
The Writer's Inkhorn

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Continuing Reflections on the Word for Your Personal Growth in Christ

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So, How Much Do You Owe?



will also forgive you: But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Focus: Matthew 6:12, 14, 15

Main Scripture Test: Matthew 18:21-35

This month's issue is reshaped from a chapel message I shared at Trinity Christian College. I have chosen not to remove some of the contextual references because I thought you would enjoy them just as they are, to help illuminate the message in the texts of Scripture.

Community matters. There are three texts of Scripture that I will draw from for this lesson: Matthew 6:12, 14, 15; Matthew 18:21-35, and Colossians 3:12-17. We get a glimpse of the community gathered on one occasion when Jesus delivers what has come to be known as "The Sermon on the Mount," as recorded in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7. In just about the middle of Matthew's record, there appears what we have also termed "The Lord's Prayer," although, as many others have aptly pointed out, it *could* have been called "the *disciples'* prayer," since it is the Lord, Jesus, teaching His *disciples* how to pray as per *their* request. I think it is particularly instructive that, of all of the things covered in the Lord's Prayer, the thing Jesus returns to at the immediate conclusion of the prayer is this issue of **forgiveness**. Matthew 6:12 says, "and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Verse 13 offers a conclusion to the overall prayer: "for thine is the kingdom" and so on. But then vs.14 and 15 say this:

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father

I need you to read it again, and just hold on to that thought for a bit.

Later on in Matthew's gospel, he presents some more instruction that Jesus has given on forgiveness that happens as an answer to a question that Peter posed to Jesus. We cannot tell from the text, chronologically, where this exchange takes place and what were the circumstances surrounding the question. However, what seems likely to me is that Peter has gotten a bit *perturbed*. Possibly someone has gotten on, shall we say, his *last* nerve, committing the *same* offense against him repeatedly, and then apologizing for it, over and over and over, again.

Most of us can attest to what that feels like, I'm sure. Amen? Amen! As a college student, you may have had the roommate that agreed to share the expenses of living together in community, but every time the toothpaste was gone, the shampoo was used up, the washing detergent was out, they never had any money to buy more. But, if you were going out to eat and it was clear that everyone was paying for themselves, money mysteriously appeared, and you would hear something like, "My Grandpa sent me a check; remember? I told you as you rushed out the door to get to class on time." Repeated offenses! Forgiveness? Are you there, yet?

And there are those professors or instructors who have had the same student that regularly turned in late assignments – the *same* offense – but the rationale, thin but well-crafted, differs each time: Week 2, his

computer crashed; Week 4, the thumb drive is misplaced; Week 6, he e-mailed the paper to himself at TCC but the file would not open once he arrived; Week 8, he opened file and went to print, but had no copies left on his ID card, and no money to buy more.

Living in community *is* tough. And what I *want* to do, what I *should* do, and what I *do* are not always nicely aligned. When I am hurt, I want *to* hurt, or at the very least, just go somewhere and nurse my wounds. We want to operate asynchronously (that is, doing our *own* thing), when synchronicity (working in concert with others) is the order of the day. Community matters. In community, we are responsible *to* one another, and *for* one another. Listen to the words of Christian artist, Matthew West:

It's the hardest thing to give away.
And the last thing on your mind today
It always goes to those that don't deserve
It's the opposite of how you feel when
the pain they caused is just too real
It takes everything you have to say the
word...
Forgiveness...

So here is a story. Jesus has just given instructions about what to do if someone offends you. He says to first, pull that person aside, to talk to him or her alone. If the person does not hear or want to receive what you are saying, take one or two witnesses and try it again. If *that* doesn't work, bring him or her before the church – the community. But do you sense a set-up coming? Jesus knows what has been going on among the brothers; He has not been oblivious, but Peter walks right into it. Here we go: Matthew 18:21-35, NIV:

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

²¹ *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?"

[Jesus gives first a direct response.]

²² *Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*

Then Jesus gives Peter this extended response in the form of a story.

²³ *Therefore is the kingdom of heaven like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.*

[A talent was worth about **16-20 years** of a day laborer's wages.]

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 [had compassion] 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 denarii.*

[A denarius was the usual daily wage of a day laborer – **one day's pay**.]

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 back everything."

