

INI

Matthew 18,21-35

Trinity 22 / 23 October 2016

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Matthew, which was read earlier:

And his [the unforgiving slave's] lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. [And Jesus concludes:] So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction. Jesus was not fond of scaring the hell of out of people in order to make believers out of them, but Jesus did not hesitate to scare believers out of hell in order to keep them on the straight and narrow. To this end, Jesus tells a parable which from our point of view does not at all have a “happy ending.”

The context of today's Gospel lesson comes out of what we would call a discussion about church discipline. At the end of the lesson, Peter, like any good seminary student, wants to know what are the limits to how often he has to forgive a fellow-believer. Now some Jewish law said that the obligation to forgive only extended to three or four instances. Perhaps Peter thought that he finally was catching on to what

Jesus was speaking about and decided to be generous, to go out on a limb, to go beyond what might have been the custom, and venture that seven times was a good number for forgiveness. Perhaps Peter thought that after speaking a word of forgiveness seven times to the same person, by the eighth time the person was not really serious and was just pulling his chain and taking advantage of him. Seven seemed like a good number.

Jesus, however, sets Peter and the disciples and us straight. Not only is the limit not seven, it is seventy times seven. For those quick in math, you know that equals 490. Jesus, however, is not speaking about keeping a scorecard; for example, when someone asks for forgiveness at the 491st instance, the incorrect response would be “Too bad, you’ve exceeded your limit – no forgiveness for you!” Jesus is speaking about unlimited forgiveness.

To drive His point home, Jesus tells Peter and the disciples a parable, or a story with a punch-line. In many Bibles this is known as the parable of the “unforgiving servant,” or “the unmerciful slave or servant,” or something along those lines. But the parable itself leads me to today’s sermon theme: “**God’s Forgiveness: Take a Bath Accounting.**” I’ll develop this theme in three points:

- 1) Incomprehensible Forgiveness;**
- 2) An Incomprehensible Reaction;** and,
- 3) A Cautionary Note.**

1) Incomprehensible Forgiveness. In accounting, to “take a bath” means to write off loses with a single stroke of the pen. Often, this means writing off debts which either cannot be collected or the company or individual has no hope of collecting, now or in the future.

In effect, in Jesus’ parable, the king is writing off the debts of the

servant. They are so enormous, that there is no hope of repayment. So, in effect, the king is practicing “take a bath accounting.”

To put this take a bath accounting of the king into perspective, I’d like to examine Jesus’ parable a bit more closely.

There are several points in the parable which make it clear that the king is not a Jewish king but a Gentile king, and the servant would not so much be a slave but a provincial governor, or satrap, within the king’s dominions.

First, no Jewish king would have such wealth; second, while selling someone into slavery to pay off a debt was legal under Jewish law, it was not legal to sell off the rest of the family; later in the parable, the king throws the unforgiving servant over to the torturers, but torture was illegal under Jewish law (it must be said, however, that this did not prevent the Herodian kings from practicing torture — such a “nice” family).

The king calls in one of his provincial governors to settle accounts. The amount owed was 10,000 talents. Let’s put this amount into perspective.

A talent was equivalent to about 6,000 denarii. A denarius was a day’s wage for a laborer. Thus, for the average person, a talent represented about 19 years wages. 10,000 talents represented the wages for over 190,000 years of working. I think that it is safe to say that no one could pay off this debt. The debt is incomprehensible. It is a debt that cannot be paid!

Now the servant of the king, after hearing that the king is planning on selling him and his family into slavery to pay off the debt, throws himself on the king’s mercy. The king responds and forgives the debt.

The servant is free. The slate of debt has been wiped clean. Neither he nor his family need live in fear any more. He is free to go. This is truly “take a bath accounting” in regard to an incomprehensible debt.

Now, however, Jesus gives us an

2) An Incomprehensible Reaction. But as the servant leaves he meets one of his servants, a man who owes him a 100 denarii, or about a third of a year’s wage. Even after having been forgiven, the ungrateful servant grabs the other servant by the throat and demands repayment of the debt of 100 denarii. In effect, he chokes the servant and screams, “Pay up!”

Now even though this debt is repayable by any human standards of measurement, the unforgiving servant does not accept any excuses and has the man thrown into prison for the debt. In fact, throwing a man into prison for this small a debt was also against Jewish law of the time. For example, the amount owed was only 100 dinarii but the average price of a slave during the time of Jesus was 500 denarii, so this was an illegal imprisonment.

The second servant even used the same words that the first servant used in front of the king to plead for mercy, “Have patience with me and I will repay you.” But patience for another human being does not seem to dwell within the heart of the first servant. Neither does mercy.

Isn’t it amazing that the first servant would be so unforgiving of such a small debt when in fact he had been forgiven such a large, incomprehensible debt? If you do the math, the second debt in relation to the first and forgiven debt was 600,000 times smaller than the first debt! If we were to use statistics, we’d say that the second amounted owed was insignificant and microscopic in comparison to the first.

