

deserve it. You can never really deserve true forgiveness. But just like you and I don't deserve forgiveness and receive it, so we must give it to those in our lives who have hurt us or wronged us, even when they do not deserve it.

This parable begins with a question from Peter. How many times should I forgive? How about seven times? Jesus said not seven times seventy. In other words, there is no limit to forgiveness. That is true in our relationship with God and it must be true in our relationships with each other. Let us re-discover forgiveness.



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The Trinity Pulpit

Summer Short Stories

Discovering Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

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Why is forgiveness so important in our lives? It is important for several reasons. One, it is important for us. When we are forgiven we are released from the burden of guilt, shame and regret that can fill our lives. These burdens can overwhelm our thinking and our living. They can leave us with a skewed view of who we are in the eyes of God and of others. It can also give us a false view of our self. Forgiveness is important for each of us.

It is also important for others. We can choose not to forgive others and this can cause others to live with guilt, shame and regret. As Christians we are very aware of our need to be forgiven by God, but we shutter at the words of Jesus that as we forgive others God will forgive us. We are anxious when we utter the prayer of Jesus and ask God to forgive us as we forgive others.

Our parable today is about forgiveness. It is about us understanding how much we have been forgiven and the power of forgiveness not only in our lives, but in the lives of others and the corporate body of Christ. Let's look at this complex parable from Jesus

As we have seen, many of Jesus parables are simple parables. They might be as simple as a comparison or a short one character story. We have also discovered that Jesus told some parables that were complex. There are several characters, movements and scenes. The Prodigal Son is a good example of such a parable. Our parable today is also a good example of a complex parable. It is filled with characters, movements and scenes. Most scholars try to divide this parable into three scenes and confrontations. There is the first scene that is the confrontation of the master and the servant. There is a second scene that contains a con-

frontation between the servant and a fellow servant. Lastly, the third scene is filled with characters including a host of servants.

Let us look at the parable together. We are told that the first servant owed the King an unimaginable amount. Jesus uses the amount of 10,000 talents. This is an amount almost beyond the comprehension of Jesus' listener. There have been several attempts to put this amount into perspective. One scholar suggests it means 60 million working days. One talent represented 24 years of work with weekends off. For Jesus to us 10,000 talents as his debt number is an exaggerated number. It is not meant to be taken as an amount that could never be paid back. It is an amount that is to shock and probably almost sounded humorous when Jesus used it. The first response would be simply who could pay back such and amount. The servant makes the suggestion that he could if given time, but it is really a statement of one who is in trouble and his world his collapsing around him.

The King's plan is a common plan. It is to collect the debt and if not the debt, the collateral which was the man's family. He is going to sell his family and him into slavery as his only way of getting satisfaction. It should be noted that many believe this servant not to be a slave, but maybe a person standing in the King's court or administration. What we might have in this story is a man who is someone of stature having a public reckoning and his whole life is falling apart. He is loosing his status, freedom and family. He is left with nothing, but to plea for forgiveness.

The King is moved by the man's apparent humility and request forgiveness of the man's debt. Now please notice the debt is not reduced to something the man can repay. His payments are not consolidated at a lower interest rate, so he can at least make some repayments. It is an unbelievable act by the King.

The debt is completely forgiven. The servant walks away from the King a free man, a man of status and a man with a family and future.

In our first encounter we are reminded that true forgiveness is beyond our expectations. This is especially true with us in our relationship with God. Jesus wants us to know that we owe a debt that is beyond our ability to repay. The term debt is a term to describe a loan of gold that many times required collateral of a person. This makes the forgiveness more incredible. When someone's life was on the line there was forgiveness.

Your life and my life were on the line when God forgave our sins. Our sin was a debt that we could never repay. Now we think that somehow we can pay it off. We tend to convince our self that grace and mercy depends on our actions. We try to devise a repayment plan of good acts to make God overlook our sin. Yet, the Bible is clear that there is nothing we can do to repay the sin debt we owe. The only way we can know forgiveness is simply to receive it. We cannot earn it. We cannot negotiate for it. We simply must receive it. It is hard to believe. I know that it is difficult for some of us to believe that all we must do is ask God to forgive us and God will, but that is what the Bible says. Surely there must be more. No, John writes "if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The first encounter reminds us that God's forgiveness is beyond our expectations.

However this is not how the story ends. It would be great if this was how it ends, but it does not. In fact it takes a difficult turn almost immediately. This same servant who has just been forgiven has an encounter with another servant. The description means that they are two people on the same level, as far as power is concerned. The first servant finds the second one and demands repayment. It is unclear whether the first servant just came across the second servant or if worse, right after forgiveness he sought him out. However, the story seems to indicate that there is little time between the first servant being forgiven beyond his expectation and request and his encounter with the second servant.

The second servant owes a paltry sum compared to what was forgiven the first man. It is one six hundred thousandth of the first sum. In other words, unlike the other which could never be paid back, this one could be paid back in a reasonable amount of time. All that was needed was some reasonable time and payment plans. However, the response of the first servant is described in very violent terms. The first servant seizes him. He

grabs him and holds him physically. He chokes him and he demands that he pay what he owes. The scene is described in such violent terms it would have been a true scene. Unlike the King's demand of repayment, his scene is violent and without cause. When the second servant essentially uses the same words as the first, the first servant is now moved. Instead of showing mercy practicing forgiveness, he sends the servant to prison indefinitely.

