

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Title: The Unforgiving Servant

Truth: True Christians are truly forgiving people.

Date/Location: January 22, 2017 at FBC; revised June 5, 2022

Introduction

The parable itself starts in verse 23, but the section includes verses 21-22 as well since they introduce Christ's teaching on forgiveness.

I. Peter's Question and Suggested Answer, v. 21

- A. Peter's question. He asked Jesus about how forgiving he should be toward people who sin against him. Peter obviously intended his question to be general in the sense that it applies to everyone, not just himself. So, we might as well be the ones asking the question.
- B. Peter's suggested answer was seven times (occurrences). That seems like quite a lot, at least to someone not familiar with the way of Christ. After seven times, a person who sins against you is a nuisance and you probably feel like he should be pushed out of your life or treated "like he deserves."
- C. It appears from other places in the New Testament that Peter may have been generous compared to some of his contemporaries, like the Pharisees. As we see in the parable of the lost son in Luke 15, the Pharisees wrote off the tax collectors and sinners like the older brother in the parable wrote off his younger brother. They treated the sinner as a pariah that was unredeemable.
- D. Several interpreters point out that the rabbis taught that you only had to forgive three times (perhaps on the basis of Amos 1:3, 6, etc.). The fourth offense brought God's wrath and there is no forgiveness left by that point. But how exactly we could apply that in our personal interactions with people is not at all clear. A limited forgiveness like this is nothing like what God is like, nor what He wishes for us to be like.

E. So that we don't get too down on the Jews, as if they are all "Pharisees," I thought it would be helpful to replicate this bit of teaching from their Talmud:¹

"All who act mercifully (i.e., forgivingly) toward their fellow creatures will be treated mercifully by Heaven, and all who do not act mercifully toward their fellow creatures will not be treated mercifully by Heaven" (Shab. 151b; see also RH, 17a; Meg. 28a). If the injured party refuses to forgive even when the sinner has come before him three times in the presence of others and asked for forgiveness, then he is in turn deemed to have sinned (see Tanh. Hukat 19). He is called akhzari ("cruel"). The unforgiving man is not of the seed of Abraham (Bez. 32b), since one of the distinguishing marks of all of Abraham's descendants is that they are forgiving. The quality of forgiveness was one of the gifts God bestowed on Abraham and his seed (Yer. 79a; Num. R. 8:4; Yad, Teshuvah 2:10)."²

F. The Talmud text provides the opportunity for us to illustrate a truth which even those who reject Christ understand under the effects of common grace: a person who has offended another should ask for forgiveness. But how hard it is for us to admit that we are wrong and humble ourselves, even to our spouses, or our children, or any of those close to us! Not only must we forgive when we are wronged, but we must seek forgiveness when we are the wrongdoer. To not do so is sin.

G. As we critically evaluate the statement, we see that it reflects some Biblical teaching, for instance, about judgment being without mercy for those who have no mercy (James 2:13, Matthew 5:7, Prov. 21:13). It is also interesting that the statement recognizes in some fashion that not all who are of Israel are Israel, when it says that an unforgiving man is not of the seed of Abraham. It also

¹ The Talmud is for Jews an authoritative document. It consists of two parts. The first is the Mishnah, which explains and applies the Old Testament law and contains the oral traditions supposedly passed from God to Moses and the elders. The second part is the Gemara, which is analysis and commentary on the first part. There is a Babylonian Talmud, and an older Jerusalem Talmud. When people say "the Talmud" they are referring to the larger Babylonian version.

² https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0007_0_06619.html

acknowledges that an unforgiving man is thus a sinner, just as the parable in verse 32 calls the unforgiving man a "wicked servant."

H. The verb *forgive* is used in verses 21 and 35 (the bookends) and in verses 27 and 32. What does it mean? The Greek dictionary (BDAG) defines it this way: "to release from legal or moral obligation or consequence, cancel, remit, pardon." It does not mean "give the silent treatment to someone" or "give them the cold shoulder" or "make them pay" or "be angry for a while until it wears off" or "hold onto a grudge for years" or "criticize the sinner to other people so as to maximize damage to him and make myself look good."

II. The Lord's Answer to Peter's Question, v. 22

- A. The Lord rejected the seven-times suggested answer of Peter. It is far too stingy.
- B. Our Lord gave instead an answer of 77 times. Because of the repetition of the numeral seven and the fact that the Lord takes Peter's number and greatly multiplies it, it is obvious that He is speaking figuratively.
 1. The KJV and NAS translate this phrase as *seventy times seven*. The Greek phrase is made of two words: *seventy occurrences* and *seven*. The *seventy times* in the first phrase is not *multiplied by* but *occurrences*. So, it is more appropriate to translate it as *77*. *Seventy times plus seven more* or just *77 times* would be the best translation. There is no difference between 77 and 490 in the sense intended by Jesus.
 2. His meaning is that there is no limit on the number of times you forgive someone. Here is a paraphrase of His words: "It is 10 times more than you think, Peter, and then even beyond that. It is unlimited."
 3. The attitude of a true forgiver is that you don't keep track of sins done against you. Love keeps no record of wrongs in a little black book, or in any other book, hard copy, computerized, in our mind, or anywhere else! Not incidentally, the attitude of the true Christian is that you truly forgive those who have wronged you.

4. Contrast this with the vengeful spirit of Lamech and his seventy-seven fold revenge (Gen. 4:23-24).
5. Also, this instruction does not undo what is taught in verses 15-20, as if we "just have to be nice and forgiving" and cannot hold anyone to account for their unrepentant sin. Also, Peter's question is in an individual, person-to-person context whereas the prior text is talking about an unrepentant sin that has elevated to the level of the church family.

