

## As We Forgive our Debtors

*(The following message is the third in our series titled The Journey to the Cross: Four Practices to Prepare Us for Easter.)*

### Matthew 18:21-35

Ernest Hemingway's short story, 'The Capital of the World', starts with a local joke about the fact that Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is short for the name Francisco. In the joke there's a father who came to Madrid and placed an ad in the local newspaper which said:

*'PACO, MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA AT NOON TUESDAY. ALL IS FORGIVEN. PAPA.'*

The punch line was that the police had to be called to disperse the crowd of more than 800 boys named Paco who answered the ad and came looking for their father's forgiveness.

There's something so sad about that story—it points us to a truth that we don't like to talk about that much: the need we all have to give and to experience forgiveness.

We talked last Sunday about the fact that everyone needs to confess sometimes. Today we shift to the other side of the relationship—the call to forgive.

*21Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

*22Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

*23"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25Since 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"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27The 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 denarii. 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 you back.'*

*30"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed 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. 33Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34In anger his master turned 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 from your heart."*

Lent is a time of reflection and preparation for our remembrance and celebration of Christ's love for us as we find it in the Easter miracle. Over these four Sundays we're exploring some practices that will prepare our hearts and minds for Holy Week and Easter. The habits and practices we're looking at are prayer, confession, forgiveness and hospitality.

Each one of these serves to help us understand and experience what Christ has offered to us—each one of these gets us out of our regular routines and practices and makes Lent and Easter more meaningful.

As we come to the midpoint of our journey to the Cross, it's important for us to notice that all four of the practices and habits we're talking about: prayer, confession, forgiveness and hospitality—all four of these are relational practices. They're ways that we interact with God and with each other—ways that we make the values of God's Kingdom become a part of the way we live each day. Keep that in mind as we make our way toward Easter Sunday.

So back to our parable.

The plot of our text today is fairly simple. A king discovers that one of his managers has embezzled a huge amount of money—an amount so great that it could never be paid back. (We know now, of course, that that could never really happen, right?)

The king's response was to sell the manager's family and all of his possessions, not to pay the debt back, but as punishment for what he'd done. The crooked manager

begs for mercy, and in the second-most shocking detail in the story, the king shows mercy and lets the man and his family go free.

The crooked servant then goes out to someone who owed him a small amount of money, and demanded payment of the debt. But it's more than that. The text says that he basically mugged him—he choked him first and then shouted at him to 'pay back what you owe me!' When he couldn't pay up, the man begged for mercy, but our lead character has him thrown in debtor's prison.

The king hears about it and calls his manager to explain himself. The question the king asks is the question that our text confronts us with today:

*'Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'*

Let's come back to that one.

Often we think of this story as a comment on Jewish law or practice about forgiving. Actually, it's a reversal of an Old Testament story of revenge. In Genesis 4, Lamech boasts that if anyone ever attacked him, he would avenge it 77 times. When Peter comes to Jesus with his hypothetical question about how many times he's supposed to forgive the annoying people in his life, Jesus turns it around by quoting one of the truly violent revenge stories of the Scriptures.

The oldest sense of the word forgiveness—it goes all the way back to classical Greek—means 'the voluntary release of a person or thing over which one has legal or actual control.' By the time Jesus uses the word here in Matthew, it describes the essence of what Christ came to do—to forgive, to release, to share the good news that through him, 'no account will be made of the sins that we have committed,' one writer described it. It's the very opposite of revenge, which is the point Jesus is making.

Notice also that the story Jesus tells begins with this key phrase: 'The Kingdom of God is like...' That's a key that this parable teaches something that is close to the center of the gospel. We've talked about the Kingdom of God a lot here, and for good reason. It's Jesus' favorite topic.

Remember that God's Kingdom isn't a realm with boundaries and limits. The Kingdom of God is God's reign—his rule and power over all things, even death. So many of his stories and miracles and sermons point to what the world looks like

under the reign of God—what the values of the world would look like if they allowed God to rule in their hearts and minds and lives.

The parable this morning is about how we are called to forgive—the extravagant, lavish, reckless acts of forgiving that Jesus asks us to do. There's no mystery here. The point Jesus is making in this parable is that we should forgive as God has forgiven us through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's all.

Jewish law and common sense and our own gut feelings and personal boundaries might tell us that seven times is plenty of chances to give someone who wrongs us—someone who sins against us, someone who owes us, someone who has messed up something that is ours.

It's enough to have to try to forgive people seven times, but Jesus tears that up and proposes a ridiculous number—77 individual acts of forgiveness. And that's not a total for our lifetime. That's a number of forgiving acts with each individual person who does us wrong.

