

BIBLE PASSAGE AND READING FOR FEBRUARY 14, 2024

FREE TO FORGIVE

BIBLE PASSAGE & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Ephesians 4:30-32

30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

1. What TRUTHS do I need to BELIEVE about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), myself, or the world?
2. What SINS do I need to REPENT of doing or seek to avoid?
3. What ACTIONS will I take to OBEY the truths I have observed or learned?

FREE TO FORGIVE

One fundamental premise of [the Christian life] is that although we are familiar with the gospel, we continue to live in a manner that practically speaking, denies the gospel as we relate to God and to others. We know it, but we do not know it. We know we are justified by faith, yet insist on our self-justification projects to give us our sense of worth. We know we are beloved children of God, yet succumb to anxiety and worry, self-pity and self-hatred.

One area that rather ruthlessly exposes the often shallow depths to which the professions we hold in our head have penetrated our hearts is our resistance to forgive others who have genuinely hurt us. This is the point where it gets real, and for many there is perhaps no other area that is as challenging as this one when it comes to living out what we say we believe. One teacher has remarked, “There is nothing else in my life that has shown me how impotent I am like trying to forgive.”¹ Why is it so difficult for us to forgive?

Jesus and Paul speak repeatedly about forgiveness and the commands to forgive are consistently set in the context of the forgiveness that we’ve received from God (Matt. 6:12, 14–15; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). In Matthew 6, you’ll recall that Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray. Of all the petitions contained in the Lord’s prayer, Jesus only bothers to explicate one of them: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14–15). That is a difficult teaching. Can it really be? Can we, in some way, be disqualified from the forgiveness of sins by our refusal to forgive others?

Jesus is not teaching that as I struggle today to forgive my spouse or my roommate that my salvation is somehow teetering on the brink. That militates against everything we have been talking about to this point in this study. But I do think that it is fair to say that in a very real way, if we don’t “get” forgiveness, we don’t “get” the gospel. Or put another way, if you want to know if the gospel is taking deep root in your life, then you can look right here for the answer: are you able to forgive those who have hurt you?

We’ll spend the rest of our time reflecting on the radical nature of biblical forgiveness contained in Matt. 18:21–35, the Parable of the Forgiving King.

Matthew 18:21 Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven. 23 “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 25 And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

True forgiveness is costly. Forgiveness involves a real debt and a real offense. And forgiving that debt will come at great cost to us. Minimizing the offense for the sake of a superficial, expedient peace is not true forgiveness. The payment is not forgiven, it is simply deferred (and also likely to be demanded at a later, more convenient time!).

That's bookkeeping. The king surrendered an immeasurable sum in forgiving the servant's debt. Someone always has to incur the cost. Everything within us wants the perpetrator to incur it, but true forgiveness requires we assume it. And how do we incur the cost? Practically what does this look like? Don Hamilton writes:

“Once upon a time, I was engaged to a young woman who changed her mind. I forgave her . . . but in small sums over a year . . . done when I spoke to her and refrained from rehashing the past, done whenever I renounced jealousy and self-pity when seeing her with another man, done when I praised her to others when I wanted to slice away at her reputation. Those were the payments—but she never saw them.” 2

This is a great picture of what it means to incur the debt in extending forgiveness. The author incurred the debt each time he refused to gossip about her. He made a payment each time he willingly engaged her in conversation refusing to avoid her through the silent treatment. Forgiveness is costly and feels unjust. And it doesn't end at the moment forgiveness is granted; the payments are usually made incrementally over time because again, the hurt is real and forgiveness is costly.

True forgiveness doesn't demand repayment. There is a perfect word-picture for an unforgiving heart in verse 28: “. . . and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’” Now we may not recognize ourselves in this scene until we realize that “seizing” and “choking” do not necessarily entail physical violence. We can “choke” someone in refusing to extend forgiveness through much subtler, “refined” means: gossip, avoidance, coldness, angry thoughts, biting remarks, bitterness, and others. In one form or another, we will demand that the offender incur a cost if we are not willing to incur it ourselves. And for any action over which we can honestly say, “Because you have done that, I will now do this,” we are “choking” and “seizing” our debtor.

