

Bruce, A. B. (1995, c1877). *The training of the twelve; or, Passages out of the Gospels, exhibiting the twelve disciples of Jesus under discipline for the apostleship.*

SECTION III FORGIVING INJURIES

Matt. xviii. 21-35

A lesson on forgiveness fitly ended the solemn discourse on humility delivered in the hearing of disputatious disciples. The connection of thought between beginning and end is very real, though it does not quite lie on the surface. A vindictive temper, which is the thing here condemned, is one of the vices fostered by an ambitious spirit. An ambitious man is sure to be the receiver of many offences, real or imaginary. He is quick to take offence, and slow to forgive or forget wrong. Forgiving injuries is not in his way: he is more in his element when he lays hold of his debtor by the throat, and with ruffian fierceness demands payment.

The concluding part of the discourse was occasioned by a question put by Peter, the usual spokesman of the twelve, who came to Jesus and said: “ Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him ? till seven times ? “ By what precise association of ideas the question was suggested to Peter’s mind we know not; perhaps he did not know himself, for the movements of the mind are often mysterious, and in impulsive mercurial natures they are also apt to be sudden. Thoughts shoot into consciousness like meteors into the upper atmosphere; and suddenly conceived, are as abruptly uttered, with physical gestures accompanying, indicating the force with which they have taken possession of the soul. Suffice it to say, that the disciple’s query, however suggested, was relevant to the subject in hand, and had latent spiritual affinities with all that Jesus had said concerning humility and the giving and receiving of offences. It showed on Peter’s part an intelligent attention to the words of his Master, and a conscientious solicitude to conform his conduct to those heavenly precepts by which he felt for the moment subdued and softened.

The question put by Peter further revealed a curious mixture of childlikeness and childishness. To be so earnest about the duty of forgiving, and even to think of practicing the duty so often as seven times towards the same offender, betrayed the true child of the kingdom; for none but the graciously-minded are exercised in that fashion. But to imagine that pardon repeated just so many times would exhaust obligation and amount to something magnanimous and divine, was very simple. Poor Peter, in his ingenuous attempt at the magnanimous, was like a child standing on tiptoe to make himself as tall as his father, or climbing to the top of a hillock to get near the skies.

The reply of Jesus to His honest but crude disciple was admirably adapted to put him out of conceit with himself, and to make him feel how puny and petty were the dimensions of his charity. Echoing the thought of the prophetic oracle, it tells those who would be like God that they must multiply pardons: “ I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven.” Alas for the rarity of such charity under the sun! Christ’s thoughts are not man’s thoughts, neither are His ways common among men. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are His thoughts and ways higher than those current in this world. For many, far from forgiving times without number a brother confessing his fault, do not forgive even so much as once, but act so that we can recognize their portrait drawn to the life in the parable of the unmerciful servant.

In this parable, whose minutes details are fraught with instruction, three things are specially noteworthy: the contrast between the two debts; the corresponding contrast between the two creditors; and the doom pronounced on those who, being forgiven the large debt owed by them, refuse to forgive the small debt owed to them.

The two debts are respectively ten thousand talents and a hundred denarii, being to each other in the proportion of, say, a million to one. The enormous disparity is intended to represent the difference between the shortcomings of all men towards God, and those with which any man can charge a fellow-creature. The representation is confessed to be just by all who know human nature and their own hearts; and the consciousness of its truth helps them greatly to be gentle and forbearing towards offenders. Yet the parable seems to be faulty in this, that it makes the unmerciful servant answerable for such a debt as it seems impossible for any man to run up. Who ever heard of a private debt amounting in British money to millions sterling? The difficulty is met by the suggestion that the debtor is a person of high rank, like one of the princes whom Darius set over the kingdom of Persia, or a provincial governor of the Roman Empire. Such an official might very soon make himself liable for the huge sum here specified, simply by retaining for his own benefit the revenues of his province as they passed through his hands, instead of remitting them to the royal treasury.

That it was some such unscrupulous minister of state, guilty of the crime of embezzlement, whom Jesus had in His eye, appears all but certain when we recollect what gave rise to the discourse of which this parable forms the conclusion. The disciples had disputed among themselves who should be greatest in the kingdom, each one being ambitious to obtain the place of distinction for himself. Here, accordingly, their Master holds up to their view the conduct of a great one, concerned not about the faithful discharge of his duty, but about his own aggrandizement. "Behold," He says to them in effect, "what men who wish to be great ones do! They rob their king of his revenue, and abuse the opportunities afforded by their position to enrich themselves; and while scandalously negligent of their own obligations, they are characteristically exacting towards any little one who may happen in the most innocent way, not by fraud, but by misfortune, to have become their debtor."

Thus understood, the parable faithfully represents the guilt and criminality of those at least who are animated by the spirit of pride, and deliberately make self-advancement their chief end: a class by no means small in number. Such men are great sinners, whoever may be little ones. They not merely come short of the glory of God, the true chief end of man, but they deliberately rob the Supreme of His due, calling in question His sovereignty, denying their accountability to Him for their actions, and by the spirit which animates them, saying every moment of their lives, "Who is Lord over us?" It is impossible to over-estimate the magnitude of their guilt.