The number isn't meant to describe a new, improved, more stringent set of rules. It's not to raise the limit on how many times we're supposed to forgive. This isn't a new Law for us to follow.

The number Jesus gave as his answer about forgiving people was meant to be so high as to mean that we should never stop forgiving each other—that there is no limit to how many times we're supposed to forgive—that if we're called to forgive as God forgives us, then the job is never, ever, really finished.

That raises a question for us about how exactly God forgives us. What do we mean when we say that the God of the universe has somehow cleansed us from whatever sin or brokenness was keeping us from connecting with him?

And that takes us back to the question the king asks in our parable today: 'Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'

Miroslav Volf, in his book called *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, describes in detail what the Scriptures say about how God forgives.

Volf reminds us that God doesn't keep a record of our debts (Romans 4 and Psalm

32).

God covers our sin—he hides what we've done even from his own sight—he puts it behind his back, we see in Isaiah 38.

God removes our transgressions as far as the east is from the west, and he blots out our sin so that we're without stain or blemish. He sweeps our sin away like mist, we see in Isaiah 44.

And then, in the real miracle of miracles for us, God chooses to forget—literally not to remember our sin. That one is so important that we see it in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hebrews.

When Jesus tells that story where the king asks: 'Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' This is the mercy he's talking about. Peter asks Jesus a lame hypothetical question, and Jesus gives him a real-life answer.

But that doesn't mean that any of that is easy for us. Check out the quote from Volf's book on the front of your bulletin.

*"How should we forgive? The simple answer is that we should forgive as God forgave in Jesus Christ. But before exploring many facets of that simple answer, I need to address a serious objection. How can we forgive as God forgives when we are obviously not God? We are human—wonderfully, finitely, and sinfully human. We are not divine. How can we do anything as God does, let alone forgive?"*

Volf goes on to talk about the link between God's forgiving and the way we're called to forgive. Our forgiving is faulty, he says, but God's is perfect. Ours is provisional, but God's is final and eternal. Volf writes: 'The only way we dare forgive us by making our forgiving transparent to God's, and always open to revision. After all, our forgiveness is only possible as an echo of God's.'

*Our forgiveness is only possible as an echo of God's.*

We saw one of the most dramatic echoes of God's forgiveness in the response of the Amish community to the shooting at one of their schools. The details were horrible, but almost immediately afterward the families of the kids who'd been lost expressed their forgiveness to the shooter. The news media couldn't make

sense of it, and neither could any of the rest of us, if we're honest. Because it wasn't just words.

The forgiveness the Amish showed had some teeth to it—at the shooter's funeral, more than half of the people in attendance were Amish. To this day that particular part of the Amish community visits the widow of the man who committed the crime—they provide financial support to his children.

It's no coincidence that in that Amish they do something that we've been talking about over the last few weeks. They pray the Lord's Prayer—sometimes as many as five times a day. The forgiveness they showed didn't really have much to do with the person they were forgiving. It was a recognition that as forgiven people, they were called to forgive.

As that line from the Lord's Prayer—'forgive us our sin, as we forgive those who sin against us'—as that phrase works its way into our hearts and minds and lives, we're able to reach out with forgiveness because we know we've been forgiven already.

So how does this help us prepare to remember Holy Week and Easter?

In the Hemingway story, all those kids—800 of them—came looking for forgiveness from their father. But only one of them could be the true son that the father was looking for.

In our own stories we come to God looking for forgiveness, and we find that *because of his one, true son, he has an unlimited supply—that all of us are covered by his love and grace and mercy.*

What God asks for—not as a condition of forgiveness, but as a response to it—what God asks for is that we forgive each other as recklessly and lavishly as he's forgiven us.

'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.'

It sounds so matter-of-fact—it sounds so simple, but we know it doesn't work that way. Without the model of the way Jesus forgave, and without the Holy Spirit working within us to shape us into the people we were made to be—without the Son and Spirit we can never truly be about the Father's work.

As we continue this journey through Lent—this journey to the Cross—as we pray and confess together, the call on us is to add forgiveness into the mix.

As we release people from the weight of whatever they might have done to us, we come closer to living the lives Christ made possible for us.

As we give up our right to claim whatever is owed to us by the people in our lives, we find an even greater gift given to us.

And through all of that forgiving and releasing and erasing, *we become an echo of the way God has loved and forgiven us first.*

To make this practical, during this Lent season, find someone who has wronged you somehow. Tell them about it, and in faith offer them the gift of forgiveness.

Nothing prepares our hearts more for the joy of Easter than to share what God has done for us with someone else.

Nothing shows God more that we're starting to understand how much he loves us, than if we share that love with someone else.

'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.'

Let's pray that together as we prepare our hearts for Holy Week and Easter.