

“FORGIVENESS AND SANCTIFICATION”
BRUCE BUMGARDNER

One of the most challenging concepts for Christians to comprehend, accept and apply is the concept of forgiveness. We are most happy to accept God’s forgiveness of us but we are often very reluctant to extend forgiveness to others. Without a thorough understanding of the idea of forgiveness, both God’s forgiveness of us, and our responsibility to forgive one another, it is almost a sure thing that we will find ourselves stuck in spiritual rut.

This paper will highlight the significance of the believer’s forgiveness of sins committed against him and its relationship to the ongoing process of experiential sanctification. A refusal to engage in interpersonal forgiveness will result in the believer living perpetually out of fellowship with God.

The paper will begin with a brief survey of the forgiveness from the eternal penalty of sin that is the believer’s at the moment of salvation. It will continue with a short review of the forgiveness of the temporal consequence of the believer’s post-salvation sins that occurs at the moment he confesses those sins. The balance of the paper will introduce the concept of interpersonal forgiveness from Matthew 6:12-15; Mark 11:25 and Ephesians 4:32. Once the mandate of interpersonal forgiveness is established the concept will be illustrated in the parable of The Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18:21-35.

FORGIVENESS FROM THE ETERNAL PENALTY OF SIN

While psychologists speak of “guilt feelings” the Scriptures paint a clear picture that all men are *actually* guilty of violating God’s moral law. It is not simply feelings of guilt that we must face but the reality of *real guilt*. That real guilt the Bible calls “sin.”¹

When Eve took and ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil she became the first human sinner. Her husband Adam followed almost immediately. Genesis 3:6 reports how quickly everything fell apart for the first couple.

“When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband and he ate.”

Because Eve was deceived and Adam was not it is Adam’s sin that is passed down to the rest of the human race and causes each of us to be born “physically alive and spiritually

¹ Sin has been defined in various ways by a number of fine theologians but perhaps the one combines the benefits of accuracy and ease of remembrance is: “Sin is anything that violates God’s holy standard.”

dead.” There are competing theological theories as to how this happens but there can be no disagreement that it does happen.²

We all then commit acts of personal sin consistent with the nature and guilt inherited from Adam. So, even if you have a problem with being born condemned by association with Adam one can hardly complain when each of us have personally violated God’s moral law more times than we could count.

Since God is perfectly holy it would be a violation of His very nature for Him to fellowship with that which violates His holiness. His perfect righteousness and justice demand that He condemn sin, that is, if He is to act rationally, if He is to act consistently with who He is. And God is always rational. He always acts consistently with His own character. And so, we were all born with a problem too great for any of us to solve on our own.

We are sinful. God is perfectly holy. We need a remedy for our sin that we cannot provide for ourselves. Without solving the “sin problem” we will live out our lives and go to our physical death in a state of sin and condemnation.

God’s holiness demands that sin be punished.

That punishment or judgment was accomplished on the Cross. God the Father poured out His wrath against sin and the individuals who committed it (contrary to popular opinion, we can never really divorce sin from the individual) when He judged His Son, Jesus Christ on the Cross.

As Jesus cried out *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabathani* “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” the question was, of course, rhetorical. He knew perfectly well why the Father was forsaking Him. It was part of God’s eternal plan with reference to the “sin problem.”

“He made Him who knew no sin to be made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (2 Cor 5.21)

Jesus did not sin. He was “made sin.” Our sins were imputed to Him and judged. So, rather than God judging each of us individually for our rebellion, He judged His Son for our rebellion against Himself.

Jesus died as a substitute for each of us. He paid the price for our disobedience. And at the moment we place our faith in Him, God the Father takes the finished work of Christ on the Cross and applies it to our account and we are forgiven. Further, we are declared righteous and we are positionally sanctified.

We were spared the penalty that was due us—eternal death: eternal separation from God and His blessing. The one who places his faith in Jesus will never have to pay that penalty. Jesus paid it for us and we have received the benefit of that payment.

