

Proportionate Forgiving • Matthew 18:21-35

It was Alexander Pope, the 18th century English poet, who wrote that “to err is human, to forgive divine.” His words had an autobiographical ring to them. At one time he had once loved Lady Mary Wortley Mantagu. She had encouraged him and then scorned him. He did not forgive her. Instead, he often sought revenge against her in his writings.

We have all had those who erred against us. Perhaps it was someone who hurt us badly and whom we are reticent to forgive: a parent who has left emotional scars on our now grown-up souls; a teacher who humiliated us in front of our friends; an assailant who assaulted us and invaded our lives; a business partner who cost us a fortune; a lover who now is hated; a pastor who betrayed our trust; a child who took advantage of our love; a friend who did us in.

Whether it was intentional or unintentional, others have erred against us all. And with each hurt we have been given the opportunity and the decision to forgive or not to forgive. And if we forgive, how many times? Ought we forgive a second time or a third?

The first century rabbis taught that one ought to forgive and forgive and forgive. Three times. The number was based on the first and second chapters of the Old Testament prophet Amos. He quotes God as saying that he will forgive three times the transgressions of such places and peoples as Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab. The rabbis’ logic was that no one ought to be more forgiving than God.

It was against that background that the apostle Peter one day asked Jesus, “How many times ought we forgive?” Peter figured that Jesus would agree with the rabbis and say “three” so he decided to make himself look more magnanimous by adding, “Up to seven times?” It seemed that he was doubling what the rabbis said and doubling what God would do and throwing in one for good measure.

Jesus must have loved having Peter around! Peter gave Jesus such great opportunities to teach

truth and often to shock his listeners. And he must have really shocked them that day when he said to Peter and those who listened, “*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*” What Jesus was saying was that we are to forgive and forgive and forgive indefinitely.

With Peter and company too stunned to speak, Jesus told a parable with the message to forgive others as God forgives us. That parable which is in Matthew 18:23-27 begins with a powerful king and an indebted servant. The king was tightening up the finances of the realm—paying off his debts, collecting from his debtors. One of the king’s subjects owed a horrendous amount of money: 10,000 tal-

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ents. It’s hard to compare the value of ancient talents to today’s money, but let’s at least try to get an idea.

The total revenue for the Roman province covering Idumaea, Judea and Samaria was 600 talents. The total revenue for the province of Galilee was 300 talents. That was an area about the size of the USA west of the Rockies, New England and the mid-west from Texas to Minnesota.

One writer has estimated 10,000 talents to be equivalent to \$13 million in our money. But that’s not a fair comparison because it would have an effect in ancient times far greater than the effect of \$13 million today. Suffice it to say, this guy had a major financial problem. He was broke and owed an astronomical amount of money.

I’m not sure if it is funny or sad that verse 25 begins by saying, “. . . *he was not able to pay.*” No one could pay that kind of debt. The king himself probably couldn’t.

The king figured he would get what he could, so he ordered the man to be sold as a slave. In fact, he ordered that everything the man owned be sold, including his wife and children. That would recoup a little of the money, would get rid of the debtor and would make a public example for future borrowers.

The servant hit the floor. He went down on his knees and began to beg: “*Be patient with me,*

and I will pay you back.”

Isn't it interesting how optimistic those who owe money can be? There is no possible way he could keep up with the interest much less pay the principle. It was hopeless!

The king was a merciful master. He had pity on the servant. He felt sorry for him and wanted to help him—even though he didn't deserve it and even though it meant a huge loss to the king. So he went all the way. He didn't just reduce the debt. He didn't offer a \$50,000-a-year payment schedule with a loan coupon book. He forgave the debt—all of it! Completely! He cancelled the note. In a sense, he gave him a gift of 10,000 talents.

Can you imagine how that servant felt when that happened? Better than winning the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes! It was the happiest moment of his life. He went in a debtor and came out debt-free. Disaster was turned to delight. Slavery became freedom. It was and absolutely wonderful story.

But this isn't a true story. Jesus made it up. It didn't actually happen. He is not talking about a king and he is not talking about a servant. He's talking about us and God and sin. He's saying we are terrible sinners who are so deep in the hole of our sins that we could never dig ourselves out!

