

If You Do Not Forgive Your Brother

"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:35)

Summary:

Setting the context – "seventy times seven" – Genesis 4:24 – the gospel, a message of forgiveness – Jesus' parable – His lesson from the parable – Would God revoke a pardon that he had once granted? – the necessity of a forgiving spirit – "debt" and "sin" – forgiveness, a matter of grace – another parable, another aspect.

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This is a very hard saying. The "so" which introduces this statement refers to the severe punishment which the king in a parable inflicted on one of his unforgiving servants.

The parable arises out of a conversation between Jesus and Peter. Jesus repeatedly impressed on his disciples the necessity of forgiveness: they were not to harbour resentment but freely forgive those who injured them. "Yes, but how often?" Peter asked. "Seven times?" – and probably he thought that that was about the limit of reasonable forbearance. "Not seven times," said Jesus, "but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22). Perhaps by the time one had forgiven for the seventy-times-seventh time, forgiveness would have become second nature to the individual.

Some commentators have seen an allusion here to the war-song of Lamech in Genesis 4:24. Lamech was a descendant of Cain, who (surprisingly, it may be thought) was taken under God's protection. "If anyone slays Cain," God said, "vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." Lamech boasted in his war-song that no one would injure him and get away with it: "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (or perhaps "seventy times sevenfold"). So, alongside the seventy-times-sevenfold vengeance, Jesus sets, as the target for his followers, seventy-times-sevenfold forgiveness.

The gospel is a message of forgiveness. It could not be otherwise, because it is the gospel of God, and God is a forgiving God. "Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity?" said one Hebrew prophet (Micah 7:18). "I knew, said another (protesting against God's tendency to forgive those who, he thought, did not deserve forgiveness), that thou

art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Jonah 4:2).

It is to be expected, then, that those who receive the forgiveness which God holds out in the gospel, those who call him their Father, will display something of his character and show a forgiving attitude to others. If they do not, what then?

What then? Jesus answers this question in the parable of the unforgiving servant, which he told to confirm his words to Peter about repeated forgiveness "until seventy times seven." A king, said Jesus, decided to settle accounts with his servants, and found that one of them (who must have had a very high office) had incurred debts to the royal exchequer which ran into millions.

The king was about to deal with him as a king might be expected to do at that time, when the man fell at his feet, begged for mercy, and promised that, if the king would be patient with him, he would make full repayment. The king knew perfectly well that he could never repay such a debt, but he felt sorry for him and cancelled the debt.

Then the man found someone else in the royal service who was in debt to him personally (not to the king). His debt amounted to a few pounds, but the man demanded prompt payment and when the debtor asked him for time to pay, he refused and had him put in the debtor's prison.

The king got to hear of it and summoned the man whom he had pardoned back into his presence, revoked the pardon, and treated him as he had treated the other man: "in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt."

"So," said Jesus, "in this way my heavenly Father will deal with any one of you if you do not forgive your brother (or sister) from your heart.

Would God revoke a pardon that he had once granted? God would not do a thing like that, surely? Jesus said he would. A hard saying indeed!

Jesus emphasizes the necessity of having a forgiving spirit as central to his teaching. This is seen also from the fact that it is enshrined in both versions of the Lord's Prayer. In Luke 11:4 the disciples are told to pray, "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us."

It is difficult to believe that anyone could utter this prayer deliberately, knowing at the same time that he or she cherished an unforgiving spirit

towards someone else. In the Aramaic language which Jesus spoke the word for "sin" is the same as the word for "debt;" hence "everyone who is indebted to us" means everyone who has sinned against us. In the parallel petition of Matthew 6:12 this use of "debt" in the sense of "sin" occurs twice: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" means "Forgive us our sins, as we for our part have forgiven those who have sinned against us."

This wording implies that the person praying has already forgiven any injury received; otherwise, it would be impossible to ask God's forgiveness for one's own sins with any sense of honesty. Immediately after Matthew's version of the prayer this is emphasized again: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

The meaning is unambiguous, and it is unwise to try to avoid its uncomfortable challenge.

Forgiveness is neither given nor received on "legal ground;" it is always a matter of grace. The lack of forgiveness shows a lack of grace. This is what Paul says in Ephesians 4:32: "be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." But if some of those to whom this admonition was addressed (and it is addressed to all Christians at all times) should persist in an unforgiving attitude towards others, could they have enjoyed the assurance of God's forgiveness? If Jesus's teaching means what it says, they could not have enjoyed God's forgiveness.

Jesus told another parable about two debtors to illustrate another aspect of forgiveness. This was in the house of Simon the Pharisee, who neglected to pay him the courtesies normally shown to a guest, whereas the woman who ventured in from the street lavished her grateful affection on him by wetting his feet with her tears (Luke 7:36-50). The point of the parable was that one who has been forgiven a great debt will respond with great love, whereas no great response will be made by one whose sense of having been forgiven is minimal.

The two parables are addressed to two different situations, and forgiveness and love are not subject to cast iron rules of inevitable necessity.

Where there is a genuine response of love, there will be a forgiving spirit, and where there is a forgiving spirit, there will be a still greater appreciation of God's forgiving mercy, and still greater love in consequence. Some commentators find difficulty with Jesus's words about the woman, "her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she

loved much.”

The logic of the parable would suggest that “she loves much, for her sins have been forgiven.” But, that is not so, for if that had been the meaning, that is what would have been said.

She did not love simply because she had been forgiven for love and forgiveness come together. Love and forgiveness set up a chain reaction: the more forgiveness, the more love; the more love, the more forgiveness.