

Forgiveness-The Necessary Virtue

Matthew 6:14, 15

With Study Questions

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

Introduction

I trust you all had a wonderful holiday and were greatly comforted by the glorious message surrounding the birth of Jesus. Now, as we embark upon a new year, I will seek to make us all as uncomfortable as possible.

This morning I would like to address one of the (in my opinion) most disconcerting statements Jesus ever made. Following the instruction of, what has been commonly referred to as the Lord's Prayer, Jesus uses the conjunction "for" (*ean*), in the beginning of His very next statement. In doing this, He is attaching this statement to the Lord's Prayer, almost as a commentary on the prayer He just taught.

But it is more than a commentary. It's more like a personal challenge. We might imagine a professor instructing his students from his notes before pausing, looking up, making eye-contact and letting them know that this next piece of information is so vital to the class, that if you miss it, you fail!

So what is this brief commentary / challenge we see as an epilog to the Lord's Prayer?

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions (Matthew 6:14, 15).

I am unaware of any other virtue in the Bible that carries with it this admonition. The Scriptures don't say unless you're kind, patient, courageous, gentle, wise, enthusiastic, etc., you will not be forgiven. The subjunctive clause "**if you do not forgive**" (as far as I know) is only related to the virtue of forgiveness. It is regarding forgiveness and forgiveness only that we see this powerful '**if you don't then neither shall I**' statement.

Why does this particular virtue carry with it such a strong emphasis from our Lord? What I would like to address this morning is the virtue of forgiveness and why it is the necessary virtue. I will seek to ask and answer three questions:

1. Why should we be eager to forgive?
2. What constrains us from being forgiving people?
3. Is it truly unforgivable to lack this virtue?

The Unmerciful Servant

If what we read already is insufficient to convince us of the serious nature offense of being unforgiving, what we'll look at now should make it more iron-clad.

Jesus tells a parable many have entitled 'The Unmerciful Servant'. It's a parable about a man who had a debt to a king so large it couldn't be paid. He asked and received forgiveness from this debt by the merciful king. After the debt was forgiven the man met a debtor (a fellow slave) and refused to offer him any forgiveness at concerning his debt. When the king heard about this, he took the man whose debt he had forgiven and threw him into torturers until all the original debt was paid.

What is often missed in this parable is the context—which is the confrontation which leads to church discipline. The one on one confrontation followed by the two or more confrontation followed by the church disciplinary action—all in an effort (among other things) to restore the sinning brother (Matthew 18:15-20).

Peter seemed to be a little disturbed (or at least confused) by this. Perhaps Peter had friends who failed on a regular basis and then were restored only to fail again and be restored again. Peter wanted to know how often! He offers a suggestion.

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him Up to seven times? (Matthew 18:21)?"

How Often Do We Forgive?

It is this question which launches Jesus into the parable. As we look at the parable, let us seek to answer the three questions: Why should we be eager to forgive? What constrains us from being forgiving people? And is it truly unforgivable to lack this virtue?

The youthful, confident and exuberant Peter desires to know the reasonable limits of human forgiveness. No doubt, thinking himself

generous, he blurts out the number of perfection, of completion. The offender Peter has in mind has completely offended him (seven transgressions), which require seven acts of forgiveness.

Peter's question tells us something about Peter. And I think it is something common to man. Although Peter was willing to forgive, his forgiveness carried with it a sense of entitlement—as if he were entitled to stop forgiving at a certain point. If our willingness to forgive is founded upon our own gentile disposition then it is unavoidable for us to say “thus far and no more”. Somewhere in the recesses of our mind the words are ringing “I deserve better.”

Perhaps Peter would think it feeble at that point to continue to forgive—unwilling to say ‘enough is enough!’ You wonder if Peter reflected upon this conversation later after having denied his Lord three times in a brief period (Luke 22:60).

One must also wonder if Peter remembered this parable. If Peter remembered how comfortably he questioned whether or not the weak and failing sinner should continue to be forgiven. Did Peter consider this lesson when, after denying His Savior repeatedly, the Lord, being led to His death, took the time to turn and look at Peter (Luke 22:61). When the penetrating eyes of Jesus see us in our darkest moments, how we take refuge in His lessons of mercy!