Let's try to turn this into numbers. How many times do you think the average person sins? In Matthew 12:36 we read that we

“will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word we have spoken.” Add every sinful thought. Include everything each of us has done that we shouldn't have and everything we should have done that we didn't. What would you think would be the average? Ten per day? Actually that's probably a low estimate. Surely it would be more like 100. That means 3,000 sins per month! That's 36,500 sins per year! If you are ten-years-old that means you have sinned about 365,000 times. By the time we reach the age of 30, 1,095,000 sins that have been committed. And if a person lives to be 80 years old it adds up to 3 million sins.

And God will forgive them all! Those who come to him, confessing their sins and asking for

forgiveness, accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord — are forgiven! Our debt to God may be absolutely enormous, but God forgives it all. For when Jesus died on the cross for our sins he paid the price for every one of those sins. All we must do is tell God we trust him and accept his forgiveness. That makes our debt bigger than the parable talents, makes God a more merciful master than the parable king and makes us far more forgiven than the parable servant!

The forgiven servant in the parable came floating out of the king's palace the happiest and most forgiven man in the entire kingdom. As he went out he ran into a fellow employee. This fellow servant owed the forgiven servant 100 denarii. That's about 100 days' wages for a laborer. Like any amount of money, it's a lot if you don't have it. But, by comparison to the 10,000 talents it was nothing.

The same writer who estimates the 10,000 talents at \$13 million estimates the 100 denarii at \$17. The coins for 100 denarii would easily fit in a man's pocket; the coins for 10,000 talents would more than fill a freight train. The debt of the second servant was about 1/20,000 of 1% of the debt of the servant to the king. It was a legal debt, to be

sure, but it was *nothing* compared to what had just been forgiven in the king's office!

The forgiven servant showed no

mercy to his fellow servant. He grabbed his coworker by the throat and demanded, *“Pay back what you owe me!”*

Speaking what should have sounded like familiar words to the first servant, the second servant pleaded: *“Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.”*

Again the debtor's line: “Don't worry; I can take care of it. Everything will be fine!” But at least maybe he had a chance. A denarius was one day's wage and if he worked hard and lived frugally maybe, eventually, he could have paid it. It was at least possible.

Now what should have happened is obvious. The first servant should have turned to the second servant and said, “I forgive your one hundred

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denarii debt. As I have been forgiven, so I forgive you. As I am happy, so you be happy also.” But according to verse 30, *“Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.”*

We don’t have debtor’s prisons in America but in those days a debtor’s prison was a place where people were often tortured to extract information on hidden resources in order to reduce the debt.

The first servant was a rotten man! How could he forget so soon? Didn’t he see the obvious comparison? What was the matter with him? How could anyone be that selfish, that greedy, that unforgiving? He was really rotten.

And again Jesus is speaking to us! He is saying here that we who have been forgiven all our sins are to forgive others 77 times. How dare we not forgive someone else, no matter what that person has done? We have been forgiven so much through Jesus Christ.

There is an epilogue to the story. Sure enough, there were some other servants who saw it all and told the king. The king was furious! He recalled the forgiven servant and said to him,

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

At the end of Matthew 18 Jesus adds a moral to the story, something relatively unusual in Jesus’ parables, saying, *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”*

Jesus is not threatening to rescind forgiveness of sin or take back salvation but he is saying that those who are forgiven Christians, if we refuse to forgive others, will somehow receive in the prison of present circumstances punishment that will teach us the truth that is here taught in the parable.

The parable has two parts: forgiven and forgive. Those two parts raise two questions. The first question is, have you been forgiven? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin so that your tens of thousands of sins will all be forgiven? If not, let’s take care of that right now. Say to God something like this:

God, I admit I’m a sinner who could never pay my debts. Thank you for Jesus who died for me. I accept your forgiveness of my sins through Jesus Christ. I accept him as my Savior and Lord.

Question number two is this: Will you forgive? Will you forgive the person who has sinned against you as God has forgiven you? Decide right now that the answer is yes. And having decided that, tell God. And if it is appropriate, tell that other person, too.

God desires that we be the kind of people Jesus talked about in this parable: those who are forgiven and those who forgive.

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