

BREAKING THE RESENTMENT BARRIER

by Ray C. Stedman

The parable we have before us deals with the healing of hurts between people, that is, the way to resolve differences, to heal the breaches that frequently come between members of families and members of churches, to dissolve the resentments and settle the bitter feuds and the fights that sometimes break out.

Some time ago I read a psychologist who said that Christians, he felt, were very much like porcupines on a cold winter's night. The cold drives them to huddle together to keep warm, but as soon as they get close to another they start jabbing each other with their spines and that forces them to move apart; thus they are forever coming together and moving apart in a kind of slow dance.

There may be a great deal of truth to that. You will remember the little jingle that I frequently quote,

To dwell above
with saints we love,
Oh, that will be glory.
But to dwell below
with saints we know,
Well, that's another story.

But now we want to speak about forgiving one another; the only way to break through the resentment barrier that separates us from each other. Forgiveness, of course, is the virtue we most enjoy, and least employ, in our Christian experience. We all love to be forgiven -- we expect it, and want it. But we find it a struggle to forgive; we resist it, and refuse oftentimes to do it.

We are like a little boy who was saying his prayers. As he went down the list of his family, asking God to bless them, he omitted his brother's name. His mother said to him, "Why didn't you pray for Cliff?" He said, "I'm not going to ask God to bless Cliff because he hit me." And his mother said, "Don't you remember Jesus said to forgive your enemies?" But the little boy said, "That's just the trouble. He's not my enemy; he's my brother!"

Perhaps many of us have the same difficulty, as did the Apostle Peter. He too was faced with this same problem, the problem of forgiving his brother. In Matthew 18, in a great passage in which our Lord has been dealing with the question of relationships between those who belong to him, we find Peter, in his impetuous bluntness, coming to Christ with a question.

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." {Matt 18:21-22 RSV}

I have often wondered, as I read this account, if Peter was not actually thinking of his literal brother, Andrew. Peter and Andrew were brothers and had grown up together. They had joined the band of those transparent people who never can hide anything. I tend to feel that he actually has in view some offense of Andrew here. Perhaps Andrew habitually left the cap off the toothpaste tube; or he was always borrowing some favorite jacket of Peter's, and wearing it without permission; or perhaps he refused to clean up his side of the room, or some other manifestation of brotherly evil.

At any rate, Peter feels that he is being very magnanimous here in suggesting that he forgive him seven times. There was good reason for him to think it was magnanimous. The rabbis taught that you only needed to forgive someone three times at the most. The fourth time you could do whatever you liked. They even taught that God did this, based upon a misunderstanding of a text in the prophet Amos, in which Amos repeatedly uses the formula, "for three sins, yea, and for four" {cf, Amos 1:3, et al} God brings judgment upon

such-and-such a city. Thus they taught that God himself never forgave more than three times. You can see from this that Peter feels he has gone to the utmost limit when he doubled that, added one for good measure, and suggests that he might be willing to forgive his brother seven times.

Now, there is humor in our Lord's reply. There are many passages which we oftentimes misunderstand and take seriously -- and misunderstand because we take them seriously -- though our Lord is speaking humorously. I am sure there is a note of laughter in his reply to Peter here. If we would put it in modern parlance, what he says is, "Peter, would you believe four hundred and ninety times?" In effect our Lord is saying, it is not a question of how often, i.e., how many times should I forgive my brother. That is not really the question. There is a deeper matter beneath that. The real question is, "Why should I forgive at all? When you see that you should forgive, then you will see, Peter, that there is no limit at all, that forgiveness is the kind of thing that ought to go on without limit." He has only chosen this figure of 490 times as a play upon what Peter has said to him, but it really suggests an unlimited forgiveness. So, to answer that deeper question, "Why should I forgive my brother," our Lord gives us this parable of the unforgiving steward. The opening part of it is found in Verses 23-30:

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt." {Matt 18:23-30 RSV}

The valuable of this parable lies in seeing that it is a picture of us. The Lord Jesus is here holding up a mirror in order that we might see ourselves. We are the servant who has been forgiven a vast and staggering amount of money, and God is the great king that has forgiven us. This ten thousand talents is an incredible amount. According to the margin a talent was worth about a thousand dollars. Ten thousand talents is ten million dollars which, in those days, would be a king's ransom. The entirely yearly income of a kingdom would hardly be that much.

When the settling of accounts came, this man was confronted with this vast debt and he could not pay it. The king ordered that justice be carried out and that the man, his wife and children, and all that he had be sold, as was possible in those days. Even then it would be far, far short of the amount of this debt. In desperation the man makes an impossible promise. He falls on his knees and says to the king, "Have patience, sir, and I will pay you everything." Now he could never do that. If he worked all his lifetime, and his family also, he would never be able to pay ten million dollars. But in desperation he cries out, and the king's heart is moved by the man's impossible situation, and, out of pity toward him, he forgives him, at staggering cost to himself. It means, of course, that this king assumed the debt himself, allowing it to go unpaid and thus impoverishing his treasury. This is no trifling matter. It was at staggering cost to himself that the king forgave the debt.

