

ZILLIONS OF DOLLARS
Matthew 18:21-35

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We all have those enemies in our life – those who have wronged us, used us, belittled us, abandoned us, hurt us. If I were to mention your nemesis’s name, it would make you angry. Or the very thought of her makes your skin crawl.

Much that we keep stored in boxes is not valuable to anyone but us. Ticket stubs, blackened corsages, graduation programs are worthless. Yet we keep collecting, preserving memories of important occasions.

There are happy memories and sad ones. Perhaps even some bitter ones. We remember angry words and hurt feelings. The relative who didn’t come to our wedding. The daughter-in-law who told us to stop interfering. We keep these in our mental storage boxes, getting them out from time to time, reliving the painful experience.

In Isaiah 43:25 God says to His people, “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.” All those terrible things we have done – God cancels them, wipes them out. He doesn’t stuff them away in a drawer just in case he wants to drag them out to jog his memory. He obliterates them. He can’t remember them anymore.

Jesus is going to ask you today to do the hardest thing He’s ever asked you to do. Jesus has asked some folks some pretty hard things before, hasn’t He? “Go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor” (the rich, young ruler). Or, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (all disciples). Or, He even said to Simon Peter, “Come, step out of the boat and walk on the water with me.” Those are all hard things, but the hardest thing: when Jesus says, “I say to you who hear, ‘Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you’” (Luke 6:27).

The word of God for today is that we are to be as gracious to our enemies as God is to us.

Fred Craddock tells a story.

“I remember when the man down the road from our farm killed our dog. Our dog’s name was Dempsey, named for the great prize fighter of the time – Jack Dempsey. Dempsey was just a mutt, but he was our dog. And this man down the road killed Dempsey. He was a strange man. He didn’t like children or dogs. When we told our father, when he came home, that Mr. Cook killed our dog, my father just immediately put on his hat and coat and went out. And we said, ‘Yeah. You’re going to get Mr. Cook.’”

“He was gone a long time. My mother got real worried. Maybe it didn’t go like he had planned. Finally he came in. Actually had some blood on his coat. ‘What happened?’ we asked.

“He said, ‘I didn’t know Mr. Cook was an epileptic. He was having a seizure when I went in. He was chewing his tongue; it was already bleeding. So I just stayed to take care of him.’

“I remember we said, ‘Well, that’s good, Dad, but are you going to go back when he’s better and beat him up?’ And he said, ‘No.’

“I mean, he killed our dog. I just don’t understand some people. How can you just let that go?”

Today’s word is forgiveness. Forgiveness is the removal of personal barriers within a relationship caused by wrongdoing – real or imagined – on the one hand, and resentment and desire for revenge on the other.

In our text today, found in Matthew 18, Peter poses a question. And Jesus responds with a parable.

Matthew 18:21

Then Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

Jewish rabbis taught, and perhaps Peter had learned, that if a man sins once, twice, or three times, one must forgive him. But if a man sins a fourth time, then you DO NOT forgive him (Joma 5:13). In fact, repeatedly in the book of Amos we hear, “For three transgressions and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.” It had become common in ancient Israel to think of forgiveness as a threefold affair, but on the fourth offense, you did not have to forgive (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6).

Actually, Peter is trying to be a good guy. He’s learned something from Jesus. But the weakness of Peter’s question is the notion that even forgiveness has limits.

Forgiveness is the very heart of the gospel, and it knows no boundaries.

Jesus replies in verse 22. I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy-seven times.” Your translation might say “seventy times seven,” but, really, a better translation is seventy-seven times. The number comes from Genesis 4:22-24, a difficult text early in Genesis (some of the earliest known poetry)

Genesis 4:22-24.

As for Zillah, she also gave birth to Tubal-cain, the forger of all implements of bronze and iron; and the sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah. Lamech said to his wives, “Adah and Zillah, listen to my voice, you wives of Lamech, give heed to my speech, for I have killed a man for wounding me; and a boy for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.

Imagine the setting in Genesis like this: Tubal (Cain) has manufactured a crude sword with his abilities to shape and hammer metal. Lamech, his father, picks up the sword and begins to boast to a captive audience – to his two wives. The essence of verse 24 is this: If God will see to it that anyone

who harms Cain will have a seven-fold punishment, then I, by my own power, will place a seventy-seven fold vengeance on anyone who attempts to harm me.

The whole point here is that Jesus, who knows his scriptures well, alludes to Lamech's song of unlimited revenge and turns it into a new message of boundless forgiveness. In the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, the construction in Genesis 4 is exactly the same as found in Matthew, which makes us best translate it "seventy-seven times."

This early poem about payback is now made, thru Jesus, a parable about pardoning. Jesus reverses Lamech's wild revenge.

Then Jesus tells a parable. It has two acts. Jesus invites us into His theater. Watch the actors as they come and go across the stage of scripture. Jesus wants His disciples to learn what it means to be part of the kingdom of God.