² Paul makes this quite clear in Romans 5:12-21.

Judgment of sin occurred at the Cross, forgiveness of the individual awaits the moment of faith. This is crucial and far too often misunderstood. The atoning work of Jesus Christ was *sufficient* for every person who has ever taken a breath on this earth. But the work of Christ is *efficient* only for those who believe.

Norman Geisler put it this way,

“The actual cancelling of the debt is conditional upon belief, i.e. upon actual acceptance of it. Hence, there is no contradiction when there is no forgiveness of those who choose to attempt to pay their own debt. Likewise those who are forgiven do not have to pay their own debt, since Christ’s payment has been applied to them.”³

It should go without saying that no fallen, sinful, depraved, rebellious human being deserves in any way to be forgiven. None of us earned the right of forgiveness. On the contrary, all of us are the recipients of incredible compassion, mercy and grace on the part of God. Our freedom, our forgiveness was purchased by the substitutionary death of the Son of God through no merit of our own. This is no insignificant point. It forms the foundation for God’s demand that we forgive one another.

FORGIVENESS FROM THE TEMPORAL CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

The first thing we must note is that the Bible does speak of the believer’s responsibility to confess sins *after* salvation.

While there are differing views on the precise nature of this confession, there is no doubt that the Bible speaks of the concept. That must be our first observation. The Roman Catholic sees the need for a believer to make this confession to a priest. Most Protestants hold that every believer is a priest and has the responsibility to make their own confession before God. But both groups recognize that the Bible gives the believer the responsibility to confess.

When the believer sins he has not fallen subject to payment for the eternal debt owed all over again. He is not condemned. But he has lost something. God is still holy. And anything of unholiness found in the believer will cause the relationship he has with His Heavenly Father to suffer. The believer has suffered a “loss of fellowship” as opposed to condemnation or “loss of salvation.”⁴

Since faith alone in Christ alone is the divinely prescribed remedy for salvation from the penalty of sin and condemnation, then what is the divinely prescribed remedy for the sin the Christian commits *after* salvation?

³ Norman Geisler *Systematic Theology* (Bloomington: Bethany House 2004) 3:250

⁴ It is outside the scope of this paper to defend the doctrine of eternal security. But a brief review of passages like John 10:27-39; Ephesians 4:30 and Romans 8:38-39 might prove helpful to the reader.

One of the most well known verses in the NT supplies the answer.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Some hold that 1 John 1:9 is a salvation verse that presents a separate and necessary condition in addition to faith for receiving forgiveness from the eternal penalty of sin. Those that hold this view typically include in their gospel presentation a “precondition” of confessing all known sin prior to exercising faith, with an intention of turning away from those sins. But this view is a result of confusion as to the respective “purposes of the Gospel of John and John’s first epistle.

The Gospel of John is the only book in the Bible that has, as its expressed purpose in the text, the evangelization of the unbeliever. In that Gospel, John gave but one condition for the receiving of eternal life and the forgiveness of sins, faith in Christ.

The epistle of 1 John was not written to demonstrate to the unbeliever how they might receive eternal life but rather to the believer to demonstrate how one ought to live after salvation given the fact that they already have eternal life.

This is critical. For if 1 John was written to show the unbeliever how to get to heaven, and if 1 John 1:9 is a salvation verse as some have claimed, then John made a colossal mistake in the writing of his gospel. He left out a necessary condition!

1 John 1:9 is not describing what it takes to receive forgiveness from the eternal penalty of sin. It is a verse, written to Christians, that gives the divinely prescribed remedy for the consequence of post salvation sins. It tells us how we might be restored to fellowship with God after we have done something that offends His holiness.

In 1 John 1:5-8, the apostle makes it clear that believers can, and do, sin after salvation. Anyone who is honest must admit as much. Verse 10 asserts that to deny that reality makes one a liar.

But in between we find 1 John 1:9. We can understand this kind of “conditional clause” this way:

If you do “A” then “B” will happen.

“If the doctor does the surgery, he will receive his pay.”