We have the same questions that those who first heard this story must have had. How can this be? How can someone who has just been forgiven so much not be changed? How can someone who has tasted of mercy be so merciless? How can this be? What is missing?

First, true repentance. It is one thing to say I'm sorry and it is another thing to repent. The first servant was suffering from what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as cheap grace. Cheap grace is grace without cost, change, or repentance. It is easy to say God forgive me and I am sorry, but it is another thing to say God forgive me and I am going to turn from this choice and make another choice. True repentance is a part of God's forgiveness. The first servant appears to have humbled himself, he appears to truly be a person who is authentic, but his plea seems not to be about acknowledging his debt as much as it is his debt being recognized by the King.

The truth is that most of the time it is not our sin that we are sorry for, as much as our sin being public and exposed. Our culture is filled with well known politicians, celebrities, clergy, teachers, CEO's and others who utter words of "I am sorry", but the truth is they are sorry for getting caught. There is a great difference between being sorry and repentance. We cannot truly experience forgiveness from God without repentance. The first servant knew nothing of repentance. He had received forgiveness, but he had not changed. His heart was the same as it was when he went into to meet the King.

It is interesting in the Greek the actual phrasing used by Jesus is this "he did not will to be merciful." It was not that the first servant just forgot to be merciful or fell back into an old character trait, it seems that the first servant chose his actions even in light of his own forgiveness. He would not will himself to be merciful. He had a choice. He had a choice to practice forgiveness, but he chose violence.

A second quality that the first servant lacked was humility. He had been on his knees only moments earlier, but when he came into the presence of a person who was his equal and not his superior, he chose not humility but to use his power and the loan against the man. We like to exert our power against the other. Sometimes we even like the idea

having something on another person, so we can call in our favors when we need them. What we lack is humility.

This past week in Belize I saw humility over and over again. Whether it was the hundreds who lined up at our dental clinic who stood in sweltering heat without complaining and then would simply say thank you when they were told to come back the next day, or the persons who were told at the end we cannot see you. We cannot treat your baby. They did not complain, but said through their disappointment I understand.

No wonder Jesus says the meek will inherit the earth. The poor in Spirit will inherit the kingdom of God. For us to learn forgiveness we must also learn humility.

This second encounter reminds us that although God's forgiveness in our lives exceeds our expectations, forgiveness can be limited by us. How is it my friends that you and I can be forgiven so much and yet not find it within us to forgive one another? We have to will it. We have to choose it. We have to choose repentance, a change of heart so that we too can learn to forgive.

Who is it you need to forgive? What change can you say that God's forgiveness has truly brought to your life? Who is in your life, and you have ever right to, "lord over them for what they have done", but you can choose humility and forgiveness.

There is one more scene I want us to look at, but it is not the scene you are thinking of. It is not the scene of the King and the first servant after the King knows the servant's action. That scene is one that we see coming. It is a scene of the King exposing the true character of the first servant who has lacked repentance, humility and mercy. The scene I want us to see is the scene between the other servants and the King. We don't get much conversation, but there was a conversation. We are told that when the other servants who watched the first servant forgiven treat the second servant in such a violent way, they went to the King and reported what they had witnessed.

You know when you see mercy you don't forget it. When forgiveness is practiced over and over again it becomes a way of life for a community. When enough in a community learn forgiveness, then only forgiveness is tolerated. The church should be a place where forgiveness is the norm. Jesus tells us

we must love the Lord our God and also love our neighbor as ourselves. John reminds us that we cannot say we love God and hate our brother or sister. He goes on to tell us, just like Jesus laid down his life for us we must lay down our lives for each other. The Apostle Paul writes:

Therefore as God's chosen people holy and dearly loved by God clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love which binds them together in perfect unity.

The church must be the place where forgiveness is found and demonstrated. We cannot expect to find it anywhere else, but here in this place with each other we must rediscover forgiveness. Once a community sees forgiveness and begins to practice it, then mercy and grace become a part of the community's DNA. Lives are transformed and people are drawn to such community's of faith because what they witness is so rare.

How are we going to practice forgiveness at Trinity Baptist Church? How are the members of our church going to practice forgiveness in the workplace and at school? What difference will forgiveness make in our lives?

The story ends with the servant receiving a harsh punishment for the way he treated his fellow servant. We might ask where is forgiveness in that scene? Jesus' point is well taken. The first servant had received something under false pretenses. The man's heart was never what it appeared to be. He was not truly humble, repentant or concerned about his debt. Jesus is reminding us that forgiveness is ours, but if we do not receive it and let it change us then there will come a day of reckoning.

It is time to rediscover forgiveness.

I want to ask you to rediscover forgiveness in your life. First, rediscover God's forgiveness. We are not entitled to it, but we can receive it as a gift. God's forgiveness is as full and complete as it can be. It is for you and for me. It is beyond what we could ever expect. All we must do is repent of our sins, humble ourselves and receive it. Rediscover God's forgiveness in your life.

Second, forgive as God has forgiven you. Who in your life do you need to forgive? I know they don't