Matthew 18:21-35

21 Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’22Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven[\*](javascript:void(0);) times.

**The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant**

23 ‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;25and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.”27And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.28But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.”29Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.”30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt.31When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.32Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?”34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister[\*](javascript:void(0);) from your heart.’

**10,000 Talents of Grace**

This is a difficult parable, and quite appropriate for the tenth anniversary of 9-11. All of us were affected by that event, some in a profound way as you lost family and friends. As a nation, the event shook us in a way that we had not been shaken since December 7, 1941 when Pearl Harbor was attacked. It has led us into the two longest wars in American history, and the number of lives lost as a result of 9-11 continues to grow.

How can we forgive those who planned and executed such a ruthless attack on so many innocent people? How can we forgive those who are directly responsible for the deaths and injuries and illnesses of our friends and neighbors, particularly when those who planned and carried out the attacks rather than being remorseful, are proud of carrying out the attack and probably planning more? The fact that they’re not remorseful actually makes it easier for us to **not** forgive them since they seem not to be seeking pardon. Does the fact that they’re not asking for our forgiveness get us off the hook and allow us to harbor hatred and exact revenge? Is it a condition of forgiveness the offender has to *ask* to be forgiven? Does the command to forgive “seven times seventy times” apply only to offenders *within* the Church?

I seem to recall our Savior dying upon a cross and pleading with the Father, “forgive them; they know not what they do,” long before we ever asked to be forgiven. And Jesus was pleading for all of humanity, not just his disciples. Clearly we *are* called to forgive everyone who offends us, and we are expected to forgive them again and again and again. Therefore it will help us to define what *forgiveness* really is.

The Greek word for forgiveness that is used in today’s text is *aphiemi*, which means “to send away,” “to remove.” Imagine a dart board, and the bull’s eye represents the correct way to act toward another person, and the darts are others’ actions toward you. Every dart that misses the mark would be a sin against you – from the cashier bruises the peaches that you just bought by tossing them on the conveyer belt to the two guys who break into your home and steal your new television. Forgiveness is your choice to remove those darts, to take them off the board. You’re not forgetting that the darts were thrown. You’re not excusing the one who threw the darts. You’re not being reconciled with the one who threw them. And you’re not expecting the other person to remove the darts for you. **You** are deciding to remove the darts. You are choosing to give up your right to resentment and negative judgment. You are choosing to be compassionate, generous, yea even *loving* to the person or persons who have wrongly offended you.

And Jesus makes it abundantly clear to us that the quantity of the darts is not a consideration. In today’s parable, we find a slave who owes a king 10,000 talents. Sound like a lot? It is. But the king forgives the entire debt – he doesn’t say, “Pay off what you can.” He simply removes the darts. No more thought about it. He doesn’t rub it in the slave’s face; he has pity on the slave and just erases the debt.

I’d like to present two practical reasons to forgive, and then what I consider the underlying reason. First, let’s consider the natural consequences of un-forgiveness on individuals. People who can’t forgive walk around with darts sticking out of them, and those darts are visible. Unforgiving persons tend to show more symptoms of anxiety, paranoia, and narcissism, and they are more likely than average to suffer from psychosomatic complications, heart disease, and have less resistance to physical illness. Spiritually speaking, people who cannot forgive suffer in their prayer life – by refusing to remove the darts, they refuse to be healed.[[1]](#footnote-1) By holding onto grief and anger, they prevent themselves from growing in grace and being transformed by God’s Spirit. They’re stuck in the mud, unhappy and angry.

In 1998, a team of psychologists at Stanford University began what was called “the Stanford Forgiveness Project.” This was a training program designed to help people learn to forgive. One part of the project involved five mothers from Northern Ireland who had suffered catastrophic loss, four of them having had a son who was murdered. These women learned to see the people who killed their sons from a different, more sympathetic perspective. The women show lower stress, a lower degree of hurt, and lower incidence of depression once they learned how to forgive.

The second reason we need to forgive is a social reason. What happens when entire nations, or races, or cultures cannot forgive? Events like 9-11 can push us beyond our forgiveness threshold. When great pain is inflicted in an instant on so many people, and it is done intentionally by those who hate us, our natural *human* response is to put up our dukes, and though I do understand the importance of protecting ourselves and others from fanatical killers, our motives aren’t always quite so noble. When a whole country becomes unforgiving of those who have offended them, narcissism becomes nationalism, and paranoia becomes isolationism or militarism as we forcefully protect or advance our way of life from those who would threaten it. How many innocent *Americans* have been harassed since 9-11 simply due to the spelling of their names, or the color of their skin, or their proficiency with the English language? I hear those who want those who attack us to suffer the way so many Americans have – perhaps some of the interrogators at Abu Grab or Guantanamo sought such retaliation on those that they were interrogating. Such is our human response. We attempt to “get even.” We want justice on our own terms. But everyone wants to get in the last word. Everyone wants justice on their own terms. And so the battle rages. Do we really believe that our war on terrorism will ever end? Some nations have been in conflict for literally thousands of years, as each throws punches at the other, naively thinking that their punch will be the last.

The parable that we read today ends with the king handing over the wicked, unforgiving slave to be tortured, and Jesus warns, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” This sounds like a harsh punishment, hardly in sync with a loving, forgiving God. But as I think about the *natural* consequences of our un-forgiveness – the anxiety, the depression, the paranoia, the endless conflict between nations and even among people within nations, all the blood that is spilled and the constant threat that the fight will come into our own homes – I realize that we are already being tortured by ourselves.

I can present the practical arguments for forgiving others, but Jesus says forgiveness must come “from your heart.” Hence, something within us needs to change. We are a broken people in need of God to repair our corrupted hearts so as to enable us to forgive others. How can change begin? Answer: with the Word of God. Let’s consider today’s parable…

The first slave owes the king 10,000 talents. One talent represents about fifteen years of wages, therefore 10,000 talents would be 150,000 years wages. This is an insurmountable debt! Meanwhile the second slave owes the first slave 100 denari, or 100 days wages, a hefty sum but not unpayable. Note the contrast in the debts. Jesus was prone to use hyperbole to drive in the points of his parables, but the difference here is so extreme that’s it's ridiculous. Why would a king give so much to a slave? How could a king simply forgive such a debt? Yet this is precisely what God has done for us! Our own actions should have condemned us long ago, yet here we are, alive and thriving, forgiven our insurmountable debt by God’s grace through Jesus Christ. As people who have been forgiven so much, how can we fail to forgive those who offend us?

It is a fashionable belief these days that Christianity is just a religion like any other, that all religions are equally valid – or invalid. Those who espouse this belief fail to appreciate God’s grace through Christ. Each of us has received 10,000 talents of grace through Jesus Christ who paid the debt we could never pay. To say we had dug ourselves into a hole would be to trivialize the extent of our plight. We were beyond any hope apart from Christ. And because our debt is forgiven, we rejoice. We are not Christian by tradition but by choice. We worship not out of obligation but out of joy. We obey not because we have to but because we love our Savior. So on this day, the anniversary of a horrible sin, let us remember our own sins and just as importantly the infinite grace that covers the sins of all humanity.

1. Kevin Culligan, *“Prayer and Forgiveness: Can Psychology Help?”*  *Spiritual Life*, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)