

This evening our subject is forgiveness. We are working our way through the character traits that Paul is telling Christians to put on in chapter 3 of his epistle to the Colossians. This instruction flows from the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. One author has expressed this by saying, "Paul's listeners are ... to live as resurrection people in a world of death." That certainly gets at the gospel call to living the Christian life. In the first part of this chapter Paul has reminded the Colossians that they had been raised with Christ. Christians share in Christ's resurrection. They have received eternal life. And so our calling is "to live as resurrection people in a world of death." Unbelievers are dead in sin. Believers are alive in Christ. And the Christian life is about demonstrating to the world what truly being alive looks like.

And so we are to put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We are to bear with one another. "And," Paul continues in verse 13, "if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

The command for Christians to forgive those who have sinned against them, stands out in Scripture. It stands out by how much it is emphasized. It stands out in that almost every time it is mentioned, it is tied to God's forgiveness of us. And it stands out because many times when it is mentioned it comes with the warning that if we do not forgive those who have sinned against us, God will not forgive us. Clearly it is really, really important to God that those whom he has forgiven for sinning against him, forgive people who have sinned against them. And the reason, as we will see, is that if we are not willing to forgive others who have sinned against us, we do not truly value God's forgiveness of us in Christ. An unwillingness to forgive others is a sure sign that we do not understand how sinful we are and what a wonderful thing God's forgiveness is.

So Paul tells us "If anyone has a complaint against another, [we must forgive] each other; as the Lord has forgiven [us] so [we] must also forgive." We are going to think this through by looking at Jesus' parable about forgiveness in Matthew 18 because that parable is such a clear and powerful treatment of this whole subject. The parable is occasioned by a question from Peter. Matthew 18:21. "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Peter seems to have understood how important it is for followers of Jesus to forgive those who have sinned against them. He realizes that its not good enough to forgive a person only once and then if he sins against you again, you are free to get your revenge. Peter realizes that you need to keep on forgiving a person who repeatedly sins against you. But surely there must be a limit, he thinks. And so he wonders if forgiving a person seven times is sufficient.

Jesus' answer is basically that there is no limit. Matthew 18:22, "Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven-times.'" That is a very big number and by it Jesus is saying that there is no limit to how many times we must forgive a person who sins against us. He is certainly not saying that we are to keep track and when the number reaches 78, we are free to exact our revenge. Jesus is saying that there are no limits to the number of times we are to forgive someone who sins against us repeatedly.

Now to understand this we need to understand what forgiveness is and how it relates to things like justice and protecting yourself from harm. In the section just before this in Matthew 18, Jesus gives instruction about what to do if someone sins against you. There is a place for calling a person to repentance and if that does not work, getting a few others involved and if that does not work getting the church involved. Whatever forgiveness means it does not mean just taking it over and over again. So it is important that we understand exactly what forgiveness is and how it fits with confronting the sinner and calling him to repentance. More on that later.

Jesus' parable powerfully teaches why forgiveness is so important and it helps us to understand what forgiveness is. Jesus tells a story of "a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants." One of those servants owed the king ten thousand talents. This is an astronomical debt. It is a debt that could never be paid. The footnote in the ESV says that one talent was "worth about twenty years' wages for a laborer" so it would take 200,000 years to make that much money. Jesus' point is that the debt the servant owed the king was far beyond what he could ever pay. It was so huge that it was unpayable. There was no way that the debt could ever be repaid.

So the king decided to sell the man, his wife, and children into slavery until the full amount was paid. Since the debt was too huge ever to be paid, that meant they would be slaves forever. The man begs for mercy. And we are told "And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt." The point, of course, is that this is what the forgiveness of sins is like. This is an obvious picture of how God forgives sinners. The debt we owe for our sins is so vast that we could never repay it. This gives us a sense of how serious our sins are and what an amazing thing it is that God forgives our sins.

But then Jesus story continues. The man who had just received such incalculable mercy from the king, turned around and sought out a fellow servant who owed 100 denarii and insisted that the man pay up. The fellow servant pleaded for mercy in the same way that the first servant had done to the king, but the first servant showed no mercy. Verse 30, "He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt."

Now the smaller debt was still substantial. A denarius was about a day's wage for a laborer and so the amount owed would take 100 days of work to earn. That is a substantial debt and that is important when the point is applied to forgiveness. But the main point of the parable is the contrast between the astronomical debt that the king forgave the first servant and the substantial but relatively small debt that the first servant was not willing to forgive.

The story is meant to make us feel indignant. The story is intended to make us feel outraged at the fact that the great mercy shown to the first servant did not incline him to show mercy to the man who owed him so much less. We are meant to feel a very strong reaction of disgust toward the unmerciful servant. It's profoundly disturbing that the incredible grace that had been shown to him did not change him and motivate him to show grace to the one who owed him a tiny fraction of what he had owed the king.