We must see ourselves in this if we are going to be helped by this word of Jesus. We must see that the sum of our offenses against God through the years constitutes this kind of a debt, an absolutely impossible amount. Our rebellions, our selfish acts and thoughts, our willful choices, our lovelessness toward one another, and the hurt we have caused others, our pride, our anger, our lusts, our bitterness, our hates, and our lies; all these add up through the years to a staggering debt we owe God and which we cannot pay. But then there comes the good news, the wonderful good news of the gospel. There came a day when we stood in the presence of God and heard him pronounce those words, "Forgiven, in Christ's name." The debt was wiped away. In one moment it was gone. How well we remember, as we look back to it, the glory of that moment when we realized that before God we stood cleansed, blameless, free; the debt was paid and we were free.

Jesus places, in direct contrast to this, another account which he says occurred immediately, as this man went out from his experience of being so unbelievably forgiven. "As he went out," he met a man who owed him

twenty dollars -- that is the amount of a hundred denarii -- and seizing him by the throat he said, "Pay me what you owe." But when the second man says exactly the same words the first had said just a few moments before, "Have patience with me and I'll pay you everything," instead of forgiving him this paltry amount, he throws him into prison till he shall pay the full amount.

That, says Jesus, is what we do when we refuse to forgive each other even the most insulting and injurious offenses. No matter how bad it may appear to us, no matter how hurt we are by what someone has done to us, in comparison to what God has forgiven us, it is like comparing twenty dollars to ten million dollars of debt. And these two events are occurring simultaneously in our lives, in immediate context, just as Jesus said.

There is not one of us here who is a Christian, who does not realize that he did not stop sinning when he was first forgiven in Christ. Despite the increasing light and power that has come to us as we have learned more of the provision for life that God has made available, we have still experienced much failure. Not a day goes by but that we do not stand in desperate need of the forgiving word of the great King. Again and again he cancels out the debt as we come in our guilt and abandon, in the consciousness that we have terribly failed, hearing anew the tender forgiving word. And yet, when someone offends us, how quickly we revert to the basis of justice and start demanding, "Pay me what you owe." "I demand an apology." "Give me my rights." "Let me have what's coming to me." "Treat me like I deserve." "I demand to be treated with respect." How many times do we utter such words?

In the rest of the story our Lord reveals the two great reasons why Christians must forgive those who offend them.

"When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servants as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers [the margin says, accurately, "the torturers"] till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." {Matt 18:31-35 RSV}

There are two reasons revealed here why Christians must forgive each other:

First, we must forgive because anything less is hypocritical. We cannot demand justice from others because we do not stand on that ground ourselves. As the king said to this servant, "You wicked servant! Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" This is what Jesus is saying to us. We must forgive one another because we have already been forgiven. Is not that the ground the Apostle Paul takes in Colossians 3, and in Ephesians 4:31?

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. {Eph 4:31-32 RSV}

That is the basis of Christian forgiveness. Jesus says that, when we refuse to do this, when we hold a grudge, or are difficult or bitter and refuse to settle an issue, then we are doing exactly what this unrighteous steward does here. In the very moment of our own forgiveness we are demanding justice, when we ourselves cannot and do not stand on that level.

The sign that we are acting on the basis of justice and not mercy is that, like this servant, we act harshly. That is the invariable mark we are demanding justice and not acting in forgiveness or mercy. We speak severely and sharply to the other. The servant took him by the throat and said, "Pay me what you owe me." It is always the mark that we are demanding justice when we speak caustically to one another. I have come to learn, by sad experience, as well as by observation, that this is one of the most destructive problems in homes. It is the reason why parents and children are often unable to communicate with one another.

Parents act this way frequently. We consign our children to a prison of rejection and scorn by the fact that we demand justice of them when we ourselves do not stand on that basis. We speak harshly to them, severely. We scold them and act terribly offended by their misdeeds. But, of course, when we do that we are victims of the deceitfulness of sin. We feel that we are defending righteousness, that we are showing our great concern for the truth, for justice and righteousness. But that is never the way it comes across to them. The way it strikes them is that we are being hypocritical, that we are asking them to live on a standard that we ourselves do not fulfill, that we are asking them to be always right, always truthful, always honest, always good, when we ourselves cannot do this. That is what causes rejection on the part of children toward parents, and the feeling that they are hypocritical and not honest.

There is a passage in Second Peter which describes the graces God gives; the grace of self-control, of godliness, of brotherly affection and of loving concern. Peter adds this very revealing word:

Whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. {2 Pet 1:9 RSV}

That is frequently our problem. We demand of others that they act in a way that we ourselves could never achieve, and therefore harshness creeps into our voice. We are severe and unbending, rigid in our demands. It is not that discipline is not necessary, or that we do not need to deal with wrong. The problem is the spirit in which we do it. The minute we revert to the basis of justice we are following the law of retaliation, and the law of retaliation always has an escalating clause in it. Your radio is too loud, so I pound on the wall. You squawk; I roar. The next time we meet, you won't speak to me. So I take advantage of you in a business deal, and soon the thing has escalated till it involves, if the conditions are such, a large group of people and can break out into actual violence and warfare. That is what happens when we deal in the demands of justice toward each other.

