

The Measure of Forgiveness

Luke 17:

³ Take heed to yourselves: If your brother trespass against you [not against God], rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. ⁴ And if he trespass against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to you, saying, "I repent;" you shall forgive him.

Matthew 18:

²¹ Then came Peter to Him, and said, "LORD, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?" ²² Jesus says to him, "I say not to you, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."

Peter had come to Christ with the question, "How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?" The rabbis limited the exercise of forgiveness to three offences. Peter, carrying out, as he supposed, the teaching of Christ, thought to extend it to seven, the number signifying perfection. But Christ taught that we are never to become weary of forgiving. Not "Until seven times," He said, "but, Until seventy times seven."

Then He showed the true ground upon which forgiveness is to be granted and the danger of cherishing an unforgiving spirit. In a parable He told of a king's dealing with the officers who administered the affairs of his government. (Matthew 18:23-35.) Some of these officers were in receipt of vast sums of money belonging to the state. As the king investigated their administration of this trust, there was brought before him one man whose account showed a debt to his lord for the immense sum of ten thousand talents. He had nothing to pay, and according to the custom, the king ordered him to be sold, with all that he had, that payment might be made. But the terrified man fell at his feet and besought him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

“But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence; and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that you owe. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay you all. And he would not; but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told to their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said to him, O you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt, because you desired me: should not you also have had compassion on your fellowservant, even as I had pity on you? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due to him.”

This parable presents details which are needed for the filling out of the picture but which have no counterpart in its spiritual significance. The attention should not be diverted to them. Certain great truths are illustrated, and to these our thought should be given.

The pardon granted by this king represents a divine forgiveness of all sin. Christ is represented by the king, who, moved with compassion, forgave the debt of his servant. Man was under the condemnation of the broken law. He could not save himself, and for this reason Christ came to this world, clothed His divinity with humanity, and gave His life, the just for the unjust. He gave Himself for our sins, and to every soul He freely offers the blood-bought pardon. “With the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption.” Psalm 130:7.

Here is the ground upon which we should exercise compassion toward our fellow sinners. “If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.” John 4:11. “Freely you have received,” Christ says, “freely give.” Matthew 10:8.

In the parable, when the debtor pleaded for delay, with the promise, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you all,” the sentence was revoked. The whole debt was cancelled. And he was soon given an opportunity to follow the example of the master who had forgiven him. Going out, he met a fellow servant who owed him a small sum. He had been forgiven ten thousand talents; the debtor owed him a hundred pence. But he who had been so mercifully treated, dealt with his fellow laborer in an altogether different manner. His debtor made an appeal similar to that which he himself had made to the king, but without a similar result. He who had so recently been

forgiven was not tenderhearted and pitiful. The mercy shown him he did not exercise in dealing with his fellowservant. He heeded not the request to be patient. The small sum owed to him was all that the ungrateful servant would keep in mind. He demanded all that he thought his due, and carried into effect a sentence similar to that which had been so graciously revoked for him.

How many are today manifesting the same spirit. When the debtor pleaded with his lord for mercy, he had no true sense of the greatness of his debt. He did not realize his helplessness. He hoped to deliver himself. "Have patience with me," he said, "and I will pay you all." So there are many who hope by their own works to merit God's favour. They do not realize their helplessness. They do not accept the grace of God as a free gift, but are trying to build themselves up in self-righteousness. Their own hearts are not broken and humbled on account of sin, and they are exacting and unforgiving toward others. Their own sins against God, compared with their brother's sins against them, are as ten thousand talents to one hundred pence – nearly one million to one; yet they dare to be unforgiving.

In the parable the lord summoned the unmerciful debtor, and "said to him, O you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt, because you desired me; should not you also have had compassion on your fellowservant, even as I had pity on you? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due to him." "So likewise," said Jesus, "shall My Heavenly Father do also to you, if you from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses." He who refuses to forgive is thereby casting away his own hope of pardon.

But the teaching of this parable should not be misapplied.

God's forgiveness toward us lessens in no wise our duty to obey Him. So the spirit of forgiveness toward our fellow men does not lessen the claim of just obligation. In the prayer which Christ taught His disciples He said, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Matthew 6:12. By this He did not mean that in order to be forgiven our sins we must not require our just dues from our debtors. If they cannot pay, even though this may be the result of unwise management, they are not to be cast into prison, oppressed, or even treated harshly; but the parable does not teach us to encourage indolence. The word of God declares that if a man will not work, neither shall he eat.

