

Matthew 18:21-35. Sept 27, 2020.

- Topic: Forgiveness. Especially looking at: **Offering Forgiveness to Others**
- Also, see prior Bible Lessons with added notes on forgiveness.

²¹ Then Peter came up and asked Jesus, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you as many as seventy-seven times.” ²³ For this reason the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle them, a man who owed him ten thousand talents ^[1] was brought to him. ²⁵ Because the man was not able to pay the debt, his master ordered that he be sold, along with his wife, children, and all that he owned to repay the debt. ²⁶ “Then the servant fell down on his knees in front of him, saying, ‘Master, be patient with me, and I will pay you everything!’” ²⁷ The master of that servant had pity on him, released him, and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii. ^[1] He grabbed him and began choking him, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’” ²⁹ “So his fellow servant fell down and begged him, saying, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’” ³⁰ But he refused. Instead he went off and threw the man into prison until he could pay back what he owed. ³¹ “When his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were very distressed. They went and reported to their master everything that had taken place. ³² “Then his master called him in and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt when you begged me to. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?’” ³⁴ His master was angry and handed him over to the jailers until he could pay back everything he owed. ³⁵ “This is what my heavenly Father will also do to you unless each one of you forgives his brother from his heart.”

"A few dollars." What do you think of when you hear that description?

I'm guessing there are times that if *a few dollars* are handed your way, you may - without maybe a second thought, or even much of a first one - stuff them into your pocket. Not much concern. If a few dollars is handed back to you through the car window at the drive thru, you may have at times – like me – just dropped that into the car console. Not really thinking about it after that. And is *a few dollars* a big deal between friends? Say you pulled out your phone, and you saw a message there: “Hey, can I drop by and return that *few dollars* I had to borrow from you?” I can picture many an instance where the reply back would be, “Oh, no need. That’s really nothing. Forget about it.”

"A few dollars." That's the suggestion one Bible footnote gave for a modern day example of a 100 denarii debt.

But doesn't that miss the point?

You maybe have heard the term “denarius” from other Bible accounts. Either those other Bible sections or other Bible footnotes will clarify that a denarius was a common day’s wage at the time. So 100 denarii was 100 days wages for a day laborer. Multiply 100 days, times 8 hours, times today's minimum wage. Now you’re talking a multiple thousand dollar figure. Such a debt probably isn’t going to be easily forgotten between two individuals who aren’t flush with cash.

And so now we come to it. The issue. As we talk about offering forgiveness, we should recognize: how many times will there be a struggle? Forgiveness is a beautiful thing. But if we talk about the beauty of it – and, oh let’s do that! –, let’s also be real and talk about the challenge we face. Sometimes it’s going to be a struggle for us to offer it out.

Times like, times including when... the fellow servant is someone into whose life you've poured love. When a loved one of yours overlooks your kindness – or treats it as nothing. Or when you hear a friend belittle you to

someone else, even though you've stood by them through some pretty big issues they had to work through. Those are a few times where it is very personal. There's also times when it's not the person who wrongs you, but it's the painful way in which someone has wronged you. I think you understand – I think you've got examples – where: it would miss the point to say, "Oh that's really nothing."

When the debt registers more like 100 denarii, than a few dollars, how hard it is *not* to stake some kind of claim of the right to hold onto that (as if justice for the wrong should be ours to determine, and exact or demand).

I'm going to suggest that we all have ways we slip into demanding payback from our fellow servants. I want you to think this through with me. It might show up in different ways from one of us to the next. Though more subtle than choking, they aren't too hard to uncover. Perhaps it shows by internal fuming and delivering the bill with a cold shoulder. Maybe we "defer" payment, but keep the debt calculated... until some other incident happens, with a real or maybe only imagined offense (our perspective being clouded by bitterness). And we unleash the pent up fury on the "repeat offender," exacting a balloon payment with interest added on from the original offense. Or maybe payback shows up in what may turn out the least noticeable way, but maybe most painfully: compassion from us being "out of stock" the next time the other person could really use it.