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22).

Peter now finds his magnanimity blown to smithereens by Jesus; seventy times seven clearly meaning infinitely. How rabbinic of Peter! How Pharisaical we tend to be. We desire to set standards on other people's behavior that are quantifiable. When we make the statement “I am willing to forgive so much but no more,” it is not so much a testimony to the irritation that others bring us as it is a testimony to our own weakness and lack of willingness to imitate the graciousness of Christ. William Hendriksen states that the forgiving spirit is not,

...a commodity that could be weighed, measured, and counted...the spirit of genuine forgiveness recognizes no boundaries. It is a state of heart, not a matter of calculation. One might as well ask, ‘How often must I love my wife, my husband, my children?’ as to ask, ‘How often shall I forgive?’

The Forgiving Victim

Forgiving somebody, it must be stated, even over and over, does not necessitate allowing them to continue to sinfully take advantage of your amiable nature or convictions. The wife who continues to allow her battering husband to abuse her without turning him into the police is not serving God or her husband. Calvin states,

For when God commands us to wish well to our enemies, He does not therefore demand that we approve in them what He condemns, but only desires that our minds shall be purified from all hatred.

It is not contained in the act of forgiveness to disregard God's justice in the life of another person. If a person were to murder your friend, it would not at all be inconsistent thinking to forgive that person, while at the same time turning them over to the authorities for judgment—even execution. Forgiveness and justice are not mutually exclusive but work together. Our forgiveness should never undermine nor over-rule God's justice.

Jesus explains His answer with a parable—a parable that will help us answer our three questions.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 And when he had begun to settle *them*, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents (Matthew 18:23, 24).

Settling Accounts

We learn here that the kingdom of God is not a kingdom where people's debts are ignored. The king (who is God) has slaves (*doulon*) and he is about settling accounts with them. We should never view our relationship with God as having been reconciled by His ignoring of our sins. The king does not ignore the debt but he settles the account (*sunarai*—can be understood as in the ASV “make a reckoning”). All debts are due and payable).

The Un-Payable Debt

An Attic talent is equal to six thousand denarii. A denarii is one day's wages. Just to make the story clear to us. This slave owed his king ten thousand times six thousand days work. My math may be wrong on

this but this slave owed his king 60,000,000 days work. If he were to work seven days a week and give 100% of his earnings to his king, he would have to live 164,383 years to get even. The point is, it was an un-payable debt. How critical is it for us to understand that we have nothing to contribute to such a debt.

And there is no bankruptcy or white-collar club-fed prison here. The man will pay forever—if one considers interest his debt increases at a higher level than his payments—to follow the parable this man would owe more every day. Jesus adds to the intimacy of this with a reference to his wife and children—something that during the Roman Empire, when this was written, many of His listeners would have some level of experience. Owing this kind of debt would cost you everything. Jesus explains:

But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made (Matthew 18:25).

The Consequence of Debt

We see here the consequences of debt before God. At the apex of our lives we may view ourselves as invulnerable, self-sufficient and fearless. A young man sat in my office boasting that he had no fear of death. I told him that would change—either in this life or in the next. Like Belshazzar, the king of Babylon, who having seen the mere finger of God writing upon the plaster of the wall of his palace...

...his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his __knees knocked against each other (Daniel 5:6).

The idea of God settling accounts is a fearful thing.

_For behold, the Lord will come with fire And with His chariots, like a whirlwind, To render His anger with fury, And His rebuke with flames of fire. ¹⁶ For by fire and by __His sword The Lord will judge all flesh; And the slain of the Lord shall be __many (Isaiah 66:15, 16).

According to Jesus, there will be a day of reckoning. And there is simply not a man who has the financial, moral or intellectual capital sufficient to settle his own account.

With what shall I come before the Lord, *And* bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old? ⁷ _Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand __rivers of oil? _Shall I give my firstborn *for* my transgression, _The fruit of my body *for* the sin of my soul (Micah 6:6, 7)?

The implied answer to these rhetorical questions is that none of these offerings are sufficient. We, therefore, see the plea.

