

“As I Had Mercy on You”

In the name of him who died and lived again that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living, dear friends in Christ: Peter imagined that he was being generous to the extreme when he asked the Lord Jesus, “How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” I mean think about it. That really is going far beyond what’s even remotely reasonable. And to prove it, let’s personalize this. Think about a time someone really crossed the line with you. They did something hurtful to you, not accidentally or without thinking about it, but with malice of forethought. They meant you to suffer, be it physically, emotionally, perhaps financially. Maybe it was a case of character assassination; your reputation suffered. And whatever it was they did to you worked. You were hurt and deeply offended; probably angry too. ... Are you there? You got that someone and their sin against you in mind?

Okay, now and (you might have to use your imagination here because it may not have happened, but) they come to you and say, “Gosh, I feel just terrible about what I did to you. I am so very sorry. Will you please forgive me?”

Well, you’re reluctant, of course. The injury is still there. You’re letting it go won’t make you stop hurting. So, you’re searching for signs of sincerity. Do they really mean it? But then you remember that no one said that forgiveness didn’t come at a price. And you are, after all, a Bible believing Christian. You know what the right thing to do is. So as difficult as it is you say, “Yes, I forgive you.” And by your subsequent words and actions you try to show that you mean it. You treat your relationship with this person like their sin never happened.

Then one week later the same person commits the same offense against you or some other offense equally hurtful. Now you’re furious. Not only have you suffered again from the sin, now the affect is magnified by your sense of betrayal. It’s like they took your forgiveness which cost them nothing by you so much and stomped all over it, treating it with contempt; almost like a free pass to sin against you again.

You can guess what happens next. You got it: the offender comes to a second time and says, “You must be really angry with me this time. And I get it; you have every right to be. But look: I’m sorry. I was wrong. I never should have done it the first time, much less the second. I know I don’t deserve it, but I’m asking you out of Christian charity to please forgive me.”

It’s a lot harder this time around, isn’t it? But again, you know what the right thing to do is, don’t you? So you forgive. Now, imagine how you’d feel after five more cycles of the same scenario. That seventh act of forgiveness would be nigh on impossible, wouldn’t it? I’m willing to bet that none of us would make it that far. At some point (probably around the second offense) you’d say, “Forget it. I’m not wasting any more of my forgiveness or my time on you. From this day forth you are officially out of my life. I don’t want to see you. I don’t want to hear you. I don’t want to have anything to do with you. You are dead to me.” That sound about right?

So yes, in human terms Peter suggesting that forgiving as many as seven times goes well beyond what could be expected by anyone – anyone except Jesus, that is. Imagine then Peter’s reaction when he heard Jesus reply, “No, not seven, but seventy times seven.” And less anyone misunderstand, Jesus did not mean that you could keep a little record book of sins against you and when you get to someone’s 491st offense it’s okay to withhold forgiveness. He

meant that your forgiveness should have no limits, that it should never end. There never comes a point at which you are in the right to say to someone, “No. I don’t forgive you.”

And it’s actually more complicated than the little scenario I walked you through. In it we had the offender repeatedly coming back all apologetic and asking you for forgiveness. But here’s the thing: your forgiveness is to come first, whether they ask for or it not, whether they are sorry about what they did or not. Your forgiveness doesn’t depend on an apology. It’s to be there in advance so that if the person did come to you asking for it you can say, “I’ve already forgiven you.”

That’s an awful tall order, isn’t it? It seems hard to imagine that Jesus would require this of us. It must have floored Peter to hear it. It ought to floor you too. But not when put in proper perspective, which is what Jesus proceeds to do by telling the Parable of the Unmerciful Debtor.

You know the story. A king is settling his accounts. A guy is brought before him who owes ten thousand talents. How much is that? Well in those times the average working man earned one denarius for a day’s labor. A single talent was worth six hundred denarii, so, figure two years gross income. Multiply that by ten thousand and in today’s terms we’re talking somewhere on the order of a cool billion dollars. That’s billion with a B. It’s hard to guess how he could have run up such a huge debt, but he did. He asks for time to pay it off; but there’s no way. Ten lifetimes of work, if he saved every penny, wouldn’t be enough.

But surprisingly, the king is moved to take pity on him. He forgives the debt outright – which means, by the way, the king himself suffers the entire loss. He effectively pays the debt for the guy who owed him so much.

And then, as we heard, the same guy goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him one hundred denarii. Again, if you run the numbers, that’s four months worth of wages for an average worker. In today’s terms, what? About twenty thousand dollars, give or take? The point is that it isn’t chump change. It’s a sizeable debt. But it’s a tiny drop in the bucket compared to what he owed the king.

The fellow servant pleads for time, just like the first guy did; but no, he’s not having any of that. He has the poor guy thrown into a debtor’s prison, which makes no sense when you think about it. How’s he going to pay off the debt if he can’t work because he’s in jail? It’s just dumb. And totally heartless.

Word gets back to the king of the first guy’s behavior. He’s not at all happy. He has the first guy brought back before him. And he reads him the riot act: “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”

The obvious answer is yes, he should have. That he didn’t shows that he had no appreciation of or thankfulness for the much greater mercy and forgiveness that he had received from the king. So the king takes them back. He reapplies the original staggering debt, and he hands him over to the jailers until he pays off everything he owes. And it’s helpful to know that the Greek word for jailers there also means “torturers”. This is the king’s dungeon, not a debtor’s prison. What the guy can’t pay in cash will be taken out on his flesh.

The point of the parable is clear. Each and every one of us is that first guy. We owe the King and Creator of the universe the staggering debt of our sin, the staggering debt that not an eternity of suffering in hellfire could pay. In mercy the King has forgiven you that entire debt.

He himself paid it by placing it upon his beloved Son and giving him up on the cross. Whatever grief someone by their sin may have caused you pales in comparison to the agony Christ endured to redeem you. And seen in that light, with the proper perspective, the sins that others commit against you ought to be easy to forgive.

That they aren't shows that you have no appreciation of or thankfulness for the mercy and forgiveness you have received. It shows that what Jesus suffered to save you means nothing to you. And if that's the case, if Jesus means nothing to you, you are still in your sin and will pay its dreadful price.

"As I had mercy on you" is not some lofty goal we are to strive to reach one day. It's the Christian standard. It's the Lord's natural expectation for someone who lives in faith in Jesus' blood-bought redemption. So, if there is someone out there who hurt you by their sin and against whom you are still nursing a grudge, whom you have not forgiven from your heart, you need to see in yourself what the King calls wicked. And repent of it. Let it go. See that person's sin in light of your own sins against the Lord and forgive them.

No one ever said that forgiveness is easy, that it doesn't come at a cost. The Lord knows that. He knows exactly what it cost him. He wants you to know it too. And live like you know it. Forgive like you know it.

And know too that he forgives you, not seven times, not seventy times seven times, but as often and as many times that you come to him pleading for mercy for the sake of Jesus. When you do that he answers, "I have already forgiven you. Go forth and have mercy on others as I had mercy on you." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!