

Ten Thousand Talents

Scripture Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction

A kid once said, "If we don't forgive others, the only friends we will have will be imaginary ones." Isn't that the truth? If we don't forgive other people we want have any friends, except those we imagine. Those people closest to us can oftentimes hurt us the most. The reason for this is that those closest to us are closest to our hearts. Our loved ones are in a special place in our lives and pain caused by them, or pain they experience, hurts us more than those who are not so close to us. This is true for the church. Sometimes, it is painful because we just don't expect to be hurt by those closest to us, so when we are, it is much more painful. And when we are wronged and hurt by others, whoever it is, we naturally want comfort from that pain. Oftentimes, we want justice. We want things made right. We might even want that person to pay for what he has done.

Just before the passage for this sermon, Jesus gave the disciples instructions about what to do when your brother (in the church) sins against you. The church is a *group of people who have been called out of the world into fellowship with Jesus Christ to be God's holy people for the glory of God*. The church ought to be distinct, different from the world from which it is called. Therefore, when trouble and sin occur within the church, it is our duty to resolve it and to restore the fellowship that has been broken – fellowship with God and fellowship with each other. Jesus said that it is our responsibility to go to someone who has sinned against us in order to reconcile that relationship. He also described a process of church discipline, where a person goes to the one who has sinned and attempts to restore that person back into Christian fellowship. The goal of church discipline is restoration – to restore a person back to fellowship with the church. It is not to remove a person from the congregation, although that might happen.

The Parable

After Jesus described this process of restoring a person to fellowship with the church, Peter then came up and asked Jesus about how often we are required to forgive someone. Maybe you can imagine what Peter was thinking here. Realizing that members within the church family are going to say and do things to offend each other, many times, he probably wondered just how often he would have to forgive repeat offenders. Have you ever had those people in your life that no matter how gracious you are to forgive a wrong they have done, you can expect that person will be offending you again – probably in near future. Maybe you have children, and if so I believe you know what this is like. Well, Jesus answered Peter's question, but we will come back to that later. Jesus then tells a parable to teach Peter and the other disciples about forgiveness and unforgiveness. There are three main characters in this parable:

1. A King
2. An Unforgiving Servant
3. A Fellow Servant

Jesus said this parable was a description of the kingdom of heaven. He began the parable in verse 23 saying, "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants." The two servants had accumulated much debt, but one had accumulated a lot more debt than the other. Both servants work for the king. So, the fellow servant is like a co-worker to the first servant, both working for the same employer. Does that sound familiar? The church consists of fellow servants working together for our Boss, our King – Jesus Christ. The king in the parable called his servants to him in order to settle their accounts, to settle the debts that they owed him.

The first servant owed the king ten thousand talents. We do not use talents anymore and haven't used them in quite some time. In the New Testament, a talent was the highest monetary unit of currency at that time. A talent was worth about six thousand denarii, something else we do not use anymore, at least I assume there isn't anyone using denarii. A denarius was a Roman silver coin equivalent to a day's wage of a common laborer. So if a denarius was equal to one day's worth of work, then a talent was equal to approximately twenty years' worth of wages for a common laborer. Therefore, the first servant owed the king ten thousand talents, which was about two hundred thousand years worth of work. Talk about maxing out your credit limit! No wonder the king called the debt in! In today's world, this would be equivalent to about \$6 billion. For most of us, that would be an incalculable debt – which is the point to the parable.

The second servant owed the first servant one hundred denarii, which remember a denarius was equal to a day's wage of a common laborer. Therefore, this second servant owed approximately one hundred days worth of wages. This was still a large amount, which was equivalent to about \$12,000 in today's terms. That is still a lot of money, but much, much less than what the first servant owed. Jesus told the parable of the two servants with very different debts to illustrate how we ought to forgive one another as God has forgiven us. There are three things I would like to point out about this passage:

1. Sin (and Unforgiveness) is Costly
2. Forgiveness is Divine
3. Forgiveness is Ongoing

Sin (and Unforgiveness) is Costly

The king called his servants to him in order to settle their debts. The first servant in the parable comes to the king but he cannot pay the debt he owed. Remember, he owed what some believe to be almost \$6 billion by today's standards. That was a lot of debt, even now, and the first servant could not pay it. So the king ordered the servant and his family to be sold into slavery, and all that he owned to be sold in order to make payment on the debt. This would most likely not pay off the entire debt owed to the king, but something was better than nothing. We may not fully relate to the king's actions, particularly of selling the servant's family into slavery, but selling people into slavery to pay a person's debt was extremely common in the ancient world. Remember, we are also talking about heavenly things.

The reason Jesus uses ten thousand talents for this parable is to make the point that this is a debt the first servant could never repay and to illustrate just how costly and immeasurable the servant's debt was – how hopeless his situation was. The king in the parable represents none other than God Himself. He is the king who has called in our debts. We all owe God far more than any of us could ever repay. What we owe Him through our sin and rebellion to Him is immeasurable, like ten thousand talents, and the consequence is great. Paul wrote in the letter of Romans:

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Scripture declares that we earn death as a wage for sin. Our sin has earned death and separation from God. Another way to look at it is that we have accumulated so much debt with God that we cannot possibly repay it. We cannot possibly work our way out of sin. We are headed straight for a debtor's prison with a life sentence. That's the whole point with having a Savior. We can't pay our debt and therefore we desperately need a Savior.

