

Introduction

Two brothers of long ago had a falling out. The younger had stolen something very precious from the older, and it could not be replaced. In fear he ran far away from home. After 20 years, he determined to move his family back home. But there was grave concern. Even after all this time, would the older brother seek vengeance for the wound the younger had inflicted? The older was Esau and the younger Jacob. The offense was the theft of the blessing belonging to the firstborn. Jacob sent messengers ahead of his caravan to seek Esau's favor. They returned with the news that Esau was coming out to meet Jacob with 400 men.

Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed and took strategic steps to protect his family from attack. He went ahead of everyone and bowed himself to the ground seven times until he came near to his brother. Fear gripped him as Esau and the 400 men approached. Esau began running toward Jacob. Jacob braced himself, and as the two came into contact Esau reached for Jacob's neck. Esau's intent, however, was not to retaliate but to reconcile. The two greeted one another with affection and great emotion. They both wept. Jacob sought Esau's favor and Esau greeted Jacob with forgiveness. What a joyful reunion!

Reconciliation is a beautiful thing. An offense is committed; relationships are shattered. Heartache, brokenness, angst, and unrest destroy peace. But the offender acknowledges his wrong and seeks forgiveness. When the offended chooses to bless with reconciliation over retaliation, there is great joy and peace. But what happens when the offended refuses to forgive? The consequences are enormously destructive. Most importantly, the destruction comes back on the one who refuses to forgive. In our text this morning, Jesus provides a vivid portrayal of what is wrong with an unforgiving spirit and what are its grave consequences.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

As we come to explain and apply what Jesus is saying here, it is important to keep in mind the whole of Matthew 18. Jesus instructs his disciples that you cannot get in to the kingdom of heaven without coming as a little child. And even the greatest in the kingdom is one who is humble like a little child.

A child is vulnerable to threat, but the Father is their protector and defender. The greatest threat to the children in the kingdom is sin. Therefore, Jesus pronounces woe upon those who tempt and he warns the children to deal ruthlessly with sin. When the children do fall into sin, the Father will not rest. He will pursue the wandering child. He uses the children to do so. They are to confront one another for serious breaches of righteousness. If the wanderer will not respond to the entreaty of God's people, they are to be cast out of the assembly. But restoration is the goal. So what should be done when the wanderer seeks restoration? How many times should the children forgive their wandering brothers and sisters?

This is the question that occurs to Peter as he seeks to absorb what Jesus is teaching. Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Is there a limit to the number of times I should forgive a brother? Seven times seems like a good number. It is the number of completion. Seems gracious and merciful. Jesus corrects him. Whether he indicates 70 times 7 or 77 is hard to know based on the Greek language. Whichever number Jesus actually used, the point is clear. Forgive as many times as you are asked. It's a greater number than you can count. Is that not how God forgives? What if God put a limit on how many times he would forgive you before stopping? That would be disastrous to us all. God is amazingly gracious to forgive. In his omniscience he cannot fail to know with complete precision every single sin we have committed against him. But when he forgives, he does not stop to count to see if you or I have gone over the limit. That is not the issue for him and it must not be the issue for us either.

Jesus turns to one of his familiar and effective devices to give rich expression to the importance of forgiveness among the children of God. He tells a parable. This one presents a king who wished to settle accounts with his subjects. I would like to direct your attention to four highlights of the parable which expose the wickedness of an unforgiving heart.

I. The Magnitude of God's Forgiving Grace

A. An Infinite Debt

A subject was brought before the king who owed him an incredible amount—10,000 talents. This reference communicated an incalculable sum

of money. For those in Jesus' earthly days, the number 10,000 reflected the idea of myriad. A myriad is a host so numerous as to defy calculation. Think of big things. Think of the growing debt of the United States. It is big, really big—\$24.95 trillion. That is a lot but it is calculable. Think of the number of miles to the next galaxy—146.6 quadrillion miles. Again that is a lot, but it is calculable. The debt owed by this slave was greater than a calculable physical distance. The debt in the parable is greater than any mere monetary debt.

By the figure Jesus is pointing us to the sin debt each one of us owes to God for our sin. Our sin against God incurs a debt that cannot be calculated in monetary terms. In Romans 3:23 Paul tells us that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. You might get the idea of something that is close; it falls just short. But our sin is the complete opposite of God's glory. When human beings come face to face with the holiness and glory of God, we are undone because if there is one thing that is apparent to us it is that we owe a debt that is inestimable. Sure we fall short of God's glory. But that is like falling short of infinity. God is the singular self-existent and eternal being. Sins against him and his holiness are impossible to measure. They can only be measured in terms of the magnitude of God over against us. To sin against God is an infinite offense creating an infinite debt.

