

## AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US

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Matt 18: 21-35

We pick up where we left off last week with the theme of forgiveness. Now we see Jesus teaches that forgiveness is an integral component of a healthy congregation. Everything before is how important each member is to the congregation. What did forgiveness mean in the time of Jesus? What were the cultural implications then and now? Most importantly why is it so hard to forgive others?

This passage makes clear the importance of forgiveness in the early church. This is an extended parable that ends with a very forceful pronouncement. It is critical to understand that this parable is a great example of Jesus' use of hyperbole. One talent represented years of labor and a 1000 talents is an enormous, an impossible amount. One commentary said it equaled all the taxes paid to Rome in a year. There is no way the slave could have either run up that kind of debt or paid it back. The forgiven slave then goes and attacks another slave that owes him money and even that is a fairly large amount since a denari equaled a days wages, but seizing him by the throat was certainly over the top.

The parable concludes with the rather horrendous punishment of torture by the king of the slave who would not forgive and that to is hyperbole. Then the pronouncement, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." You read that and I think, wow that's very clear. It seems clear that forgiveness was a problem for Matthew's early community. This also implies that this is more than an individual problem, but a community problem that was manifesting itself in divisions and arguments. If forgiveness is an issue for the community at the time the gospel is written this would explain why it was included.

To understand forgiveness in this context we need to understand that the world of Jesus was based on honor and shame as a defining way of operating. Honor and shame are something that is earned and is entirely external. Having honor was absolutely the most critical social goal of the society in which Jesus lived. People, principally men gained honor in the sight of others by what they did, what they owned, what they wore, and how they lived. All of these are externals. Shame took away all that and reduced the person's social standing. Honor once gained must be defended at all costs and never relinquished.

Richard Rohr in the lecture the Wednesday Night Bible Study is listening to said, *"Whenever you forgive someone you are refusing higher moral ground. That's why it is hard for us to forgive. If you refuse to forgive someone you have one up on them. You have put them down as an inferior person and set yourself up as a superior person. That's why forgiveness is impossible for powerful people where power is your way of life."* That was very much the way of the world then and truth be told of the world today.

So in that world and today, forgiving is an act that levels the playing field again and our ego rarely wants to do that.

So why should we do something so difficult? First of all because of the damage that not forgiving can do. Mostly we should do this because Jesus demands it then and now.

Br. Curtis Almquist from the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Boston said in a sermon on the passage that precedes today's gospel:

We need to forgive, we need be at least moving in the direction of forgiving other people from whom we've experienced offense, if not for their sake then for our own. We don't forgive another person because they are worthy, nor because they've asked for forgiveness. We forgive them because if we don't, we tacitly allow them to hold power over us, to keep us, as it were, locked in a prison. We need to forgive them or, at least for starters, to move in that direction, if not for their sake (though they will be helped), then for our own sake."<sup>1</sup>

When we choose not to forgive we hand the other person power over us. I have often heard people say, "When you did such and such you made me feel so fill in the blank." So who is in control here? This type of attitude hands control to the one who has sinned against us. This turns the power over to the other person. Failing to forgive is like drinking poison in hopes that the other person will die!

Now let me be absolutely clear, I am not talking about forgive and forget. That just does not happen. We cannot nor should we forget what happened. Forgiveness does not mean that the event did not happen or that the hurt is not real. A wise spiritual director told me once that we all carry a tape recorder around in our souls that records every hurt. The problem is there isn't a stop button nor an erase button, however there is a volume control. Forgiveness allows us to turn down the volume on the hurt so that we can move on in our lives.

There is a service in our Book of Common Prayer for the Reconciliation of a Penitent. This is our form of one on one confession between a person and a priest, deacon or trained lay person. I have used this service many times in a situation where someone is carrying a burden that is so heavy that they are stuck, frozen in their relationship with God and with others. There are two forms and most people choose the second form. They choose Form 2 because not only does this form ask for forgiveness from God for our sins, but they have also come to realize that they need to forgive someone in their lives and form 2 provides for that. Often the sin that they confess is directly tied up with the offense of another against them. The real release most people tell me and in my own experience is not in being forgiven, but in forgiving. That is where the weight is lifted from our souls. In doing this, the person has decided to stop drinking the poison and move on even if the offender cannot or will not ask for forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> Br. Almquist's sermon is posted at <http://ssje.org/sermons/?p=2836>

This is what today's parable is about. This is an image of God who is so big that we can always ask for forgiveness. God will forgive us, but does ask us to in turn forgive others. This is for our own good as well as for the good of the world.

Most of us say the Lord's prayer every week if not every day, but have you really listened to what is in there. The modern translation, which I prefer, says "forgive us our sins and we forgive those who sin against us." Look deep within your heart and ask do I really mean it? That is the starting point. From there we can begin to change the world from one of hate into one of love and respect. It is your choice, hold on to the hate or surrender to the love. You cannot do both and be whole.

Forgiveness is critical to every individual and to the entire group, or in our case congregation. We can never get past the divisions we see everywhere if forgiveness is something that can't happen. Bishop Neil Alexander said last spring in a meeting with clergy, "We used to walk towards each other as we disagreed, but now we as a church and a nation are walking away from each other. This must change." Walking towards the other and being willing to both apologize and to forgive is critical to healing what ails our churches and our nation. This is not easy, but I believe it is essential for us to move forward in healing all the hurt that is out there.