There is no comparison.

So here is the picture. From being forgiven an incomprehensible and really unpayable debt, the first servant goes out of the king's chambers, forgets all about being forgiven, and when presented with the same scenario with one of his underlings, demonstrates revenge, hardheartedness, mercilessness and an unforgiving spirit — despite a plea for mercy and forgiveness! This is really incomprehensible reaction, isn't it?

Now, however, we have a

3) Cautionary Note. The other servants of the king tell him what had happened. The king hauls the first servant back into his presence, forgets about the previous offer of forgiveness and mercy, and gives the servant over to the torturers. In fact, he even asks the first servant: “Should you also not have had mercy on your fellow servant, even as I had mercy on you?” (v 33). That is a rhetorical question if ever there was one! Of course the answer is, “Yes! Yes, you should have had mercy! 600,000 times “Yes!””

When Jesus says “the Kingdom of Heaven is like,” He is speaking of relationships within the Kingdom of Grace and among believers and God. It is well to make the point, that Jesus is not speaking of the kingdom of the left hand, or, as we would say, of government. God expects governments and the police to operate in the kingdom of the left hand and to operate by different standards than the church, which stands in the Kingdom of the Right Hand, or of forgiveness and mercy. The duty of governments and the police is to uphold public order and punish criminals. But Jesus is speaking of the Kingdom of the Right Hand, His Church.

We have learned that forgiven sins stay forgiven. This parable,

however, presents us with a different picture. In this parable, Jesus tells those who have been forgiven that if they do not forgive in the same way they have been forgiven, then all of a sudden the forgiveness we have received will stand in judgment against an unforgiving attitude and condemn us.

Do we gloss over this relationship in the Lord's Prayer? There, in the Fifth Petition, Jesus teaches us to pray: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

In law, for example, if you receive a pardon for a crime, your record is sealed, and before the law you now stand as if the crime had never been committed. But if you commit another criminal act, the government may unseal that pardon and evidence of your past criminal activity may be used against you in sentencing. By the way, this is what happens in many adult criminal cases when juvenile records are unsealed and give evidence of the reprobate character of the convicted perpetrator.

Because of Jesus' sacrificial death on our behalf on the Cross our sins are forgiven. We are assured that we have been forgiven because Jesus rose triumphant on Easter morning. Jesus died for our sins. Those sins, even the smallest, condemn us before God and can not be paid by us. We cannot live the perfect life God demands of us and we cannot make the perfect satisfaction for our sins that God demands of us.

There are some who say that this parable holds out some hope for forgiveness. Realistically speaking, however, even at prison wages, anyone who tried to repay the debt would be long dead before even a little would be paid. Let me do the math to drive the point home. Say a denarius is one dollar; the average daily wage for a laborer is \$15 an hour, or \$30,000 per year. Multiply that by 19 years and the result is \$570,000. Now multiply that by 10,000, which is the amount of talents

nd the number is a staggering \$570,000,000 – that 570 with six zeros after it. As I said, at prison wages you'd be long dead.

The blood of Jesus, however, cleanses us from all unrighteousness. The writer to the Hebrews, however, goes on to say that:

if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of the judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. (Hebrews 10,26ff).

In view of this and similar passages, we can say:

- 1) the unforgiving servant sinned willfully, and
- 2) rejected the covering of Jesus' blood for the forgiveness of his sins when he did not forgive another.

All of a sudden, with this rejection, what was covered by Jesus was uncovered by the unforgiving servant himself. God did not uncover the previously covered sin; rather, the sinner himself did the uncovering. The king merely affirmed the fact that in the face of a plea for forgiveness and mercy an unforgiving heart rejects the forgiveness Jesus offers.

Not only is this a cautionary note, it is downright frightening and sobering, as well it should be. God is not mocked!

Conclusion. There is a story about a husband who seemingly and freely forgave his wife whenever she did anything wrong. He said he was a Christian. But in his basement he had a blackboard. Every time he forgave his wife he made a check on the blackboard. Towards what was he counting? He had read but misinterpreted the parable. He was

counting toward 490. But my friends, this man was not practicing forgiveness. He was keeping score.

Is there any hope for such a person? Yes. But hope lies in the realization that keeping score in relation to forgiveness is a sin. It means repenting of that sin and destroying that backboard and crucifying the mentality of score keeping. It means going to the cross and receiving the forgiveness that he otherwise would have forfeited.

In the life of a Christian, there is no place for keeping score. All of us have had the incomprehensible and unpayable debt of our sins wiped clean on account of Jesus. This once-for-all sacrifice by Jesus for us is God's "take a bath accounting" in relation to our sin. Why would God do such a thing? For Jesus' sake God forgives us so that indeed we might be as forgiving in the same measure as we have been forgiven. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

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