True forgiveness makes us free. One reason that we may bristle against forgiveness is that we appeal to our sense of justice—and isn't justice a good thing? “But, they deserve it!” We fear that in extending forgiveness, we will be taken advantage of, abused, or controlled in some way. We certainly don't want to be a doormat, and so we assert our rights by demanding that they pay. But when we refuse to forgive, and we harbor bitterness, plot our revenge, or work to avoid this person, then ironically, we have allowed the offender to exert control over us—the very thing we feared would happen if we had forgiven them their debt! We actually place ourselves in bondage to our debtor when we refuse to extend forgiveness. We find ourselves in a figurative prison, held hostage by destructive thoughts and emotions. Forgiveness is what brings us our true freedom and joy. But how do we grow to be able to forgive like that?

Our debt is far greater than any debt that is owed us. Whatever offense we have suffered and whatever debt we feel is owed to us as a result, it is paltry in comparison to the debt that we have been forgiven by God. The parable is intended to be laughable. It is caricature. One denarius was roughly equal to one day's wages. One talent was roughly equal to 6,000 denarii. Ten thousand talents would then equal roughly 164,000 years of wages. It is a ridiculous sum, impossible to ever repay. That one person could owe ten thousand talents is simply inconceivable. Yet that is what we are told. This is a picture of our indebtedness to God for our sinfulness and for the offenses we have committed against our Creator and Lord. It is a debt that is impossible to repay and trying to repay it is simply absurd. Can you imagine just how ridiculous it is for this servant to ever think that he could work to repay his debt? “Ten-thousand talents? OK, the check is in the mail!” But that's a perfect picture of us when we think that we could ever repay our debt through any measure of self-imposed laws or standards we have set for ourselves. The good news of the gospel is that we have been forgiven a debt even greater than that of this pitiable servant by a merciful and gracious King. And we have nothing now to pay. But it was costly for our King as well. It cost him the life of his son. Our debt is paid in full and that truth needs to be worked out in our relationships with others, even those who have hurt us.

The gospel frees us and empowers us to forgive. Having received this great mercy, the foolish servant turns immediately to a fellow servant, seizes him, chokes him, and demands payment from him. What has happened? He has utterly forgotten the mercy of the Great King. Or, that mercy has not done a thing to change him. Quite possibly, he still feels as if he can repay his great debt (for such a degree of mercy is humiliating, isn't it?), and so he

practically lives as if all of the resources available to him in forgiveness aren't really there. We rightly see this servant as foolish, insolent, and impossibly dense. But if we are honest, that is us in living color when we refuse to forgive. The good news of our forgiveness has not penetrated our hearts. We know it, but we don't know it. When we withhold forgiveness, we remove ourselves from the company of the indebted and from the community of sinners saved wholly by grace. We count others the greater sinners, their debts greater than our own. "But I would never do that!" But the gospel tells us that we've done far worse and still find mercy. We are the bigger debtor. Only our awareness of the debt that we have been forgiven frees us to release others from their indebtedness to us, costly though it may be.

The foolish servant is not imprisoned for his debt, but for the hardness of his heart. It is because he could not forgive, though forgiven. It is because he could not show compassion, though pitied. The gospel frees us to forgive because our debt has been cancelled. Now we can release others from their paltry debts. But the gospel also empowers us to forgive because in it we find the resources to deal honestly with the hurt in our lives. Has someone maliciously tarnished your reputation? Your reputation and identity are secure as a child of God! Has someone stolen something of value to you, be it peace of mind, a relationship, or an opportunity? Your wealth is found in Christ! The gospel both frees us and empowers us to forgive others. To persist in withholding forgiveness then is to disparage both the great mercies we have been shown and the wealth of resources that we have freely in Christ. And that is why forgiveness gets to the very heart of the gospel.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. Why is it so difficult for us to forgive someone who has wronged us? What gospel promises do we need to believe? How is withholding forgiveness a manifestation of self-righteousness?
3. Share about an instance where refusing to extend forgiveness to someone figuratively imprisoned you—OR—share about a redemptive experience you have had in forgiving someone who has harmed you or in being forgiven by someone you wronged. How was the gospel operating in that situation?

Notes:

1. Dave Desforge, "Forgiveness," *Sonship* (1997), 14–8.
2. Don Hamilton, *Forgiveness*, 10.