The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything' (Matthew 18:26).

The Foolish Plea

When it came to the face to face confrontation with the king, this slave became very religious. The King James Version says 'he worshipped him.' Then he offered to do something that he, in no conceivable manner, could have actually done...pay the debt. This is man's concept of religion at its lowest. 'Let's go to church and see if we can pay off God.' Perhaps the later transgression of the servant is related to the foolish promise made here. Any person standing by must have recognized the folly of such a promise. The plea is foolish but the response is compassionate. God's answers are wiser and more gracious than our requests.

And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt (Matthew 18:27).

The Compassionate Response

As ludicrous and impossible the promise on the part of the slave, the Lord felt compassion and released him. As bad as religion might be and as fickle as our approach to God might get, we serve a compassionate God. Though we be ignorant of Him and even insult Him with our trifles, selfish requests and petty offerings, He looks beyond our short-comings and lavishes His grace and mercy upon us. We should never view this as license for continued sin or ignorance, but it is, as some level for all of us, the nature of the case.

The man asked for patience and time to repay. The wise and merciful master doesn't set up a payment plan, he cancels the debt. Such

mercy, such grace should have transformed every grain of this servant's character. Imagine calling the bank to get an extension on your home loan only to find they have cancelled your debt! That is nothing compared to this reprieve. The eternal slavery for him and his family—pardoned!

But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began* to choke *him*, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' ' 29 "So his fellow slave fell down and *began* to entreat him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' 30 "He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed (Matthew 18:28-30).

Justice or Mercy?

Is our primary disposition toward our brothers ruled by justice or mercy? In the parable the comparison is obvious. The man's fellow slave owed him (and he did owe him) much less than he had owed—it was a payable debt (probably three or four months of work). His vicious disposition is revealed by grabbing the man by the throat and demanding payment—something we did not see his master do to him. And when asked for the same leniency, instead of extending the clemency he had received he threw the man into prison.

I read this parable and at first thought, 'What an ingrate!' Marveling at how any man could be so clueless. But then I realized this parable has this strange "you are the man¹" ring to it. How easily we forget the canceled debt. How quickly we cry for justice while we ourselves bask in mercy. How true the hymn which reminds us:

**O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!**

Is this to say that it is a godly action to ignore sin? Clearly not! In the parallel account Jesus explains:

Take heed to yourselves. __If your brother sins __against you, __rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. ⁻⁴⁻ 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).

¹ From 2 Samuel 12:1-7 when Nathan had told the story of the rich man who had exceeding flocks who took and slaughtered the one ewe lamb owned by a poor man—David was incensed and said that the man should surely die. Nathan then revealed to David that he had been speaking of him and what he had done with Uriah and Bathsheba.

Over and above us, it is God who is offended at man's sin and calls men to repent. We work unlike and against God to offer forgiveness without repentance. People should not be under the impression that their sins are swept away without repentance—*metanoese* a changing of the mind and turning away from sin.

Yet at the same time we should not approach our offending brother with our hands around their throat. God forgives us our sins when we repent. But God is also efficiently active in bringing us to repentance—as His children we should seek to imitate both.

In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "**forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors**" (Matthew 6:12). In Matthew 6:14, 15 we learn that a forgiving disposition is so woven into the fabric saving faith that Jesus teaches,

-For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ⁻¹⁵⁻ But __if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 16:14, 15).

Important to note that Jesus doesn't say we're forgiven on account of our forgiveness of others, as if we earn forgiveness by being forgiving. Our lack of willingness to forgive simply reveals that we have chosen to operate in a world of merit or justice (what is deserved) rather than grace or mercy (what is freely given). And it is in that context that Jesus taught,

So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. 33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you' (Matthew 18:31-33)?

The Standard of Forgiveness

By what standard do we forgive? By the same standard that we have been forgiven. It should be our prayer that we all become acutely aware of the nature of our own depravity, of our debt before God, of our inability to pay that debt (the Greek construction of this passage places the phrase 'all that debt' at the beginning; emphasizing the immensity of the debt).

