

IS FORGIVENESS HARD OR EASY?

Text: Matthew 18:23-35

3/21/10

Introduction

Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?

Peter's question to Jesus tells us why believing in the *forgiveness of sins* is where it is in the Apostles' Creed. Anyone who spends much time in the "holy, catholic church", rubbing shoulders with their brothers and sister saints, will soon discover why forgiveness can't remain a theory.

But forgiveness worries us, particularly when it gets too generous. I haven't seen too many people pleading for Nordegren to forgive Tiger, or for Jenny Sanford to forgive her husband the unfaithful governor of South Carolina. There aren't many people pleading for the absolution of Bernie Madoff. What about justice, and common sense? If forgiveness is too easy won't all kind of unsavory people wipe their muddy feet all over us?

Voltaire the great atheist once said with contempt, "God forgives because it is his business." He was right. But he said it with a sneer, and it's the sneer we fear when God's forgiveness is too easy.

But we don't like the other option either. If forgiveness is too hard (which is another way of saying if God is too stingy) how can we ever be sure where *we* stand? Who really likes the part of the Lord's Prayer which says, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us?" Does God keep score? Have I done enough forgiving to be forgiven?

Forgiveness is such a big deal in the Christian life Peter the apostle is looking for a way to make it manageable. Seven times perhaps. Maybe more, maybe less?

II

Jesus deals with such an important question by telling what appears to be a simple story. When it comes to dealing with forgiveness, “The Kingdom of God is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with servants.”

It turns out there was this one servant who had run up quite a tab with the king’s money. He owes 10,000 talents which is something close to the equivalent of 150,000 years of paychecks. It’s a staggering, inconceivable amount he owes the king which he cannot begin to pay. The king does what a creditor could do in the world at that time. He orders the man and his family to be sold into slavery to pay the debt.

The servant does what all of us would probably do – he asks for more time to pay a debt he will never be able to overcome. And the story simply says, *The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go.*

What! Just like that the king says all is forgiven, hit the road. It would be like calling Wells Fargo one year into your thirty year mortgage and telling them you are finding the payments a bit burdensome. So the loan officer says, “Don’t worry about, we’ll just write it off as a loss and you can go your way.” The king forgives a monstrous debt, simply because the king wants to. He has shown inconceivable, unspeakable generosity.

It appears that people owe God more than they can ever pay. Paul says it this way:

There is no difference, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God...

And it appears that God is more than willing to pay what they owe. Again Paul says:

...and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.

So God is willing to forgive everybody because everybody needs to be forgiven. It’s wonderful. It’s troubling. And it’s a bit terrifying to discover that you owe so much that accepting forgiveness is the only way out of the hole.

III

In fact what seems easy for God is hard for us. It is so difficult to accept the truth that we have dug such deep holes for ourselves in God's world that only God's reckless act of forgiveness will do us any good.

The servant who has been forgiven everything by the master now returns to the world that runs according to a different set of rules, and sees somebody who owes him. The debtor who is now the creditor is owed a few measly denarii, chump change in terms of what he had previously owed.

This new debtor also pleads for more time to pay what he owes. But our recently forgiven servant will have none of it and throws the man into prison until he can pay the debt.

Of course the other servants are outraged. They now how much forgiveness has already been extended. They sense of the outrage of failing to extend it from one servant to the next.

The forgiven couldn't forgive. But are we so surprised? We have some deep seated fears about what will happen if we practice radical forgiveness in our lives. Some are justified but many are not.

Lewis Smedes in his great little book *Forgive and Forget* says we need to remember what forgiveness is not:

Forgiveness is not making excuses for people. You forgive them because you hold them to account and refuse to excuse them. It is not the opposite of justice.

Forgiveness is not smothering conflict. When you pretend or deny there is conflict, you have removed the possibility of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not accepting people warts and all. You forgive people who have done something to you that is unacceptable.

Forgiveness is not tolerating the bad things people do to you. You can forgive people and still refuse to tolerate their behavior.

Forgiveness is separating the person from the wound they have caused in your life. It is freeing them from condemnation. You will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well.

But forgiveness flows from the radical discovery that you must be and have been forgiven. God has held you accountable for your debt. Jesus Christ has bled for it. And God has forgiven you and sent you on your way

Short of that we may confess with our mouth all the church teaches about forgiveness. But our lives will tell a different story.

IV

And now we come to most demanding and generous part of the story.

Word got back to the master about the unforgiveness of his servant. It seems a master who forgives all can't have a servant who forgives little or nothing. And the servant who was freed from prison is now sent there to pay back what he never can.

This part of the story scares us. Is Jesus saying that the God who has forgiven us will revoke his mercy toward us if we refuse to show it to others? Is there a limit to God's forgiveness after all?

I think the parable is saying something a little different. This is not the story of God who plays tit-for-tat. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of people caught up in the radical forgiveness of God. The king didn't simply cancel the servant's debt. He's invited the servant to live a whole different kind of existence! Forgiveness is God's business after all and he expects us to be excited to manage a bit of the franchise.

But forgiveness didn't "take" in the life of this servant. There's no room in the merciful kingdom of God for a servant who has little use for mercy.

To believe in the forgiveness of sins is to practice it with your spouse, parents, children, teachers, and co-workers. It is to help the church be what the world is not – a community that neither delights in nor denies its sins, but forgives them.

V

Back in 2006 a gunman broke into a school in the Amish Christian community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania and killed five schoolgirls, wounded five others, and then killed himself.

It was an incredible trauma for any community, but especially for a non-violent, pacifist religious community like the Amish. The world watched to see how the leaders of these people would respond.

Scarcely a day went by before the horse and buggies of the Amish community pulled up in front of the house of the family of the gunman; his widow and her children. They brought them food and they raised money to help them pay their bills because this family on top of everything else had lost its wage-earner.

And while a disbelieving, uncomprehending world watched, the Amish forgave.

Well, they're Amish, we might think. They do strange things like that.

Or maybe they were better at remembering what we more worldly Christians are quicker to forget. Having been forgiven all by the king they recalled that they too are in the forgiveness business.