

SOCIAL GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

IV. The Law of Forgiveness
Matthew 18:21-35

"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Mt 6:12)

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." We pray "debts"; other communions pray "trespasses." Wouldn't one wording be much simpler, avoiding the inconvenience of explaining that we pray "debts"? Of course it would! Is there any reason we can't all get together? Is there any reason for the difference?

In the text (Matt 6:12), "Forgive us our debts," the Greek word is "opheilemata," which literally means "debts" and refers to our relationship with God. But when in the 14th verse, Jesus says, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you," the word is "paraptomata" which literally means "missing the mark" and refers to our relationships with one another. In the Scripture, Jesus answers Peter's question, "Lord, how often should I forgive my brother?" with the parable of the unforgiving servant, to emphasize the absurdity of our debt toward God. A man was forgiven a debt of 10,000 talents. That's an incredible debt. It's more than the total income of an entire province. Yet he refused to forgive a debt of 100 denarii, 1/500,000th of the debt which he himself had been forgiven. The word "debts" underlines our impossible debt to a gracious God who has forgiven us. Yet, we continue to have very anti-social relationships in our unforgiving attitudes to one another.

There are 63 words for "forgiveness" in the New Testament and 22 of them relate to our relationships with one another. We forgive not once, not twice, but as often as necessary, because this is the way God treats us. There should be no limit to man's forgiveness -- not 7 times, not 70 times, not even 490 times. Forgiveness is not an act, it's an attitude; it's not a spurt, it's the Spirit of God. Our debt to God is written in large red letters with the blood from Calvary's Cross. We can't repay God for that. All we can do to say "Thank you" to Him is to forgive each other.

About a year or two ago, Janet had a flat tire and when she tried to pay the man who fixed it for her, he said, "No, sometime your husband can help somebody else in a similar predicament, " a debt which, incidentally, I have since repaid. And this is the way forgiveness works. I express my thankfulness to God for His forgiveness by forgiving you.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." James says, "For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy." (Ja 2:13) This is the simple, solemn truth. If we forgive, we shall be forgiven. If we don't forgive, we shall be judged. Thus, you see, the Social Gospel of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with social or political pronouncements. It has to do with attitudes and relationships. The Social Gospel of Jesus is not demonstration but forgiveness. In our Social Gospel, in our war against evil, because we have been forgiven a debt impossible for us to repay, we go forth in a spirit of forgiveness to right the wrong, to heal the hurt, and to change the society in which we live.

In this series of sermons, of all the laws of social behaviour, this one is perhaps the most frightening. For 2,000 years, men have been praying, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." For 1800 years we have been reciting an Apostles' Creed in which we affirm our belief in the forgiveness of sins. And this is the awesome truth -- if there is any unhealed breach, any unsettled quarrel, any fractured relationship, if there is any wrong which we have not attempted to right in our relationships with each other, God will not forgive us. Do you really want to pray this prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors"?

Robert Louis Stevenson was having morning devotions with his family in the South Sea islands. When it came time to pray the Lord's Prayer, he got up and left the room. Because he was very sickly, his wife followed him out of the room, thinking he had been taken ill. "What is the matter, dear? Are you ill?" "No," he replied, "I'm just not fit to pray the Lord's Prayer this morning." Were you fit to pray it when we prayed a few minutes ago? "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." To be fit to pray this prayer we must try to do three things: First, we must try to understand; second, we must try to forget; and third, we must try to love.

1. We Must Try to Understand

One of the hardest things for us to understand in our personal relationships together is that offensiveness is not always personal. When another person offends us, it may not be a personal affront at all, only the way he got out of bed, or what he had to eat for breakfast, or a stomach ulcer acting up again, or perhaps even the arrangement of his genes and chromosomes. ~~Jenny said to me not long ago, "I don't learn to argue with you."~~ When a man raises his voice he may not be angry, just excited. When a person seems to be cold and indifferent, he may not be haughty or rude, just shy or frightened; and his indifference may very well be preoccupation. We say that most of our problems result from our failure to communicate with one another. But it is even harder to communicate emotions.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's play The Transfiguration, Miriam says to the puritanical Hilda, "You have no sin and no conception of it; therefore you are so terribly severe; as an angel you are not amiss, but as a human creature you need a sin to soften you." Sometimes with our pharisaical righteousness, and our angelic rigidity, we can be quite unforgiving and quite judgmental in our relationships. I do not think this implies that we need a sin to soften us. Our Lord "in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning." (Heb 4:15) We don't need to sin to make us compassionate but we do need an understanding of the sinner.

