

Lord, How Often?

Scripture Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction

Are there things you love to receive but do not like to give away as much? For instance, when I was growing up, I loved to get the last piece of fried chicken my mother cooked. When my brother was around, it was a competition to see who would get it, which I believe I probably lost many times. Though I liked to get that last piece of chicken, I did not want to equally share it with someone else. Adults can be that way, too. I suspect most of us love to receive certain things and we have certain things we cherish. We are probably less likely to give those same things away to another person. The same can be said of forgiveness! We all love to receive forgiveness, but we probably do not as easily give it. Forgiveness is one of those things that we want to receive from others, but when someone offends us or hurts us, we do not as easily want to forgive them as we would like for them to forgive us. The thing is, it is necessary for us to forgive as well as to receive forgiveness. We all need it and we all need to give it. I remember watching a video about forgiveness and a child in that video said, "If we don't forgive others, the only friends we will have will be imaginary ones." That is the truth! If we do not forgive each other we will not have any friends, except those we imagine.

So, why is it so hard to forgive one another when we expect them to forgive us? It is because we do not want to be hurt or wronged. When we are hurt or wronged, we often expect the person who offended us to pay for that pain they caused, or to also hurt in the same or worse way that we experienced. We expect justice! We want things to be made right. Sometimes, those people closest to us can oftentimes be the ones to hurt us the most. The reason for this is that those closer to us are closer to our hearts. Your family and your closest friends can hurt you more than the stranger you meet, or the neighbor you hardly know. Our loved ones are in a special place in our lives and the pain they cause us, or the pain they experience, hurts us more than those who are not so close to us. Sometimes, it is painful because we just do not expect to be hurt by those we love, so when we are, not only are we surprised, but the pain is much more intense. And when we hurt, we naturally want comfort and relief, and forgiving the person who hurt us just does not feel all that comforting. Admit it. You know that is true.

Church Discipline

It is interesting that just before the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus gave His disciples instructions about what to do when someone in the church sins against another. It should not be this way, but oftentimes people in the church hurt other people in the church. When this happens, the whole church hurts. The church is the family of God. The church has been called out of the world into fellowship with Jesus Christ to be God's holy people for the glory of God. When sin occurs in the church, particularly sin that could harm the witness of the church, it must be dealt with, just like a family. When there is trouble from within, the other members of the family must deal with the problem. *To ignore sin, is to approve it.* Let me repeat: to ignore sin and not deal with it is to

approve of it. Jesus Christ did not die on the cross and rise from the grave to create a bunch of hypocrites who are no more holy than the unbelieving world.

The church ought to be distinct, different from the world from which it is called. Remember, we were called out of the world. The word “church” means “the called out ones.” When trouble occurs 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. It is our responsibility to go to someone who has sinned against us in order to reconcile that relationship. In the passage just before the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus described a process by which the church disciplines its members. The process begins with the person who was offended going to the one who has sinned and attempting to restore that person back into Christian fellowship. If that person who sinned does not repent, Jesus stated that we are to then take two or three with us. If the person still does not repent, then we are to tell it to the whole church. If the person still does not repent, then the church is to basically treat the person as a non-member. The goal of this whole process is to restore a brother or sister back to fellowship with the church. It is not to remove a person from the congregation, although that might happen. Sin breaks fellowship. Discipline should restore fellowship, but it requires repentance.

Therefore, what does forgiveness have to do with church discipline? Why did Jesus tell this parable after describing how to discipline members in the church? Is it possible to take church discipline too far? Is it possible that we push people away, who legitimately repent of some wrongdoing and ask for our forgiveness? I think it is not only possible but it really happens. In a desire to be holy and righteous we may push away people who do repent and seek forgiveness, particularly if we were personally hurt by them. We ought to correct one another for the purpose of maintaining Christian fellowship with God and each other, but we must also be quick to forgive for the same reason. Jesus addressed the issue of rebuking and forgiving in Luke chapter seventeen:

Luke 17:3-4 *Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, “repent,” you must forgive him.*

Therefore, rebuke sin and forgive sin. Keep in mind, there is an assumption that the one who offends, who has a debt to you, does repent and ask for forgiveness.

The Parable

After Jesus explained the model for church discipline and restoring a person to fellowship with the church, Peter came up and asked Him 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, he probably wondered just how often he would have to forgive repeat offenders. There are those who no matter how gracious you are to forgive a wrong they have done, they will be offending you again. If you have children, you probably know exactly what this is like. Jesus responded to Peter and said, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-

seven times.” Jesus expects us to be a forgiving people. He then told the parable of two servants who had accumulated much debt. The two servants were co-workers serving the same king. This is similar to the church which consists of fellow servants working together for our King – Jesus Christ. The king in the parable called for his servants to come to him in order to settle the debts that they owed him.

