

MATTHEW 18:21-35

17th Sunday After Pentecost, September 27 2020

Smith

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus 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. 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.”

God gives the human government the authority and power to punish wrongdoing and wickedness in the world. This is the first use of the law, the law as a curb, to keep the evil of mankind’s sins in check, to keep from letting violence overrun the world.ⁱ

The law also serves as a mirror. This is the second use of the law, and it applies to everyone. A mirror shows me my faults and my many flaws. The mirror of God’s law shows me where I have sinned, what I need to repent about, and where my life needs to change.

The law has another use, a third use. We’ll come back to that one. In our parable, Jesus describes forgiveness in two ways. He shows us the kind of forgiveness that God gives to us, and then he shows the kind of forgiveness God wants us to show to others.

In the parable, a man owes his king a lot of money: ten thousand ‘talents’ or bags of gold. A servant owes that first man a hundred ‘silver coins,’ a coin called a denarius. The first man owed billions of today’s dollars, billions with a “b.” But the other man owed a few thousand dollars. Both are serious debts.

If you owed someone 4 or 5 thousand dollars, the payment would probably hurt you. The government would say that you have to pay it back, and they might force you to.

But if you somehow owed billions? First of all, if you were a servant, the employee of a company, that kind of debt could only be achieved if you stole it, so let's not pretend that just anyone could have that kind of debt, as if you purchased the planet Jupiter and now the bill came. No, he was a thief. This debt came because of sin.

How could you ever pay that back? You would be in prison and everything you owned would be sold off and it wouldn't even make a dent in that debt. And if you stole or cheated so much that you owed Billions, you would probably have swindled or cheated everyone you know. You would be so hated that your life would be in danger in prison-- even more danger on the outside. But you would certainly be in prison, and you wouldn't be getting out. That's the government's only way of handling crime; a debt.

But our debt before God is even more terrible.ⁱⁱ God says to the conscience, "You shall have no other gods." That means we are to trust in God only, and in nothing and in no one else, including ourselves. But any amount of greed or coveting or jealousy or any other sin violates this commandment because we don't trust God to give us good gifts, and we build up a debt so large we could never pay it off. You and I cannot keep a single letter of the law. Our debt is greater even than the servant of the king in the parable.

When the conscience hears this, it begins to turn every which way like a trapped animal. What could I ever do? I might deny the charge. But God knows everything. I might try to negotiate the debt, but God is flawless in his judgment, there is no negotiation. I think I can hide but I can't hide any better than Adam and Eve could hide. The conscience is trapped, the sinner is trapped. I'm trapped.

But like the King in the parable, God has considered our debt, he has had compassion on us, and he has wiped the debt away. It was unbearable, unpayable, impossible. The burden of a single sin has us handcuffed and our legs chained and facing eternity of agony, punishment, pain and loneliness, separation forever from every kind of compassion, friendship, friendliness or love.

But the love of God has lifted all of that away. The handcuffs are removed, the chains are unlocked, the prison cell is closed to us, and we have been removed from the lists of the prison altogether. We are not only set free from the prison of hell, we are barred, banned, forbidden from hell's power or authority-- hell has no way to grab us. The gates of hell cannot prevail over us. In eternity, where there is only heaven and hell, to be anywhere outside of hell is to be in heaven, in all its glorious infinity, and that's where God wants us. With him.

How grateful we are! We don't know how to thank God enough, because the debt was so incredible. We would give our lives in service to him, to thank him for rescuing us, for saving us. But then in a single moment we go back to living for ourselves and breaking his will once again. But he says again and again: You are forgiven. I forgive you.

But watch what happens. Like the forgiven servant, we forget our forgiven debt, and we go and grab hold of somebody who owes us a little bit, who's wronged us a little, who's guilty of being the same kind of sinner we are, and we jump into God's boots and start to rattle him by throat: You owe me!

We forget our forgiveness. And God would be perfectly justified and right to dump our whole debt right back into our laps and say: If you're going to treat each other this way, then I'm going to treat you that way, too. You do unto others, and it will be done to you.

Maybe each one of us has one thing in mind, one person they just can't forgive. One sin that seems so revolting, so hurtful and so hateful, that they just can't forgive it or get past it. We say, even to ourselves, "I know God wants me to forgive this, but I just can't."

Think of Peter in the front lawn of the high priest. Right in the middle of denying he knew Jesus, the Lord turned and looked at him. Now try to say it again: "I know God wants me to forgive this, but I just can't." Say it as Jesus looks you right in the eye. And remember that this is the same Jesus who will be your Judge on Judgment Day.

Now what? I can't tell you what emotion you're feeling over that, but I can share some of mine. Fear, real terror, shame, guilt, embarrassment, worthlessness that makes me begin to understand the words, "poor, miserable sinner." (4 beats)

It's Jesus who reaches down and lifts your chin, who brushes the tears from your eyes, who stands you up and takes you and says, "I forgive you, and I have always forgiven you. Your sins are gone in my blood.

Remember that the law has a third use? This is the law as a guide. Knowing that I have forgiveness in Christ, and freedom from the law, I am free to use the law of God to discover how best I might serve God, by loving my neighbor and honoring my parents. And so this law becomes in me a guide for kindness, for service, for compassion.

So however the law has attacked your conscience today, by means of the curb or the mirror, the gospel is here to soothe your conscience and to heal your broken heart. But then the law remains, not as a command, but in its third use as a guide, to teach us how to love and forgive one another.

How many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins? Should I be generous and say "Seven"? A lot of us never even get to seven. We start to think like the government, which doesn't exist to have compassion, but to punish wrongdoing. But Jesus says, If they sin against you and say they're sorry, how would you like to be treated? Would you like people to keep a little tally of all your mistakes? Or would you like to be forgiven every time, because there's going to be another, and another, because we have a sinful sinning shameful human nature.

So forgive. Forgive the way God forgives. You're forgiven as if hell itself is forbidden from even looking at you the wrong way. God gives you forgiveness in the name of Christ Jesus so that the devil is afraid you. Give that forgiveness, not for any reason but that you are forgiven. Because God loves you that much, that big, so powerfully-- that you will forgive and you will love that much, that big, so very powerfully in Jesus Christ. Amen.

ⁱ For the most part, the government does this well. Those who endanger the safety of others are given fines. Those who hurt others are imprisoned. Those who steal are jailed. Depending on the state, there is a principal is that those who commit murder are either executed, which God's word allows but does not command, or else they are imprisoned for so long that they either cannot be paroled, or if they live long enough, they will no longer be able to hurt anyone. As I said, that's the principal.

ⁱⁱ See Luther's sermon on this text, para. 9.