This was the situation for the indebted subject before his king. His was a debt he could never repay even as our sin before God creates a debt we can never repay. Recognizing the situation for what it was, the subject did all he could think of. He made a plea for mercy. He actually pled for more time even though more time would not have ultimately helped him. But his plea struck a chord with the king.

B. A Complete Absolution

The king was merciful, infinitely merciful. He did better than give him more time. Postponing judgment for an infinite debt merely postpones the inevitable. Out of pity the king released him and forgave the debt in its entirety! He canceled the record that stood against this subject. He no longer owed the king anything. Everything was as good as paid for by the merciful and gracious kindness of the king because the subject pleaded with him.

Friends, this is a picture of the forgiveness of God for those who call upon him for salvation. What stands against us is a record of indebtedness due to our sins, each of which is enough to condemn us eternally to the debtors' prison which is hell. I love the testimony of Paul to the Colossians: And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:13-14).

It is a complete absolution for debtors so indebted to God they could never repay in their own efforts, so guilty before God that they are not merely a nuisance to him but an outright stench, not a bother but a repulsion. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Now think about this. While still we were a repulsion, he did everything required to remove the repulsion and bring us into fellowship with him. The chasm that lay between us and God was infinite. The mountain of debt before us was infinite. He sent his Son. He called our names one-by-one. He breathed life into our dead spirit and brought us out of death into life and out of debt in riches!

This is the magnitude of God's forgiving grace. Every person that enters the kingdom of heaven must do so as a child because they are not depending on what they can do but upon what Christ alone has done.

Ultimately God will call everyone to settle accounts with him. But through the gospel preached, God calls people to account even now. He lays before them the immensity of their debt to him in the form of breaking his law over and over. He lays us bare to the evil of our sexual immorality, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, divisions, envy, strife, drunkenness, and the like. And he speaks through his word, "pay up." Perhaps it is the case with you this morning. It is as though you are standing before him clothed in the filthy rags of your sin. And you realize your condition is something you can do nothing to change. The good news for you is that God made his son who knew no sin to become sin for those who will cast themselves on his mercy for forgiveness and for cleaning. We have celebrated this in the observance of the Lord's Supper today. You need to know that your only hope is God's provision of Christ. Nothing else can satisfy for an infinite mountain of sin debt. This is the magnitude of the forgiving grace of God.

II. The Enormity of Man's Unforgiving Coldness

A. The forgiven subject went out and found another subject who owed him money and he brought him to the judgment seat. The amount he owed was relatively small. One hundred denarii was a very payable amount of money. It was not insignificant, but nothing compared to infinity.

And this is the point. When God's children sin against one another, it is not nothing, but it should be seen as almost nothing. Each one should compare our sin against God to the sin of others against us. Theirs is next-to-nothing. Why is it that we treat it as more?

But look at this guy. He seizes his debtor and puts his hands around his neck not to give a hug and say, "you are forgiven," but rather, "Pay me! Pay me!" The fellow servant pleads for mercy, pleads for patience, but the forgiven servant refuses and throws his fellow servant in prison until he pays.

Unreasonable, ruthless, callous, violent, incomprehensible. This is what it is when sinners forgiven by God withhold forgiveness from fellow sinners. Everybody else recognizes it and cannot believe what they are seeing. In the parable the fellow subjects were greatly distressed and went and told the king because they were appalled.

B. Remember the only way into God's kingdom is as a child. And the greatest in the kingdom is still a child. None of us came in because of our greatness. We are all in despite our sin against God. And that is because God is a sin-forgiving God. If you are not willing to forgive what others have done to you, how can you worship God who is so willing to forgive?

Each of us needs to search out our hearts for unforgiveness. We need to see the enormous evil and wickedness that unforgiveness is, and we need to be ashamed. We need to be humbled. We need to repent and seek God's forgiveness.

III. The Egregious Consequences of Unforgiveness

A. The king called the previously forgiven subject back before the throne. He charged him with wickedness. The king would expect forgiven debtors

to display the kind of mercy they received from him. The failure to appreciate the beauty of God's gracious forgiveness stirs the ire of God. It offends his holiness. In anger the king delivered this subject to the jailers. That is the word we find in the ESV. In the NASB and the Authorized version we have the idea not of people who keep a door shut but of those who inflict torment.

