



WESTMINSTER
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The Forgiveness of Sins

"Fifth in a Series on the Apostles' Creed"

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:31).

Peter comes to Jesus and says, “Lord, if somebody sins against me, how many times should I forgive that person? As many as seven times?”

You get the sense that this is not an entirely hypothetical question. In fact, it sounds like Peter is already on number six. Can you hear it in his voice? Really, Jesus. As many as *seven* times? We heard you talk about turning the other cheek, but we only have two cheeks after all. How many times do we have to forgive people when they keep on doing such awful things, when they make it so hard for everybody else? Are we really supposed to keep on forgiving? By the seventh time, surely we have a right to pay them back.

Jesus hears this, and it strikes him like a whole cluster of discordant notes. He hears Peter rationalizing the revenge he’s been contemplating ever since he turned that other cheek. People always rationalize when they’re about to do something they shouldn’t. Then Jesus hears the irony. Someone sinned against Peter and he’s chomping at the bit to get even, but the whole world has sinned against Jesus, the Son of God. He’s just told his disciples that he’s about to be handed over to suffer and die, and he will go willingly to a cross for more of other people’s sins than anyone can imagine. Some of those sins will be Peter’s. And some will be yours, and some will be mine.

Then there’s the church Jesus said he would build on

this rock called Peter, but already there are cracks in the rock, and the church will be an imperfect thing ever after. The incongruity of it all strikes Jesus as funny, in a bittersweet sort of way, so he smiles at this shaky pillar of his church and says, “No, Peter, not seven times, but seventy times seven you must forgive.”

This is not what Peter wants to hear, so Jesus goes on to tell a story for Peter and everyone else who’s hanging around and listening. He says, “The kingdom of heaven is like this. It’s like there’s a great king who wants to settle accounts with all his servants. One servant owes the king 10,000 talents....” Now a talent is about fifteen year’s wages, so 10,000 talents is something like 150,000 years’ wages. It’s a gazillion dollars. It’s an incredibly huge, ridiculously large amount of money. There’s no way the servant can pay back the king, so he falls on his knees and begs for mercy. And it turns out that the king is merciful, so this servant with the enormous debt is off the hook.

Now this same servant turns around and finds another servant who owes him 100 denarii. A denarius is about a day’s pay, so 100 denarii is a significant amount, but it’s a tiny, almost invisible fraction of what the first servant owes the king. You might think that, having been forgiven such a colossal debt and received such mercy from the king, the one servant would have mercy on the other. But no, that’s not what happens. Instead, he throws the second servant in prison until he can pay off his debt—which, of course, he can’t because he can’t earn any money while he’s stuck there in jail.

Some other servants see what’s going on and they send word to tell the king all about it. When the king hears, he’s furious. He summons the heartless servant and says,

“You wicked man! What have you done? I showed you so much mercy, and you don’t think you should have had mercy on your fellow servant?” So the king hands the heartless one over to be tormented until he can pay back his entire debt. “And that,” Jesus says, “is what my heavenly Father will do to each one of you, if you don’t forgive one another from your heart.”

Now there are at least three things to notice about what Jesus says.

First, he tells this story about debts in response to Peter’s question on forgiveness. It’s as if to say, when we sin against someone, when we do something that hurts another person, we incur a kind of debt. Not all debts are financial after all. When we harm or offend or injure someone, we owe that person something. We have an obligation to make things right. That’s why different versions of the Lord’s Prayer say “Forgive us our *debts*,” “Forgive us our *trespasses*,” or “Forgive us our *sins*.” It’s because sins and trespasses incur a kind of moral debt, an obligation to make restitution and seek forgiveness, and ultimately to work towards reconciliation.

The second thing about Jesus’ story is that, while we may have a moral debt or obligation to one another, what each of us owes to God is infinitely greater.

Other people might owe us something because they’ve harmed us in some way, or we may have hurt another person and so we have a moral debt to that person. Some of those debts are great, because the things people do to one another can be very painful. Jesus never says that forgiving someone means pretending the offense never happened, or denying that the pain is real. That’s true

whether we're the one who was hurt, or the one who caused the pain, or both—since sometimes we are the victim as well as the cause of our own bad behavior.