In this example of a future more vivid conditional clause, the doctor may or may not perform the surgery.⁵ But if he does, he will be paid. Obviously, if he doesn’t, he will not.

⁵ Contemporary Greek Grammarians prefer the term “future more vivid conditional” to the older “third class conditional.” The implication is that it is more likely than not what has been proposed in the protasis is going to happen. In John’s argument, confession of sin is the *expected* behavior for the one who is growing in their faith and desires fellowship with God. On the future more vivid conditional clause see,

Confession is the only condition given by God for the forgiveness of the consequences of post salvations sins and a return to complete fellowship with Himself. If we choose not to confess our sins, then we are not forgiven and fellowship is not restored.

Please note again, when we sin after salvation, we are not condemned. We will not pay the eternal penalty for those sins. But, if we refuse to confess our sins, then we are not forgiven.

What is meant by confession?

A confession is an honest admission to God that what we did was sinful, that what we did was wrong, that what we did violated His holy standard. It is coming face to face with something we have done and acknowledging to God that it was a sin.

It is something personal, not mechanical. And since it is personal and not mechanical, yes, one may very well feel some sense of guilt when the confession is offered.

The feeling of guilt does not enhance forgiveness, but in a healthy individual both psychologically and spiritually, if one is guilty then it is not unreasonable to assume that a feeling of guilt might accompany the reality of guilt.

When we confess, when we admit, when we acknowledge our sin, God forgives, every sin, every time. He is faithful and just. All known sin must be confessed for restoration to fellowship.

If we know that we have lied to friend, stolen a bicycle and are in the middle of an extramarital affair, we must confess all three. If you confess the first two and refuse to confess the extramarital affair because you are not ready to deal with that yet, you have not been restored to fellowship.

Confession restores the believer to fellowship. Repentance keeps the believer there. To remain in a state of fellowship we must repent or turn away from the sin. Repentance is more than just a change of mind it is a change of heart. Confession without subsequent repentance does little effective good.

INTERPERSONAL FORGIVENESS

Interpersonal forgiveness is a subject that has probably not received the attention in recent years that it deserves. C.S. Lewis wrote, "Every one says forgiveness is a lovely

Maurice Balme and Glibert Lawall *Athenaze, An Intorduction to Ancient Greek, Book 2* (New York: Oxford University Press 1991) 76, 193, 202. Also see Daniel B. Wallace *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1996) 470. Dr. Wallace holds that the breadth of usage of this conditional expanded in the Hellenistic age and that "The context will always be of the greatest help in determining an author's use of the third class conditional."

idea, until they have something to forgive.”⁶ When we sin against God we are quick to confess and we expect the slate to be wiped clean. And by that I mean there is a return to intimacy with the Almighty without delay and without acts of penance.⁷ Yes, there may be divine discipline, but the restoration to fellowship is complete. But when people sin against us there is often a tendency to withhold forgiveness or to extend partial forgiveness, which, it can be argued, is not really forgiveness at all.

Several New Testament passages reveal the believer’s responsibility to forgive one that has wronged him.

Matthew 6:12, 14-15

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

These verses appear to give a second and necessary condition for the receiving of God’s forgiveness. In addition to confession we must forgive others. If we refuse to forgive we will live in a state of perpetual carnality. We may confess our sins to God but if we harbor anger, resentment or a vengeful attitude toward another, our confession is **functionally worthless**.

The psalmist said, “If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear.” Our Lord picked up this idea as He addressed His disciples shortly before the Crucifixion.