Act I

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt" (Matthew 18:23-27).

Act I starts out with "the kingdom of heaven." Matthew is a Jewish gospel, and the word "heaven" is a substitute for "God." The other gospel writers might say "the kingdom of God." Matthew, careful how he uses God's name, substitutes "heaven."

In these parables of old, the king is usually God Himself. The king wants to settle accounts with his slaves. It's April 15 – we're all familiar with that day. It's time to pay up or be punished. One particular servant (v. 24) owes 10,000 talents. I don't know how to make you understand the enormity of this debt, but according to Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, the taxes of Judea, Idumaea, Samaria, Galilee, and Peraea – all together – only amounted to 800 talents. And yet this one servant owed 10,000 talents. One day's wage was a denarius. One talent equaled 6,000 denarii. Therefore, this individual owed the king 60 million denarii. I did the math – not working on the Sabbath, he would have to work 5,476.9 lifetimes to pay back this debt.

So let's put a simple translation on it this way: He owed zillions of dollars!

Perhaps he was a high-level member of the financial arm of the kingdom. Perhaps he was responsible for the tax of an entire province, maybe like the Persian Empire. I don't know. But his debt was unfathomable.

The first truth of the gospel is this: We are in deep debt to God.

The second great truth of the gospel is this: Our debt is so deep we have no way to pay it.

“But since he did not have means to repay it” (v. 25). No, he did not, nor would he ever. So the king says, “Sell him into slavery. Take his wife and his kids, too.” Of course, the sale of a slave, along with his wife and children, wouldn’t be a drop in the bucket. And Jewish law prohibited the sale of a wife and child for purposes of debt. It was just an absurd illustration used by Jesus to show the seriousness of the sentence.

The man begged, “Just give me more time, and I will repay it all.” The king, however, gives him immeasurably more than he ever asks for. He asked for patience and a chance to repay. He received a complete forgiveness of the debt, a pardon.

- We owe God a deep debt.
- Secondly, we cannot replay the debt.
- And thirdly, we receive forgiveness from the gracious King.

Verse 27 is one of the most beautiful verses of all the New Testament: “The Lord had compassion on the slave and just cancelled the debt – forgave him all that debt.”

However enormously cruel kings of old could be, they also had the power to be extravagantly generous. The loan is not extended. The loan is considered paid in full. It’s cancelled.

Act II

Sometimes the hardest word of scripture is the adversative conjunction, “but.” Look at it in verse 28. “But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed” (Matthew 18:28-30).

The story turns sour. Even while this slave is basking in the sunshine of forgiveness from the king, he goes out and finds one of his underlings who owes him only 100 denarii. He grabs him, chokes him, and says, “Pay me back.”

A denarius, again, was a day’s wage, so this man owed him about three-and-a-half months worth of work – a payable debt. The man who had been forgiven 60 million denarii now wouldn’t be patient on a payment of only 100 denarii.

I want you to notice the comparison here. In verse 26, the first slave fell down and began to beg for more time to repay. In verse 29, the underling also fell down and began to beg for more time to repay. Wouldn’t you think a king’s zillion dollar forgiveness would surely produce patience in the forgiven one with all future, petty debtors? A zillion verses a few months’ wages means this: Our guilt before God is unendingly greater than any other person’s guilt before us.

The words in verse 26 and 29 are almost exactly the same. Couldn't he hear himself in the second servant's begging? Hadn't he said the same words to the king over his zillion dollars? This man lacks an appreciation for the king's forgiveness in the past, and he lacks a fear of the king's judgment in the future.

Here is what I want you to see – it's the essence of the gospel. As God forgives us, we forgive each other.

We all remember the Lord's Prayer. "And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." But Jesus finishes out the Lord's Prayer with words that are hardly ever remembered. "For if you do not forgive other people their sins, neither will your Father in heaven forgive yours" (Matthew 6:15). Or, elsewhere He says, "With the measure that you measure out to others in mercy and judgment, you yourselves will be measured" (Matthew 7:2).

I read this story, and I don't like the first servant. The anger inside of me begins to boil over. How could he? I don't like this character. How could he receive so much forgiveness and, yet, be so unforgiving?

I've had that moment. Maybe it's your day to have that "aha" moment when you realize YOU are the first servant. You are the one who has been forgiven by God for a debt you could never repay. You're the zillion dollar debtor. And, yet, you try to hold others accountable for their wrong-doing to you.

Jesus asks you a hard thing today. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44). For some of us, we'd rather that He ask us to walk on water. Not to forgive is to choose to live backward and not forward in God's grace. It is to be imprisoned in your own anger and revenge, rather than to be released to live freely in the present.

Someone once asked, "Do I have to forgive him if he doesn't repent?" It's the wrong question, isn't it. Maybe the real question is this: "Can he repent if I don't forgive?"

