

That's Unforgiveable!
Matthew 18:21-35
Sunday, February 21, 2021

People ask some interesting hypothetical, philosophical questions about God. Sometimes they're asked when someone is in a pondering mood. Sometimes they are asked when people are just having a laugh. Have you heard this one before?

"Since God can do anything, can God make a boulder so big that even God couldn't move it?"

How would you answer that question? Maybe we embrace the question seriously and discuss the nature of God. Maybe we dismiss it as foolish. Maybe we roll our eyes and get on with our day.

Or more goofily you may hear,

"Could God make a pepper so hot that even God couldn't eat it?"

We can dismiss those questions as not very serious, but other hypothetical God questions may be closer to home for some people. This is one I have heard quite a bit.

"If Charles Manson repented of his murder would God actually forgive him?"

Maybe the name in the question was different. It could have been Hitler, or Geoffrey Dahmer, or Robert Pickton, or any number of serial killers or global monsters.

But the question remains the same: "If such-and-such repented of their horrible sins, would God forgive them?"

Christians believe God's grace is immense. We believe that nothing is greater. We believe that God is love. So very quickly and flippantly we tend to answer, "Of course God could forgive Manson or Hitler or Dahmer!" For most of us it's not our family killed or involved. We have nothing personally at stake in this hypothetical game. We feel we need to defend God's ability to forgive for some reason.

But the answer, "yes, God can forgive anyone or anything" certainly does not seem fair. It certainly does not feel loving to the families who have lost loved ones to genocide or murder. A flippant answer doesn't seem to acknowledge the depth of evil in the world. God's grace and forgiveness spoken of in a flippant, dismissive way can be a very disappointing answer.

So maybe we try to use theology to explain the grace of God or the forgiveness of God. And maybe we make a good logical argument for God's grace and forgiveness. But theological arguments don't solve much. The answers we come up with through theology can seem distant. They seem wooden and uncaring to people who have suffered real harm.

Behind the question "Can God forgive anyone for anything?" may be someone who has done stuff that they feel is unforgiveable, and they may need assurance that they can be forgiven.

Behind the question “Can God forgive anyone for anything?” may be someone who has lost something deeply, and they feel that if the universe has any justice in it at all, that forgiveness should not always be granted.

Theology feels like it falls short when it comes to describing the problems that deeply affect the people we know.

In her book *Sold into Egypt*, Madeline L’Engle says, “We can tell more about God through the words of a story than through any amount of theology” (p. 176). At first this might sound fluffy or false. But the ways Jesus teaches shows this to be true. Over and over again Jesus responds to difficult theological questions with a story. On the topic of forgiveness, Jesus uses a story to teach essential things about forgiveness.

Jesus isn’t asked, “If King Herod repented of his murder and sin would God forgive him?” He is asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” The story Jesus gives in response is insightful to both questions. Jesus says,

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, cancelled the debt and let him go. (Matt. 18:23-27)*

The forgiveness is massive! This is no small debt.

The king, in forgiving this debt, loses out on a lot of money! In offering forgiveness of the debt, the king takes a massive hit. This is money that he trusted would be returned, and he is never getting it back.

The servant hadn’t even begged for a cancelled debt. The servant had begged for an extension. He pleads, “I need more time.” But the king says, “Your debt is forgiven.” The response of the king exceeds what is asked of him.

The forgiveness offered to the servant is remarkable. Free of his debt, the servant is free to return to his life.

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. (Matt. 18:28-31)*

The response is shocking! The servant is owed money by another servant. He should pass on the remarkable forgiveness he was given from the king.

But he does not do this. He throws the fellow servant in prison.

The other servants are outraged! They knew the servant had been forgiven massive amounts of money. And then he turns around and does this? The king is told the news by the shocked servants and responds.

³² *"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled 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.*

The story makes sense. Justice has been done in the story. The servant forgiven of his debt should have forgiven the servant that owed him. But he doesn't. He pays with torture and prison. For many this would be a satisfying end to the story.

But here's why Jesus speaks in parables. He pulls you in with the story. He pulls you in with a satisfying conclusion. And when he has your attention he says something you cannot un-hear.

³⁵ *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."* (Matt. 18:31-35)

Jesus says: if you want to be on the outside of God's grace, withhold forgiveness from other people.

Jesus gives this teaching to people that assumed they were on God's side. They were the Chosen. And yet Jesus says to them, *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

We, too, can hear this story and exclaim: "But this can't possibly apply to me! I'm a Christian! I've asked Jesus into my heart! I have eternal security! I'm absolved!"

And I'm pretty sure Jesus is saying to us, *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

I don't like that lesson at all! I know my heart. I know how petty I can be. I know how deeply I can hold a grudge.

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

The end result sounds extreme. But the result speaks of something true we see in everyday life. In this parable Jesus speaks of torture. When we withhold forgiveness from others, the torture is real.

