

August 19, 2018

"He who has ears, let him hear..."

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins your Father will not forgive your sins."

Matthew 6:14-15

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Luke 7:41-42

"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a king..."

Matthew 18:15-35

For those who follow Jesus learning to forgive is an essential part of that discipleship. Jesus teaches in his 'Sermon on the Mount' that our Father and God will not forgive us if we do not forgive others, but forgiveness is extremely hard for us.

In learning to forgive there are, I think, several key principles that we must understand. First, forgiveness does not require that the sinner is repentant. Forgiveness is our choice regardless of what those who sin against us do or do not do. Forgiveness is ultimately giving up our right to exact justice, to get even. As Jesus is being crucified his prayer for his executioners is, ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*** (Luke 23:34) His prayer is not dependent on their repentance.

Second, forgiveness does not mean that we will automatically be reconciled with those who have sinned against us. Reconciliation does not come through our forgiveness alone, but through their repentance coupled with our forgiveness. But even here Jesus does not permit us to stand back in arrogant judgment. He commands us, ***"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens you have won your brother over..."*** (Matthew 18:15-16) So, if someone sins against me I need to forgive them, giving up my right to exact justice, and I need to go to them confronting their sin and creating an opportunity through my actions for reconciliation to occur.

The relationship between our willingness to forgive others and our need for God to forgive our sin is one Jesus often addresses in parables. Among these one of the more well known is the parable of the 'unmerciful servant' found in Matthew 18:21-35.

In this parable Jesus again appeals to a fairly common situation in the environment of his day. Two men owe debts to a king, or in other parables, a money lender. One servant owes the king a huge amount. In this parable he owes ten thousand talents; literally that would be millions of dollars in our time.

When the servant is unable to pay back the debt the king orders that he and his family be sold into slavery. When this servant begs for forgiveness the king agrees to be merciful and erases the entire amount owed.

Having received overwhelming mercy this same servant goes out and finds another servant who owes him a hundred denarii. A denarii is about one days pay in Jesus' day. When the servant begs for time to repay this unmerciful servant refuses and has the man thrown into debtors prison.

The point of this parable is, I think, obvious. God, in his great mercy and at huge cost to himself, has chosen to give us grace; to forgive us all our sins. Having received such mercy, how can we go through life failing to forgive those who might have sinned against us. To be unforgiving after we have been forgiven so much is unthinkable.

One of my favorite lines in Paul's definition of love in I Corinthians 13 is love "...*keeps no record of wrongs.*" Are we guilty of failing to forgive when we have been forgiven? Are we holding on to the record of wrongs that others have done to us? Are we being unmerciful, when we have received such mercy?

