

Citizenship: Forgiveness
Part One: Our Role as the Offended
Matthew 18:21-35

I started my sermon last week by stating that something we all have in common is that we have all been offended at one time or another. We have all been the recipient of rude behavior, a violation of trust, and attacks on our character. Everyone has been offended by someone at some time in some way. Charles Swindoll said that "forgiveness is a required course in the Christian life and the exams are tough to take."

Last week we saw and experienced the truth that as the offender, it is hard to ask for forgiveness, but when God tugs at our heart, we must answer. Yet, as difficult as it is to ask for forgiveness of someone, I believe it is much harder to give. Not only do I say this from my personal experience, I see this in the text we have read this morning. Let us, then, examine our role as the *offended*.

The first word we read in this passage is "then." "Then Peter come to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?'" This small transition word, "then," clues us into the larger picture of the parable Jesus told. The whole reason Jesus even tells this parable is because Peter had a heart issue going on with the previous teaching, the one in which we studied last week:

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17, NIV).

Either Peter had an issue with forgiving someone in his past or he was having problems at that moment with forgiving someone that prompted his question to Jesus. As I stated last week, unless we are wholeheartedly seeking the Lord, we will never feel his prompting on our lives. If one wishes to live care-free and unhindered from the promptings of the Holy Spirit upon their lives, one should not follow Christ, because Jesus desires to lead us from the ways of this world and its desires to pursuit of his ways and his desires. We have often said it this way, "Living in the world, but not of the world." Paul told the church in Colossae,

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1-3, NIV).

When he heard the word of his Lord, Peter was convicted and sought deeper truth in what Jesus had said. "Peter suggests to him the generous number of seven times [considering] the Talmud¹ mandated that a person be forgiven only three times. Jesus' response is not to be taken literally. This is a wonderful example of the way numbers have an emotional value in Judaism as much as a numerical value. A good paraphrase of Jesus' answer might be, 'More times than you can possibly imagine'" ("Matthew: The Gospel of Identity", Michael Card, Pg. 166). I like how Charles Swindoll paraphrased Jesus' words when he said, "We forgive so many times we forget the first time we forgave." How hard this truly is, but how necessary this must become to us in times of offense. This parable makes this life lesson quite clear.

We find this parable quite stirring. A king and ruler had lent much money to one of his servants. When we convert ten thousand talents to our U.S. Dollar, we find the man's

debt to be well over \$200 Million. We are not told how the man got himself into such a place, but rather we are meant to focus on the significance that it is a debt he could never repay. If he were to work off the debt, in his day he would have had to work over 3 million days. Again, this is a number of emotional value meant to communicate the great debt of the servant and the even greater wealth of the king.

In that day, gentiles would cause a man and his family to enter slavery to pay off the bondage to their debt. They may have been free from the debt itself, but they would forever feel its effects in their slavery. Because this is a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven and the king is God, when the man dropped to his knees and begged for one more opportunity to repay the debt, the king, being as gracious as we know our God to be, not only let him go that day but cancelled, forgave the debt. He did not have to. Facts are facts. There was no arguing with his great debt, but there was even greater forgiveness of it. What a relief that must have been for the servant! What a great lesson it could have been for the servant... if he had only paid more attention. Because he had been so greatly forgiven, it would have been only right for him to forgive others their insignificant debts against him because of the significant debt forgiven him. Instead... Have you ever heard that in and around your life? "They could have..." "We could have..." "But instead..." That was the case for this servant. Instead of living in the light of forgiveness, he demanded someone of much, much lesser debt pay up or face the consequences of his wrath. Was the man justified? Yes. The facts are the facts and spell out the story of the man's debt against him. When this man begged of forgiveness, no mercy was shown, not even a drop. He instead had the man thrown in prison. This greatly troubled the other servants of the king, the other subjects of the kingdom. They saw what happened, they experienced the lack of mercy shown for such small debt against a fellow servant when such a great debt had been forgiven. They immediately began turning the issue over to the king who dealt with the matter the way only he could. No one else could hold the man accountable but the king. The king asked the unmerciful servant a question: "Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?" (vs. 33)

Today, the question of the king to the unmerciful servant is the same question still being asked of us. We are all in need of forgiving others, even when we feel they are underserving. "Facts are facts," we may say or think. However, for as much as we may feel that way, and it may even be true, what happened to the unmerciful servant is quite clear: "In anger², his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed" (vs. 34). As long as we remain in a state of offense, we will be tortured. We will continually feel the effects of anger. Like the unmerciful servant, we may feel separation from friends and loved ones as we suffer the torture alone, and our fellow servants will take notice. Our need for forgiveness is bigger than just us and our offender. Jesus words again are quite clear in verse 35, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." The heart being the place where we are hurt the deepest, this is from where and how we are called to forgive. Listen again to the words of Paul to the Church in Colossae:

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful" (Colossians 3:12-15, NIV).

Church, we need to be so thankful for the forgiveness we have in Christ, the mercy shown us, that we know the value of forgiving others. If for no other reason than that Christ told us to do so.

So then, who is need of our forgiveness?

¹ An accepted rabbinic teaching of that day.

² The anger of God always being righteous anger.