

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

Matthew 18:21-35

There are many hot topics political discourse these days, but one such topic is that of student loan forgiveness. It's a debate with many nuances to it, and one such rebuttal is.... "it's not fair" I either already paid them back, or I didn't have loans and would have if I'd known I was going to be getting free money. And it reinforces/encourages people to not take responsibility for their decisions, such as the choice to take on large amounts of debt.

Although I don't really understand that thinking, especially in terms of school. Because we've long since touted that education is the ticket out of poverty, and yet if you family lives in poverty there is no way you can be educated without a loan.

There is truth in the argument that it's not "fair", forgiving debts isn't fair in the sense that it's earned or deserved. If someone paid their loan back then they've earned being debt free, but loan forgiveness is different it is a radical gift of generosity, its an act of liberation.

The thing about forgiveness is that it isn't "fair", it isn't earned. And it's central to who God is, and what life is in the kingdom of God. Student loan forgiveness is a radical thing. And yet Jesus envisioned a debt free world.

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Our parable today is the Parable of the Unforgiving servant, and right before the parable itself begins, Peter approaches Jesus with a question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answers,

“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Then Jesus responds with a parable

In the parable, Jesus describes a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One servant owed him ten thousand talents—a debt so enormous that it was impossible to repay. The king ordered that the servant, along with his family and possessions, be sold to repay the debt.

The servant fell on his knees and begged for patience, promising to pay back everything. Moved with compassion, the king took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go

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It'd be like a single mom, with two young kids whose partner, in the throws of depression disappears, and she couldn't make the housing payment on her own. So she's staring homelessness in the face as the bank is knocking on the door to foreclose and evict them. And then in their mercy not only decide not to foreclose and kick them out, but erase their mortgage all together.

That would never happen though right...

I remember when I was in high school and I was beginning to see the world through a different lens and making sense out of stuff I'd heard about my life like the word mortgage. And I realized that actually this who loan thing doesn't make sense because the more money you have the better of you are. I remember discovering...wait, if I go and buy a home for say \$200,000 and get a 30 year mortgage,

I would have to pay substantially more for the house in the end than someone who is very wealthy and could pay all the money up front.

This whole system is set up to benefit those who have money.

Y'all know this though... do you remember when you first realized this?

Now I'm not sure that this realization was what motivated the king to forgive the astronomical debts of the servant. The scripture doesn't say. But then the parable continues. The man who was just given an astronomical amount of debt was carrying on this life after his generous release from the king and he came upon someone who owed him a great deal, and he dealt with him harshly and threw him into prison for not repaying his small debt to him.

The parable ends with...so my heavenly father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart...

OUCH.

It must be metaphorical right? After all —in our conversations about debt forgiveness in politics with so called Christian nationalists - they don't seem to acknowledge that forgiveness of debts is biblical...

but it wouldn't work right? It'd jeopardize our capitalist economy - which would cause lots of suffering. I'm not saying it wouldn't What I am saying is this parable is illustrating what the Kingdom of God is like.

When you say the Lord's prayer...do you say forgive us our trespasses or forgive us our debts? I was always taught trespasses. But that word translated as either trespasses/debts in the lords prayer is the same word used in this parable talking about debt (an economic and legal term) is the same word used in the lords prayer that we usually use to refer to sin, which is a moral and theological term.

Both the parable of the Unmerciful servant and the Lord's prayer "the word for "debt" is that same slippery term that means both economic debt and moral transgression. In Matthew's gospel, it is difficult to separate the two. It is hard to untangle money from sin. It is almost as if Jesus means for us to be confused or upset by his little story.¹"

Forgiveness is one of THE central values in scripture/in the in-breaking Kingdom of God/and is supposed to be a central value in the lives of those who follow Jesus. Forgiveness of debts (legal and economic) and forgiveness of sins (moral and theological) is central to the Kingdom of God.

Forgiveness — both the giving and the receiving of it — is reciprocal, one cannot have it without doing it. They are two sides of the same coin.

