

Why Forgive?

Matt. 18:23-35

Last week, we stood at the close of the message and declared together the Lord's Prayer, straight from the model prayer that Jesus gave his followers in Matthew 6:9-13. Most of the words come easily for us: *Hallowed be Your name... Your kingdom come... Give us this day our daily bread... Forgive us our debts...* And then suddenly, without warning, there is a phrase that – if prayed sincerely – threatens to stick in our throats:

... as we have also forgiven our debtors.

What does that really mean? Is forgiving others a prerequisite to being forgiven by God? How often should we be willing to forgive someone who has wronged us? What does forgiveness really mean? We've all heard the clichéd injunction to "forgive and forget" but is that even realistic? And the questions go on...

Regarding the issue of forgiveness, Jesus once told a powerful story that is profound, arresting and instantly convicting. Though brief, it reads much like a Shakespeare play which unfolds in three acts.

Act 1: The King does the Unthinkable (Matt. 18:23-27).

Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

Act 2: The Servant does the Unpardonable (Matt. 18:28-30).

But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

Act 3: All Men are Accountable. (Matt. 18:31-35).

When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

The Bottom Line: When we demand justice without mercy, we bring misery down upon ourselves.