

Introduction

The Biblical teaching on forgiveness is a marvelous part of the gospel, that man can be forgiven sin and on top of that be justified or made right in the sight of God. If we have received such forgiveness, we are called to be “forgivers” ourselves, despite how we may feel about it.

1. The Question and Answer, vv. 21-22

This section is tied with the previous one where the Lord reveals the correct procedure for church discipline. This is apparent because in v. 15 the Lord sets forth a hypothetical situation in which “your brother sins against you.” In v. 21, Peter asked, “how often shall my brother sin against me...” So actually we are looking at two sides of one situation: the lesson on discipline for the offender if he will not “hear” and respond with repentance (18:15-20) and the lesson on forgiveness for the one offended (18:21-35).

The subject is introduced by Peter’s question on how many times he should accept his brother’s “hearing” and forgive him. In other words, how many times can v. 15 be applied if the brother repents each time but then falls back into bad behavior? Peter suggests the number of seven times. This seems somewhat like a Pharisaic approach to things. Fixed numbers and traditions are not what we are about!

The Lord’s answer is, “Not seven, but 490!” The number is obviously so far above what Peter was thinking, and so far above where anyone could keep count, that the Lord means, “Putting a number on it is missing the point.” We cannot put any limit on our forgiveness for others, for as we will see, God forgave us such a huge debt that it is incalculable. May I say that “keeping score” and remembering how many offenses someone has done to you demonstrates a lack of real understanding of forgiveness?

In order to drive the point home, the Lord gives an extended parable.

2. The Parable, vv. 23-34

We are all hopefully familiar with the parable. The main points are:

- A. There was a certain man who was heavily indebted to a king. 10,000 talents is a debt beyond imagination—millions of dollars in today’s money.
- B. He was nearly sold into debtor’s prison to pay the debt, but the king had compassion on him and totally forgave him the debt.
- C. The same servant went out and found someone who owed him \$10 and had him thrown into debtor’s prison, even though his fellow servant plead with him the same way he had plead to the king!
- D. Other servants saw this hypocrisy and thought it totally unjust. And they were right. So they told the king, who recalled the servant.
- E. The king called the servant wicked and said that since he had been forgiven so much, he should have forgiven his fellow servant. (Even had he done so grudgingly, he should have realized he was still millions of dollars ahead of the game at the end of the day!) He did not even follow the golden rule to treat others as he would want to be treated!
- F. Such lack of compassion made the compassionate master angry at the wicked servant and he turned around and reinstated the debt. The wicked servant was judged as he judged. Here is an application of Matt. 7:1.

3. The Conclusion, v. 35

The last verse of the chapter calls out the point for us. Obviously, the king of the parable represents God. The servant who owed a huge debt represents us and our huge debt of sin. However, this servant does not appreciate forgiveness and he is called a “wicked servant” in v. 32, indicating that he pictures an unbeliever. The fellow-servant who owed a small amount represents a brother who (slightly) offends us. God forgave us our huge sin debt and therefore we must forgive from the heart when someone trespasses against us.

It is completely natural for a redeemed sinner to understand the doctrine of forgiveness and to exercise that kind of spirit toward others. He realizes that some little thing someone says or does to him is miniscule compared to what he himself says or does to others, much less what he does and did to God. He truly appreciates forgiveness—the release from debt that accompanies salvation.

The parable obviously is effective to show that a completely unforgiving person is one who also has not been forgiven. But it also instructs us as believers that if there is something we are harboring against another person, we must swiftly take care of it. Don’t keep score. Forgive! Don’t be bitter. Forgive!

Don’t miss the point that the our forgiveness is not what saves us. What happens first is that we are forgiven, like the king forgave the indebted servant. Then since we truly appreciate the value of that forgiveness, we will forgive others. One who comes face to face with God’s forgiveness and then behaves like the wicked servant in the parable is demonstrating that he does not really appreciate God’s forgiveness and is thus he is demonstrating that he has not been born again. He has not the disposition that a true believer has.

We’ve must get the point that offenses done to us are small compared to what we have done to God.

Some Questions

Does the other person have to ask for our forgiveness before we tender it? No. Luke 23:34 and Acts 7:60 make this clear.

Even if we are forgiven, aren’t there consequences to sin? Sometimes there are. Other times we are released from those consequences by God’s grace, like the servant in the parable was released from the debt (v. 27). It is not our job to enforce some kind of consequences ourselves upon someone who has sinned against us. If we forgive, then we are not going to dole out consequences. Otherwise, our forgiveness is simply lip service and not from the heart as v. 35 says. Some consequences may be the natural result of a sin, may be restitution required by the law of the land, or may come from God, but none of these are things we cause.

Does forgiving mean going back to the status quo? Not necessarily! If someone does something to hurt another, you might be more cautious next time, or they might have restrictions placed on them to prevent a recurrence. Do not allow forgiveness to become a warm-fuzzy that has no wisdom behind it.

Conclusion

See Eph. 4:32 for another reference to forgiveness. We are *commanded* to be forgiving. Here in Matthew, we are *persuaded* to do so as well, since it would be ridiculous and awful not to do so given what we have experienced from God. Lack of forgiveness is a real problem in the home and the church. It can cause great problems to develop in our relationships and in ourselves. Let’s meditate on the Word regarding this point and move toward holiness in this area. MAP