And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father who is in Heaven also may forgive you your transgressions. (Mark 11:25)

⁶ C.S Lewis *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins 1952) 89 This quote deserves to be heard in its fuller context. “I said in a previous chapter that chastity was the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. But I am not sure I was right. I believe there is one even more unpopular. It is laid down in the Christian rule, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ Because in Christian morals ‘thy neighbor’ includes ‘thy enemy,’ and so we come up against this terrible duty of forgiving our enemies. Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive, as we have had during the war. And then to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger. It is not that people think this is to high and difficult a virtue: it is that they think it hateful and contemptible. ‘That sort of talk makes then sick,’ they say. And half of you already want to ask me, ‘I wonder how you’d feel about forgiving the Gestapo if you were a Pole or a Jew?’ So do I. I wonder very much. Just as when Christianity tells me that I must not deny my religion even to save myself from death by torture, I wonder very much what I should do when it came to the point. I am not trying to tell you in this book what I could do — I can do precious little — I am telling you Christianity is. I did not invent it. And there, right in the middle of it, I find ‘Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us.’ There is no slightest suggestion that we are offered forgiveness on any other terms. It is made perfectly clear that if we do not forgive we shall not be forgiven. There are no two ways about it.”

⁷ I speak here of what some have called “vertical” forgiveness, the forgiveness that God extends upon the sole condition of confession. Since many of the sins we commit involve other people there is also the issue of “horizontal” forgiveness, forgiveness between people. For that forgiveness to be complete, restitution may be an issue.

Our prayers will only be effective when we make them from a heart that is free from antagonism toward others. One who stubbornly refuses to extend forgiveness, having been a recipient of forgiveness, cannot expect God's intervention as a result of prayer.

Paul teaches interpersonal forgiveness as vital to the spiritual life in Ephesians 4:30-31

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with malice. And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Paul hits to the heart of the issue in verse 31. We have been the recipients of God's merciful forgiveness. It is the height of inconsistency for us, who have been shown mercy to refuse to extend the same to others. Further, it is in our own best interests to forgive. Bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice are all symptomatic of a soul that is holding a grudge. Paul says, let it go. For your own good, *let it go*.

Luke 17:3-4 reads:

Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying I repent, forgive him.

Verse three is a conditional sentence much like 1 John 1:9, in that it is a future more vivid clause. But there is a difference. In 1 John 1:9 the structure was:

If you do "A" then "B" will happen.

"If the doctor does the surgery, he will receive his pay."

Here, in Luke 17:3, there is a slight difference,

If one does "A" the other party *has the responsibility* to do "B"

Private reproof, repentance with restitution, and forgiveness were standard doctrines of Jewish piety. The rabbis doubted the genuineness of repentance if one planned to sin again, but like Jewish legal experts exploring legal principles, Jesus offers here a theoretical case: if a person does genuinely repent repeatedly, you must forgive that person, repeatedly.

The verb Luke uses in 17:3, ἐπιτιμᾶω (*epitimaō*) means "to rebuke, to reprove to censure, to speak seriously, or "to warn in order to prevent an action or bring one to an end."⁸ The last of these possibilities best fits the context here: "to warn in order to prevent an action or bring one to an end."

⁸ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick Danker *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1979) 303

The scenario plays out something like this:

Someone does something to you that is a legitimate offence. (Not something that you simply choose to infer as an offence, but a real offence.) You approach that individual and discuss the situation with the goal of preventing the action from occurring in the future or with the intention of bringing the offending action to an end. The person sees your point and turns from the action. In polite society an, "I'm sorry about that" would probably accompany the repentance. It is then your responsibility (a command from God) to forgive the individual. This does not mean that the action is forgotten in the sense of cognition. Of course we remember the offence. It means the issue is not acted upon further, either in action or with thoughts of antagonism or hatred.

But what if the one who has wronged us does not ask for forgiveness? After all, if God's mercy toward us is the model, shouldn't our forgiveness of others await the moment they confess their sin or acknowledge the wrong to me? The question is a fair one.

Surely this is the norm. Typically in normal, civil human interaction when one person wrongs another there is some form of apology. It may be formal or informal based upon the level of familiarity between the individuals but typically there is some acknowledgement of wrongdoing and an indication that it is the intention of the offender to refrain from the offending activity in the future. In addition there should be some action taken on the part of the offender to "right the situation." If money has been stolen, for example, restitution should be made. That is the norm.