(2 Thessalonians 3:10.) The LORD does not require the hard-working man to support others in idleness. With many there is a waste of time, a lack of effort, which brings to poverty and want. If these faults are not corrected by those who indulge them, all that might be done in their behalf would be like putting treasure into a bag with holes. Yet there is an unavoidable poverty, and we are to manifest tenderness and compassion toward those who are unfortunate.

We should treat others just as we ourselves, in like circumstances, would wish to be treated.

The Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul charges us: “If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfil you my joy, that you be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 2:1-5.

But sin is not to be lightly regarded. The LORD has commanded us not to suffer wrong upon our brother. He says, “If your brother trespass against you, rebuke him.” Luke 17:3. Sin is to be called by its right name, and is to be plainly laid out before the wrongdoer.

In his charge to Timothy, Paul, writing by the Holy Spirit, says, “Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” 2 Timothy 4:2. And to Titus he writes, “There are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers. . . . Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith.” Titus 1:10-13.

“If your brother shall trespass against you,” Christ said, “go and tell him his fault between you and him alone: if he shall hear you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear you, then take with you one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it to the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be to you as an heathen man and a publican.” Matthew 18:15-17.

Our LORD teaches that matters of difficulty between Christians are to be settled within the church. They should not be opened before those who do not fear God. If a Christian is wronged by his brother, let him not appeal to unbelievers in a court of justice. Let him follow out the instruction Christ has given. Instead of trying to avenge himself, let him seek to save his brother. God will guard the interests of those who love and fear Him, and with confidence we may commit our case to Him who judges righteously.

Too often when wrongs are committed again and again, and the wrongdoer confesses his fault, the injured one becomes weary, and thinks he has forgiven quite enough. But the Saviour has plainly told us how to deal with the erring: "If your brother trespass against you, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him." Luke 17:3. Do not hold him off as unworthy of your confidence. Consider "yourself, lest you also be tempted." Galatians 6:1.

If your brethren err, you are to forgive them. When they come to you with confession, you should not say, I do not think they are humble enough. I do not think they feel their confession. What right have you to judge them, as if you could read the heart? The word of God says, "If he repent, forgive him. And if he trespasses against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to you, saying, I repent; you shall forgive him." Luke 17:3-4. And not only seven times, but seventy times seven – just as often as God forgives you.

We ourselves owe everything to God's free grace. Grace in the covenant ordained our adoption. Grace in the Saviour effected our redemption, our regeneration, and our exaltation to heirship with Christ. Let this grace be revealed to others.

Give the erring one no occasion for discouragement. Suffer not a Pharisaical hardness to come in and hurt your brother. Let no bitter sneer rise in mind or heart. Let no tinge of scorn be manifest in the voice. If you speak a word of your own, if you take an attitude of indifference, or show suspicion or distrust, it may prove the ruin of a soul. He needs a brother with the Elder Brother's heart of sympathy to touch his heart of humanity. Let him feel the strong clasp of a sympathizing hand, and hear the whisper, Let us pray. God will give a rich experience to you both. Prayer unites us with one another and with God. Prayer brings Jesus to our side, and gives to the fainting, perplexed

soul new strength to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil. Prayer turns aside the attacks of Satan.

When one turns away from human imperfections to behold Jesus, a divine transformation takes place in the character. The Spirit of Christ working upon the heart conforms it to His image. Then let it be your effort to lift up Jesus. Let the mind's eye be directed to “the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world.” John 1:29. And as you engage in this work, remember that “he which converts the sinner from the error of his way, shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.” James 5:20.

“But if you forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Matthew 6:15. Nothing can justify an unforgiving spirit. He who is unmerciful toward others shows that he himself is not a partaker of God's pardoning grace. In God's forgiveness the heart of the erring one is drawn close to the great heart of Infinite Love. The tide of divine compassion flows into the sinner's soul, and from him to the souls of others. The tenderness and mercy that Christ has revealed in His own precious life will be seen in those who become sharers of His grace. But “if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.” Romans 8:9. He is alienated from God, fitted only for eternal separation from Him.

It is true that he may once have received forgiveness; but his unmerciful spirit shows that he now rejects God's pardoning love. He has separated himself from God, and is in the same condition as before he was forgiven. He has denied his repentance, and his sins are upon him as if he had not repented.

But the great lesson of the parable lies in the contrast between God's compassion and man's hardheartedness; in the fact that God's forgiving mercy is to be the measure of our own. “Should not you also have had compassion on your fellowservant, even as I had pity on you?”

We are not forgiven because we forgive, but as we forgive. The ground of all forgiveness is found in the unmerited love of God, but by our attitude toward others we show whether we have made that love our own. Wherefore Christ says, “With what judgment you judge, you shall be judged; and with what measure you mete, it shall be measured to you again.” Matthew 7:2.

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