

Matthew 18:21-35

Pentecost 17; September 27, 2020

It was supposed to be a happy family affair. A family held a small gathering for a gender reveal party on Saturday, September 5th. They used a smoke-generating pyrotechnic device to release blue smoke or pink smoke to announce the gender of their expected child. But then something went very, very wrong. Before they knew it, the dry grass at the park where they were caught fire. Apparently surveillance camera in the area show that the couple tried to put out the fire with water bottles. But they were no match for the flames. By the time the fire department arrived, the flames were out of control. As of last week, nearly 23,000 acres were burned, four homes have been destroyed, six other structures destroyed and one firefighter has lost his life. Nearly 1,200 fire fighters continue to fight the flames and the fire is only about 75% contained. For the rest of their lives they will have to carry the guilt of being the cause of this large fire, the guilt of knowing that a fire fighter has lost his life. Fire officials have said that they could face possible criminal charges, and they could be responsible for the cost of fighting the fire which will be in the millions and millions of dollars. It would be a debt that they never will be able to pay.

They were supposed to be the greatest creation of God. He had created a perfect place for them to live in. He would walk with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. We can only imagine what it must have been like to be able to walk with God. Then everything came crashing down. They listened to a talking snake and sin came into the world. The payment that would be needed to forgive sin was no match for them. It was a debt that they never could pay. It was a debt that no one from the human race could ever pay. So, it would be God himself who would step into this world and pay the debt that no one could ever pay.

To illustrate how great the debt was that needed to be forgiven, Jesus used a parable. Jesus said: **“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.”** This was a debt that was beyond imagination. As the number of 10,000 is converted to our currency today, there are varying amounts that can be found for these bags of gold. One example that I saw was that it would be the equivalent of a servant working for 200,000 years. Another amount that I saw was it would be worth about 4.5 billion dollars today. Regardless of the number, this was a debt that this man could never have been able to pay back. (The question that comes to my mind is: *“how could one servant even run up this kind of debt?”*) This is not your home mortgage; this is a national debt. He could never pay this back, and the servant knew it. When the king heard that the servant could never pay the debt back, there was only one thing left for the king to do. **“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.”**

The picture of the parable is pretty easy to see. The servant is us. **“The bags of gold”** – they are the sins that we do every single day. As servants under God, we fall under the rule of his law. He expects us to be perfect, holy, according to his standards – nothing more and nothing less. God’s grading system is easy – you fail once, you fail it all. James summarizes it clearly in his letter: **“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”** We cannot pay back to God the debt of our sin. There is nothing that we can do that can wipe away the guilt of sin.

The servant in the parable knew that. All he could do is throw himself at the feet of the king. **“Be patient with me, he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’”** In reality, he never could pay back the king. It was not possible. Then the king did something that he never expected. **“The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.”** You see that’s what forgiveness is. Forgiveness is God releasing you from the debt. Your debt is wiped out because Jesus paid it for you! He paid your debt with His body and blood. He paid off your massive debt and now you are free. The Bible tells us: **“as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”** (Psalm 103:12) Your account is *“paid in full.”* And every time you come here and confess your sins, every time you beg for patience, God reminds you that your debt is paid in full. You are forgiven, go debt free, go in peace. Our relationship with God has changed. You are no longer a servant, you are his child.

That forgiveness not only changes the relationship that we have with God, it changes the relationship that we have with each other. The compassion that God has had on us should lead us to have compassion on others. Yet, that’s not what the first servant did, is it? **“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." The king forgave the debt that this first servant could never have paid in thousands of life times. That servant goes after another servant for pocket change. You see, this forgiveness thing is hard. The Bible tells us that forgiveness is to be a defining characteristic of a Christian. Yet, if we honestly look at how we forgive the other people in our lives, we don't forgive like God forgives, do we? We'll forgive someone, when they are sorry for what they have done against me. Yet, God's forgiveness cannot be earned. It is based, not on the worthiness of the recipient, but on the compassion of the giver. God's grace in Christ is the only thing that caused him to forgive us. God's grace in Christ is the only thing that can possibly motivate us to forgive others.

Peter was struggling a bit with this idea. **"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"** Peter knew what Jewish traditional law said about forgiveness. It said that if someone sins against you once, you forgive them. Twice, you forgive them. Three times, you forgive them. Four times, you are done. So, when Peter comes to Jesus and says **"seven times,"** he probably is thinking that he is being pretty generous. But Jesus tells him that, that is not how God forgives. **"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."** Some have said that Jesus actually was saying that you should forgive someone seventy times 70 times. Whether it is 77 times or 7x70, the number isn't all that important. Jesus' point is simple: Forgive each other as I have forgiven you.

The king had forgiven that first servant so much more than 77 times. Yet, he was unwilling to forgive a debt that was so much smaller than the debt the king had forgiven for him. So, what does the king do? **"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, '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 handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."**

May God help all of us to forgive like God forgives. Look at the cross of Jesus, and you will see how God forgives. Go in peace, your sins are forgiven. Amen.