The contrast between the two creditors is not less striking than that between the two debts. The king forgives the enormous debt of his unprincipled satrap on receiving a simple promise to pay; the forgiven satrap relentlessly exacts the petty debt of some three pounds sterling from the poor hapless underling who owes it, stopping his ear to the identical petition for delay which he had himself successfully presented to his sovereign lord. Here also the coloring of the parable appears too strong. The great creditor seems lenient to excess: for surely such a crime as the satrap had been guilty of ought not to go unpunished; and surely it had been wise to attach little weight to a promise of future payment made by a man who, with unbounded extravagance, had already squandered such a prodigious sum, so that he had nothing to pay! Then this great debtor, in his character as small creditor, seems incredibly inhuman; for even the meanest, most greedy,

and grasping churl, not to speak of so great a gentleman, might well be ashamed to show such eagerness about so trifling a sum as to seize the poor wight who owed it by the throat and drag him to prison, to lie there till he paid it.

The representation is doubtless extreme, and yet in both parts it is in accordance with truth. God does deal with His debtors as the king dealt with the satrap. He is slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth Him of the evil He hath threatened. He giveth men space to repent, and by providential delays accepts promises of amendment, though He knoweth full well that they will be broken, and that those who made them will go on sinning as before. So He dealt with Pharaoh, with Israel, with Nineveh; so He deals with all whom He calls to account by remorse of conscience, by a visitation of sickness, or by the apprehension of death, when, on their exclaiming, in a passing penitential mood, “ Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay Thee all,” He grants their petition, knowing that when the danger or the fit of repentance is over, the promise of amendment will be utterly forgotten. Truly was it written of old: “He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.”

Nor is the part played by the unmerciful servant, however infamous and inhuman, altogether unexampled; although its comparative rarity is implied in that part of the parabolic story which represents the fellow-servants of the relentless one as shocked and grieved at his conduct, and as reporting it to the common master. It would not be impossible to find originals of the dark picture, even among professors of the Christian religion, who believe in the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus, and hope to experience all the benefits of divine mercy for His sake. It is, indeed, precisely by such persons that the crime of unmercifulness is, in the parable, supposed to be committed. The exacting creditor meets his debtor just as he himself comes out from the presence of the king after craving and receiving remission of his own debt. This feature in the story at once adapts its lesson specially to believers in the gospel, and points out the enormity of their guilt. All such, if not really forgiven, do at least consciously live under a reign of grace, in which God is assuming the attitude of one who desires all to be reconciled unto Himself, and for that end proclaims a gratuitous pardon to all who will receive it. In men so situated the spirit of unmercifulness is peculiarly offensive. Shameful in a pagan,—for the light of nature teacheth the duty of being merciful,—such inhuman rigor as is here portrayed in a Christian is utterly abominable. Think of it! he goes out from the presence of the King of grace; rises up from the perusal of the blessed gospel, which tells of One who received publicans and sinners, even the chief; walks forth from the house of prayer where the precious evangel is proclaimed, yea, from the communion table, which commemorates the love that moved the Son of God to pay the debt of sinners; and he meets a fellow-mortal who has done him some petty wrong, and seizes him by the throat, and truculently demands reparation on pain of imprisonment or something worse if it be not forthcoming. May not the most gracious Lord righteously say to such an one: “ O thou wicked servant! I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me; shouldest thou not also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee? ” What can the miscreant who showed no mercy expect, but to receive judgment without mercy, and to be delivered over to the tormentors, to be kept in durance and put to the rack, without hope of release, till he shall have paid his debt to the uttermost farthing ?

This very doom Jesus, in the closing sentences of His discourse, solemnly assured His disciples awaited all who cherish an unforgiving temper, even if they themselves should be the guilty parties. “ So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you if ye from your hearts forgive

