

Re-Wired for Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

If you were to say what part of the Christian faith is hardest for you to buy into, what would it be? Or, let me ask the same question yet another way: if there were a part of our faith that came closest to making you think twice about even being a Christian, what would it be?

Might it be the virgin birth? That used to be a deal breaker for a lot of people, although it's become something of a non-issue lately. But, would you say it's the hardest part for you to accept?

Maybe, for you, it's the whole Creation – Evolution thing that everybody seems to get so overheated about.

Or how about the incarnation idea, that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. That's a pretty tough idea to get your brain around. A lot of people would be Christians if it weren't for our belief that Jesus was more than just a great man.

Maybe it's the doctrine of the Trinity – that's no walk in the park; or, Jesus' Second Coming – I mean, come on, it's been 2000 years now.

Can I share what the hardest part of Christianity is for me to accept? It is the emphasis our faith puts on forgiveness... both God's forgiveness of us, and God's expectation that we forgive those who have wronged us. I just don't like it. And, I have a hunch many of you will feel the same way.

You know, we're the only religion in which people don't earn their way into God's good graces. Everybody else says that it is up to each one of us to earn a spot in heaven. Every other religion has a code of conduct, a set of laws, rules, a path, something you have to *do* in order to get into heaven. But not us. We take another view. We believe that someone else has done this for us, and, that, of course, is Jesus. Instead of our making ourselves righteous by following a set of rules, we believe Jesus has *made us righteous* through his death; that he has atoned for our sins, and there's nothing we must do. No rules, no laws, no paths, no reincarnations – coming back again and again until we get it right. Jesus has done it for us. There's nothing we have to do, we just say yes to the gift.

And that grates on me. Oh sure, part of me loves this gift of grace, this salvation by faith, not by works; but part of me isn't so crazy about it, because it takes the control of my life out of my own hands. Am I alone in this, or can some of you identify with what I'm saying? I'm an oldest-child, Type A, overachieving perfectionist who very much wants to be able to say, "I did this." I want no asterisks in the record book of life that say, "Oh, but he didn't really earn that perfect score; he had help from Jesus." I want it to be all me, all about me. And I keep trying to do that. I keep thinking that, as long I'm a good boy, go to church, tithe, say my prayers, and help little old ladies across the street, that I will deserve eternal life. Surely God wouldn't keep me out if I'm a good guy, right? Likewise, those who aren't good boys and girls, don't go to church or give or pray or help little old ladies, well, they get what's coming to them. It's the way I'm wired.

And, as for forgiving others, well, especially on this 10th anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the bravery of those who took down the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania instead of wherever it was headed in DC, I'm struggling. Aren't you? All this talk of forgiveness, loving enemies, turning the other cheek, it just isn't easy to accept... doesn't seem fair. Whatever happened to that "Eye for an eye" idea where we all get what we deserve? That's what comes naturally to me... that's how I'm wired. Forgiveness? I'm just not wired for it.

So, this parable makes me very uncomfortable. A king decides it is time to get his financial records reconciled. There are people who owe him money and it is time to collect. So, he calls in his first servant. Evidently he's starting at the top because this guy owes him an incredible amount of money – over a billion dollars in today's figures. When the king demands to be repaid, the servant says his assets aren't that liquid, so the king orders the servant and his family to be thrown in jail until he pays. But, then the servant falls on his knees and begs the king for a little more time and he'll pay the money back. As though putting together a billion dollars is doable, if given a couple of days. Instead of granting the request for time, the king, in a sudden and inexplicable burst of magnanimity, forgives the debt altogether.

But, when the servant leaves and is out on the street, he runs into another servant who owes him a miniscule amount. Peanuts, in comparison. If the space station equals the first servant's debt, the second servant's debt would be a paper airplane. But the first servant grabs the second servant by the throat and demands repayment, and when he asks for a little time, the first servant has him thrown in debtor's prison until he can repay.

When the king gets word of it, he summons him and says, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?”

Now, let’s stop and consider what has just happened. The king has forgiven his servant’s debt. What had been no longer exists. The debt has been cancelled. What a gift – forgiving a billion dollar debt is a great sacrifice for the king to make. What a humbling thing to have someone make that kind of sacrifice for you.

Clearly, the king’s forgiveness is supposed to do something to the servant. What does it do? Surely it lifts a great burden from his shoulders. A billion dollars is nothing to sneeze at. What an incredible sense of relief, of freedom. Can you imagine leaving the king’s palace and walking down the street feeling freer than you’ve ever felt before? Nothing – absolutely nothing to worry about. You feel so light you think you’re going to float right off the ground. You can breathe deeply and the air smells sweet. Suddenly you notice things you never noticed before: how blue the sky is, how beautiful the flowers are, the laughter of children. This kind of thing is life-changing.

At least it is supposed to be. Receiving such a gift is supposed to transform you, re-wire you, so that, instead of seeing forgiveness as a burden, a requirement, an obligation, it suddenly becomes... a joy. Forgiving becomes a gift you *want* to give because you know how incredible this gift feels to receive. And then, when you give it, you realize that you had only experienced half the joy as the recipient of forgiveness, because you discover that giving forgiveness to someone else is also giving a gift to yourself. To let go of the anger, to let go of the bitterness and resentment; to let go of the dark thoughts about the person who wronged you; to discover the peace that comes when you forgive, suddenly you discover why God loves to do this so much.

Now, I’m not saying that forgiveness is easy, but, most of life’s greatest joys require a lot of hard work before we get to the joy. But, I think what Jesus is saying here is that understanding the debt that has been forgiven us; truly grasping the sacrifice God has made in order to free us from our debt; comprehending the size of the gift that has been given to us should change us, transform us, *re-wire us* in a deep and permanent way so that, instead of seeing forgiveness as an undesirable obligation, an unfair requirement of our faith, we begin to see it for what it is: a new way of living that has the potential to transform the world around us. We begin to see it as a gift that not only brings joy and freedom to the receiver, but to the giver as well.

When Jesus says, at the end of the parable, that his Father in heaven will throw us into prison to be tortured if we do not forgive our brother or sister from the heart, the truth is that God doesn’t have to throw us very far, because when we withhold our forgiveness and fill our lives with bitterness, resentment, and clinging to painful pasts, we’re already there, already torturing ourselves.

Jesus tells this parable in answer to Peter’s question, “Lord, if a brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Do you hear the spirit in which Peter asks this question? It is a spirit of obligation, of shoulds and oughts, of laws and requirements. The implication is that he doesn’t really want to forgive, so he wants to know the limit. It is like a kid at the dinner table – “How many bites of vegetables do I have to eat before I can get dessert?”

Jesus’ answer is supposed to make us see the issue from a whole other perspective. The Greek can be translated as “seventy-seven times” or as “seventy times seven,” but, either way, forgiveness from Jesus’ perspective becomes either the greatest and most unpleasant of all of life’s burdens, or it becomes the greatest of all of life’s joys.

I guess it just depends on how you’re wired.

May God continue to re-wire us for forgiveness.

Amen.