

MATTHEW 18:21-35

HOW MANY TIMES LORD?!

How many times Lord must I forgive?! That's the cry of Peter in our text, and often our own cry too. We don't like to forgive. Forgiveness means that we cannot hold the sin of another against them. Forgiveness means that we can't run around telling others about what someone did to us. Forgiveness means that we cannot hold anger and hatred in our hearts, but we must love the one who has hurt us. If they're repentant, that can work out greatly, but if they're not repentant, if they don't care that they hurt us, and if they continue to hurt us, it can truly be very hard to forgive someone like that.

The rabbis in Jesus' time taught that one could be forgiven three times for repeated sins, but no more. Peter extends that to seven times, the biblical number of perfection. Jesus had just taught in the verses right before our text how to settle disputes among ourselves and to forgive one another, and Peter thinks that if he ups the rabbis limit from three to seven, he's making a great suggestion to Jesus.

Yet, Jesus tells us that seven times isn't enough. He gives the number of 490 times. Can you keep track of that many times someone hurts you? Likely not. The point is to forgive one another without measure. Don't count how many times someone keeps sinning against you, but rather just forgive them, and love them. Don't look for an opportunity to show them how much they hurt you, or run to tell others, but rather just forgive them and love them.

A few weeks ago we heard Paul tell us to "live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:16-21).

These Christian principals are hard to live by, and so Jesus tells Peter, and those with him, and us, a parable that shows how hard it is to live as a forgiven and forgiving Christian, but also how important it is to live as a forgiving Christian, because we are forgiven Christians.

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents" (vv 23-24). Now, we can't grasp the immensity of this debt unless we understand what a talent is. In the first century, an average labourer would need to work six thousand days to

earn a single talent. Multiply that by ten thousand, and you have sixty million days of work! No doubt when those around Jesus heard this amount, they either gasped or laughed at its absurd immensity.

The point is that this is an impossible debt to pay. The story continues: “And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made” (v 25). If the servant couldn’t pay a thousand lifetimes of wages, he would still have to pay from what little he had in a lifetime in slavery.

The servant begs for a time extension. He “fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything’” (v 26). Of course, it’s ridiculous that this servant thought he could pay off his debt. He apparently had no concept of its enormity. But the master understood that the only way out of debt was through forgiveness. So, “out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt” (v 27).

What’s the servant’s response to this amazing act of mercy? For one thing, he doesn’t say, “Thank you.” For another, he doesn’t act pardoned. The mercy granted to him doesn’t flow through him to another. Jesus continued the story: “But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe’” (v 28). A denarius was a day’s wage, and one hundred of these would amount to about one-third of a year’s wages. That’s minuscule compared to the amount he had owed to the master! The other servant also pleads for a time extension, just as the first servant had done. Yet no grace is given to him. Instead, this man is thrown in prison “until he should pay the debt” (v 30). Did he think that he still had to collect money to pay off his debt to his master? Did he not trust in the forgiveness of his master? Did he think that he could pay off his debt?

When the report of this disgraceful act reached the ears of the master, he was furious! “His master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt” (vv 32–34). The master now withdraws his mercy from the one whose heart was hardened. And that’s the end of Jesus’ story.

So, what’s the meaning of this parable? Jesus told parables to impart a truth to us. What’s the application of this story? Well, Jesus tells us. He says: “So also My heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (v 35). The message applies to our relationships with God and with others. It has to do with forgiveness, which was the subject of Peter’s original question to Jesus.

The first point is that God forgives us the immense debt of our sin. When we break God's Law, we violate His will and we offend Him. We come under debt to God, owing Him a penalty for our infractions. Justice demands that someone has to pay for the wrong things we do. And we have done many wrong things — the Bible calls these sins — and we're accountable to pay for them. Our wrongdoings before God puts us in debt to Him. What's the payment for sin? The Bible says that "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). That penalty isn't only physical death but it's also eternal spiritual death — eternal separation from God. People are sent to the tormentors in jail, and they never get out because they can never pay off their debt to God. This is why our debt is so serious! Like the servant in Jesus' parable, there's no way we could ever pay off our debt on our own. It's an impossible debt for us to repay.

So, who pays our debt? God does. In the parable, the master freely forgives the entire debt of his servant. But the fact is that in forgiving ten thousand talents, the master **paid** ten thousand talents. All that money came out of his pocket! This points to the gracious act of God to forgive our immense debt of sin. Forgiveness frees us, but it cost God. It cost Him His life on the cross in the person of His Son Jesus. King Jesus takes our sin, and bears our debt, and pays for it in full by His death. He suffers separation from God in our place. PAID IN FULL is stamped in Jesus' blood on your bill. Your debt of sin is canceled in Christ!

This parable applies to our relationship with God, but it also speaks to our relationship with other people, especially those who have sinned against us. It graphically illustrates the appropriate response to being forgiven by God. That response is to forgive others. In response to God's unlimited forgiveness in Jesus, we extend forgiveness to others. This is why we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Our forgiveness of others isn't a condition for God to forgive us, but it's a **result** of God forgiving us.

The fact is, God isn't keeping tally of our sins. He has put them on Christ, who paid for us in full. Thus, the proper response to God forgiving our debts to Him is that we no longer keep track of the debts of others for the wrongs they've committed against us. They don't have a bill of sin that they owe to us.

Because of Jesus' sacrifice for us, there's no limit on God's forgiveness. Accordingly, there's to be no limit on our forgiveness of the sins of others, whether it be seven times, or seventy times seven, or you just lose count of how many times you've forgiven someone. God has forgiven you your debt of sin without limit, enabling you to forgive others. Amen.