But there are other occasions when the person who has wronged you does not in any way acknowledge the wrong. There is no apology, no repentance. It is possible that the other individual does not agree with you that a wrong has even been perpetuated. What are we to do then?

If you are wise you will forgive them in spite of their lack of repentance and move on. And by "moving on" I mean to put the situation behind you.

Matthew 6:14-15 mentions nothing about a prerequisite for us forgiving others. It is in our best interest to forgive. To maintain an unforgiving spirit is to harm ourselves. It gives the Enemy a constant opening for attack and does nothing positive for our own spiritual life. We remain out of fellowship with God. One day it will hit us like a brick falling on our head that the person actually got to us twice. Once was their fault, once was ours. Their action kept us out of fellowship by our choice. Life is too short for that.

We must note however, that forgiveness does not mean that you are obligated to continue to put yourself in a position to be hurt, cheated or abused.

If your business partner cheats you, you must forgive him but you do not necessarily have to continue to participate in business together. If your boyfriend is abusive, forgive him but don't marry him. If a friend continually takes advantage of the friendship, forgive her and then find someone else to spend time with.

The more challenging application comes within families. Those relationships are not so easily avoided.

When I am legitimately wronged, whether or not the offending individual ever acknowledges the wrong I can *choose* to forgive them. This means that I harbor no ill will toward the individual, that I expel all malice and bitterness from my soul concerning that person and that I look at them in the future through a lens of love.

As far as it is within your control, “live in peace with all men.”

Hebrews 12:14-15 reads,

Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble and by it many be defiled.

The term pursue is the Greek term διώκω (*dioko*) which means just that, “to pursue, to seek, to run after.”⁹ It is a term of intensity.

We are to actively seek peace with all men. Not passively, but actively. This means we actively forgive and look for every opportunity to restore. We love because He first loved us. We have the responsibility to act graciously toward others because we have been the recipients of great grace ourselves.

Matthew 18:21-35: “The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant”

The Gospel of Matthew was written to a primarily Jewish audience to confirm that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the covenanted Messiah to Israel.¹⁰ Matthew presents Jesus as the King of the Jews and was very possibly the first of the gospels written.¹¹

Matthew is organized around five discourses with the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant concluding the fourth of the five discourses. In chapter 18 Jesus elaborates upon the concept of life within community. For many the idea “community” is an uncomfortable concept. But the Body of Christ is a community of believers who are each uniquely gifted spiritually for the “common good.”

⁹ BAGD, 201

¹⁰ While Matthew was written primarily to a Jewish audience to demonstrate that Jesus was indeed the covenanted Messiah to Israel, it was written well into the Church Age for the edification of Church age believers.

¹¹ Critical scholarship generally accepts the priority of Mark but this is far from certain. Carson speculates that Matthew could have been written anywhere from 40-100 AD with a date in the mid sixties as most likely. See his discussion in D.A. Carson *Matthew, The Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1984) 19-21.

We live, work and worship in and around other people, whether we like it or not. And it is inevitable that when we are around others for an extended period of time the opportunities for offence even between fellow believers is a potential that far too often becomes a reality. Being in a family does not preclude misunderstandings, conflicts and occasional hard feelings.

What are we to do when we are wronged by a “brother?” In the context of community, the parable of the Unforgiving Servant gives us the answer. In the context of the answer the parable sheds light on God’s attitude toward those who are quite happy to receive mercy, compassion and forgiveness but at the same time quite reluctant to give it.

Verses 15-20 of chapter 18 address the issue of interpersonal conflict within community. Jesus lays down a specific course of action for those who desire to heal discord in a righteous manner. As Peter absorbs this teaching he is conflicted. He knows that the Pharisees, as a rule, taught that a righteous person had an obligation to forgive a wrong suffered against them two times. And for good measure the individual stood on even firmer ground if the offence was forgiven three times, provided that the repentance expressed by the offender was sincere.¹² So in verse 21 Peter asks Jesus,

“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

Peter, by using the term “brothers,” recognizes that Jesus has been teaching about life in the community of believers. And he is surely aware of the prevailing view that a willingness to forgive a brother rather than retaliate is a mark of one who is living righteously.¹³ Both Jesus and the Pharisees taught that. But Peter is confused as to the scale of the forgiveness that God expects of the righteous. Were the Pharisees correct in their assertion that two times was enough but three times would certainly be sufficient to continue to reside in the sphere of righteousness? He must have had his doubts because he doubles the Pharisees’ three times and adds one more just to be safe. “Up to *seven* times?”