not every one his brother.” Stern words these, which lay down a rule of universal application, not relaxable in the case of favored parties. Were partiality admissible at all, such as the twelve would surely get the benefit of it; but as if to intimate that in this matter there is no respect of persons, the law is enunciated with direct, emphatic reference to them. And harsh as the law might seem, Jesus is careful to indicate His cordial approval of its being enforced with Rhadamanthine rigor. For that purpose He calls God the Judge by the endearing name “ My heavenly Father; “ as if to say: “The great God and King does not seem to me unduly stern in decreeing such penalties against the unforgiving. I, the merciful, tender-hearted Son of man, thoroughly sympathize with such judicial severity. I should solemnly say Amen to that doom pronounced even against you if you behaved so as to deserve it. Think not that because ye are my chosen companions, therefore violations of the law of love by you will be winked at. On the contrary, just because ye are great ones in the kingdom, so far as privilege goes, will compliance with its fundamental laws be especially expected of you, and non-compliance most severely punished. To whom much is given, of him shall much be required. See, then, that ye forgive every one his brother their trespasses, and that ye do so really, not in pretense, even from your very hearts.” By such severe plainness of speech did Jesus educate His disciples for being truly great ones in His kingdom: great not in pride, pretension, and presumption, but in loyal obedience to the behests of their King, and particular]y to this law of forgiveness, on which He insisted in His teaching so earnestly and so frequently. And we cannot but remark here, at the close of our exposition of the discourse on humility, that if the apostles in after days did not rise superior to petty passions, it was not the fault of their Master in neglecting their training. “With holy earnestness,”—to quote the language of a German scholar,—” springing equally out of solicitude for the new community, zeal for the cause of God and of men; nay, for the essential truths of the new religion of divine grace and of the brotherhood of mankind, Jesus sought to ward off the dark shadow of petty, ungodly feelings which He saw creeping stealthily into the circle of His disciples, and of whose still more extensive and mischievous influence, after His departure, He could not but be apprehensive.” We cannot believe that all this earnestness had been manifested in vain; that the disciples did not at length get the salt thoroughly into them.

Sproul, R. (1996, c1991). *Following Christ*.

Forgive Us Our Debts As We Also Have Forgiven Our Debtors

This is an extremely dangerous prayer to pray, but it contains a principle that the New Testament takes very seriously. The supreme warning from Jesus is that God will judge us according to how we have judged other people. Since man is saved by grace, what better evidence could there be of a man's salvation than that he offers to others the grace he himself has so generously received? If that grace is not conspicuous in our lives, we may validly question the genuineness of our own alleged conversion.

We must take God seriously on this point. In Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus tells the story of two men who owed money. One owed roughly \$10 million, and the other owed about \$18. The one who owed the large sum had his debt forgiven by the man to whom he owed that debt. But he, in turn, would not forgive the man who owed him the paltry sum of \$18. Interestingly enough, both men asked for the same thing—more time—not a total release from the debt.

It was comical for the man with the exorbitantly large debt to ask for more time, since even by today's wage standards, the amount owed was an astronomical figure. The daily wage at that time was approximately eighteen cents per day. The man with the small debt could have paid his debt in three months. His request for more time was not unreasonable, but his creditor, rather than expressing the forgiveness he had received, began to harass him. The point should be clear. Our offenses to each other and the offenses people do to us are like an \$18 debt, while the innumerable offenses we have committed against the Lord God Omnipotent are like the \$10 million debt.

Jonathan Edwards, in his famous sermon "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners," said that any sin is more or less heinous, depending upon the honor and majesty of the one whom we had offended. Since God is of infinite honor, infinite majesty, and infinite holiness, the slightest sin is of infinite consequence. Such seemingly trivial sins are nothing less than "cosmic treason" when viewed in light of the great King against whom we have sinned. We are debtors who cannot pay, yet we have been released from the threat of debtors' prison. It is an insult to God for us to withhold forgiveness and grace from those who ask us, while claiming to be forgiven and saved by grace ourselves.

There is another important point to consider here. Even in our act of forgiveness there is no merit. We cannot commend ourselves to God and claim forgiveness merely because we have shown forgiveness to someone else. Our forgiveness in no way obligates God toward us. Luke 17:10 clearly points out that there is no merit even in the best of our good works: "When you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

We deserve nothing for our obedience because obedience—even to the point of perfection—is the minimal requirement of a citizen of God's kingdom. Obedience is his duty. The only thing we could claim would be a lack of punishment, but certainly no reward, because we have done only what is expected. Obedience never qualifies as service "above and beyond the call of duty." We are merely in a position to prostrate ourselves before God and beg his forgiveness. But, if we do, we must be prepared to show that forgiveness ourselves; otherwise our position in Christ dangles precariously. The bottom line of what Jesus is saying is this: "Forgiven people forgive

other people.” We dare not claim to be possessors of his life and nature and at the same time fail to exhibit that life and nature.

To carry the thought further, if God has forgiven someone, can we do any less? It would be incredible to think that we, who are so guilty, would refuse to forgive someone who has been forgiven by God, who is completely guiltless. We are to be mirrors of grace to others, reflecting what we have received ourselves. This implements the Golden Rule in practical terms.

Forgiveness is not a private matter but a corporate one. The body of Christ is a group of people who live daily in the context of forgiveness. What distinguishes us is the fact that we are forgiven sinners. Jesus calls attention, not only to the horizontal elements in the petition, but also to the vertical. We are to pray every day for the forgiveness of our sins.

Some may ask at this point, “If God has already forgiven us, why should we ask for forgiveness? Isn’t it wrong to ask for something he’s already given us?” The ultimate answer to questions like this is always the same. We do it because God commands it. First John 1:9 points out that one mark of a Christian is his continual asking for forgiveness. The verb tense in the Greek indicates an ongoing process. Forgiveness sets the Christian apart. The unbeliever represses his sinfulness, but the Christian is sensitive to his unworthiness. Confession takes up a significant portion of his prayer time.