Sometimes, we forget this, that we have offended God so greatly and are in need of forgiveness. We particularly forget this when other people offend us or hurt us. When that friend or family member does something to hurt us, we think we have been unjustly treated, and forget how unjust we have been. The 100 denarii that other people owe us pales in comparison to the ten thousand talents we owe God. It is a reminder that what we owe God is far greater than what other people owe us. But, fortunately, to borrow Paul Harvey's famous statement, that is **not** the rest of the story.

Forgiveness is Divine

Once the first servant heard the sentence for his debt, that he and his family was to be sold into slavery, and all that he owned to be sold, he then falls to his knees. The servant pleads with the king to give him time to pay it back. Notice, he didn't ask the king to cancel the debt, to wipe it away, but just to give him time in order to repay the debt he owed. He begs for mercy. But he did not receive mercy, he received something far better, something he didn't deserve. That is grace. The king knew the servant couldn't possibly repay the debt. It was impossible. The king, though, had compassion on the servant and rather than giving him time like the servant requested, the king canceled the debt. All ten thousand talents, \$6 billion, the king wiped that debt away. The servant received a clean slate.

We don't deserve God's forgiveness. We deserve death. We have earned it. But God being great in mercy and grace provides forgiveness to us through His Son Jesus Christ. The first servant received forgiveness for a great debt. But he was not the only one with a debt. There is still the other servant, the second servant in the parable. Remember, he owed the first servant 100 denarii. That was not nearly as much as what the first servant owed, but it was still a debt. The first servant went to the second servant and took hold of him and began to choke him,

saying, "Pay what you owe." Remember, the first servant was just forgiven a great debt and the first thing he did was find someone else who owed him money.

Both servants responded in the same way: they each fell on their knees, begged for patience, and promised to pay everything. How did the first servant respond to the second servant who owed him 100 denarii? He withheld it. He threw the second servant in prison rather than forgiving him. Forgiveness is divine and it should not be withheld. We all encounter people, family, friends who hurt us, but like the forgiveness we have each received from God, we need to extend forgiveness to others. We must remember the grace and mercy we have received when dealing with those who hurt us. As God has shown us mercy and forgiven our great debt, our ten thousand talents, He expects us to pay it forward and to forgive those who owe us only 100 denarii. Forgiveness to one another is required because great forgiveness has been received.

What if God forgave us the way we forgive each other? Sometimes we may say, "I am not going to forgive them until they come to me?" or "That person has hurt me so badly there is no way I can possibly forgive him." If God were to extend forgiveness in that way, all of us would remain lost. But God is gracious, and so should we be to others. To forgive someone is to set one free only to realize that you were also in prison. Not forgiving someone is like placing ourselves in a prison and throwing away the key. It costs us our freedom and hurts our loved ones. Forgiving someone else frees both you and the one you are forgiving.

Forgiveness is On-going

Forgiveness is not only required, but it is ongoing. Do you recall what Peter asked Jesus before he told them this parable? Peter asked Jesus:

Matthew 18:21 "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

All of us probably know someone that for one reason or another seems to constantly require your forgiveness. They are constantly doing something to hurt you. You might think that forgiving such a person seven times would be plenty. But that is not what Jesus told Peter. Jesus said to Peter, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. Some believe that it may have been seventy times seven. Either way, Jesus expects that we forgive others a lot more than just seven times, regardless of whether they are repeat offenders, as is true many times. And in case you might be thinking that you ought to count the amount of times you forgive a person, Jesus' point is not to withhold forgiveness after the seventy-eighth offense. The point with this parable is to illustrate, that like God is patient and forgiving to us, we should be incredibly gracious and quick to forgive those who do ask for mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus also stated a consequence for not forgiving others. There is a severe judgment that awaits those who refuse to forgive other people. In the parable, the king put the unforgiving servant into prison until he should pay his entire

debt because he had failed to extend forgiveness to another servant in need. Some claim that this is a picture of purgatory or hell. Some claim that this shows that God can retract the forgiveness He gives to His children. I am not sure that any of these are true, but what we are told is that forgiving other people is required and it is related to the forgiveness we receive from God. Jesus may have taught that no true disciple could ever behave as the unforgiving servant did; those who do show that they have not really received forgiveness. This would be much like the ones who claim to say “Lord, Lord” but will not enter the kingdom of heaven. I am not sure of this, but what we are told is that God has forgiven us a great debt and we should therefore extend forgiveness to others, no matter how many times it is genuinely requested.

Conclusion

In closing, I believe this parable shows us several things. First, the gift of salvation is immeasurably great. We do not deserve it, but God is gracious and forgives a great debt of sin that we all have accumulated. Second, just as we have received so great a salvation and forgiveness from God, we are required to forgive others who wrong us. I realize this is difficult, especially when it is someone who has hurt us deeply. We naturally want justice or revenge or at least for that person to experience some of the pain he/she has caused us. God understands that and cares for you. But, we are like the second servant in the parable and have owed someone else a debt. Like him, we all have done things to one another that are wrong or hurtful. And like that servant, we all need forgiveness from time to time.

The question is how will we respond when those moments occur. Will you be like the unforgiving servant, who would not forgive the much lesser debt of his fellow servant after having received so great a salvation? Or will you extend divine forgiveness to another, realizing that you have needed forgiveness and giving it freely to another heals you just as much as it heals that one receiving it? Will you remain imprisoned by your unforgiveness or will you allow yourself the freedom to release yourself and others from the pain caused by sin? You have the choice and God wants you to extend grace whenever it is required. May it be so! Amen!