How much of the relational conflict and disharmony that we have experienced in life at its root, at least in part, has been caused by our own heart holding onto the demand for repayment - repayment where *we* set the terms?

So where does this leave us?

"A few dollars"? No. That doesn't capture everything in the picture.

And yet... while not only *a few dollars*, the final point stands powerfully clear even when we ratchet it up to a several thousand dollar figure debt.

A Bible commentary, by Martin Franzmann, notes that King Herod's annual income was 900 talents. Recall our debt earlier in Jesus' parable is pictured as 10,000 talents. So about 11 years of a king's wage. Place 100 days wages of a day laborer side-by-side with 11 years of what was owed a king. Or to put it another way, the 10,000 talent debt would be along the lines of 200,000 years' worth of a common person's wage.

What's the take away? The one is almost incomprehensibly larger. And so the spiritual truth is brought into clarity.

Mercy or justice? To insist on a system of "getting what one deserves" is in effect handing God, the Judge of all, a verdict for myself, written by my own hand or heart. "Judge me based on what I owe." Is that what we want? For if that is the determining factor of our judgment from God (and not mercy), by that rule you or I will get the death sentence – hell.

The moments of your and my lust for justice with hands around our debtor's neck stands in stark contrast to our Savior's longing for mercy with his hands open to hold a nail – on His cross. The sinless one weighed down, shouldering the sins of the world.

Ohhhh, indeed, how has the Lord, my King, treated me? A 10,000 talent debt. He showed mercy. He forgave the full debt I owed him.

Suddenly, there are no sweeter words than Jesus saying to the woman who knew her sin, but turned to Him in trust for mercy: "Your sins have been forgiven. ... Go in peace."

And in that same recognition of our sin and trust in Jesus for mercy, we are led to pray: "Lord Jesus, thank you for placing your nail marked hands, not around my throat, but around my heart! Holy Spirit, day by day keep hammering away my proud heart, and strengthen the heart of faith you've created. And moved by what you've done for me, Lord, help me - among other beautiful things - to be willing to forgive as you have forgiven me!"

Make sure there is no confusion at the end. God's mercy to us is not based on either how good we've been or how often we've failed at having a forgiving spirit. Your King and Lord has already forgiven you the unable-to-be-paid debt of sins. 100% no strings attached, no conditions for you to meet, totally undeserved. By this God upends our old way of thinking. And He works in us hearts that desire to forgive, as He - in Christ - forgave us.

Remind me, O merciful Savior, that if you kept a record of sin, I could not stand. But you have shown mercy. By that empower my heart to refuse to keep records of my fellow servants' sins. Make me merciful, O merciful Lord!

What a beautiful thing it would be - in spite of our flawed attempts - to be known as people with a spirit of forgiveness.

"They said no one could understand a single thought of Martin Luther unless they understood it first as a thought about the forgiveness of sins."

I ran across this statement for the first time this past week. I like it. I appreciate it, as I think back over what I've read from Martin Luther's sermons and Bible commentary.

But if you don't know much or even anything about Martin Luther, don't worry. I don't think you need to here. The concept by itself remains striking. Does it not?

"They said no one could understand a single thought of Martin Luther unless they understood it first as a thought about the forgiveness of sins."

Think of holding such a prominent view of the forgiveness of sins, like that. That your view of it so colors your life that it bleeds into everything else. Where that forgiveness of sins from God, then, permeates and radiates into every scene in your life. Including where someone has wronged you.

Jesus' answer to Peter today moves us from an attempt to set a formula for "what to do when someone sins against you," to... an attitude of the heart worked by God's forgiving love, with which we then approach everything in life, including the times when someone has wronged us.

And so we walk away with more than an explanation of *what to do* when someone wrongs us. With hearts melted and reformed by the Holy Spirit's work, we walk away with the power to forgive.

Imperfect as we may be at it, Lord, move us to be - and ever remain - people with a spirit of forgiveness. Amen.