But what our Lord is saying is that forgiveness is possible because we have been forgiven. Because this vast and staggering debt against us has been wiped out by the grace of God, we have the capability of forgiving also. These words are not addressed to anyone who is not a Christian. We cannot expect men of the flesh to live on this level. They may forgive an offense, but, even then, it is not on the same ground as Christians. They may remit a penalty, but there is a spirit of hardness and rejection that goes with it. But Christian forgiveness eliminates that hardness. The inner attitude is changed, and there is an acceptance of the person, and an understanding and sympathy extended that permits an honest look at the problem, and opens the door for help. That is the first reason Jesus said we must forgive each other -- because we have been forgiven so very much ourselves.

The second reason we must forgive is because of the torment which an unforgiving spirit inflicts upon us.

"And in anger his lord delivered him to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." {Matt 18:34-35 RSV}

This is but a further amplification of what our Lord is saying in the Sermon on the Mount. He says there, "If you forgive not others their trespasses neither will my Father forgive yours," {cf, Matt 6:15 RSV}. That has been greatly misunderstood by many as teaching that the Sermon on the Mount puts God's blessing on a basis of works, that God is saying to men in general, "Unless you forgive others, I won't forgive you." But that indicates a distorted understanding of the passage. The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to those who have already been forgiven by God. It is addressed to those in whom the Spirit of God lives and therefore God knows they have the ability and capacity to forgive. But if they will not exercise it, the Lord Jesus says, if they insist upon going back to the ground of justice with others, well, then, that is the way God will handle them. If we insist on justice, we will be given justice ourselves. As James tell us, "Judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy," {Jas 2:13}. The result will be that we are "delivered to the torturers."

This is a marvelously expressive phrase to describe what happens to us when we do not forgive another. It is an accurate description of gnawing resentment and bitterness, the awful gall of hate or envy. It is a terrible feeling. We cannot get away from it, we cannot escape it. We find ourselves powerless to avoid it. We feel strongly this separation from another, and, every time we think of them, we feel within the acid of resentment

and hate eating away at our peace and calmness. This is the torturing that our Lord says will take place.

In the book of Hebrews we read, "Let no root of bitterness springing up trouble you," {cf, Heb 12:15}. Notice where the trouble occurs? It hits you, not the other fellow.

A number of years ago I had a difficulty with another Christian. I do not believe in evolution in the sense of feeling that men come from monkeys, but I do believe that some men are skunks! This man had done an injustice to me, a very evil thing as I saw it. It hurt me greatly. But the trouble was, he was living about three thousand miles from me. If he had lived next door where I could have done something about it -- thrown my garbage over his fence, or something like that -- it would have helped. But he was three thousand miles away and did not even know how I felt about him. The bitterness I had did not bother him in the least -- but, oh, how it bothered me. It ate at me constantly. I could not forget it. It was always recurring. At every mention of his name I could feel the acid eating in my own heart until, fortunately, reading the Scriptures I ran across certain verses that deal with this matter, and I realized that the problem was not with him but with me. In grace I was enabled to put it away and forgive him, to write to him and tell him so, and forget it. Immediately there was peace brought again to my own heart.

Jesus says that if you do not do this, this torture will go on for as many years as you refuse to forgive. It will never stop.

I had a striking illustration of that occur a number of years ago. A woman in her eighties told me that, fifty years before, her aunt had said something insulting to her, and this woman had never forgiven her. Fifty years later she could recount the event to the precise detail, and she felt all the same bitterness, anger, and resentment welling up within her as when it originally occurred. It was no wonder to me that, by this time, she had become a bitter, crotchety, quarrelsome, unhappy woman who could find no happiness in life whatsoever. She was still in the hands of the torturers fifty years later.

Our Lord is telling us that forgiveness occurs when we stop saying, "Look what you're doing to me," and start saying, "What can I do to relieve your hurt?" That is when we forgive, when we are no longer concerned about self, but are concerned about what we are doing to someone else as retaliation for what they have done to us. The thing that makes forgiveness possible is to remember how our Lord puts this principle. Can we not forgive twenty dollars' worth of injury, when we have been forgiven ten million, ourselves? That is always our situation. Therefore, if there is a grudge, if we have been harboring resentment, if there is a feeling of antipathy, if we do not want to speak to someone else, if we feel cut off from another, two things have happened:

- We have reacted as an ungrateful wretch to the grace that has been extended to us, just as this unforgiving steward did.
- Second, we have consigned ourselves to bitterness of heart, to the eating of the acid of resentment to our own hurt.

This is why nothing will ever take place toward the healing of the world until there is the healing of the church, the healing of the heart, and the healing of hurts, one with another, by the grace God has shown to us.

Let us move over onto this ground, and live on this level.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for dealing so honestly with us. We know you do not show us these things in order to leave us feeling condemned and guilty, but rather that we might take again of the riches of grace, once again hear the word of the great King, "All is forgiven." In the glory of that restored relationship, realizing that this vast debt has been set aside on our behalf, we can turn to our brother and say, "I'll forget it," and live, Lord, as you have lived toward us. We pray this may find its application in practical ways in the lives of each one of us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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