The first servant owed the king ten thousand talents. In the New Testament, one talent was worth about six thousand denarii. What this servant owed would have been in the millions or billions of dollars today. The first servant could not pay his debt, so the king ordered him and his family to be sold into slavery, and all that he owned to be sold in order to pay part of the debt. Jesus made the point that this was a debt the first servant could never repay. This illustrates just how costly and immeasurable the servant’s debt was – how hopeless his situation was. The first servant fell on his knees and pleaded with the king to give him time to pay it back. Notice, he did not ask the king to cancel the debt, but just to give him time to repay what he owed. He begged for mercy, but he received something for more. The first servant received grace. The king had compassion on the servant and rather than giving him time like the servant requested, the king canceled the debt. The king wiped that debt away - all ten thousand talents, billions of dollars. The first servant received a clean slate.

The second servant was not so fortunate. He owed the first servant only one hundred denarii. A denarius was what a common laborer would receive for one day of work. Therefore, this second servant owed approximately one hundred days worth of wages. That was still a lot of money, but much, much less than what the first servant owed. The first servant, who had just been forgiven a great debt, went to the second servant, took hold of him and began to choke him, saying, “Pay what you owe.” Interestingly, both servants responded in the same way when asked to pay their debts: they each fell on their knees, begged for patience, and promised to pay the debt. However, the difference was that the first servant responded to the second servant who owed him only one hundred denarii by withholding forgiveness. He threw the second servant in prison rather than forgiving him. As you can imagine, when the king heard of this he was not happy. Because the first servant had refused to also forgive another servant in need, the king put the unmerciful servant into prison until he should pay his entire debt.

Jesus told the parable of the two servants to illustrate *how we ought to forgive one another just as God has forgiven us*. There are several truths this parable describes.

We Owe God More Than We Could Ever Repay

The king in the parable represents God. He is the King Who has called in our debts. We all owe God far more than any of us could ever repay. Our debt of sin and rebellion 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 for sin. The consequence of sin is death and separation from God. Another way to look at it is that we have accumulated so much debt with God that we simply cannot repay it. We cannot possibly work our way out of sin. We are headed straight for a debtor's prison with a life sentence, just like the first servant in this parable. Sometimes, we forget that we have offended God so greatly and need His forgiveness. We particularly forget this when other people offend us. When that friend or family member does something to hurt us, we think we have been treated unjustly, and forget how unjust we have been. The one hundred denarii that other people owe us pales in comparison to the ten thousand talents we all owe to God. We owe God far greater than what other people owe us. Fortunately, that is not the rest of the story.

God's Grace is Sufficient to Forgive Our Great Debt

Our great debt to God underscores our great need for a Savior. We cannot pay our debt to God and therefore we desperately need a Savior to redeem us - to rescue us and pay our debt for us! We do not deserve God's mercy. We deserve death. We have earned it, remember? But God being great in mercy and grace provided forgiveness to us through His Son Jesus Christ. The first servant received forgiveness for a great debt. The king wiped his debt clean. This is true for anyone who repents of their sin and trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation. Scripture declares that a person who believes in Christ is a new creation. God wipes the slate clean.

Forgiveness Demonstrates Christ-likeness

What if God forgave us the way we forgive each other? Sometimes we may say, "That person has hurt me so badly there is no way I can forgive him." If God forgave our sins in the same way we forgive others, none of us would be forgiven. But God forgives us completely, all ten thousand talents of our sin. He is gracious, and so should we be to others. Because God has forgiven us, we are to forgive each other. Because we have received much mercy, we ought to be merciful to others. In the letter to the Ephesians in a passage describing the new life we have as followers of Jesus Christ, Paul explained the reason we ought to forgive one another. It sounds very much like the principle Jesus was saying in this parable.

Ephesians 4:32 *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

How can we ask God to forgive us of our sin and we do not forgive someone else who has offended us? If you have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and have been forgiven of your sin, you should likewise forgive one another. God expects us to pay it forward and to forgive those who owe us only one hundred denarii. Forgiveness to others is required because great forgiveness has been received. In fact, a person who has genuinely experienced God's magnificent grace will be inclined to extend mercy to others, because he or she knows the mercy God has extended to him or her.

If you refuse to forgive someone, like the unmerciful servant in this parable, you cheapen the grace of God and show that you do not understand the debt you owe to God. Also, if you are unwilling to extend forgiveness to others, it might indicate that you have not received God's forgiveness yourself. Those who are being shaped by the Gospel, who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, are forgiven a great debt and through the Holy Spirit will be inclined to forgive others their debts. Forgiveness may not be easy. It may not even be natural. But *forgiveness is Christ-like*. If you want to follow Jesus Christ and be like Him, you will forgive one another.

Conclusion

In closing, the main point to the parable is that since God has forgiven our great debt, we must in turn forgive one another. We do not deserve forgiveness, but God is gracious and forgives a great debt of sin that we all have accumulated. Just as we have been forgiven so much 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 or she has caused us. 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 you respond when those moments occur. Will you be like the unmerciful servant, who would not forgive the much lesser debt of his fellow servant after having received so great a forgiveness from the king? Or will you extend forgiveness to another, realizing that you have also needed forgiveness? Which will you do? Forgiving someone heals you just as much as it heals that one receiving it? In fact, to forgive someone is to set one free only to realize that you both were 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. 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 to others as He has extended it to you. What are you going to do?