The cross. Jesus says from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Who had repented of the crucifixion when Christ forgave from the cross? Who? Pilate? The high priests? The Romans? The silent masses? The cowardly disciples? Who?

No, not one. And yet Jesus cried out from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." No one had repented, and, yet, Jesus forgave.

Who knows, maybe by forgiving your enemy he may repent and become all that God intends for him to be. (Randall O'Brien, *Set Free By Grace*, p. 71)

A few years ago, a nationwide poll asked the question, "What word or phrase would you most like to hear uttered to you, sincerely?" The first was – you guessed it – "I love you." The second was, "You are forgiven."

The first was "I love you" – God's unconditional love.

The second was “You are forgiven” – God’s unmerited grace.

And the third is “Supper’s ready” – God’s unsurpassed invitation.

When you choose not to forgive, ironically, you become the victim yet again. The deed of your enemy locks you into a painful past – a past of which you cannot let go. When you spend your time thinking of sweet revenge, the reality is you are giving her, you are giving him rent-free space in your head. She’s in your thoughts, your dreams, your imagination. You’re preoccupying your precious mind’s eye with your enemy.

Frederick Buechner said of the seven deadly sins that anger is possibly the most fun – to lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still come, and to savor the last toothsome morsel both of pain you are given and the pain you are giving back. In some ways, it’s a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast of revenge is you. (*Wishful Thinking*)

It was a September 28. I did a funeral for Lucile Mitchell. Often, I’ll ask the family for the Bible of the person who died. Sometimes people leave clues in their Bible, they underline their favorite passages. You get a sense of what’s important to her by using her Bible when you preach her funeral.

In the front of Lucile Mitchell’s Bible, the words were written. “A good forgetter is a blessing.”

So I asked her husband, Roy, a bricklayer. Asked her daughters, Darlena, Sharron, Sandra, and Kim. “What does it mean: ‘A good forgetter is a blessing’? Why did she write that in her Bible?”

Lucile often came to church in a wheelchair. She’d been married to Roy for 64 years. Roy said the keys to a successful marriage are two words, “Yes,” and “Darlin’”, two words that Lucile taught him early on in their marriage. The first time Roy ever laid eyes on Lucile, he said – out loud – “That is the girl I’m going to marry.” And he didn’t even know her name. They eloped to Plainview, Texas. Her mama, on the sly, gave her a whopping sum of \$5 – all her mother had – by which they could run off, get married, and start a life together. Roy was soon called to serve in the Army, but he wrote a letter back to Lucile every day.

“Roy, what did you write?”

“I wrote ‘I love you’ every day.”

Lucile sitting in the wheelchair in the First Baptist Church of Amarillo. I could point to you where she would sit – right over here. Always with a smile on her face.

What does it mean, “A good forgetter is a blessing?” What was Lucile trying to forget?

I did not know her story.

In addition to those four girls, Darlena, Sharron, Sandra, and Kim, the Mitchells had a son named Gary. When Gary was 35 years of age, sitting in his car at a stoplight in Houston, Texas, a man came up behind him with a 20-gauge pump shotgun and shot him dead – in the back – while he sat on the Interstate 10 access road. December 19, 1985.

I went back and read the newspaper articles. To make matters worse, in an awful twist of injustice, the murderer walked away. The prosecutor, Karen Morris, said the jury's verdict was absolutely ridiculous.

Can you imagine how Roy and Lucile felt? Not only had their boy been murdered, but the murderer had walked away, scott free. The life of their son had ended, while the life of the murderer continued as if things were the same. Could you imagine the responsibility you would feel as a father if someone murdered your son. If the courts won't give justice, then it's up to you to take justice into your own hands. Can you imagine the hate and anger pumping through your body, like rich, red blood surging through your veins?

That's what Roy and Lucile felt when they found out that the murderer was going to walk. A fellow church member, Bill Sherwood, walked in to visit with Roy. They really didn't know each other very well before that. Roy was ready with rage. But Bill said, "Roy, you can't do this. "Revenge is mine," sayeth the Lord.' This man has gotten away with nothing. There is another court that takes no excuses. There is another place where justice is done. Roy, you have to let this go."

That day, Lucile got up, went over to her Bible – the Bible I held in my hand at her funeral – and wrote in the front, "A good forgetter is a blessing."

Roy and Lucile lived life in love and grace. And they refused to let revenge rage through their family.

I asked Roy who killed his son. He looked at me and said, "I don't know the man's name. I would not know him if he walked in this room and sat beside you, because I have chosen to forget."

"A good forgetter is a blessing."

What do you need to forget today? Who do you need to forgive today?

If you knew tomorrow would be the last day of your life and you could only make one call to extend grace, who would you call, and what would you say? And why are you waiting?

Let us pray.