


Sunday, February 11

WHO IS  THE
Greatest
a study of Matthew 18

Peter is an astute listener. He heard what Jesus had said about relationships and dealing with conflict. He understood the implications. If you have relationships, you are going to have to forgive. People are sinners. And the moment you connect yourself to another human being, you are opening yourself up to not just the possibility but the absolute certainty of getting hurt. Jesus has just told us what we have to do when that happens. Now Peter wants to know how many times to do it.

Mt 18:21 — Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

Peter offers what must have seemed like a gracious response. “Seven times?” It was the number of perfection and more than double what some religious leaders said was required. But we all think we are good/gracious until we meet the standard set by God. Jesus responded, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Mt 18:22). There is a lot of discussion about why Jesus chose this number. It may have been a reference back to the story of Lamech in Genesis 4. He wrote a song after killing a man; “If Cain would be avenged seven fold, then anyone who hurt Lamech would be avenged seventy-seven times.” That story was about vengeance, but it appears that Jesus borrowed from it to introduce a story about forgiveness.

Jesus tells Peter that because the standard is so high, “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants” (v. 23). And as he did, he came across one who owed him ten thousand talents (v. 24). It is impossible to translate this into today’s currency, but best estimates suggest it would be in the hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars. It was a lot, and the servant did not have it.

Matthew 18:25 - And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.

Please note, Jesus is not endorsing this action. He is simply stating things as they were in his culture. And in his culture, if you had a debt, the debt had to be paid. No bailouts, no bankruptcy. If you borrowed more than you could pay back or misused what was put into your trust, the consequences were dire. It’s a terrible situation. There is no way out. And when there is no way out, the only thing you can do is beg.

Matthew 18:26 - So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’

The servant clearly knew he needed mercy. He just didn’t know how much mercy he needed. His solution is more time and more effort. That is the way we think; if we just had a little more time and a little more effort, we would be fine. But you can write this down: Our biggest problems are not caused by a lack of time and effort. For this guy, no

amount of time and no amount of effort could have fixed his problem. Why would he ask for patience to pay a debt he could never repay? I think it is a blend of three reasons:

- *He doesn't understand the extent of his debt.*
- *He doesn't understand the limits of his ability.*
- *He doesn't understand the master's heart.*

Sadly, the same is true for those who refuse to accept the Gospel. *They thinking too little of your debt. They think too much of your ability. They think too little of God's grace.*

The servant clearly didn't grasp any of this. And yet, the master is gracious beyond the servant's understanding. "Out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him," which is good. That would allow him more time for more effort to repay his debt. But he doesn't need to. Because in addition to setting the servant free, he "forgave him the debt" (v. 27). Can you stop and imagine how that would feel? If your loan company paid off your car. If your mortgage company paid off your house. If EdFinancial paid off your student loans. How grateful would you be? More importantly, would that gratitude change you? If you were really blessed in that way, would it make you more generous? It should.

But this forgiven servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. This would have been roughly a year's wages, which is still a lot. I love what Jesus does here. He is the author of this story, so he could have made this debt as much or as little as he wished. He could have made it ten mites. But he makes it a significant amount. Why would he do this? I think it is because he doesn't minimize the wounds we suffer. You've been hurt. God is not going to tell you that it doesn't matter, that your pain is not real, or that you should just suck it up and move on. The forgiven servant is owed a significant amount, but he's just been forgiven for the GDP of a small nation.

The forgiven servant seized his fellow servant by the throat and demanded, "Pay what you owe!" His fellow servant could pay, but what could he do? There is no way out. And when there is no way out, the only thing you can do is beg:

Matthew 18:29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'

The request for mercy was identical to that asked for by the forgiven servant. But the response was totally different:

Matthew 18:30 - He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.

The forgiven servant has assumed the posture of the master. But he's not a master; he's a servant. Take note: servants make terrible masters. They lack the wisdom and restraint needed to govern.

The forgiven servant doesn't see he is acting like a lord. He's too consumed with the thrill of power. But those looking from the outside can tell when a servant is acting like a master. And when they reported what they've seen back to the real master, he took immediate action. He summoned the servant and began, "You wicked servant!" Wicked! This is a word we typically reserved for big sins like sexual immorality or violence. But Jesus uses it here to describe a spirit of un-forgiveness. Think about that. In the mind of God, holding a grudge is wicked. Refusing to talk to someone out of spite is wicked. Avoiding someone because you harbor anger in your heart against them is wicked. Why does God think it's wicked? Look back at verse 32:

Matthew 18:32b-33 - "I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"

Seems reasonable. For believers, unforgiveness is simply not an option. We have experienced and been filled with forgiveness:

- *Experience forgiveness: To do anything complex, you don't need someone to tell you; you need someone to show you. That's why instructions always come with pictures. It's why "how-to" videos on YouTube are so popular. Examples are powerful, but even more so when the example lives inside of you.*
- *Filled with forgiveness: For the believer, forgiveness is something that lives inside of us. Jesus, the forgiving one, lives inside of us. And if he lives inside of us, his forgiving spirit fills us. Which means the believer has ample forgiveness to share.*

So, if Jesus is to be believed, you and I have everything we need to forgive. They need forgiveness. And to not forgive is wicked and judged by God.

Matthew 18:34 - And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

How seriously does God take forgiveness? Think of all the sins in the Bible pardoned by God. Abraham was pardoned for fathering a child with a woman who was not his wife. David was pardoned for murder. Israel was pardoned for idolatry. Peter was pardoned for denying Jesus. And do you remember what Jesus said while he was being crucified? But when it comes to unbelief, God says, "I'll treat you the way this master treated the wicked servant unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