The fellow servants in the story who witness the unmerciful spirit of the servant who had been forgiven the huge debt are “greatly distressed.” They tell the king what has happened and the king is very angry. He summons the first servant, calls him a wicked servant, and throws him in jail “until he should pay all his debt.” And Jesus’ makes the application of the story. Verse, 35, “So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

It is a powerful story. It is powerful because it causes us to feel strong indignation against the unmerciful servant. And the strong reaction that we feel helps us to understand how terrible it is if we have an unforgiving spirit after God has forgiven us so much. And the point is that receiving such great forgiveness from God for our sins, should affect us deeply so that we are inclined to reflect God’s merciful spirit when it comes to dealing with people who have sinned against us.

It is easy to see, from Jesus’ parable, how awful it is when we who have been forgiven so much are not willing to forgive others a much smaller debt. And this gets at the very heart of the experience of forgiveness. If we understand the enormity of what God has forgiven us, it will change us profoundly, and if we are not changed profoundly, we have not understood the enormity of our debt to God because of our sins and the magnitude of God’s mercy in forgiving us. That is a really important insight from Jesus’ parable.

The unmerciful servant’s heart was not softened by the loving mercy that had been shown to him. He was not overwhelmed by the mercy that had been shown to him. He did not see how the mercy shown to him obligated him to show similar mercy to others. He was not humbled by the vastness of his debt and the incredible compassion of the king in forgiving it. Ultimately then, he did not really perceive the enormity of his debt and the enormity of the king’s compassion, which means that he took it for granted. The unmerciful servant, by being unmerciful, showed that he did not rightly value the mercy that had been shown to him.

If we are not willing to forgive others who sin against us, it shows that we do not see how massive our predicament is because of our sins. It means that we are not thankful. It means that we have not been humbled before God. It means that we count God’s forgiveness of us a small thing. It means that it has not affected us very deeply. And it is a devaluing of what Jesus gave for us on the cross. If we understand that our sins are like the ten thousand talents of debt and the unspeakable love and mercy in forgiveness, that will profoundly change us so that we will look at the sins of others against us in a completely different way and we will feel the weight of our moral obligation to extend the same kind of mercy to others.

These thoughts highlight the wonder of the grace of God in the gospel. Jesus’ parable helps us to see how amazing God’s forgiveness of our sins really is. It is beyond anything we could ever expect or imagine once we understand the magnitude of significance of our sin and our guilt. There is no way we could ever make up for it. There is no way we could ever suffer enough to pay off the penalty for our sins. And God comes along and just forgives them all and treats us as if we had never sinned. And he does that by suffering in our place in Jesus. He does that by paying the debt himself – at great cost to himself. The biblical teaching on the necessity

of us forgiving others is rooted in the very heart of the gospel. And that is why it is such a prominent theme in the NT.

So Jesus' parable shows the profound connection between God's forgiveness of our sins and our obligation to forgive those who have sinned against us. It helps us to see why God will not forgive us if we are not willing to forgive those who sin against us. It shows us that if we are not willing to forgive those who sin against us, we haven't got a clue about the wonder of God forgiving us.

Jesus' parable also help us to understand what forgiveness is. It is releasing a debt. In illustrating the nature of forgiveness, Jesus' uses the idea of releasing a person from a debt.

So when a person sins against us, they have incurred a debt. This is a matter of justice. Sin incurs debt. Justice demands that sin be punished. This principle is expressed in the OT as an "eye for eye, tooth for tooth." The punishment must fit the crime. Now God's way of dealing with this principle of justice in human society is by administering justice himself, partly through the state and ultimately in the final judgment. The main point here is that we are never to administer justice ourselves. Paul writes in Romans 12: 19, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" Justice is about payback. And if someone has sinned against us, it is not up to us to make them pay. God does that either through the state or at the final judgment or both. When a person sins against us, they have incurred a debt. But dealing with that debt is God's business and not ours.

But this idea of debt in the light of Jesus' parable does highlight the fact that we can be significantly wronged when someone sins against us. Many times the sin against us can be minor, but Jesus' parable makes the point that it can also be major. The debt of the second servant to the first servant was a substantial debt – worth 100 days of work for a laborer. Sometimes the debt incurred by a person who sins against us is a substantial debt. There are small things that must be forgiven, but there are also big things. People can sin against us in small ways, but they can also sin against us in big ways. Big sins will be harder to forgive, but Jesus makes it clear that big sins must be forgiven as well as little sins. The debt owed in Jesus' parable by the second servant to the first servant was a substantial debt and Jesus is using that to illustrate the necessity for us to forgive those who sin against us.

Jesus' parable also teaches us that the core of forgiveness is forgiving the debt. It is not seeking to make the person pay. It is not seeking vengeance. It is not punishing the other person. Our natural sinful reaction to being sinned against is to get even, to retaliate, to make the person pay. And forgiveness is leaving that part up to God.

Now it is important that we understand that this does not mean that if a person owes us 1/3 of a year's wages worth of money and decides not to pay it that we just let that go. In interpreting parables we need to make sure we understand the point and not press the details in ways that go beyond the intent of the parable. In

the parable Jesus is talking about the forgiveness of sins. The ten thousand talents is a symbol of what we owe God because of our sins and the hundred denarii is a symbol of the debt that is result of someone sinning against us. Forgiveness means that we do not make the person pay for his sin.

