

October 9, 2011
Pentecost 17

"Forgiveness! What a Blessing!"

MATTHEW 18:21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' ³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Terry Mikel was traveling from Phoenix to Tucson on the I 10 freeway, going faster than the posted speed limit of 75 miles per hour. The highway patrol officer stopped him and lectured him on the dangers of speeding. And then much to Terry's surprise the officer said, "I am going to let you off the hook and not give you a ticket as you deserve." "Thanks officer," said Terry. The officer closed his ticket book, put on his sun glasses and said, "Slow down and drive safe." Terry Mikel could not keep silent. He opens his mouth and says, "Safely. The correct English is 'drive safely' the adverb form that modifies the verb." Without even taking off his sunglasses and saying a word, the officer opened his ticket book and wrote the ticket out for the full amount of the fine. Did you ever hear of someone being so foolish?

Jesus tells the story of a man who was more than an ordinary fool. He was a malicious fool. The king has just forgiven his debt of millions of dollars and he immediately grabs a fellow servant who owes him a few thousand dollars and demands immediate payment.

Jesus told this story to show us how foolish and sinful it is to withhold forgiveness from people when they are sorry for what they have done. Maybe you have heard people say, "I will forgive but I will never forget." There is the old Native American saying, "Don't bury the hatchet with the handle sticking out?" I once knew a young man who was so angry at his wife for leaving him that when it came to praying the Lord's Prayer in church on Sunday

he refused to join in with the well known words, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Do people have a hard time forgiving people who hurt them? Will you ever be challenged to show forgiveness and love to people who hurt you or disappoint you? If you go to Amazon.com and search for a book on forgiveness it will offer you 5,692 books on forgiveness with such titles as "Forgiveness the Greatest Healer of All." Forgiveness is such a blessing. It comes to us through Jesus and then goes through us to others from Jesus.

The blessing of forgives comes to us

Peter is concerned about how much he should forgive a brother who sins against him. "Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Peter offers the holy number "7" as a suggestion for how often he should be forgiving to a brother who hurts him and sins against him. Jesus says, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." With these words Jesus wants us to know that there should be no limit to our willingness to forgive and love just as he was willing to forgive us the debt of our sin.

Jesus tells a story of a man who accumulated a monster debt. "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants." If you use a credit card to make purchases, you know that you eventually have to pay the debt on the credit card. I once knew a person who had accumulated over \$200,000 in credit card debt. How small that debt is to the huge debt that threatens to sink our country, a debit that is approaching 15 trillion dollars. In the kingdom of heaven or our relationship to God, we build up a huge debt of sin that needs to be settled before we die, or it will be held against us on judgment day.

Jesus illustrates how large the debt of sin by telling us of a servant who came with a debt of 10,000 talents, a vast sum of money, millions of dollars in debt. And what does the king do with the man who had such a large debt? "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 pay the debt." In today's world a person with such a huge debt would simply declare bankruptcy and start over again. Does God know the debt of sin you have accumulated in your lifetime? Psalm 139 says, "O Lord you have searched me and known me." Nothing escapes the all knowing eye of God. Are we held accountable to God for how we live our lives? In his holiness and righteousness God must by his very nature as God require payment for sin committed against him, just as the king demanded payment from the servant.

What does the servant do? He falls to his knees and says, "Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything." Let's go back to the man who was stopped by the Arizona Highway Patrol. Imagine if he had given the officer a dollar bill and said, "Officer, here is a dollar if you let me off the hook." How foolish to think you can bribe an officer of the law with a dollar bill. Jesus wants us to know how foolish it is to think we have the power to pay the debt of our sin by the good deeds we do. Today we hear a lot about the word "redemption." The crooked or immoral politician seeks redemption with society by reforming and living a new life. That may work with people, but a holy and perfect God cannot accept the things

we try to do right because they are never adequate to pay for even one small sin.

How does the king deal with his servant who is pleading for mercy? "The servant's master took pity on him and canceled the debt." That's amazing considering how astronomical the debt is. I cannot image the European Union canceling the debt for Greece. Our God, King of kings and Lord of lords is holy and perfect. He will not cancel debt because that would violate his justice and holiness and righteousness. Yet, he loves people and cares about them. He takes the monster debt of my sin and yours, even the sin of the world, and places it all on Jesus. Isaiah 53 tells us, "The Lord laid on him (on Jesus) the iniquity of us." Listen to how Colossians describes this canceling of the debt that took place in Jesus. "He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross." Just before Jesus died, he cried out from the cross, "It is finished!" That is one word in the Greek, the word "tetelestai." That same word has been found on ancient pieces of paper to mark bills paid in full.

It is in this complete canceling of the debt that we find the strength to forgive others who sin against us. The power to forgive is not found in our hearts. It is found in the heart of God. The forgiveness that comes to us through Jesus flows through us to those who hurt us and sin against us.

The blessing of forgiveness flows through us

Jesus shocks us with the rest of the story about this man who had a large debt forgiven. "But when that servant went out he found one of his fellow servants who owe him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded." It says that he went out. He can hardly wait to get his hands on one of the servants who owes him a few thousand dollars. He grabs him around the neck and begins choking him. He yells at him to pay back what he owes. When the servant begs for mercy he turns a deaf ear. There is no compassion, no concern and no caring that should flow from the fact he had a huge debt forgiven. He has the man thrown into prison until he can pay of the debt. This man is not just being a bozo like Terry Mikel. He is willfully and maliciously attacking his fellow servant for the debt that is owed him.

The other servants saw what had happened. This did not happen in secret. That is often the case when someone refuses to forgive another person. The whole family knows about. Did you hear about that guy down the street? He and his son have gotten into an argument and they have not spoken to each other for years? The whole community knows about this sad case.

What did the master do when he found about the servant who refused to forgive the other servant? "Then the master called the servant in, 'You wicked servant,' he said. 'I canceled all the 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 jailors to be tortured until he should pay back all he owed." What will happen to any of us if we willfully, and angrily, and stubbornly and sinfully refuse to forgive and show mercy to those who hurt us? Jesus warns us, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart." Jesus forgives all our sin, but he does

not forgive the sin we refuse to hand over to him for forgiveness.

And where will we find the strength to forgive? It comes from a heart and life that has been changed by God's mercy and God's forgiveness. Jesus was fully tempted as we are. He was tempted to flashes of anger as he was being mocked and mistreated and nailed to the cross. You know what he prayed as he was being nailed to the cross. "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." In her book *The Hiding Place* Corrie ten Boom tells of the suffering and abuse she and her sister experienced while they were in a prison camp in Germany during WW2. After the war she told of how the Lord Jesus was with them during those dark days. It was she who said, "There is no pit so deep that Christ is not deeper." After one of her lectures a man approached her and asked for her forgiveness. She saw his face. It was the German guard who had beaten her sister. She writes how everything inside of her cried out, "I will not forgive that man for what he has done to my sister." But then the words of Jesus came back to her "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." She found the power to forgive not from within her heart, but from the heart of Jesus, his mercy and kindness, that flowed through her.

So it was with poor Joseph. Imagine the anger that must have welled up inside of him as he lived each day with how his ten brothers threw him into a pit to die, but then sold him into slavery in Egypt. When he became a powerful ruler in Egypt he could have gotten even with them. Instead when they asked for forgiveness, the Lord who loved Joseph and forgave his sins also gave him the power to forgive. The Lord who has given you the blessing of forgiveness will also give the blessing and power to forgive. Amen.