

The Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor

Forgiveness, Generosity and Reconciliation

Phil Purkiss (17 April 2009)

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow-servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. “His fellow-servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”
Matthew 18.21-35, NIV

I think that this parable is about how we treat other people – particularly the relationships we have in and through the Kingdom, in light of how we have been treated by God and his Kingdom, and the three things here that stand out for me are: Forgiveness; Generosity; and Reconciliation.

Now the entire eighteenth chapter of Matthew 18 deals primarily with how we deal with each other, our attitude to who we consider important, our attitude and actions toward children, how we deal with brothers and sisters who have hurts and are at enmity with us, and how we reconcile with our brothers and sisters, and offer forgiveness to those around us.

The chapter starts by Peter asking Jesus a question and exposing an attitude that is based on self interest and self importance, Peter asks “Who is greatest in the Kingdom?” and Jesus responds that if you want to even get into the Kingdom, you have to change your attitude and outlook, and become as humble as a little child. Now the Kingdom of God is not about our own agenda’s, and our own self importance, it is not about who is ranked above whom, or who is more important. In fact, when we hold these attitudes we are counter-kingdom and thinking in a way that is ultimately destructive.

Jesus then questions our attitude to children, you can imagine the disciples balking at this idea of become humble like children, and Jesus says if you want to understand what it means to welcome me, welcome little child because how you treat them is how you are treating me, and it is better to tie a millstone around your neck and throw yourself in the river than harm a little child. And just a good shepherd will leave the ninety-nine sheep and go looking for the one, Jesus said it is his heavenly father’s intention that not one of these little children should perish.

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Jesus then starts talking about how to deal with conflict, when a fellow believer has done something wrong with against you, and he says talk to him about the issue. Don't harbour the feelings, don't ignore the elephant in the room or sweep the issues under the rug, but deal with it and try resolving the issues, be reconciled with your brother or sister. And he gives us a model of how we can resolve the issues when it seems that reconciliation is not that easy, and what do when the parties involved refuse to change or admit their wrong, and what happens when reconciliation can't happen.

He then gives us this parable of the unforgiving debtor, now the importance of this parable is this that, in the Kingdom, anytime you are going to have to deal with conflicts you have with other people, you are going to need to be generous with other people, and you are going to have to be willing to offer forgiveness, and you are going to have to be willing to work at being reconciled with others, even when you have been wronged.

I think that the truth here is that our world operates by revenge and vengeance, but Jesus says if we are going to change this world and live in a way that is life giving and counter to culture in this Kingdom, then we are going to have to understand what it means to forgive and be reconciled. Now what I find interesting, firstly revenge doesn't work. It doesn't give you what you feel you are owed through being wronged, and perpetuates a cycle of hatred and violence that continues and escalates as time goes on. Further, what I really find interesting, is how we so often try to make God and his Kingdom about revenge, you will hear people say things like 'God will take care of you' and we quote the scripture where God says 'Vengeance is mine', like God is going to fight everyone of our personal vendetta's against people. And I do believe that God fights our battles, and I do believe that God will take vengeance against the evil atrocities that are committed. However, the Kingdom of God is not about revenge and vengeance but it is about generosity, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

Now this parable is started by Peter asking Jesus how many times should someone be forgiven, and he suggests seven times – I have read some stuff where it suggests that Jewish tradition says forgiveness should be offered up to the fourth event, but Jesus states Seventy-seven times or some people believe that it is translated seventy times seven – the idea here is that we are not meant to keep count when it comes to forgiveness in the kingdom.

Now Jesus tells this story, in this story is the king has a servant that owes him some money – the figure here is ten thousand talents, now this is a ridiculously high figure and in this parable, like many others, the circumstances are stretched to emphasis the impact. Now one talent is equivalent

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to 6,000 denarii, so this figure is 60 million denarii – now a denarii was equivalent to a day's wages and some have suggested that this figure is equivalent to around £2 Billion. Now the fact that this person owes this much money and eventually gets this debt cancelled is ridiculous, but Jesus is making a point.

Now this servant couldn't pay this sum of money and so the king orders his wife and family, and all his possessions sold, after the man begs for mercy, the king takes pity on him and cancels this massive debt – now note the debt is not deferred but cancelled, wiped out, cleared. Now I think that what is important here is that in this story, the king is not God, as this King is willing for this man's family to be sold to repay the possessions, however I wonder whether this story is meant to place a thought in the hearers mind that if this pagan king, who is willing to sell a man's family, can forgive and cancel a debt – how much more merciful is our heavenly father who loves us. Here is a thought, what if God is better than you can ever imagine? Also, if this ruthless, pagan king is this merciful, how much more merciful ought we to be to our brothers and sisters?

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow-servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. “His fellow-servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

Now the when this servant left the kings court, he goes out to find one of his fellow servants that owes him a one hundred drenarii – which is probably equivalent to around £6k. Now this fellow servant begs for mercy but instead of passing on the same mercy he has received he has him thrown in prison. Now there are a couple of things to note here:

- 1) This chap is a fellow servant, he is not his master, he ought to have a different relationship with this person than the king did with him, and he ought to be more compassionate to his cause.
- 2) This chap knows what it feels to be in a position where he can't pay back the debt and to be in a place where he is about to lose his wife and family, so he ought to be willing to be more compassionate and generous to his fellow servant.
- 3) This chap has just been forgiven a debt, which in comparison that to what he is owed is nothing. Therefore because he has had this huge debt cancelled, he therefore ought to be willing to cancel out the tiny debt of his fellow servant.

This servant is uncompassionate and greedy, and unwilling to show to others the forgiveness that has been given to him.

I think that this story tells us that in the Kingdom of God, the following is true:

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- 1) God, who is better than we can ever imagine, has forgiven us the massive debts of our sins and wrongs, and therefore we ought to be willing to offer forgiveness to people who wrong us – especially when those wrongs are sometimes nothing compared to our wrongs.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Matthew 5.38-48, NKJV

This parable is about forgiveness.

- 2) In the Kingdom we have to be willing to treat each other and people around us, how we wish to be treated – love you neighbour as we love ourselves. In fact make sure you are more than generous with other people because you never know when you will need someone to be generous with you.

Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven: Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.

Luke 6.37-38, NKJV

This parable is about generosity in that forgiveness.

- 3) In the Kingdom we must be willing to work at being reconciled with each other, and make sure do what we can to live peaceably with each other. Notice in story a debt is either cancelled or should have been cancelled – and sometimes we must be willing to cancel what we consider to be a debt or a desire to be revenged.

Therefore, putting away lying, “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,”¹ for we are members of one another. “Be angry, and do not sin”:² do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary

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edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.
Ephesians 4.25-32, NKJV

This parable is about reconciliation.

This parable does contain a warning, as the story tells us:

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow-servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

The warning is that in the Kingdom you can’t expect to experience the forgiveness of God and of the Kingdom and not be willing to offer that same forgiveness to other people – this mirrors the Lord’s prayer. The challenge is that learn to live in a way that dispenses the grace and forgiveness, which we have freely received from God, to our brothers and sisters and to world around us. What I believe is implied here is that God is going to:

- Hold us accountable on the forgiveness that we offer
- Judge us according to the forgiveness we offer
- Be looking at our gratitude for his forgiveness through us forgiving others

I guess the questions I will leave you with to think about today is:

1. How do we practically work out this forgiveness?
2. What does this type of forgiveness practically mean?
3. Clearly this parable is about the relationships we have in and through the kingdom, but how do we work this out for those outside the kingdom?