It does not mean that we just ignore the sin and not bother with our own interests in the matter. Let's say that we sold a fellow believer a used car and he took the car and refused to pay. According to Jesus, in the paragraph just before the parable of the unforgiving servant, we should confront him and seek to get the person to repent of his sin. That is for his own good, but also for our own good. If the person repents, we must accept that and not seek to punish him by refusing to have a relationship with him and by being bitter against him. We should be ready to be reconciled. We should not hold what he has done against him.

If the person does not repent, Jesus tells us first to involve a few others and if that does not work, to involve the leaders of the church and if that does not work, the church must excommunicate him. But even then, there must be forgiveness in the sense of seeking repentance, not vengeance. If a person sins against us and is not willing to repent, we are still to forgive him in that we are open to reconciliation if he will repent and we do not seek to make him pay – to punish him. Even if a person is not willing to repent we are to seek his wellbeing rather seeking revenge.

So the heart of forgiveness is cancelling a debt. It means not holding the person's sin against him, not seeking to make him pay, but moving toward the person in love seeking reconciliation. Timothy Lane has written one of those little booklets put out by the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation on forgiveness called, *Forgiving Others*. He gives a very helpful explanation of what it means to cancel a debt by forgiving someone who has sinned against you. He says that forgiving someone means making a three-fold promise. "I will not bring up this offense again or use it against you.... I will not gossip or malign you because of this offense... I will not dwell on this offense." That is helpful in understand more practically what it means to forgive someone. Not bringing it up or using it against the person. Not gossiping or maligning the person. Not dwelling on the offense.

In explaining these he makes the point that in certain cases it may be necessary to bring up the offense for purposes of reconciliation, but not for vengeance. So if it is brought up it is motivated by love and not hatred or bitterness.

So lets think of an example. Let's say that you are having a conversation with a friend and you reveal something about yourself that is sensitive and personal and humbling. Let's say that its about a secret sin and you are asking for prayer and accountability. You make it clear that this is in confidence. Then you hear that your friend has broken confidence and has told a number of other people your secret. Your friend as sinned against you. What does forgiveness look like? Well it certainly would be appropriate to confront your friend with his/her sin against you and seek an acknowledgement of their sin and an apology. The goal of such a confrontation would be repentance for sins committed and restoration of the relationship. Forgiveness would

mean cancelling the debt – that is not bringing up the sin again or seeking some kind of payback or punishment. It would mean not speaking about it with others in gossip. And it would mean not dwelling on it and not nursing resentment.

Let's consider another example. A husband commits adultery against his wife. What does forgiveness look like in that situation? Well she may seek a divorce in that situation according to Jesus' teaching. Forgiveness in the case of adultery does not mean that the marriage must be saved. But even then she must not seek revenge – she must not bring up the offence in destructive ways. Not gossip about it to other people. Not dwell on it for the rest of her life.

Now this example highlights the fact that forgiveness will take time when the sin is as devastating as adultery. Tim Lane in the booklet that I just mentioned makes the point that forgiveness is both an event and a process. We must understand that forgiving people who have hurt us is always difficult and in something as devastating as adultery, excruciatingly difficult. The call to forgive applies to horrific sins as well as relatively minor sins, and the difficulty and need for supernatural grace must be understood. And so the idea of forgiveness as both an event and a process is helpful.

Now thankfully most of the time the sins that we must forgive are not so devastating. Much of the time in regular congregational life, forgiveness will mean showing love by covering a multitude of sins or overlooking an offense. Since sin is mixed with everything we do, it is mixed with all our interactions with one another and if we confronted each other for every offense, the church would be a very unpleasant place. But as we have seen, there are also sins that must be confronted and forgiveness is a vital part of dealing with those as well. In all our interactions with one another, we are to seek each other's true wellbeing in the light of eternity. And forgiving one another is an important part of that.

But it is hard, there is no question about that. Forgiveness is not something that comes easily to any of us. But it is at the heart of the life that Jesus died and rose again to give us. The command to forgive those who have sinned against us is very prominent in the NT and much of the time it is motivated by the truth that God has forgiven us and by the warning that if we do not forgive others God will not forgive us. It is therefore a very serious matter and one that is at the heart of the experience of the gospel.

So let's consider our relationships and consider whether there are people who have sinned against us whom we have not forgiven. Let us consider whether there are any whose sins against us we are holding against them. Are there those whose offenses we continue to bring up, gossip about, or dwell on.

Jesus' parable puts the whole matter of forgiveness into perspective. And it teaches us what we need to dwell on to be able to forgive others. We need to dwell on our own debt to God – the ten thousand talents – and on how graciously God in Christ has forgiven us. We need to dwell on that when we struggle to forgive others. We need to think of how outrageous it was that the first servant in the parable was unwilling to forgive his fellow

servant after the king had been so gracious towards him. That is really the key to this whole matter of us forgiving others. If God has forgiven us so much, how can we not extend that same forgiveness to others when their sins against us are so much smaller than our sins against God.