

Matthew 18:21-35

Do you know the figure of speech called a hyperbole? It's an exaggeration to make a point. We say: "That flu hit me like a ton of bricks," meaning that flu made me feel so lousy! But not like I was crushed to death. We say, "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse," meaning I'm really, really hungry, but not hungry enough to eat a whole horse. We say, "I've told you that a thousand times," meaning I've told you that 5 or 10 times, but not 1000. You get the point—it's an exaggeration to emphasize a point.

And on first reading it appears that Jesus is speaking a hyperbole, when he tells Peter to forgive 77 times. But actually Peter is the one exaggerating to make a point. Rabbinical law of Peter's day taught that a person was obligated to forgive up to three times, but Peter knew that his rabbi, his teacher, was much more forgiving and gracious than that, so he suggested seven times. What a shock when Jesus told him, **"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times!"** And Jesus point is not that on the 78th time you don't have to forgive. He knows that there's a great deal Peter and you and I need to learn about forgiveness.

I gained a great understanding of Peter's mindset from by reading an article about forgiveness by a modern Jewish rabbi. "In rabbinic thought, only the offender can set the wrong aright," and then he explained that the ancient rabbis taught three kinds of forgiveness. The first is like a legal pardon in which you acknowledge the guilt of the offender but forgo the punishment. In this process the offended person "is not obliged to grant [the offender pardon] unless he has, first, desisted from all abusive activity; second, reformed his character through analysis of sin, remorse, restitution, and confession; and third, actually asked for forgiveness several times." The second type the rabbi calls forgiveness: "It is reaching a deeper understanding of the sinner. [It] is not a reconciliation or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender, too, is human, frail, and deserving of sympathy." And the third type is "atonement...a total wiping away of all sinfulness...it is only granted by God."

But I hope you recognize that the teachings of the Jewish rabbis are not strange or unfamiliar. It's so natural, so human. We divide between God's forgiveness and ours when we say, **"To err is human, to forgive divine!"** Forgiveness is divine, beyond you and me because we're just human. Have you struggled to forgive someone who wronged you, because you didn't feel forgiving, felt no sympathy for the person who hurt you? And it's so disturbing when a friend is urging you to forgive by telling you about the person who hurt you, "She never meant to say those things. He's just a hot head. They do crazy things when they've been drinking." And we have all sat back, holding a grudge, waiting for the offender to make an apology, to straighten themselves out, to make amends. I wish I could imitate Dr. Phil, because he asks it so well in his Texas accent, "How's that working for you?"

I'm ready to admit that this mercy and forgiveness thing isn't working for me—not if I have to find those feelings of sympathy for the person who betrayed me, not if I have to wait for them to apologize enough to make up for the loss or the hurt. That's why Jesus doesn't separate divine and human forgiveness; he joins them directly. He taught us to pray, **"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." "If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Mt 6:14-15)."** Is he saying that God can't forgive unforgiveness? No, but by refusing to forgive we show that we don't grasp God's forgiveness for us. We think we deserve forgiveness, but not those sinners who hurt us. When we withhold forgiveness we are subconsciously or consciously saying that we don't commit the same kind of wrongs as the person who hurt us. "Forgive us our sins, because they're just little ones, not like those big sinners who really hurt us." Let's all face it--needing forgiveness and being forgiven is uncomfortable, embarrassing, humbling, and we, too, are often desperate to avoid it!

To dispel that false notion, Jesus told his parable about the unforgiving servant, who owed a debt that was impossible to repay, 10,000 talents. A talent is a weight, 130 pounds. If you convert that to the weight of gold, 10,000 talents is \$2.4 billion or to the price of silver, \$484 million. The Bible often speaks of our sins and God's forgiveness in terms of debts and credits: "No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough (Ps 49:7-9)."

To forgive others we first need to understand that we have a debt of sin which is unpayable and unbearable. Our beloved Savior told us, **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48)."** So what is your debt, my debt? It is the accumulated sins of a lifetime, for which we will answer to our perfect God, who can't fail to notice any imperfection. Let's do a little accounting! What kind of a debt will you and I accumulate just today, in one day? Did you wake up in a great mood today, thankful to God in whom "we live and move and have our being," praising him whose "mercies are new every morning?" If not, that's the sin of ingratitude. If you let your worries or achy feelings overrule God's gracious promises, that's the sin of idolatry. Did you do everything your parents asked you to do, when they asked you to do it, without complaining or grumbling? If not, that's the sin of dishonor to the parents God gave you. Did you pass a really nice car or nice house on the way to church, thinking, "Why do they have what I don't have?" That's the sin of discontent and coveting. Did you pay attention to every word we spoke or sang this morning as the "living and enduring Word of God," the only source of faith and salvation? If not, you are guilty of the sin of hypocrisy, honoring God with your lips, but not with your hearts. We could go on to the sins of lust, anger, gossip, envy, and keep on counting, then multiplying it by the number of hours in a day and the 30,000 days in an average lifespan, but I think you get Jesus' point.

The debt of sin is beyond repayment, so, **"The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."** The master had pity, literally his heart went out to him because he was so completely lost in debt. And there is no other solution for our debt of sin. So the Lord cancelled the debt, by laying our sins on the Son of God, the sacrificial Lamb, who was punished in our place to take away the sins of the world. And you remember what he said when he died, "It is finished," literally, "paid in full!"

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' 'But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. 'Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'"

It was truly an ugly, unloving, thoughtless thing the servant did! But it's something we can identify with! I make the same mistake when I accept my forgiveness and promptly forget it. You make the same mistake when you forget that sin-debt accounting we just did. Please understand, with his parable, Jesus is not saying that forgiving the sins of those who sin against us is easy. That "silver coin" Jesus is referring to was the average day's wage for a working man, so 100 silver coins = 100 days' wages, in our terms, about \$12,000. This was not a small debt, but miniscule compared to the debt that servant and you and I have been forgiven by God.

So, forgive like God forgave you! That still sounds like a hyperbole, an overstatement, doesn't it? So how do we actually do it? Let me give you some important hints:

- Don't confuse forgiveness with trust/friendship. Forgiveness is given; trust and friendship is earned. It is not wrong, in Christian honesty, to say, "I forgive you, but I can't live with you, can't work for you, can't take your advice, can't be your friend like

before.” Jesus didn’t entrust himself to everyone, to their desires, even to their needs. He chose the most important needs always.

- Realize how God forgave you. He did it with a plan for your salvation, with a decision not to hold your sins against you for Jesus’ sake. Remembering God’s infinite forgiveness for me, I can make a decision to cancel the debt of the person who wronged me? I don’t need to find a reason in me or in them! The only reason is God’s perfect mercy for me and them. I can say, “I won’t hold it against them.” But because I’m not God, I might have to say that 7 times a day, or 77 times a day, whenever my sinful nature stirs up my pride and self-righteousness.

Finally, remember Jesus’ point, joining human and divine forgiveness as one. Jesus loves the one who hurt us no less than he loves us, and the one we forgive will know a bit of Jesus’ forgiveness, as well. So forgiveness unites us with our forgiving Lord; it helps us understand more and more what he’s done for us. When we forgive we will feel some of what the Lord felt when he forgave us.