III. The Story of the Parable, v. 23-34

- A. Jesus says, "the kingdom of heaven is like," just as he did in prior parables. The ethic of the coming kingdom is shown by way of example. Since we in the true church are citizens of that kingdom, this is how we should behave now, in advance of its inauguration.
- B. In the story, a man owed a tremendous amount of money to a king. The debt was 10,000 talents, the exact value of which we do not know. However, it is certainly in the many millions of dollars, if not a billion dollars. This servant was perhaps a governor of some state in the kingdom who had not returned a loan properly, or had not paid what was owed in some other arrangement such as a tribute.
- C. Initially the king was going to sell him off to get what he could out of the servant and his family, which would probably not be as much as the debt, but it would be better than nothing. Upon seeing the servant beg him for leniency, he forgave the whole debt. He wrote it off, considered it a bad debt and not something he was going to pursue. He must not have been too hard up for money! This shows not only how wealthy he was, but how kind and merciful he was.
- D. Then, the same situation happened between the servant and a "smaller servant." The scale of the debt was much smaller, which shows how ridiculous it was for the servant to be unforgiving. The servant seems to have forgotten that he just got \$10,000,000 written off. He was going hard after his \$30,000. As ridiculous the story is, it is just as ridiculous for you to be hard-nosed about forgiving your spouse, family member, church member, etc.

E. Others saw this and explained the situation to the king. He was angry and threw the servant into jail. He was more upset about the lack of merciful attitude than he was about the money!

IV. The Lesson of the Parable, v. 35

A. Matt 6:15 teaches that if you do not forgive others their sins, then God will not forgive you. At first glance, this looks like a works-based way of salvation. The reality is that those who come to God for forgiveness may only temporarily appeared to have embraced that forgiveness, but did not really do so. When they expose their hypocrisy by mistreatment of others, they are simply giving evidence that they never really received the gift of God's forgiveness. Then it is true that God will not forgive them in the end either.

B. A similar statement is made in Matthew 18:35, where Jesus says that God is like the master in the story. First of all, God will punish the one who apparently had gladly received the master's forgiveness, but in fact did not appreciate it whatsoever. But second, God is also like the master in the story in that He is willing to forgive very great offenses.

The juxtaposition of these two concepts—punishment and forgiveness— in the same God is jarring to some people, but very understandable to us who know God personally. He has wrath *and* mercy (Hab. 3:2), both goodness and severity (Rom. 11:22). After all, a very good God could not permit sin to pass by without punishment. Nor would He be good if He made His children suffer forever in the presence of sin and sinners.

We must add that God is like the master of the story, in the third place, in that He cannot dwell with people who are hateful and lack any kind of mercy and forgiveness themselves. This type of person is assigned to eternal punishment rather than eternal fellowship with God.

C. Notice the Lord's requirement includes forgiveness "from the heart." Oh, how hard it is to teach this to our children! How difficult it is to practice this ourselves!

- D. We believers must learn this lesson over and over—and practice it over and over! Some of us get into a rut where we act like an unbeliever but truly know better. Let us ask God to help us to be always ready to forgive, and then to actually do so when the need arises. In the extreme case, an unforgiving person is indeed an unbeliever and will be punished along with all other unrighteous sinners.
- E. Remember Ephesians 4:32. We are called to forgive one another in a way comparable to how God forgave us in Christ. Our forgiveness obviously cannot accomplish precisely what God's did (eternal fellowship with God and eternal life), but our forgiveness can be *like* God's. How? It is comparable in that it is readily extended, generously offered, complete, based on the sacrifice of Christ, and restores inter-personal fellowship and harmony. And just like God's forgiveness, ours cannot necessarily erase temporal consequences of sin. Some things may be off limits for the sinner, some penalties may remain in place, etc.

Conclusion

True Christians have been forgiven a mountain of sin against God and have been welcomed into God's family as justified saints. God's children act like God their Father does (Matthew 5:48; Philippians 2:15; 1 John 3:1-2, 10, 5:2). God is forgiving. Therefore, we should be too. We have been forgiven so much more sin than we can count or list; it is relatively nothing for us to forgive an offender against us. Look at the examples of Christ (Luke 23:34) and Stephen (Acts 7:60).

This means that we always live with an attitude and heart ready to forgive because we understand our own wickedness and the great pardon we have received. When an offender comes to us and asks us to forgive, that readiness is exercised by actually forgiving the person. Thus, the offended comes together with the offender and a "transaction" of forgiveness is finalized.

The *professing* Christian who does not understand this and/or does not practice it, thus demonstrates that they do not truly understand the forgiveness of God. He or she *apparently* did not

experience that forgiveness, or else would automatically understand the need to practice real forgiveness.

The practical challenge for us is not to intellectually understand what we have studied today. The difficulty is to do it when we have been hurt. When our hurt consumes us, we demonstrate selfishness and not love for others. This is when our heart gets clogged up with self and cannot extend forgiveness to another. This is not godly.

In another side of this, we need to know how to apologize and ask forgiveness. The two men in the story had a desperate need—huge debt that they could not pay. They had no problem asking for the debt to be forgiven because they understood the consequences if they did not. We all have a similar need in our sin-debt toward God, and our sins toward others. But the problem is pride. We do not want to admit we are wrong. We think somehow we can avoid paying our debt to God or that we can make the things toward others go away with time or other clever techniques. We need to humble ourselves and ask to be forgiven by admitting our sin to God and to others whom we have wronged. Far better that, than carrying around unresolved guilt all the time.

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