

Session 3

May 10, 2020

FORGIVE

Matthew 18:21-28; 32-33

A farmer friend of mine showed me his bleeding, bandaged hand. It seems he managed to rope a wayward horse, which then proceeded to drag him topsy-turvy across the pasture, the rope tearing the skin off his hand the entire time. “Why didn’t you just let go of the rope?” I asked. His reply was classic. “Once I caught him,” he said, “I wasn’t about to let him win.”

And so it is too often with us when it comes to forgiveness. Once we catch someone who has offended us, we aren’t about to let them win, even if it hurts us more than it hurts them.

In his conversation with Jesus, the apostle Peter thought he was being very generous in offering to forgive “as many as seven times.” Jesus used the opportunity to teach his disciples exactly what biblical forgiveness looks like. The story unfolds in three scenes.

The proposition (vv. 21-22). The question posed by Peter in verse 21 had no doubt been spawned by Jesus’ comments in the preceding verses regarding the restoration of one who has “sinned against you” (v. 15). Surely there were limits to such things! Tradition says that the Jews of antiquity agreed to forgive a person for up to three offenses, and Amos 1:3 suggests at least four. Seven, which represents the *number of completion*, might have seemed to Peter to be the upper limit of one’s grace when it comes to forgiveness. Jesus’ counter of seventy times seven is obviously not literal, but rhetorical. As often as one confesses and truly repents, forgiveness is to be granted.

The illustration (vv. 23-34). Knowing that the disciples no doubt shared Peter’s wondering, Jesus illustrated what divine forgiveness looked like using a parable. It’s noteworthy that the emotional and spiritual aspects of an intangible attitude of forgiveness are described in the harsh, tangible language of settling accounts and slave-debt. In so doing, Jesus made the concept not only understandable, but *serious*.

In the first segment of the parable, the slave had been working off an immense sum (10,000 talents; v. 24). When the master surmised that no amount of work could settle the account, he forced the man and his family into destitution (v. 25). But the impassioned pleas by the slave for mercy brought a change of mind and heart on the part of the master. Moved by compassion, the master not only freed the man, but forgave all that he owed (vv. 26-27).

In the second segment of the story (vv. 28-31), the one who had been freed and forgiven refused to do the same thing for another servant who owed him a much smaller amount (v. 28). The appalling hypocrisy of his actions was obvious, noted by everyone around them, and brought to the attention of the previously gracious but now infuriated master (v. 31).

The application (vv. 32-35). Parables are earthly stories with spiritual meanings. In this case, the spiritual application is pretty easy. How could those who have been forgiven so much (followers of Christ) refuse to pass on the same kind of mercy and grace to others? (v. 33; see also Matt. 6:14-15). Verse 34 is troubling at first glance. Does this mean that we can be freed and forgiven for our sin, only to be dragged back before God to be punished for it after all?

Thankfully, Jesus answered that in verse 35: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, *if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*” In other words, only those who genuinely forgive others with their whole heart have experienced God’s gracious forgiveness. And vice versa, only those who have genuinely experienced God’s forgiveness are able to offer it to others.