Peter, who again, as he often did, serves as the spokesman for the disciples and no doubt wanted to impress Jesus that he had understood Jesus’ message in the Sermon on the Mount,

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 5:20)

Surely exceeding the Pharisaic requirement by 133% would satisfy any possible requirement of righteousness! Jesus begs to differ.

¹² Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans 2009) 457

¹³ J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1982) 63

“I do not say to you seven times but up to seventy times seven.”¹⁴

Once again Jesus is making the point that the righteousness God requires far exceeds that of the Pharisees. In His answer Jesus used the strongest of Greek adversative conjunctions *ἀλλὰ*. Not seven times, *but* seventy times seven. The Pharisaic standard wasn't even close.

The number 490 (or 77, if the alternative view is to be taken) is representative of an unlimited number of times. This very likely stunned Peter and the rest of the disciples but it should not have. God does not put a limit on the forgiveness that He offers us. We, as His children, are expected to follow suit. Jesus then told this powerful parable.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle *them*, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell *to the ground* and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began* to choke *him*, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ “So his fellow slave fell *to the ground* and *began* to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ‘Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

This parable stresses the magnitude of God's forgiveness as the standard for the forgiveness that He expects of those who are His children. Keener writes,

“No one can offend our human moral sensibilities as much as everyone offends the moral sensibilities of a perfect God. The parable accordingly underlines the

¹⁴ Some have asserted that the Greek here is not “seventy times seven” but “seventy-seven times.” Both are possible. Those who hold to the number seventy-seven see a reference to the LXX of Genesis 4:24, and the expression of unlimited vengeance on the part of Lamech. The number there is seventy-seven. There seems to be no consensus in the scholarly community as to the number. What everyone agrees upon is that Jesus is expressing a large number, much greater than the prevailing standard of the day and reflective of an unlimited number of times. See Leon Morris *The Gospel According to Matthew, The New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans 1992) 472 and Carson, *Matthew*, 405.

magnitude of God's forgiveness, a point unlikely to be lost on Jesus' hearers...¹⁵

The king in this parable is obviously representative of God and the servants are representative of those who have been saved by grace through faith apart from works.¹⁶ Some speculate that the servants in the parable are either high level officers in the king's court or "tax farmers" working for the king on a bid arrangement as per the Roman system of the day.¹⁷

The king is owed money and desires to settle his accounts. He calls one servant into his presence that owes him "ten thousand talents." This is an enormous sum, one that would be impossible for any one individual to pay back even if given decades to do so. How this man came to owe this much is an intriguing side issue but the point of the parable lies in the size of the debt not in how the man accumulated it.

Ten thousand is the largest single number that the Greek language could express and the talent was the largest unit of measurement available in the culture of the ancient near east.¹⁸ To put this amount in perspective, at the end of the first Punic War, one of the demands that Rome made on Carthage was that they repay Rome all the costs of the war plus 3200 talents of silver. The amount was considered to be so large and oppressive that Rome gave Carthage a ten year payment plan to repay the debt. According to the historian Josephus, the combined annual tribute paid by Galilee and Perea to Herod the Great came to only 200 talents.¹⁹

Jesus does not say whether the debt was in gold or silver but the either way the amount was overwhelming, and represents a total that the servant could not possibly ever pay back. The representation here is transparent. As those who have been born in condemnation (Romans 5:12-21) and committed untold acts of personal sin in accordance with that original condemnation, we owed a debt that could never possibly be repaid. That is why salvation from the eternal penalty of sin cannot be by means of works but by grace through faith.²⁰ The magnitude of God's saving grace is portrayed here by this powerful parable.