One of Robert Browning's literary critics said of him that he had a tremendous capacity for identifying himself with the problems of other people in his poetry -- Andrea Del Sarto, Rabbi Ben Ezra, Fra Lippo Lippi, Bishop Blougram. What the master of verse did for literature, the Master of Life has done for us. He has identified Himself with us and with our problems and this is what we need to do in our relationships together, because when I begin to identify with you, then I begin to understand you, and I have taken the first step toward forgiveness.

John Wesley, in his diary, tells how he bitterly resented an individual whom he considered to be a terrible miser. When, on one occasion, he failed to respond as generously as Wesley thought he should, to one of Wesley's favorite charities, he raked the man fore and aft. Then Wesley records the man's reply. "I know a man," he said, "who, at the beginning of every week, goes to market and buys a penny's worth of parsnips, and for the week he has parsnips for meat and water to drink, and meat and drink alike cost him a penny a week." "And who is that man?" asked Wesley. "I am." "But," said Wesley indignantly, "you earn 200 pounds a year!" Then Wesley discovered that this man was using his entire income to repay debts he had incurred before his conversion. "This," said Wesley, "is the man I thought to be covetous."

We must try to understand, lest we judge unjustly and be guilty of an unforgiving heart. When understanding colors our relationships, forgiveness begins. There is a French proverb which says, "He who understands all forgives all." Jesus prayed from a cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not!" Oh, they knew all right. They were not ignorant of the crime they were perpetrating. There is no excusing the wickedness of the deed. But what they did not understand was the great depth of God's forgiveness and the great power of His reconciling love, for when they crucified Him upon a cross, Jesus absorbed all the hurt, all the shame, all the vilification, and all the brutality into Himself. He didn't react; He simply absorbed the wrong. Thus, you see, reconciliation begins, because when I no longer react, there is now no sounding board for your resentment. I absorb it into myself and resistance crumbles, the wounds begin to heal, the relationships are restored, and unity is achieved. "Forgive us our debts." If we are fit to pray this prayer, we must try to understand; and secondly, we must try to forget.

2. We Must Try to Forget

██████████, "But ██████████ I can't forget." Well, we must try. For the two words are twin -- forgiving and forgetting. When one of General Oglethorpe's servants stole a bottle of his favorite wine, John Wesley said to him, "You must forgive him." Oglethorpe replied, "All right, I'll forgive him, but I won't forget." And Wesley said, "Then, sir, I hope you never sin." "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

At the time of Queen Caroline's death Samuel Rutherford said of her, "And unforgiving, unforgiven dies." If we can't forget when we forgive, we are then in no mood to be forgiven. We don't even wish to be forgiven. All we want is to continue to harbor the grudge in our own hearts. If we nurse the wrong, our heart is not right with God, and God cannot forgive us because the heart is not prepared to receive His forgiveness. When we nurse our hurt, the grudge poisons the channel by which God offers us His reconciling grace and our relationship with God is thus destroyed. We must try to forget when we forgive.

But isn't forgetfulness being too easy with the wrongdoer? George Bernard Shaw said, in his play, Major Barbara, "Forgiveness is a beggar's refuge. We must pay our debts." ~~We criticize the Roman Catholics who go into the confessional booth, seek absolution, then immediately forget and commit the same sin again. We say that's too easy.~~

Forgetfulness seems to let them off without paying the consequence for their sin. It reminds us of the story of a judge who asked the man in the box if he had anything to say before the verdict was pronounced. "Well, your Honor," said the man, "It has always been my policy to let bygones be bygones. Why don't we just forget the whole thing right now?" Isn't forgetting and forgiving really softheartedness, and doesn't softheartedness feed and fatten and appease the wrong, and make us to become accomplices to the evil?

Pierre Corneille in his tragedy *Cinna*, said through the lips of Auguste, ~~qui pardonne aisément envie l'outrage.~~ "He who pardons easily invites offense." But there's the catch -- "He who pardons easily." There is no such thing as an easy pardon. Ask any mother with a breaking heart, or look at Calvary's Cross. Forgiveness says that we must forget, not because we would blunt our consciences toward the sordid evils which will no longer trouble us, and not because the sinner is thus easily let off the hook, but because we look to a cross where God paid it all to effect our reconciliation.

"There is a fountain filled with blood
 Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
 And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
 Lose all their guilty stains."

Thus forgiveness is not the remission of a penalty; it's the restoration of a relationship. It doesn't let us off; rather, it lifts us up.

