

Forgiveness

William Cwirla

Matthew 18:21–35

Joseph had every reason in the world to get even with his brothers. And a great opportunity. They had dumped him in a pit and sold him to slave traders and told their father he had been attacked by wild animals. Joseph wound up in Egypt, and in classic rags to riches fashion, he went from Pharaoh's prison to being in charge of Pharaoh's granary, the food supply of Egypt. When famine hit the land of Israel, his brothers came to him hat in hand to buy grain, not knowing they were dealing with Joseph. Instead of getting even, Joseph forgave his brothers, took them in along with their father Jacob, and took care of them.

And then father Jacob died, and the boys got worried. They thought payback time had come. With Jacob dead, Joseph would get even with them for what they did. So they invoked the name of their dead father. "Your father gave this command before he died. Say to Joseph, 'Forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father."

Joseph wept when he heard these words. He could have taken advantage. He could have gotten even. But instead he forgave them. "Do not fear," he said, "for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." They meant to do evil. They wanted to kill Joseph. They sold him into slavery. They lied to their father. God used it for good. He saved the sons of Israel from the famine through Joseph.

And so Joseph became not only the savior of his brothers, but a picture of our Savior Jesus by whose death comes life, by whose blood comes forgiveness, by whose cross comes salvation. It was meant for evil. An innocent man going to the most cruel of capital punishments. Crucified. It is hard to conceive of greater evil done against someone. God meant it for good. The salvation of the world. Your salvation and mine.

This is about forgiveness. Peter came up to Jesus with a question. He had heard Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and prayer. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." "If you do not

forgive you brother, neither will your Father in heaven forgive you.” Peter wondered, as we might wonder. “How often? When is enough enough? How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” Peter remembered what his teachers in the synagogue taught him. They said three times. Three times you were obligated to forgive. But not a fourth. Peter raised it to the next biblical “lucky number” – from three to seven. Surely seven times was enough. Who could ask for more than that?

“No,” Jesus said, “not seven times. I’ll see our seven raise you seventy times seven.” The point: If you’re counting and keeping book, you’re not forgiving. “Love keeps no record of wrongs,” remember?

To underscore the idea, Jesus tells a parable. It’s linked to the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, the one in which Jesus teaches us to pray for forgiveness in the same way as we forgive. “Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wants to settle accounts with his servants. There was a servant who owed an outrageous amount of money to the king, more than he could possibly pay in 10,000 lifetimes of work. Kind of like the national debt, though he couldn’t print money. The servant pleads for mercy, and the king is merciful. He wipes away the entire debt. Clears the books. And what does this forgiven servant go out and do? He finds a fellow servant who owed him a couple hundred bucks and wraps his fingers around the man’s neck and demands payment in full. When word gets back to the king, he’s not happy. And he summons the forgiven servant and condemns him to prison until his debt is paid in full. “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Think about that the next time you pray that. Forgive us in the same way that we forgive. Deal with us as we deal with one another. Hmmmmmm.

“...if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” It’s about the heart, which is not the seat of emotions, it’s not about your feelings but about your will. Forgiveness is an intentional act. From the heart. The heart is the place where Sin has had its way. From the Sin-infected heart proceed all sorts of sins – murder, theft, adultery, gossip, slander, you name it. If we are going to forgive from the heart, then our hearts must be changed, and we can’t do that. God does.

Forgiveness begins not in our hearts but in the merciful heart of God. In the heart that seeks and saves the sinner. In the heart that beats with compassion for the least and the lost, the heart that reaches out to the ungodly and the enemy. The heart of God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish in Sin, desiring everyone to turn and live. It's the heart of Jesus who prays, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing," as Roman soldiers drive nails through His hands and feet to crucify Him. "You mean this for evil, but God meant it for good."

The source of forgiveness is the cross of Jesus, pouring out forgiveness on the entire world. Our forgiveness is nothing else than His forgiveness, the overflow flowing over to the neighbor. The King has wiped away your debt. More than you could ever repay. The Law with all of demands and threats and punishments has been fulfilled, paid in full by Jesus your brother. You are forgiven.

