

Prayer and forgiveness

Mark 11:24-25

“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

Matthew 18:21- 35

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ 22 Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’

23 ‘Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold [a] was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

26 ‘At this the servant fell on his knees before him. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” 27 The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

28 ‘But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins [b]. He grabbed him and began to choke him. “Pay back what you owe me!” he demanded.

29 ‘His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.”

30 ‘But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32 ‘Then the master called the servant in. “You wicked servant,” he said, “I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 ‘This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’”

Introduction

“Why do we find it so hard to forgive?”

Even when we want to forgive others it can be challenging. Jesus’ teaching not only commands us to forgive but also empowers us to do so. Often, we feel condemned or overwhelmed until we understand how God forgives us. Only then can we access the grace, which God offers to enable us to forgive others. Forgiveness is a lifelong journey, which requires daily choices and the support of wise and loving friends. But first, we will consider some of the obstacles.

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¹[a] 18:24 Greek *ten thousand talents*; a talent was worth about 20 years of a day labourer’s wages. (\$7 billion - \$7,000,000,000) [b] 18:28 Greek *a hundred denarii*; a denarius was the usual daily wage of a day labourer (\$13,452 based on NSW minimum wage)

Anger

Anger at injustice is a major stumbling block to forgiveness. The injustice may be personal or we may feel hurt and offended on behalf of others. In either case, we may feel that others don't deserve forgiveness. Instead, we want them to be held responsible for the hurt, which they have caused. Our desire for justice can block our ability to forgive or turn into the pursuit of vengeance.

Fear

We may refuse to forgive others because we are afraid that we will be further mistreated. Rising anger and lowered trust, at repeated unfairness and injustice, make it hard to forgive. Jesus lifts the bar from Peter's "seven times" to "seventy times seven", which really means to forgive constantly and as a way of life.

Trust

It is easy to confuse forgiveness and trust. We may assume that if we forgive someone we must also trust him or her again. While forgiveness is a gift, trust has to be earned. For example, if someone took a knife and stabbed you, you may choose to forgive them but not trust them again with a knife. There will also be a wound, which needs healing.

Release

The Greek word for forgiveness has the additional meanings of "to let go or release". This meaning is reflected in the parable above. Failure to forgive the debt owed imprisons both servants. Forgiveness releases the debtor from prison. When we forgive others with God's help we also release them to become what God wants them to be.

This does not mean ignoring our anger or sense of injustice. Nor does it require us to automatically trust the other party. But it releases both parties from the burden of judgement.

Conclusion

Forgiving ourselves and others requires both grace and choice. It begins with an awareness of what God has done for us in Jesus. Our "debt" was enormous but his love was greater.

Questions

- What do you like about this parable?
- What does it teach you about the character of God?
- What does it teach you about the nature of humanity?
- When have you struggled to forgive others? What has helped or hindered the process?
- How might this parable change the way that you pray?
- *"If you hold anything against anyone, forgive them ..."* Make a private list of people (past or present, known to you personally or perhaps only indirectly) who you "hold anything against".
- Pray this prayer for each person (or group) under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,

"Lord I forgive and release (name) to become all that you want them to be."
Then destroy the list by ripping it up or burning it.