

Matthew 18: 23-35
“Burning coals”
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Scene 1 The man begs for more time to pay 150,000 years wages, but instead his king forgives his debt

Prayer is talking to God. The story goes that a man was talking to God in prayer. He asked God, “Is it true that to you, a million years is like one second?” God says, “Yes.” And the man asks, “And is true that to you, a million dollars is like one penny?” And God again responds, “Why yes.” So the man asks, “Then can I have a million dollars?” To which God responds, “Yes, wait a second!”

This parable is about forgiveness. And points out that we owe more than we can pay to God in Jesus. One talent was 20 kilograms of silver, about 44 pounds. One talent is the wages of one manual laborer for 15 years. One talent was the largest monetary unit in those days. And the Greek word for 10,000 is μυριάς, that is, myriad. It was the largest number imaginable in those days. The equivalent of a google plex today. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us the entire tax paid by the whole Jewish nation to Rome was only 600 talents. That all of King Herod’s assets were only 900 talents. That 10,000 talents exceeded the annual taxes for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria put together! 10,000 talents was truly an inconceivably high number.

After the servant’ plea for forgiveness, Matthew tells us the king is deeply moved. *Σπλαγχν νισθεις*, the Greek word, literally means, his intestines were stirred. A profound emotional reaction. Instead of giving the servant more time, the king forgives the loan. And act of unmerited forgiveness. But is the servant overwhelmed by his unbelievably good fortune?

There is a line from the movie “Saving Private Ryan.” There were three brothers in WW II, and two of them had died in the line of battle. The mother was grief stricken, and wanted her third son to survive. Somehow, this got the attention of the military brass, who had compassion on her. So a special elite force was assembled to retrieve a soldier, named Ryan, a private, from the heart of battle. All but one of the elite force died pulling Ryan out of the heart of battle. As the last one was dying, he told Private Ryan to go back home, and earn this.

The servant who owes 150,000 years of wages asks for forgiveness, and says he wants to repay it, a ridiculous offer. Ridiculous is the thought that one can ever repay 150,000 years wages. But being repentant is more than just asking for forgiveness. Being repentant is more than just words. Repenting means changing your ways.

Scene 2 The same man throws one who owes him 100 days wages in prison

After we ourselves are forgiven, we behave as if nothing has happened. We learn nothing. If the behavior of the servant who has been forgiven, that he himself cannot forgive others, if that story makes you outraged, then why when we do not forgive others, why does THAT not outrage us?

The debtor asks for forgiveness. But his behavior toward his fellow servant betray he has learned nothing about unmerited forgiveness.

The servant does not get it. Even after he has been forgiven for more than he can ever repay, he thinks somehow he has earned forgiveness. He does not realize that what has just happened is that his king has shown him unmerited, unconditional, mercy and forgiveness. There is nothing he has done to merit the mercy the king has shown him.

The man who owes him 100 days wages can repay him, but not if he is in prison. His punishment of the man who owes him 100 days wages is irrational on two accounts: He has not internalized the unmerited nature of the mercy and forgiveness he has just been shown, AND, he has turned the one who owes him a debt from one who CAN repay the debt to one who CANNOT repay it. His grudge damages both the debtor and the debtee. You see, a grudge is like that. It makes you bitter. It I like a burning coal. If you hold it tight, it will burn your hand. If you hold it tight, it will burn your very soul. Jesus calls us to let it go.

But what if the person who has hurt you continues to hurt you, because regardless whether they say they are sorry or not, they are clearly unrepentant? That is, they clearly do not change their ways?

Scene 3 Jesus tells Peter we should forgive and forgive

All of us understand in a detached sort of way that we should forgive others. We intellectually recognize there is a positive value to letting go of cherished hurts. But we find it impossible to do so. Being cheated on by a spouse or double crossed by a business partner are experiences that cause us shame and rage. That leave us feeling defective, defeated, and never quite good enough. To be told that we should forgive and let go of the pain aggravates us by heaping guilt onto our rage and shame. Why is that?

What Apostle Paul calls our flesh, and what physicians call our hormones, scream against forgiving others. Our flesh, our hormones, also scream against asking for forgiveness. We like to nurture our grudges and our pride. We are too proud to ask for forgiveness, and we are too proud to forgive. Our species are governed by our flesh, governed by our hormones. They once were useful to the survival of our species, but not as much now as 20,000 years ago.

So Jesus teaches us a new way to cope with our feelings when someone hurts us. Our hormones are not telling us the truth. The truth is, our God given souls long both to ask

for forgiveness, and long to forgive others. Because grudges are like hot coals that burn the hands of our souls unless we open our hands and release them.

There is a hormone called tumor necrosis factor (TNF). It is secreted by the white cells in our bodies, and it mobilizes lymphocytes and macrophages, types of WBCs, to kill cancer cells. But when there is too much TNF, it causes nausea. So a cancer patient stops eating, because eating is not fun anymore. I tell my patients their stomachs are not telling them the truth. Their bodies are really hungry.

Our hormone governed pride is like that. It is not telling us the truth. Our pride tells us we are not hungry to be forgiven or to forgive. But you know what, our pride is not telling us the truth! Our souls are really hungry to both be forgiven and to forgive. I tell my cancer patients to ignore the effect of TNF on their stomachs, and eat anyway. It is only by being well nourished that they can have any energy. In the same way, Jesus tells us to ignore our pride, and feed our souls by forgiving and asking for forgiveness. How much more spiritual energy we will have if we can ignore our hormone driven pride, and say and behave as if we are sorry, but also forgive others even while they are still hurting us?

The misbehavior of alcoholics is not to be laughed off. Ministers who fail to control their sexual impulses are not to be lightly excused. When we betray the trust of others, a much more Gospel based course of action, than simply expecting to be forgiven, is that we amend our behavior so we can regain that trust we have lost.

When we are the ones offended we are called to pray for strength to resist the temptation of getting even with those who have hurt us, and for grace to reflect upon the generosity of the God who creates, reconciles, and inspires us. And when we are the offending person, we pray for the strength not just to ask for forgiveness, but to amend our ways.

Conclusion

I think the first and last chapter of a book are the most important ones. The same is true of the first and last paragraph of a chapter, and the first and last sentence of a paragraph. I want you to note that chapter 50 of the first book in our Bible, the last chapter of Genesis, is all about Joseph forgiving his brothers. That is HUGE! Forgiveness is the heart of the Bible.

When we are the one who offends, we can say we are sorry, but that is not good enough. Jesus calls us to speak the words, yes, but also to behave differently, if we are truly sorry. That is what repentance means. Not just words, but change in ways.

When we are the one offended, Jesus tells Peter, and us, that even when someone continues to hurt us over and over again, when they are clearly unrepentant, we should forgive them 70 x 7 times, that is, an unlimited number of times.

Theologians tell us that redemptive violence is what Jesus did, not what we are called to do. Jesus asks us to suffer for his sake, not for the sake of the one who abuses us. We are

asked to forgive, but not forget. Jesus asks us to forgive, not to continue to suffer verbal or physical abuse. There is nothing wrong with getting ourselves out of harms way until the offender changes his or her ways.

Jesus tells us those who offend us are to be confronted, but only in a spirit of gentleness. And even when dealing with the stubbornly unrepentant, Jesus asks us to abandon vindictiveness and forgive them because we ourselves have been humbled by God's forgiving love.

I want to highlight one more thing today's scripture says about forgiveness. It is not about justice. It is about mercy.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...