[Familiar words, right? But check out what happens next.]

³⁰ *But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.*

Now notice how the community of other servants appeals for justice on behalf of Servant #2 who has just been wronged by his

fellow Servant #1. Wouldn't it be incredible if we still had that same sense of community and would speak out readily and speedily on behalf of all those who have been wronged or disenfranchised in some way? God *help* us!

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.*

Then Jesus concludes the story with these biting words:

³⁵ *This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*

Let's Do the Math

The debt that Servant #1 owed was 10,000 talents, where one talent = 6,000 denarii (about 16 years of labor); 10,000 talents would conservatively be 60 million denarii. **I did the math:** if one denarius was an average day's wage, then 60 million denarii would be 60 million days of work, roughly 164,383.5 years (the lifetimes of 170 Methuselahs each living 969 years)! What is the point here? Simply this: this was a debt impossible for him to repay.

As an aside, I wonder how *one* servant could amass such a debt, *anyway*? Were they perhaps fines for his other misdeeds? But he promised to pay a debt neither he nor all of his descendants in successive generations could yet have paid off, even up until now! But his master's response was *compassion* and *complete forgiveness*, simply because the

servant dared to ask. In my heart I hear these words:

**I owed a debt I could not pay;
Jesus paid a debt he did not owe.**

By way of comparison, the debt that Servant #2 owed to Servant #1 was a hundred denarii which was one-six hundred thousandth of the debt he had just been forgiven, an amount so miniscule that we have a difficult time wrapping our minds around it. So just let me say it this way: **100** days vs. **sixty million** days, and let *you* decide the magnitude of the attitude of unforgiveness.

Servant #1's response to Servant #2's plea for mercy was this: he grabbed him by the throat, demanding to be paid what he was owed immediately, and when Servant #2 could not comply, he had him thrown into prison until he *could* pay. As an aside, I've always been puzzled about how someone was expected to work and pay off a debt they owed if they were in prison and could not work anyway. Never mind.

In any case, Servant #1's response to forgiveness was all wrong. Our response to a request for forgiveness, or lack thereof, is a significant factor in the life, health, and well-being of your faith community and your family. How willing are you to forgive? Do you harbor unforgiveness in *your* heart? Hear Jesus' words, again:

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The master, just having forgiven the unforgiving servant was not only displeased, but I would even go so far as to say he was so **disgusted** with Servant #1's attitude and behavior, that he had *him*, Servant #1, thrown in jail as well, after giving him a good talking to, as the elders would say. Dare we act as if

we have nothing from which we need to *be* forgiven, as we stand in judgment of others?

I do not know about you, but I *do* know I *cannot* afford to have *my* sins, mistakes, errors, or whatever pile up until which time I decide I will offer forgiveness to someone *else*. Matthew West continues:

It'll clear the bitterness away;
It can even set a prisoner free
There is no end to what its power can do
So let it go and be amazed by what you
see through eyes of grace
The prisoner that it really frees is you...
Forgiveness, forgiveness...

And hear a reminder in Paul's words to the faith community at Colosse:

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive, even as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵ And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17, NIV/KJV)

Now, then, how much do *you* owe? Here are the words to a song from yesteryear. Some of you will remember it:

HOW MUCH I OWE

How much I owe for love divine?
How much I owe, since Christ is mine?
All that He is to me, I know,
I cannot tell how much I owe.

King Jesus died on Calvary
Oh, yes, He died for you and me
He paid a debt for me I know,
And I cannot tell how much I owe.

How much I owe, for love divine
How much I owe, since Christ is mine
All that He is to me, I know;
I cannot tell how much I owe.

May we never be so consumed by our own desires to fix situations when we have been wronged or otherwise hurt that we begin to harbor unforgiveness in our hearts and take matters into our own hands to get even. When we are tempted to do so, we would do well to remember the Scripture:

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord. (Romans 12:19)

So, tell me again, *how* much do you owe?

Your Teacher and Sister,
Dr. Mary Webster Moore

Contact me. May I assist you? I am available for speaking and workshops and I am dedicated to adding value to the lives of others, for spiritual, personal, and professional growth. Feel free to reach out to me at 773.735.8713 or send an email to me at mary.webster@trnty.edu



