

Forgive as Forgiven

The gospel for this coming Sunday (Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost) is Matthew 18:21-35. This text is the story of the parable of the unforgiving servant.

The text begins when Peter asks Jesus how many times he needs to forgive a brother who sins against him. Some rabbis taught that a person should be forgiven three times but no more, but we must note that God kept forgiving Israel for hundreds of years. Peter generously proposed that the number be more than doubled – make it seven times, a number that can represent God’s perfection.

The Greek number could be 77 or $70 \times 7 = 490$. But in either case, Jesus was not tagging 490 or 77 as the number of times a person was to be forgiven. God does not number our sins: “If you O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness” (Ps. 130:3-4). He forgives totally because of Jesus’ saving work. Christians also are called to forgive completely, with no restraints.

The parable is composed of an introduction (18:23) and a concluding interpretation (18:35) that are wrapped around three scenes:

1. The master’s compassion for the hopelessly indebted slave (18:24-27)
2. That forgiven slaves refusal to show mercy to his fellow slave who had far less debt (18:28-30)
3. The master’s angry retraction of his forgiveness and the subsequent punishment of the unforgiving slave (18:31-34)

The striking parallels and even more significant contrasts between scene 1 and scene 2 advance the plot of this little story and communicate its essential lesson.

Ten thousand talents was an astronomical amount, estimated at \$10 to 20 Million, depending on the weight and nationality of the coinage, and the effect of inflation. The implication is that our sin puts us so far in debt to God that we ourselves can never repay the amount. His forgiveness is the only way our account can be settled favorably.

Debtors in Israel could be sold into slavery (Ex 22:3; 2 Ki 4:1). Wife and children were considered property that could also go on the auction block to repay debts.

Out of pity, the king forgave the gigantic debt. So our heavenly Father has forgiven the enormous debt of our sin.

The servant was owed 100 denari. A denarius was the standard wage for one day’s labor, so 100 denarii was worth a substantial amount of money. However, one talent was worth 6000 denarii, so the debt the king forgave was 600,000 times larger than this debt.

It would seem only natural that he would cheerfully forgive that man his small debt, but instead he became violent and demanded immediate payment in full.

Our willingness to forgive a brother or sister is grounded in God’s abundant mercy toward us.

Prayer: Jesus, Your forgiveness for my sin has no limits. Move me likewise to forgive those who sin against me. Amen. (TLSB)