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What about forgiveness of sins - forgiveness in sins/the moral and theological debts

What is forgiveness: well the American psychology association defines forgiveness this way:

¹ <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-c45>

Forgiveness involves willfully putting aside feelings of resentment toward someone who has committed a wrong, been unfair or hurtful, or otherwise harmed you in some way. it involves a voluntary transformation of your feelings, attitudes, and behavior, so that you are no longer dominated by resentment and can express compassion, generosity, or the like toward the person who wronged you.² (American Psychological Association)

Forgiveness isn't a feeling...It's a certain posture/attitude towards others, a commitment to how we want to be in the world. Forgiveness is a choice. Forgiveness is a journey, and Forgiveness is something we can work on and get better at.

The hard part is that at the end of the day forgiveness isn't about anyone but you. It isn't about the other person. It isn't about someone acknowledging the hurt or apologizing. Two way reconciliation is different. Forgiveness is about you. Does it make it easier to forgive if the person is apologetic and remorseful, sure! Ultimately forgiveness is a practice and a commitment with yourself about how you want to respond to those who've harmed you. Or even those who are indebted to you in some way.

I also just want to name that forgiveness isn't the same as reconciliation...sometimes forgiveness leads to the repairing of a relationship but they are separate (although

connected). I think you all know this, but I just want to explicitly make it clear that forgiveness is not about not having boundaries and protecting oneself from hurt. Forgiveness is about willfully putting aside feelings of resentment towards someone who has harmed you.

But like really why should we forgive someone?

As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Staying angry with you is how I protect myself from you. Refusing to forgive you is not only how I punish you; it is also how I keep you from getting close enough to hurt me again, and nine times out of ten it works.” Works as in it keeps you from getting close enough to hurt me again. But there’s a cost to our refusal to forgive. “There is a serious side effect,” Taylor warns. “It’s called bitterness and it can do terrible things to the human body and soul.”³

As the Buddha supposedly said once, that hatred is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Forgiveness is about choosing not to hate, no matter the circumstances or reason.

And Forgiveness lies at the heart of our relationship with God, and relationships within the kingdom of God. Because ultimately God chooses love, over and over again, irregardless of us. And love is what brings life. Hatred is what brings bitterness,

³ (Barbara Brown Taylor, “Arthritis of the Spirit,” in *Gospel Medicine* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1995), 9.)

resentment and death. And that is why we forgive. Because we were created to love. And we flourish when we love, and forgive. That is in both the giving and receiving of forgiveness. A refusal to let hatred, because that is who God is.

For me at the core of forgiveness is a grace filled knowing that hurt people, hurt people. It's what I know intellectually about trauma, and what the research shows. It's easier to live with a forgiving spirit if you know their story, the incredible heartache and trauma they've endured, and you see how in their hurt they are lashing out. I will also admit, for me it's much easier to live into this spirit of forgiveness with children we've built relationships with, or children in general than it is adults. Because there is a level of "you should know better".

The meanest things that a person has ever said to me was a person from the church I was serving.

And Cultivating a forgiving spirit takes work... some wounds are very deep and painful. but we all must do the work of cultivating a forgiving spirit. Choosing to not live with continued hatred, and being diligent in guarding our hearts from hatred.

Now I want to be very clear - forgiveness isn't about not calling out the truths of abuse, and hurt, and wrongdoing. Or being angry and fighting the systems of oppression, and racism that plague our country...

Having a forgiving spirit is not about not feeling the hurt and angry. It's most definitely feeling the hurt, and being honest about it. And forgiveness isn't about not being angry at the brokenness of our world. It is about not letting the hurt and anger turn into hatred and resentment, for that destroys our soul...

Hurt people that don't transform their pain, transmit their pain, because hurt people hurt people.

Times are tense, and division is growing, and we can't even agree on what's true anymore. And as we continue pushing for equality, liberation and freedom of all people, particularly in this time of division. We can't back down and we must not stop advocating for justice, but we also must not let our hearts grow hardened and resentful. There is so much hatred in the world, and we can't respond to hatred with more hatred. Be angry yes! We must continue to foster a forgiving spirit within us, that is quick to defend the vulnerable, and quick to lay aside feelings of resentment and hatred.

Who is it that you need to forgive, what system do you need to forgive?

And how can we, as a community of faith, help one another guard are hearts from letting hurt and anger turn to hatred....how can we help one another forgive, and cultivate a spirit of forgiveness?