning signs already. Immediately after leaving the presence of the king, he found this man - implying a search. He finds him, seizes him, chokes and starts to threaten him.

2. A shocking response

Which sets us up for his shocking response. He hears nearly the same words he himself spoke to the king just moments before. And refuses to listen. Little wonder the witnesses are so grieved.

This is Act Two - the absurdity of spurning such grace.

Illustration:

True news story from a few years ago in South Africa ([READ "Throwing Him Back"](#)):

A man surprised nine men who were robbing his home. Eight of the robbers got away but the homeowner managed to shove one into his backyard pool. After realizing the robber couldn't swim, the homeowner jumped in to save him. Once out of the pool, the thief yelled to his friends to come back. Then he pulled a knife and threatened the man who had just rescued him. The homeowner threw the thief back into the water.

We hear that and think, "You've got to be kidding. That guy really deserved whatever he got."

Application:

Back to the story. Two questions. First, do we see ourselves in the first servant? We need to. Second, how could he respond this way? He insisted on being repaid what was owed him because he was oblivious, just blind, to his own debt. And what it took to cancel it.

This is us everyday. That is what lies behind so much of our anger and bitterness with one other. We think too much of the little and too little of the great. God's forgiveness of us is without limit. Which, again, is why our forgiveness of each other must be without limit as well.

III. ACT THREE - THE KING AND THE FIRST SERVANT

On to Act Three - the frightful fate awaiting the unforgiving ([READ Matthew 18:32-34](#)).

A) The Response of the King

How does the king respond to this first servant on hearing what he has done?

1. The summons

He summons him. He does not ignore it. And he presses him with some inescapable logic.

2. The sentence

He summons him and pronounces a sentence. This will not just entail being sold into slavery but handed over to jailers - actually, torturers - where repayment is impossible to make in any way.

B) The Warning from Jesus

Which takes us to the warning ([READ Matthew 18:35](#)). Lavish love but righteous anger.

1. What He is not saying

Note what Jesus is not saying. He is not saying that God's forgiveness, once given, can later be taken if a follower of Jesus refuses to forgive their brother or sister. That's not what He's saying.

2. What He is saying

What He is saying is that a refusal to forgive is a sign that we've never grasped the enormity of our debt and received His forgiveness in the first place. There is no fruit because there is no root.

That's Act Three - the frightful fate awaiting the unforgiving.

Illustration:

This is not a story of salvation lost but of a heart exposed. The MRI I had some years ago did not cause the tear of the ACL in my left knee. It exposed it. It revealed what was there.

Application:

When someone hurts or wounds us, sins against us, that is like an MRI. It reveals some things not just in them. It reveals some things in us as well. Our response, our ability or inability to forgive, is an opportunity for self-diagnosis. And it ought not to be taken lightly. Our forgiveness of each other must be without limit. For God's forgiveness of us is without limit.

CONCLUSION:

As I said earlier, there are other things to consider on this question of forgiveness. And the plan is to address some of those next week. But let's not lose sight of what's clearly in front of us. Jesus is saying that if we cannot forgive, it is an indication that we have not been forgiven. For to know the king's mercy is to then show the king's mercy. We must grapple with this.

There is a strong element of conviction here. But there is comfort as well. Think with me. Do we not desire to be merciful, to be free of the shackles of our bitterness and resentment? Are we not sick of ourselves in this and what it does to our relationships? Somewhere in the deep recesses of our hearts, do we not long to forgive? Well, this story shows us that there is a way out. There is a way forward. We don't have to stay like this. How? What hope is there?

The answer is this. We become like what we worship. Our lives are shaped by who and what defines us. Anthropologists - secular and Christian - speak to this ([READ Wright quote](#)):

Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners, or customers rather than as human beings. Those who worship sex define themselves in terms of it (their preferences, their practices, their past histories) and increasingly treat other people as actual or potential sex objects. Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors, or pawns. These and many other forms of idolatry combine in a thousand ways, all of them damaging to the image-bearing quality of the people concerned and of those whose lives they touch.

We become like who or what we worship. Think back to your childhood heroes. Mine was Steve Austin, the Six Million Dollar Man. Still to this day, when I'm looking at something off in the distance, that bionic eye sound comes to my mind. This happens with all of us. The people we admire, who embody the qualities we esteem, begin to rub off on us. And we change.

Well, what if the focus of our highest esteem, admiration, adoration, and worship was the God of all mercy, compassion, and grace? A God whose forgiveness is without limit? Imagine the effect of that upon us. Yes, this parable is a cause for conviction. But it is also an invitation.

God's forgiveness of us is without limit. Which means our forgiveness of each other must be without limit. And, by His grace, as we breathe that in, it can be. It really can be.

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