Never say, "I can't forgive." Tell the truth. "I won't forgive." That's the honest truth. Forgiveness means letting go. Releasing. Leaving something be. Which is easier? To hang on to something or to drop it? Imagine a 50 pound weight. Which is easier, to hold on to it and carry it around or to drop it? Don't say, "I can't forgive." Admit it. Confess it. Repent of it. "I won't forgive."

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Today is September 11th. 9/11. Remember that day, ten years ago? It was a Tuesday. I remember that because our circuit pastors had their monthly meeting here. I remember my wife calling me from work. "Turn on the TV. We're under siege." I remember seeing the second jet hit the Trade Center. Remember that day? Remember the anger, the outrage, the desire to lash out, get even? In the ten years since we killed Osama bin Laden and lots of Al Qaida. We dismantled Iraq. We're still fighting in Afghanistan. Considerably more people, including the number of our own soldiers, have died than died in the past ten years than did on 9/11. And I'm not saying that at least some of this wasn't necessary. It was and still is. Some things can only be restrained with a strong swift sword and the inevitable shedding of blood.

But the question is this: Does any of it change your heart? Does getting your pound of flesh from your enemy change who you are? Does it bring back loved ones who were killed? Does it fill the empty place of their absence? Does it make you feel more secure? Are you more free?

"You meant it for evil; God meant it for good."

Do you believe this? Do you believe that God can and does work good out of evil? Not that He trumps evil with good but that He works good in, with and under evil? We like to quote Romans 8 all the time. "God works all things together for good to those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose." We like to quote that as comfort to others to assure them that God will work good somehow. But do we hear what this is saying? That God works all things together for good – all things. Good things, bad things, ugly things. Evil. The hurricane that wipes out your home. The drunk driver that slams into your car. The terrorist who attacks your country. The person who sins against you and hurts you and want to harm you.

We don't forgive because we forget what debtors we are. The parable Jesus told is intentionally absurd. No one but the federal government could amass such debt as the first servant. But the point is in the comparison. How small the second debt is by comparison. How small the sins against you are compared with your sins before God. And yet we act as though our sin is nothing compared with the sins of others against us. That's why we need to come back to the source, again and again. We need to confess the truth of what we are – poor, miserable sinners. We need to hear that word of forgiveness drummed into our ears yet again before we got out into that forgiveness-starved world.

I tell all the couples preparing to get married that there are three words that are crucial to their marriage. Three words they must say to each other intentionally, whether they feel like it or not. Three words that must be said and heard frequently. "I forgive you." They always think it's "I love you." And those are important words too. But without forgiveness there will be no love. "Love keeps no record of wrong."

The servant who was forgiven much could have been a reflection of the King and his mercy. He could have tracked down his fellow servant, the one who owed him, and forgiven his debt. And in so doing, he would have enjoyed a big glass of the outrageous freedom of forgiveness. Letting go is liberating. God in Christ has let go of your debt, your sin. He let go of it. He dropped dead to it. Instead of reforming you and rehabilitating you, He simply forgives you. You are free.

Forgiveness is an act of freedom. The prison doors have been thrown wide open. You are free to walk out of that tiny little cell as free men and women in Christ. The books have been wiped clean. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Freedom. You are free to step out into this glorious land of liberty, the kingdom of heaven. But remember, this is a free kingdom. And the King is a bit crazy and has this outrageous

tendency to forgive. And so you live in His freedom and the freedom of His forgiveness by forgiving others.

Who suffers when you refuse to forgive? The person who has sinned against you or you? Who is imprisoned? Who's actions and feelings are held captive? You or the person who sinned against you? You see, to refuse to forgive is to go back the prison cell again, like that forgiven servant who wound up in prison. The kingdom of heaven is about free people forgiving freely for Jesus' sake.

"You meant it for evil; God meant it for good."

That's faith talk on the part of Joseph. That's how a free man in Christ deals with his brothers who sinned against him.

For freedom Christ has set you free. You are free to forgive.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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