Why should this be our prayer? So we can be depressed and feel small and worthless? Not at all! So we can rejoice that the price has been paid for us! So we can rejoice in the graciousness of God! So we can rejoice in the mercy of God! So we can rejoice in the forgiveness of God! So that we might, in similar fashion forgive others.

There is truly a heavy-duty ending to this parable. So much so that I thought that I might attempt to soften the blow; but since Jesus doesn't (He being the master-teacher) nor will I attempt to soften the blow.

And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 "So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:34, 35).

Worse Than the Beginning

As one who firmly believes in the perseverance of the saints, how do I explain a parable that teaches of one who had this religious experience, yet finds himself in the end, not only unforgiven, but now handed over to the torturers? He is worse off now than he ever was! This is reminiscent of something we read 2 Peter. 2:20-22,

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. ²¹For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known *it*, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. ²²But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog *is* turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire (2 Peter 2:20-22)

How does one explain this? If you were asked, 'are you saved by grace or are you saved by faith?' you would answer that I am saved by grace through faith. You would answer that Jesus Christ graciously authored my faith. Now you would say 'I have faith (given to me by God) and it is through the instrument of faith that I am saved.

In other words, even though we are saved by grace, if faith isn't present there is no salvation. Similarly², though we are not forgiven by

² This illustration breaks down when one considers the unique nature of faith—which is not a work, but a gift from God.

works, if we are people who persistently and stubbornly refuse to forgive, we are fooling ourselves to think we will be forgiven. William Hendriksen states that in the teaching of both Paul and Jesus,

...salvation rests not on human accomplishments but solely on the grace and mercy of God, this does not mean that there is nothing to do for those who receive it. They must believe. Included in this faith is the eagerness to forgive. Unless the listeners forgive men their trespasses, they themselves will remain unpardoned.

True saving faith necessarily produces (at some level) a willingness to forgive.

Answers to the Questions

What then are the answers to our questions? Briefly put, we should be eager to forgive because we have been forgiven a much greater debt than anyone could ever owe us. We are constrained from being forgiven because we fail to meditate upon our own sin before God and the price paid by Christ to wipe away the debt. Whereas having a forgiving heart does not earn us salvation, a lack of willingness to seek to forgive others may be revealing an unregenerate, or unsaved heart. You may have faith, but it is a dead faith and not the faith that saves (James 2:14, 17)

From the Heart

When Jesus teaches we should forgive from the heart He we should understand that it is not merely by words or as an obligatory Christian requirement. Forgiving from the heart requires understanding and meditating on the forgiveness we have received. We ought to be people who are eager to forgive.

Let us pray that the Holy Spirit be kneading our hearts in such a way that being unforgiving will haunt us. We are to be a people who, like the angels in heaven, rejoice in the glory of reconciled relationships (Luke 15:10). Before we stiffen our necks with a retaliatory heart, let us plumb the depths of God's gracious gospel and see the stripes that belong to us on the back of our blessed Savior realizing we have nothing to offer God but our praise and thanksgiving. Let us ever be mindful of the immensity of our debt and the graciousness of the God who paid it all. May that ever inform our willingness to forgive others.

Questions for Study

1. How does the challenge to forgive others relate to the Lord's Prayer (page 2)?
2. What is unique about this challenge to forgive (page 2)?
3. What is the context of the parable of the 'Unmerciful Servant' and why is that important (page 3)?
4. Why do people tend to set limits on forgiveness (pages 3, 4)?
5. How often should we forgive? Does that make sense to you? Why or why not (pages 4, 5)?
6. How does a forgiving person avoid being a victim (page 5)?
7. Does God ignore our debts (page 5)?
8. How much did the slave owe his master? Why is this significant (page 6)?

9. What are the consequences of this debt (pages 6, 7)?
10. Why was the plea of the slave foolish (pages 7, 8)?
11. Discuss the master's response to the foolish plea (page 8).
12. How does this parable contrast justice and mercy (pages 8, 9)?
13. By what standard should we forgive (page 10)?
14. Does the unforgiving person lose their salvation (pages 10, 11)?
15. Discuss and answer the three questions (pages 11, 12).
16. What does it mean to forgive from the heart (page 12)?