

The Reconciling Community

November 6, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 18:23-35

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

This week’s sermon is about forgiveness, and that topic is always a tough one. More than once I have been approached after preaching on the topic of forgiveness to be reproached by a parishioner who would tell me, “You don’t know what so-and-so has done to me, and I will never forgive them.” Of course, when someone says that to me, it is partially true. I don’t know what has been done to them. And I certainly don’t know the trauma that they have been dealing with as a result of it. But I do know that if they do not forgive, that they will be dealing with that pain until they do. And they will likely be dealing with the guilt of placing themselves in the position of getting hurt, although it is very likely it wasn’t their fault. Sometimes the most difficult part of forgiving others is learning to forgive yourself. The false narrative is that we can forgive others under our will power, as if we need only try harder to forgive and that it will happen based on our own resources. Trying to rely only on yourself to be able to forgive others only leads to more hurt and more abuse.

I know all this because I have lived it. I know what it is like to have someone you trust and someone you should be able to look up to be the one who hurts you again and again. And it was not a situation where I could simply avoid the person, because my job required that I be in relationship with this person. It got to the point where I not only hated being around this person, because I know that it would only lead to more abuse but I got so that I hated this person. I lived with that tension for about a year and then I had a heart attack. I couldn't help but blame my heart attack on this person, and found myself wishing something bad would happen to that person. That's when I realized that I needed help. I went on a spiritual retreat with three other friends, and after about three days God gave me what I needed to be able to forgive that person and to forgive myself.

I never did go that person to say that I forgave them. Telling someone you forgive them is something that should only be done with prayer and spiritual discernment. It is likely that the person that you have forgiven will deny they did anything to need forgiveness for. You would also need to talk to that person privately, because telling someone you forgive them publicly would be shaming, or at least appear so, more than it would be about forgiving. And it would certainly do nothing to build your relationship or lead the other person to Jesus. Some would call that an ambush, and would actually resent you for that. Check your motives for doing so. Do not tell someone you forgive them as an admonishment, and do not open yourself to more abuse. I still occasionally see the person who was abusive to me, but at a distance, and I intentionally do not put myself into situations with that person where I could be abused again.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote this about forgiveness:

To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest. It is also a process that does not exclude hatred and anger. These emotions are part of being human. You should never hate yourself for hating others who do terrible things: The depth of your love is shown by the extent of your anger.

However, when I talk of forgiveness, I mean the belief that you can come out the other side a better person. A better person than the one being consumed by anger and hatred. Remaining in that state locks you in a state of victimhood, making you almost dependent on the perpetrator. If you can find it in yourself to forgive, then you are no longer chained to the perpetrator. You can move on, and you can even help the perpetrator to become a better person, too.¹

You see, forgiveness is not so much something we do. Forgiveness is about allowing ourselves to enter into the narrative of Jesus who has the power to forgive the person who has hurt us. Jesus Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That proves God's love toward us. Second Corinthians 5:18-19 puts it like this: *"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."*

This is a clear explanation of the finality of the cross. God—in Christ—is not counting our sins against us. God stopped counting and apparently never took it back up. God is no longer dealing with us on the basis of our sins but of our faith. Jesus died for all of the sins of all of the people for all time—and that means you. Do you know that? Do you have that

¹ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*.

peace that passes all understanding? Do you have the joy of knowing that God has nothing against you?²

When we know that Jesus has forgiven us, we can begin to forgive ourselves. Knowing we are a forgiven people opens the door for us to be forgiving of others.

Jesus told the parable in Matthew chapter 18 to help illustrate this concept of forgiving others because we have been forgiven. He tells the story of a king who had forgiven a person who owed 10,000 talents. According to math.answers.com that would be the equivalent of about two billion, two hundred fifty million dollars in US currency.³ Obviously, it was more than this servant could afford, so the king ordered that this servant, his wife, his children, and all his possessions be sold. And even then it would not make up for the debt he owed. The servant, now slave, begs the king for forgiveness. Out of mercy the king forgives the slave and sets him free. One would think that this forgiven slave would be the most gracious and merciful person because of this extravagant grace that had been bestowed upon him. But such was not the case.

The man who had been forgiven bumps into someone who owes him a hundred denarii, which would be worth about \$2000 in today's US currency.⁴ That amount of money is a pittance compared to what the former slave had been forgiven. Yet, even though the man had been forgiven his enormous debt, he has the one who owes him money thrown into prison.

The king hears about this, reprimands the slave he had once set free, and hands him over to be tortured until his debt was paid. And the debt he owed was so enormous it would never be paid!

What is the point of the parable? Keep in mind the question this story was designed to answer: how much and how often should we forgive one another? The king is like God, and we are like the man who owes the king a debt we cannot pay. We can never hope to earn God's forgiveness. Our sins are too great and we simply have nothing we could offer God to repay them. However, the king forgives the unrepayable debt out of mercy, just as God, in Christ, has forgiven our unrepayable debt. The man did nothing to merit his forgiven debt, and neither do we. The point is clear: we have been forgiven for so much more than we will ever be called on to forgive. Let me be clear, lest you think I am encouraging the false narrative, insinuating that you simply must forgive out of your own strength or will. Jesus told this story in order to help us get our narratives right. If we meditate for a long time on how much we have been forgiven, it will help us forgive others.⁵

It is easy to make a mistake here and assume that our forgiveness is conditioned on our ability to forgive, or that forgiveness is like a transaction: you forgive, then God will forgive you. Many people pray the Lord's Prayer ("Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us") and conclude that our forgiveness is merited by our ability to forgive.

This is yet another false narrative, and it is so deeply embedded in people that we need to take a moment to address it. Jesus is simply trying to show us the absurdity of accepting

² Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community* (The Good and Beautiful Series) (p. 112). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

³ https://math.answers.com/Q/How_much_is_10000_talents_worth

⁴ <https://math.answers.com/search?q=How+much+is+100+Denarii+worth&exact-match=78732929&filter=all>

⁵ Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community* (The Good and Beautiful Series) (pp. 114-115). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

God's forgiveness for our countless sins and yet refusing to forgive the one or two (or even a hundred) sins done against us. It is absurd for us to glory in the forgiveness God has given us and yet remain unwilling to forgive someone who has harmed us.

A community who has been forgiven must become a community who forgives. God's forgiveness toward us is unrestricted; how can our forgiveness for one another be restricted? That is his point. Turning the story into a transaction reveals the tendency we have toward legalism. My inability to forgive another is usually based on my own sense of justice. We think, It is unfair, unjust, to forgive the person who hurt me. Why? They have not earned our forgiveness. True. So then, is that how we want to be treated? Jesus is saying to us, "All right, if it is your just deserts you are after, then you can have them. If it is justice you seek, it is justice you shall get." New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias states it this way: "Woe unto you if you try to stand on your rights; God will then stand on his and see that his sentence is executed rigorously."

So which way do we want to be treated? By mercy or by justice? Dare we have the audacity to look to God and ask for our rights when it comes to those who have sinned against us, but ask for mercy when it comes to our own trespasses? We cannot play it both ways.

Jesus' words in the Lord's Prayer are reminders that we need to hear repeatedly: You have been forgiven much; therefore you must forgive. It is not easy, but it is also not impossible. Once we stand firmly entrenched in the larger story of our own forgiveness, we can then forgive—a process that often takes time.⁶

⁶ Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Community* (The Good and Beautiful Series) (pp. 115-116). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.