We talk about forgiving and forgetting, but the order is important. We literally can't forgive *after* we've forgotten, because forgetting removes the memory of whatever needs to be forgiven. The great thing about forgiveness is that it knows full well what the offense has been. It sees clearly where the fault lies and the harm it has caused, and yet it chooses to respond with mercy and grace rather than hostility and condemnation.

Actions have consequences, and whenever sin occurs, someone always bears the cost and pays the price. That's how Jesus becomes our Savior. We know that if someone hurts us we bear the pain, even if we choose to forgive. And so it is with Jesus. Every sin is ultimately a sin against God. "Against you, you only, have I sinned," the psalmist says. So Jesus pays the penalty for our sins, not because he has to appease the wrath of his angry Father, but because it's the nature of sin to create costs and bring about pain, and the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world by taking all that pain upon himself. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, grace may be free but it is not cheap.

And that brings us to the third thing about Jesus' parable on debts and forgiveness. Did you hear the twist at the end of the story?

The king is merciful, and in the beginning of the story he forgives his servant's colossal debt. The debt is so huge that the servant could never repay it, which is by way of reminding us that salvation is always a gift. It's never earned. Christians know that we're saved by grace through faith, and

not by our own works, lest anyone should boast, as St. Paul says. But at the end of Jesus' story the king is furious when the servant he showed mercy turns out not to be merciful himself. He sends that wicked servant off to be tormented. What's going on here? Is God erratic, sometimes merciful and sometimes full of wrath and vengeance?

The answer, I think, lies in Jesus' final gloss on the parable: "So my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive from your heart." That's the secret. What God wants from us is a heart that learns to forgive, and practices forgiveness, because God's own heart is like that, and we were made in the image of God. God wants forgiveness because forgiveness is the key to reconciliation, and God was in Christ reconciling the world.

Remember, Jesus begins his parable in response to Peter's question by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like this...." The kingdom of heaven is where God's will is done, where people love God with all their heart and mind and soul and strength, and love their neighbors as themselves. There's no room in heaven for anyone who refuses to forgive, because forgiving is what love does, and forgiveness makes heaven possible.

"Blessed are the merciful," Jesus says, "for they shall receive mercy." How might a person be tormented into practicing mercy, as Jesus' parable suggests? That's not as strange as it might seem at first, because harboring anger and resentment eats away at the soul. As Anne Lamott says, refusing to forgive is like swallowing rat poison and waiting for the rat to die. A bitter and angry soul is a tormented soul, and over time that torment may become the very thing that drives people to let go of their anger and seek reconciliation.

Some people seem to enjoy being angry for a while. There's a satisfaction that comes from indignation, a sense of moral superiority over people further down the ladder of righteousness, where we see some fault in them that we don't see in ourselves. That may feel good for a time, but after a while the feeling grows old. And thank God it does, because a soul that never grew tired of anger and never learned to forgive would become a shriveled up thing, a shrunken vestige of what was meant to be something glorious—a person made in the image of God.

It's all right to be angry for a while when people do bad things. Jesus himself got angry, when he saw people turning the temple into a trading post, and when religious folk got so preoccupied with what they thought were the rules that they missed the spirit of what God wants. It's good to be angry sometimes, and in fact not to be angry when people are treated badly or in the face of injustice would be a kind of moral failure. That's why the letter to the Ephesians says, "Be angry but do not sin." Anger turns into sin when it no longer motivates us to make things right but merely drives us to want to get even.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus says, "for they shall be called children of God." Peacemaking starts with a willingness to forgive and be forgiven. Peacemakers are called children of God because God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

That may be why, in the Apostles' Creed, the forgiveness of sins comes near the end, right before the "resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Next Sunday is Easter, when we celebrate the resurrection, and the way to life everlasting is through Jesus himself, whose very person embodies the forgiveness of sins.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org