The king, (hereafter called "lord") accepts the man at his word that he cannot repay the money and orders that not only he, but also his wife and children, be sold into slavery until the debt could be repaid. As it was impossible for the unfortunate man to pay back the debt when he was free, being sold into slavery only added insult to injury.

¹⁵ Keener, *Matthew* 458

¹⁶ The parable is speaking of forgiveness within the context of community. The servants then must be representative of believers, not those outside the Christian community.

¹⁷ Rome generally "farmed out" its tax revenue collection to independent entities who then had the authority to collect the taxes owed plus a fee for collection. These collectors were backed by the Roman military and hence were not well thought of by the people in the provinces. Hence the common couplet of derision, "tax collectors and prostitutes."

¹⁸ Keener, *Matthew* p 458

¹⁹ As cited by Keener *Matthew*, 458 (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.318)

²⁰ Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5

The servant then pleads for mercy. This is expressed through his posture as well as his words, “Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.” This is of course, ridiculous. He owed an amount that could not be repaid no matter how long of an extension the king might grant. But in desperation the man humbles himself and asks that compassion be shown.

The king decides to show compassion on the man not by giving him the requested time to repay the debt but by forgiving the debt altogether! Given the amount of the debt this was no small act of compassion.

Our Lord then presented the same man who was the recipient of boundless mercy on the part of the king as one who was himself owed a debt. But the situation is much different. This man is owed 100 denarii, an amount that was equivalent to approximately 3 months wages for a common laborer, perhaps one millionth the amount he owed the king.²¹ But no mercy is shown.

The man violently assaults the one who owes him and demands immediate repayment. When faced with the same request he had made of the king, “Have patience with me and I will repay you” the forgiven servant refuses patience, much less mercy, and has the man thrown into prison until the debt was satisfied. This is the polar opposite of what the reader would have expected. Shouldn’t the man who had been forgiven an enormous sum show compassion on one who owed him comparatively little?

Of course when the king is told of the utter lack of compassion on the part of the one to whom much compassion had been shown he is justifiably angry and did not simply sell the man into slavery or put him in prison, but had him tortured until he could pay back the 10,000 talents. It should go without saying that it is rather difficult to pay back even a small sum while one is being tortured.

Then Jesus concludes the discourse with a frightening application, “So shall my heavenly Father do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” The forgiveness that the Father demands is genuine, complete and unhypocritical.

It should not be missed that God appraises the wrong we suffer at the hands of a fellow “brother” to be relatively miniscule in comparison to the way we might see it. If He can forgive us the relatively greater wrong, then God expects us to return the same courtesy to a brother who seeks forgiveness from us.

Pentecost summarizes the message of this parable nicely,

Since mercy has been extended to the servant, that servant was responsible as a creditor to extend mercy to debtors who sought forgiveness. Since we are by nature sinners, we have accumulated a debt that we are incapable of paying. Christ in mercy provided a salvation for sinners. And the one who seeks God’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ is mercifully forgiven all debts. No one can

²¹ Craig L. Bloomberg, *Matthew, The American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing 1992) 283-284

measure one's indebtedness to God for the forgiveness God has granted. Therefore, there should be no measure to the forgiveness that we grant those who seek forgiveness from us.²²

CONCLUSION

This concept has, I believe, been the missing link for many in their spiritual lives. Far too many Christians have failed to forgive past wrongs and have wondered why their own walk with God doesn't seem to be what it should be. Perhaps the problem is a refusal to engage in interpersonal forgiveness. As those who have been the recipients of overwhelming mercy does it not make sense that we should be merciful in return? God counts the refusal to forgive others as a sin. It grieves the Holy Spirit. A refusal to engage in interpersonal forgiveness will result in the believer living perpetually out of fellowship with God and with a spiritual life that is less than fulfilling. Failing to forgive is a deadly obstacle to the process of the believer's experiential sanctification.

²² Pentecost, *Parables*, 67