

In Nomine Iesu

Twenty-Second Sunday after Trinity 2021 Forgiven and forgiving – Matthew 18:23-35

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who forgave even those who crucified Him. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

When it comes to sins we commit against each other, we are quick to count other people’s sins as being very serious – especially if their sin is committed against us. At the same time we judge ourselves more charitably. Even more seriously, we assume that God, being the nice fellow that He is, is even more willing to view our sins in a charitable light than we are. Is this what the Bible teaches about sin and forgiveness?

I

In the parable from St. Matthew’s Gospel before us this morning, Jesus teaches us the truth about both sin and forgiveness in the sight of God. His own disciple, Peter, had just asked Him the question, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

Peter put forward the thought that forgiving someone who did him wrong seven times was sufficiently charitable for a true child of the heavenly Father. Jesus replied, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” (Matthew 18:21-22) “Seventy times seven,” is of course 490. Why did He choose the number 490? Well, He did not choose such a number because He intended that we keep score for each of our neighbors, so when we get to 491 with Joe and Mary next door, it is time to draw the line in the sand and stop forgiving. On the other hand, you might say, 490 is a big number. I haven’t even spoken to Joe and Mary next door 490 times, and I doubt that I ever will. Four hundred ninety should be sufficient. Really? Is it sufficient for your son or daughter? The 491st time is the determiner for when the mom and dad’s welfare program ends and its out the door with you? Time to fend for yourself? How many homeless children would we have roaming the streets and highways if this were

so? Or, take it the other way around. How confident are we that as parents we would be covered sufficiently with 490 second chances to do right with each of our children? Are they too keeping score with us? After 490 offenses would God understand when they disowned us? Would we?

And what about marriage? Should preachers present each new husband and wife with a score card on their wedding day? Each sin against the other could be stamped with the official offence logo, much like a business stamps your card so that you get the 10th one free. Would 490 stamps cover us up to our golden anniversary? That would be about ten a year. Maybe that's why so many marriages end long before fifty years. Maybe that's why people feel they are justified in getting rid of a spouse. Four hundred ninety strikes and you're out. That's pretty generous compared to the World Series. Just imagine how long this year's series between Atlanta and Houston would take if every batter got 490 strikes? The Series might well last for 50 years.

Dear friends, Jesus was not giving Peter a lesson in Christian mathematics, as if there ever could be such a thing. He was teaching us about sin and forgiveness, both in the heart of the one who sins and the one who is to forgive. He was teaching us about the God of grace and mercy who has forgiven us of so much, and has called us to live as His children. The truth is that we will sin much and many times against our neighbor, beginning right at home with our nearest neighbor, our husband or wife, our children, our parents. We will be offended by the same people as much as we offend them, because we all sin. We all come short of the glory of God. It is the will of God that we forgive not some specified number of times, but that we forgive much, remembering what it is that we ask so often of our Father who is in heaven: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Have we prayed that prayer more than 490 times? Or were we praying hypocritically and insincerely many of those times.

II

Why should we forgive much? Jesus answers that question in the parable. He answers it in a way that anyone can understand, even the most cold-hearted, calculating cynic. He answers it with mathematics. So, let's do the calculations together.

Before we begin, let's take note where the data, the numbers, for our calculations are going to be coming from. In other words, who is the "certain king" in this parable that Jesus uses to describe "the kingdom of heaven?" (v. 23) The king is God. He who is the eternal Son become man, who alone knows the Father as He really is, (John 1:18) came not only to live and die for us, and so take away the sin which separates us from God, but He came also to teach us about God and man. He came to teach us why God is so worthy of our trust. The king is God. Who then is brought before the king for the purpose of settling accounts? Is he some notorious perpetrator of spectacular sins? Is he someone so despicable, so evil and guilty before God, that Jesus just had to tell us about this awful fellow? Who believes that? The servant is just that, one of the king's servants, one like all the others. The servant is Peter. The servant is you, and I.

The king forgives the debt of this very ordinary servant. His debt, Jesus says, is ten thousand talents. Now perhaps we don't know too much about talents or denarii, but we do know that 10,000 is a much bigger number than the 100 the forgiven servant tried force out of his fellow servant. We know that having a credit card debt of 10,000

dollars is a lot bigger problem than a credit card debt of a hundred bucks. But still may seem manageable ... somehow.

How does this servant react to the king's statement that he owes 10,000? "Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all." (v. 26) Ten thousand dollars is a lot. The average person in the United States owes almost that much credit card debt. And the average is growing. Credit card debt, once it gets too high, is very difficult to pay back for the average person. But, dear friends, understand this well, the mathematics of Jesus' parable are much, much worse than that!

Let's do the math. A denarius, a unit of Roman currency, was a small silver coin that, when a faithful Jew went to the temple to exchange this coin bearing the image of the divine emperor of Roman for one minted by his own countrymen that had no graven image of any god on it, would fetch him - depending on the exchange rate - about one quarter of an Israelite shekel. In other words, a silver shekel was worth four denarii. It took sixty shekels to equal one *maneh* of silver. A *maneh* is about one pound. It takes a further sixty manehs of silver to equal one talent. 10,000 talents of silver therefore is about 600,000 pounds. The spot price of silver on the New York exchange closed at \$24.45 on Friday. So, in today's market ten thousand talents of silver would be \$14,670,000. Do you see the problem here? "Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all."

A day's wage in Jesus' day was about a denarius. How long would it have taken the servant to pay back to his king all that he owed? Ten thousand talents is 144,000,000 denarii.

The king forgave the servant all his debt, all ten thousand talents, all 144,000,000 denarii, all \$14,670,000. He didn't consider for a moment the man's request for more time. He knew the man could never in a hundred lifetimes pay back such a debt. For the king it was a matter of the forgiveness of all debt or the immediate carrying out of the sentence.

The king forgave him what could not be repaid in a hundred lifetimes, because Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, suffered the full weight of eternity in hell in payment of our debt. His voice crying out in anguish, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46), is the sound of your deficit account being cleared. It is the sound of your **enormous** debt being wiped out at **enormous** cost. The next time you hear, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son," consider how good and gracious is our God, who carried out your sentence on His only-begotten Son, so that He could forgive completely your debt, your sins against your neighbor and Him.

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"The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants." Our heavenly Father is the king. He wants to "settle accounts" with each of us. He wants to settle them not based on what little you can come up with, but based on what His Son, our Savior, has earned with His perfect life of obedience and His sacrificial death in our place. Dear friend, the mathematics of debt is clear. You can see that. But the mathematics of forgiveness can be understood only in the light of the cross of Jesus Christ. Rejoice then that your debt has been paid in full. Go in peace this day, knowing that God has forgiven you of your every sin. Go in peace, seeing

yourself as you truly are: In the light of the law, your sins against God and neighbor are so great that you cannot repay them; yet, in the light of the Gospel, in the light of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, they have been paid in full. Go in peace. Forgive those who sin against you. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

S. R. Sparley, 10/24/2021