

STUDY ON THE PARABLES OF JUDGMENT

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Read Matthew 18:21-35

Peter asked Jesus how many times one should forgive, "Till seven times?" and Jesus answered, "Not seven times but seventy times seven".

Peter was probably not drawing the question entirely out of the air. It was something that had been debated by the rabbis, and Peter was probably building on what he had heard when he asked his question. It is recorded in the rabbi's writings and it says, "If a brother sins against you once, forgive him; a second time, forgive him; a third time, forgive him; but a fourth time, do not forgive him." No doubt Peter had heard discussions like that. So, when he asked Jesus whether he should forgive a person as many as seven times, he may have felt that he was attaining the utmost heights of love. After all, the rabbis said that a person should be forgiven only as many as three times. Peter was more than doubling that. What did he expect Jesus to answer? Maybe he expected Him to say, "That is very kind of you, Peter, but I don't think it will be necessary to go quite that far. Maybe four or five times will be enough." Man's thoughts are not God's thoughts, however, and Peter had certainly misread the situation. Jesus' answer was, "No, Peter, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (or possibly seventy times seven, or 490 times). His point was that our forgiveness of others should be unlimited.

"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:14-15)

"And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." (Mark 11:25-26)

The verses above were words spoken by Jesus to emphasise the importance of forgiveness in the walk of any Christian. To the extent to which you forgive is the extent to which Father God in heaven will also forgive. This is not the requirement for your initial salvation but a requirement for your continuous walk with Christ.

Jesus told Peter a story to illustrate His point. A certain king wanted to settle accounts with his servants, so he called in one who had an enormous debt: ten thousand talents. We do not know whether they were talents of gold or silver. But since Jesus is trying to exaggerate the contrast between this great debt and the relatively small debt of verse 28, we may suppose that He was thinking of the greater of the two talents, namely, gold which in today's money will be about £3,600 million (three trillion six hundred million pounds). That is beyond our comprehension, which is precisely Jesus' point. It is an astronomical debt, entirely beyond this servant's or anybody else's capacity to pay.

Since the servant was unable to pay, the king was going to have him, his wife, and his children sold into slavery and his goods sold on the open market to pay as much of the debt as possible. But hearing that, the man fell on his knees and begged, "Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all." (v26). He could not, of course, but the king had pity on him and cancelled the obligation.

This man then found a fellow servant who owed him money, only one hundred denarii. A denarius was a day's wage for a common labourer, so that was approximately a third of a year's wages. Assuming (in our terms) that a low wage might be twelve or fifteen thousand pounds per year, it was only four or five thousand pounds. That was a significant amount of money, but it was a pittance compared to the enormous debt the first servant had incurred. Yet when the man with the smaller debt begged for time

to repay it, which he could presumably have done, the wretched or unforgiving first servant hardened his heart and had the other thrown into prison.

The other servants heard what had happened and told the king. The king called the first man in and demanded, *"You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?"* (vv. 32-33). Then, according to Jesus, his master turned him over to the jailers until he should pay back all he owed.

The principle here is, "the one forgiven much should forgive much." In other words, the principle of forgiveness is that grace or forgiveness to another is without limit. The disciples are not to count the number of times they forgive. Rather, as the parable teaches, they are to forgive much because God has forgiven much.

"And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." (**Ephesians 4:32**)

At that point in the parable, the story is finished, and we might wish that Jesus had stopped right there. But He had this final disturbing word: *"So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."* (v. 35).

That is troubling. For one thing, it seems to imply a "works" salvation. That is, if you forgive others (a work), you will be forgiven. That seems contrary to the doctrine of justification by faith. Or again, even if it does not teach that, the parable seems to imply a continuation in grace by means of works.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." (**Ephesians 2:8-9**)

We may be saved by grace; but if we fail to act in an upright manner, God may cancel His forgiveness and have us thrown into hell anyway, just as the king had his wicked servant jailed. Since that is all unacceptable for many, Bible students have devised a number of ways of getting off the hook.

As I have read the various commentaries, I have found at least three different way of trying to do that i.e., get off the hook or explain this parable away.

First, some commentators apparently believe that Jesus did not mean what He said. They regard the parable as simple hyperbole, as an exaggerated statement given for its emotional effect. According to those scholars, Jesus did not mean to say that God would send us to hell if we do not forgive our debtors, but only that forgiveness is an extremely important matter and that we ought really to be forgiving. We should forgive others just as God has already forgiven us. But if we do not, that does not mean we are not saved or that we will lose our salvation.

The second way of trying to escape Christ words is by applying them to someone else. According to that view, Jesus obviously meant what He said, but His words do not apply to people living in this age. Jesus' teaching was true for Jews living under the law, but it is not true for us. We are justified by faith apart from works. God's forgiveness does not depend in any measure on our forgiveness of others and is, in fact, not even linked to it. That is like speeding down a motorway and then, when you see the police car coming with his siren sounding and the light flashing, hoping that he is going after someone else. It is not to someone else but to us that Jesus is speaking.

The third approach is that of liberalism, which instead of trying to get off the hook, actually delights in it by throwing out the rest of the New Testament. The liberal says, "This is merely that beautiful teaching of doing to others as we would want them to do to us. We want God to forgive us. So, we should want

to forgive others. Since God does forgive us, we should understand Christ to be saying that the essence of religion is in God 's being nice to us and our being nice to others. He is the forgiving Father of all; and, since He is, we ought to treat all men as brothers" – with no consequences to unforgiveness.

Irrespective of the excuses above, Jesus is saying that if we do not forgive others, God is going to send us to hell. That is not the gospel of liberalism! There is an unbreakable connection between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of other people. That is intended to snap us out of any lethargy we may have and confront us with the life-changing power of the gospel. But it does not mean that we are saved by forgiving others but forgiving others is key in our walk-in salvation.

The parable of the forgiven but unforgiving debtor makes three points.

First, there is a judgment coming. Jesus did not pass over that. He spoke of forgiveness, but He also spoke clearly of what happened to the unforgiving man in His story that he was cast into prison until he should pay back all he owed. That judgment hangs over everyone who has not experienced God's forgiveness through Christ.

“But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.” (Romans 14:10)

Second, there is forgiveness. God does forgive. God sent Jesus to be the basis for that forgiveness.

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.” (1 John 1:8-10)

Third, the only sure proof of a person's having received God's forgiveness through true faith in Jesus is a transformed heart and a changed life.

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

“Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tender-hearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.” (1 Peter 3:8-9)

How do we get that down into the practical areas of our lives, so that we actually begin to treat others as we have been treated? It is by standing before the thrice holy God and thus seeing ourselves as the vile sinners we were - vile and yet forgiven through the death of God's own beloved Son. That awareness should humble us so that we have simply no other option but to be forgiving to others from our heart.

Conclusion

“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.” (Luke 17:3-4)

Question: what if this brother or sister or person did not ask for forgiveness?

“For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” (James 2:13)

“But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.” (Luke 6:27-28)

