

Trinity 22 Sermon

A man came to his master, a man who was a slave, a man who owed his master ninety-nine billion, one hundred and forty-four million dollars. This debt, he was forgiven. This forgiven man would then go on to strangle and jail his fellow slave who owed him a mere six-hundred and fifty-eight dollars. In another parable, Jesus asks Simon the pharisee a question: *‘There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred Denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him more?’* Simon answered and said, *‘I suppose the one whom he forgave more.’* And [Jesus] said to him, *‘you have judged rightly.’*¹ There’s a real chasm between these two parables, meaning, Jesus words should, theoretically, carry over between the two situations but I don’t have to tell you that the hearts of men are wicked and fickle things.

The first man, the one who owed the ninety-nine billion and change, you can tell he didn’t take account of his debt or think very much of the forgiveness of that debt. Really, its pretty astonishing to us to imagine being so blind to yourself – so incapable of self-reflection – but nevertheless, he exemplifies this ignorance. To add to it, this man was threatened by punishment while those in the second parable heard *no mention* of punishment and he persists in that ignorance. You can sort of get a sense of the kind of person that does this: It makes sense that he would be both incapable of

1 Luke 7:41-43

being realistic about the debt he owed, saying that he could pay it back, and that he would then continue in a sort of blissful ignorance or self-intoxicated deception after having been forgiven the debt and think little to nothing about that forgiveness.

A soul that walks the same paths as a man like that will certainly perish.

There are a matrix of related things here: vengeance, humility, forgiveness, and faithfulness all follow the same lines down a man's heart and into his life. To be very clear, the thing that makes for this man's blindness is a great and severe love of self. This self-love when it is not abased by fasting, prayer, repentance, and an honest reckoning of your account with God grows toweringly large with great power and a firm grip on your conscience and desires. Vengeance is born in the heart of self-lovers: vengeance is the bastard child of anger; anger which takes one's own part in a matter and refuses to give or lack for the benefit of another. Humility removes the desire and power of vengeance from the heart. Now, humility is difficult to learn. It can either be learned through the aforementioned tools of the Christian: fasting (that is, self denial – denying your sinful desires and denying your gluttonous or excessive desires), fervent prayer, and the hearing and learning of Scripture or it can be learned in the way of the self-obsessed slave: through a sudden and immediate punishment. If humility is not inculcated in the heart, the soul struggles to embrace the Christian Faith. Forgiveness is born out of humility – forgiveness is the lesson that the indebted slave should have learned through the kindnesses and good-will of his master.

When Jesus indicates that we must learn to forgive from the heart he means very simply that we must forgive in truth but he is also teaching us that our forgiveness of our neighbor comes from our own treasury, the treasury of our heart.

Consider this: In the parable, who has to come up with the ninety-nine billion dollars? Its not the slave! Right. It is the master. The master simply eats the debt of the slave. This teaches us about Christ through pictures. In hearing and learning the Scriptures you are brought time and time again to the cross of Christ. His blood, shed for you, specifically, makes payment for the sins you have committed against God. You, friends, in your body are finite beings. You have a limit of space and time – limits that God does not share with you. His Law, His will, is an infinite thing because it is drawn out of His infinite being. That is to say, there's no difference between God's will and God's being.

So, when you or I transgress that will, we incur an infinite debt. Another way of thinking about this is that when we were originally created, our parents in the Garden, we were made perfectly in harmony, in line, with God and His will and any step outside of that casts us into a completely, infinitely different category of being. Now, nothing can exist apart from God, nothing exists that is not created and sustained by His Holy Spirit. So, to exist outside of God's will at all means, necessarily, that you are infinitely removed from the source of existence.

The bottom line is that Scripture teaches us to consider our sins as a more costly debt than even that of this selfish slave. As the apostle writes in the letter to the Christians at Colosse, “*you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight – if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the Gospel which you heard.*”² You then who have received this forgiveness and even more than forgiveness – the life of the Holy Spirit of Christ in you – now ought to consider yourself like that forgiven slave. Better, even, than the slave! For, you have the example of the slave to root out even further the pride and hatred of the old man and the power to walk in the newness of Christ.

It is humility and forgiveness working in faith that heals the wickedness of humanity because these are the actions and life of Christ given for you to walk in. *Forgive one another even as Christ forgave you, so you also must forgive.*³ These words were written to Christians who were being persecuted and killed by a world that hated them unjustly. But I say this to you, it may be easier for a persecuted Christian to forgive than it is for you. A circumstance like persecution gives birth to great clarity because it quickly removes the power of the deceitful flesh. How much easier is it for the Spirit to instruct the soul in forgiveness when your life is on the line than it is for

2 Colossians 1:21-23a

3 Colossians 3:13

the Spirit to break through and teach you when you are comfortable, safe, content, and well-fed? Forgiving an attacker is an easier feat than forgiving a selfish and lazy spouse. Forgiving a persecutor is an easier feat than forgiving a spiteful and rude friend. In both cases, the forgiver eats the debt – that is what forgiveness is: an unjust absorbing of the damages caused by others. But how much more necessary for human life and flourishing is the forgiveness of those whom we love, those whom we ought to love, and those whom we are close to than the forgiveness of someone pointing a gun at your head?

If you've been listening along and remembered the words of the Lord's prayer you are a wise soul. "*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,*" instructs our master, following that with, "*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.*"⁴ Do you hear the parable summed up in the words of Jesus' teaching? It is not by your forgiveness that you merit the forgiveness of God but it is through the forgiveness of God and the repentant life that He has bestowed on you that your heart has a treasury from which to forgive those who wrong you. And, how much a lesser debt do we owe each other when we sin against one another than the world owes to God for its great wickedness? Do hear this clearly, however, brothers and sisters, a heart that refuses to forgive will be confirmed in its

4 Matthew 6:12, 14-15

unforgiveness by the Father who judges all flesh – there is no hope for paradise in a heart that refuses forgiveness. That is, *with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.*⁵

All of this is in answer to Peter’s question, “*Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?*” Jesus’ answer, of course, is “*seventy times seven,*” that is, perfectly, endlessly.⁶ Because, dear Christians, you are the hands and feet of Christ, you are the ones who have been forgiven. Know this also about the nature of your Father – He is perfect in His forgiveness and endless in His patience. As the psalmist writes, “*bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies... He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him.*”⁷ Look to the Father and you will always find Him forgiving. Hear His rebuke so that you do not perish in your sins but receive forgiveness for them and walk in the Life delivered to you by the death of Christ. This death of Christ is the death of your pride, the death of your pride is the death of your anger and vengeance and the beginning of your humility, forgiveness and faithfulness to Christ. It is for this life of forgiveness and love that we receive the Lord’s gifts in gratitude and joy. It is to sustain this life of forgiveness and humility that the Church

5 Luke 6:38

6 Matthew 18:22

7 Psalm 103:2-4, 10-11

makes available the Sacraments. It is to preserve your life that the Church retains and practices confession – so that you do not struggle with your sins by yourself but come at them with all the tools of the Christian, with confession and absolution, with direction in the battle against the desires of your flesh, and with the true teaching of the Word of God that preserves you from forfeiting eternal life. Learn from the self-loving and proud slave to forgive your fellow slaves and seek after the constant and faithful forgiveness of your Father in Heaven.

Amen.

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Micah 6:6-8

Philippians 1:3-11

Matthew 18:21-35