In the early American church there was a mourners' bench where the penitents sat awaiting pardon. Today we have the psychology clinic where sinners go to relieve themselves of the burden of their guilt. But forgiveness is far more than just a mourners' bench or a psychology clinic. It's Calvary's Cross, where God paid the penalty for us and the slate is wiped clean. There is nothing easy about Calvary's Cross and it will not be easy for us to forget when we forgive; yet we must try.

Think of the satisfaction you got whenever you made the final payment on an automobile, or a household appliance, or perhaps even your home? The transaction was completed; the deal was finally closed; and the burden was lifted. We must forget when we forgive, in order that the transaction can be closed, and the relationship reconciled. The perpetual blackmail which continues in some homes where there is forgiveness but no forgetting only reopens the wounds over and over again and lets the old sins rise up to haunt the sinner.

History is full of bad examples of men who could forgive but not forget. Perhaps the most recent in our experience is Germany after World War I. The attitude of the Allies was not an attitude of forgiveness but of reparation. Mercilessness begets mercilessness, and in one generation the unforgiven children by unforgiving parents were fighting each other all over again in World War II. The Romans were merciless in their relationships with the Barbarians and when the Barbarians conquered Rome, they were merciless in their attitude to the Romans. The Czar's government was heartless toward the peasants. When the Revolution of 1917 occurred the peasants showed no mercy toward their oppressors. We still see overtones of this today in Soviet policy, for the Laws of Charity and Forgiveness are not comprehended by the Soviets and every gesture

~~How slow we are to learn to forgive and forget, but we must try~~ If we are to properly pray this prayer we must not only try to understand and to forget, we must try to love.

3. We Must Try to Love

The highest expression of this sort of relationship is revealed to us by the Master. When the disciples were traveling through Samaria and the Samaritans were inhospitable, the disciples wanted vengeance, "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" (Lk 9:54) but Christ rebuked them. When Judas betrayed his Master with a gesture of love, a kiss, Jesus said, "Friend, why are you here?" (Mt 26:50), an act and a word of intimate relationship. And from the cross He prayed, "Father, forgive them." He returned good for evil. He replied to vengeance with forgiveness and to hate with love. And so must we! Because when we do, two things will happen. Portia says, in The Merchant of Venice:

"The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes."

Two things will happen -- one to the forgiver and one to the forgiven, because no man can harbor the heavy burden of resentment and bitterness in his heart without having to pay an enormous price for it. When he forgets, (1) his own heart is changed, and (2) he has won another friend whether the reconciliation is between two estranged friends, or between a bitter wife and a prodigal husband, or a distraught mother and a wayward son, or two nations fighting one another. We must forgive, not only for the sake of our relationships with people now, but for the sake of our eternal relationships with them in Heaven.

When Sir Thomas More, the Lord Chancellor of England was condemned to death by his enemies he said, "More have I not to say, my Lords, but that Saint Paul held the clothes of those who stoned Stephen to death, and as they are now both saints in heaven, and shall continue there friends forever; so I verily trust, and shall most heartily pray, that though your lordships have now here on earth been judges to my condemnation, we may nevertheless hereafter cheerfully meet in heaven in everlasting salvation." Stephen prayed "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7:60) The heart of the apostle was touched by the power of the Holy Spirit, and though there was no relationship between Paul and Stephen here, there most certainly must be in Heaven.

We ought to forgive today, because tomorrow may be too late. When Napoleon was traversing a battlefield where one of his colonels had been killed he said, "I regret that I did not speak to him before the battle to tell him that I have long since forgotten everything." We can't bring a person back to life and tell him that we forgive. And we can't resurrect a fallen nation which has perished in vengeful bloodshed. It's hard! Everyone knows it's hard, to try to understand, to try to forget, and to try to love. But we must try!

Toward the conclusion of World War II, C. S. Lewis of Oxford broadcast these words over BBC, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive, as we have in wartime. And then to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger 'That sort of talk makes them 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 I am not trying to tell you in these talks what I could do. I can do precious little. I am telling you what Christianity is. I didn't invent it. And there, right in the middle of it, I find, 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who 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 don't forgive, we shall not be forgiven." These are God's words, not mine. This is God's way, not mine. I wonder what would happen in our world and in our relationships together if we would begin, for a chance, to do things God's way and begin to forgive those who have sinned against us as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Some time ago there was

~~_____~~ a movie entitled, "Carve Her Name With Pride." It was the true life story of Violette Szabo, the heroic Allied agent in Occupied France during World War II. When she was captured and tortured, she cried out to her tormentors, "I hate you! I hate you!" Jesus prayed from the Cross, "Father, forgive them." There is only one way to translate hate into love and that's through the relationship we share with Him. He invites us into this relationship now.