Think about it.

If someone does something that hurts me, most of the time they have NO IDEA that they even hurt me.

As I burn in anger the only fire that consumes me is my own. So as I withhold forgiveness I'm only torturing myself. The torture is real!

Chances are good you have had something done to you that just eats away at you. You refuse to forgive. We reason that people cannot get away with doing awful things. That's not justice! And it is certainly true that we need to stand up for ourselves.

On principle it feels impossible to let past hurts go. But the parable seems to indicate that we must forgive or we will be locking ourselves in our own prison and submitting ourselves to torture.

In preparing for this sermon I read *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Desmond Tutu. Following the end of apartheid in South Africa, he was part of their truth and reconciliation commission. Rather than charging people for their past crimes of murder, torture and other evils, victims recounted what they experienced, perpetrators listened and responded, and forgiveness and reconciliation were granted. People would respond, "That's not justice!" No, but this was the only way the country could move forward without tearing itself apart.

Tutu shares a story of a mother illustrating the need for us to forgive even the most evil of crimes. The mother's child was abducted and murdered on a family camping trip in Montana. She knew the only hope she had of surviving this tragedy was to forgive. This is her story.

"... I had finally come to believe that real justice is not punishment but restoration, not necessarily to how things used to be, but to how they really should be. In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures whence my beliefs and values come, the God who rises up from them is a God of mercy and compassion, a God who seeks not to punish, destroy or put us to death, but a God who works unceasingly to help and heal us, rehabilitate and reconcile us, restore us to the richness and fullness of life for which we have been created. This, now, was the justice I wanted for this man who had taken my little girl.

Though he was liable for the death penalty, I felt it would violate and profane the goodness, sweetness, and beauty of Susie's life by killing the kidnapper in her name. She was deserving of a more noble and beautiful memorial than a cold-blooded, pre-meditated, state-sanctioned killing of a restrained, defenseless man, however deserving of death he may be deemed to be. I felt I far better honoured her, not by becoming that which I deplored, but by saying that all life is sacred and worthy of preservation. So I asked the prosecutor to offer the alternative sentence for this crime, mandatory life imprisonment with no chance of parole. My request was honoured, and when the alternative was offered, only then did he confess to Susie's death and also to the taking of three other young lives.

Thought I readily admit that initially I wanted to kill this man with my bare hands, by the time of the resolution of his crimes, I was convinced that my best and healthiest option was to forgive. In the twenty years since losing my daughter, I have been working with victims and their families, and my experience has been consistently confirmed. Victim families have every right to the normal, valid, human response of rage, but those persons who retain a vindictive mind-

set ultimately give the offender another victim. Embittered, tortured, enslaved by the past, their quality of life is diminished. However justified, our unforgiveness undoes us. Anger, hatred, resentment, bitterness, revenge – they are death-dealing spirits, and they will ‘take our lives’ on some level as surely as Susie’s life was taken. I believe the only way we can be whole, healthy, happy persons is to learn to forgive.” (Marietta Jaeger quoted in *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Desmond Tutu)

So much of her story resonates with the story Jesus tells. To withhold forgiveness is to incarcerate ourselves. To withhold forgiveness is to torture ourselves. This is true both in the petty incidents I encounter, and the life-altering incidents that Marietta Jaeger describes.

So forgiveness is important, but where do we even start?! How do we actively forgive? How do we let go of the offenses that chain us? This is where we cling to the supernatural power of God. Where we look to God and say, “I know you are merciful! I know you forgive! Help me to do the same.”

Here’s what Andy Stanley recommends we do to learn to forgive in his book *Enemies of the Heart*:

- **Step 1:** Identify who you are angry with. Who specifically hurt you?
- **Step 2:** Determine what that individual owes you. What do you think you are owed because of what someone did to you? What has changed in your life because of this person? What is missing from your life because of this person? We can’t just skip over an offense without considering this – otherwise we’ll never let it go. Ever offer quick forgiveness and then regret it? I have. It just makes you bitter!
- **Step 3:** Cancel the debt. This is very hard. This is why we determine what is owed to us. This requires the supernatural intervention of God.
- **Step 4:** Dismiss the case. You no longer have a “debt” owed to you by this person.

There is always a cost to forgiveness. Someone always pays the price. In the parable, the cost to the king is a significant loss of money. In the case of Jesus, Jesus took our cost of sin upon himself on the cross. At the cross deals Jesus with sin once and for all. My sin is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.

Jesus cancels our debt and Jesus forgives. Jesus empowers us to forgive as well. Jesus tells us – take up your cross daily and follow me.

Jesus empowers us to live in real freedom.

When we refuse to forgive, we heap burden upon burden on ourselves. We put ourselves in a prison. We torture ourselves. We stand to lose everything. When we forgive; when we lay those burdens down at the cross; we live in real freedom.