B. In Matthew 18 we have seen the zeal with which the Lord defends and protects his children. He treats his children with mercy and he expects his children to treat one another with the same mercy as that which they have received. Otherwise he will visit them with discomfort. He will torture them. He will discipline them until they repent and give the forgiveness that they should. It is also true that those who persist in unforgiveness according to Matthew 6 may well show themselves to be unforgiven. But at any rate nothing less than the fear of God should come upon the heart of a professing child of God who is unwilling to forgive. That is how important it is to God. If he forgives his children, how could his children refuse to forgive one another? It is unconscionable, and it will be visited from him with discipline.

IV. The Essence of Forgiveness

A. So if we underscore God's expectation of forgiveness among his children, we should also note what forgiveness looks like. It would not be surprising that misconceptions of forgiveness abound. But in this parable, one central mark of forgiveness rises to the top and helps us grasp what is at the heart of forgiveness. It is expressed in the term RELEASE. This is what dandelions do with their seeds when the breeze blows upon them.

Forgiveness involves RELEASE from indebtedness. The certificate of debt is canceled, destroyed, eliminated. The king "released" the indebted subject and forgave him the debt. He let it go. He suffered the loss himself for the freedom to set the indebted servant free.

The opposite was true for that same subject when his opportunity came along. He did not "release" his fellow subject. He seized him and began to choke him. And then he threw him in prison. He confined him. Unforgiveness is like holding a brother or sister in the Lord captive. What

you have against them you continue to hold over their heads. You bear a grudge. You simmer with bitterness. You don't let go. When you forgive a person, you are releasing them from any hold due to of their offense.

Think how Joseph reflects this. When he forgave the brothers who had sold them into slavery, he told them not to be angry with themselves. He told them not to be afraid. He was not going to retaliate. It was over and done. They were released. It never need come up again. It was a choice Joseph made. It was not without great emotion, and there can be no doubt that as Joseph experienced flashbacks of all the years of mistreatment, he would feel the pain. But he never brought it back up to them.

B. The concept of forgiveness as "a choice to release" is set in contrast to a number of mistaken notions of forgiveness which we need to sweep away lest our expectations or attempts at forgiveness meet with frustration.

1. So sweep away the idea that forgiveness is dependent upon changed feelings. Forgiveness is not a feeling. A choice to release a person does not mean that you will suddenly feel no pain at the memory of what has been done to you. Forgiveness means that even if that pain recurs, you persist not to allow that pain to be a detriment to how you relate to the offender. You will treat them with kindness no matter how you feel

2. Second, sweep away the mistaken notion that forgiveness means forgetting. Forgiveness is not forgetting. It is true that God says he forgets our sin. Isaiah 43:25 records God's promise: "I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." But God is omniscient. He knows all things. The point is not that God can eliminate something from his omniscience but that he eliminates it from his consciousness. If God has forgiven you, He refuses to remember your sins against you. He refuses to bring them back up. He does not dwell on them. Our forgiveness does not involve wiping our memory clean, but it does involve the choice, the determination not to remind ourselves, or the forgiven offender, or anyone else.

3. Sweep away the idea that forgiveness is something you must work on. Forgiveness is not a process. Again it is a choice to release. You let go. Until you have let go, you haven't forgiven.

4. Sweep away the idea that forgiveness will make things easy. Forgiveness is not a choice that it will be easy to keep. The flesh reminds us over and over again of the offenses others have brought against us. The choice must be re-enacted over and over. Forgiveness is the choice not to remind ourselves, the offender, or others what was done.

So remember, forgiveness is a choice to release. That is what God has done for his children through Christ. He has released us from the penalty due us for our sins. The certificate of debt has been canceled. It was satisfied by Christ Jesus on the cross. God will not bring it up again. Why would we bring up sins when Jesus died even for the sins committed against us as well?

Conclusion

I close this morning by offering a couple lists that put the teaching of this parable simply but strongly. Forgive your brother and forgive your sister in Christ.

Forgive, because if you don't forgive

1. You have totally missed how greatly God has forgiven
2. You are mistreating your brother cruelly
3. Others realize and see how incredible it is
4. You are behaving wickedly
5. You despise the example of God
6. You won't escape God's torture chamber until you do

Forgive because

1. You have been forgiven of far more than anyone will ever commit against you.
2. You have been forgiven by One far greater than you will ever be
3. You have been forgiven without making any payment yourself
4. You truly appreciate, admire, and exult in the forgiveness of God and you want to emulate Him

5. To refuse to forgive is to suggest you are more important than God
6. Everybody outside of you recognizes the wickedness of receiving forgiveness from God but refusing to pass it on
7. You want to stay in the good graces of the one who forgave you to begin with

As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.