

Matthew 18: 21-35

The Forgiveness Factor

Accepting God's amazing gift of forgiveness

There are some passages in the Bible that I would just prefer to avoid. This parable from Matthew would be one of them. I have never liked this one, but I decided to tackle it. I think that I dislike it for two reasons. First, if you identify the king with God, God can be perceived as a compassionate ruler but also a pretty harsh judge. And second, I dislike it because of the part of the story which commands that I must forgive and frankly I don't think I want to hear that.

When it comes to the harsh character of God, we do need to remember that at some point we will be judged, only, *that* judgement is mediated through the death and resurrection of Christ. Because of that alone, we need not fear as we are judged as people who have been washed clean. When God sees us, when God examines our hearts, it is with a heart of love and grace first, not through the eyes of judgement. That is the reason that God came to be with us in Jesus - so that we could be forgiven.

It is also important to understand that parables are stories meant to startle so that people pay attention. In a time when money funneled up and people knew where in the strata of society they clearly belonged, this story would have been startling. Now because Matthew was a tax collector, someone who dealt with money, the stories that he highlights often are about money or account keeping in some way. This made sense to him, just as Luke, a doctor, gives more descriptive accounts of physical healings.

So a little accounting background from theologian David Lose, "a talent was about 130 lbs. of silver and would take a laborer about fifteen years to earn. Which means that the servant owed the king about 150,000 years of labour! In other words, he would never, ever be able to pay this debt back. A denarius, by comparison, was worth about a day's wage, which meant that the second servant owed the first about a hundred days of labor – no small debt. But still...and everyone who hears this parable gets it...how could [the first slave] possibly not overlook that (relatively) minor debt when he had just been forgiven an impossibly huge one?"¹

And this brings us to the point of the parable and why I can now live with it and tackle it. This parable is about amazing forgiveness and how much we have been forgiven. The first point is not to focus on how much we are being asked to forgive another, it is that we ourselves have been forgiven and can count on that forgiveness as long as we believe in Christ and God's incalculable love for us.

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-15-a-forgiveness-possibility/>

Second point is that forgiveness is hard. We may or may not get our minds wrapped around what God has done for us, but how do we get our minds wrapped around forgiving others. Now I am not talking about forgiving someone's slight, or being able to forgive when someone seems truly humbled by their wrong-doing. But what of those who have damaged us or someone we love to the point that forgiveness seems impossible.

I still struggle to forgive a man who thought that I was something to be fondled when I was in my teens while I tried to go about my work at a garage. He would get me pinned up against a wall in the lunch room where I was cleaning and when all others were busy at their tasks on the floor below he would put his disgusting hands all over me.

There was also the middle-aged man, now dead, who thought that when I was eight years old he could get me away in a secluded place, place his hands inside me and then make me touch him to give him pleasure. Even as I share this I find I have to stop to take a breath. This forgiveness thing is very hard.

I think of the woman or man abused in their relationship. The child battered by a parent or caregiver. And I am sure I can't even begin to imagine the experiences that some have had in life. Forgiveness is hard and that makes this parable hard. It is then that I have to remember that God keeps forgiving me, and that my own freedom to live in grace comes in my releasing others and forgiving them. It is often said that forgiveness is not about the other, but about our own peace.

This does not mean that you ever allow harm to continue, abuse is wrong, period. You may not even be able to let the other know that they have been forgiven as to do so might put you back in harm's way. But forgiveness frees us to live without the burden of guilt and shame. It put responsibility where it belongs, but allows for God's grace to enter into the world through us.

If you are one that has harmed another in a way that seems unforgiveable, begin with God. Begin with seeking God's forgiveness and ask God to guide you in how you might reconcile and restore. Again, the best way to do that may not have anything to do with you contacting the person you have injured spiritually, emotionally, or physically, as that would just create more pain for that person or group of people. But seeking wise counsel in either case, as the one being harmed or the one doing the harm, along with seeking God's grace, seeking wisdom and guidance is a necessary step.

The process of forgiveness can be a life long endeavor. Just when you think you have forgiven someone, something crops up that brings up pain and overwhelming feelings, and it feels like you have to work through it all again.

Forgiveness is not always something that can be done quickly. But it is a choice, a choice to live your life empowered by love, or to dwell in the pain. It is a choice to free yourself and free others. You can choose to work at forgiveness even when it seems

impossible. It can come in little steps, it doesn't have to come all at once. The big thing to remember is that forgiveness frees you to live life with joy and grace.

Let me end by sharing with you an article on the Reader's Digest website. It is entitled, *10 Inspiring Stories of Extreme Forgiveness That Will Lift Your Spirits* The article was written by Juliana LaBianca.² I have taken just a few of the stories with the hope that these examples will inspire all of us to be forgiving, just as in God amazing grace we have all been forgiven.

The first example is one of forgiveness in community. "In May 2014, *New York Times* photographer Peter Hiogo began a photo essay project in Rwanda to demonstrate the forgiveness between the Hutus and Tutsis—the two cultures involved in the 1994 Rwandan genocide that took millions of lives. In the photos, members from both cultures stand by side...illustrating a story of forgiveness and how the subjects' lives are now thoroughly intertwined."

In another story it is shared that, "After a long shift at the fire department, Matt Swatzell fell asleep while driving and crashed into another vehicle, taking the life of pregnant mother June Fitzgerald and injuring her 19-month-old daughter. According to *Today*, Fitzgerald's husband, a full-time pastor, asked for the man's diminished sentence—and began meeting with Swatzell for coffee and conversation. Many years later, the two men remain close. "You forgive as you've been forgiven," Fitzgerald told *Today*.

Here is one that a number of people may be able to relate to, "In an interview *with Real Simple*, domestic violence survivor Pascale Kavanagh said that she never thought she would reconnect with her mother—her abuser—during her adult life. However, in 2010, her mother suffered several strokes that left her unable to communicate or take care of herself. With no one else to help, Kavanagh began to sit by her mother's bedside and read to her. Through this, Kavanagh says the hate she had for her mother dissipated into forgiveness and love."

These are just three of the ten examples, but if you look around you may find that there are many examples in your life. Maybe you have been the example of forgiveness. Ultimately, Jesus is the example, not that we need to die, but that love prevailed over sin, anger, pain, and hurt.

Let me take you back to the point in the service where we confess our sins. We do this for a reason near the beginning of the worship service. It is so that we can stand before God in the knowledge and security of God's love for us. And those words of assurance that you may not really be listening to as you move on to see what is next in the bulletin, those words may be the most important words you hear today. The proof of God's amazing love is this: while we were sinners Christ died for us. Know that you are forgiven and be at peace. Amen.

² <https://www.rd.com/true-stories/inspiring/inspiring-forgiveness-stories/>