

FORGIVENESS IS A TWO- WAY STREET

Our Gospel for this Sunday (Matthew 18:23-35) includes yet another parable meant to teach us about the kingdom of God in heaven and on earth. This particular parable which compares the kingdom of heaven to a king who is intent on settling his debts, is neither opaque nor difficult to understand; it is a story in which a king forgives much but the one of whom much is forgiven forgives nothing. Jesus tells the story in direct response to Peter's question about the nature of and need for forgiveness (v. 21 "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?") The answer is relatively clear. We are instructed to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Forgiveness in this parable is both an extravagant and a precious thing. An equation of the respective debts that are in play here can be helpful. A "talent" is a measure of the weight of silver and in Jesus' time was roughly equal to about 15 years' worth of wages for the typical worker. The king in our parable is owed 10,000 talents—a debt which the slave has no hope of ever repaying. The debt owed the slave by a fellow slave is 100 denarii—a denarius is a coin roughly equaling the daily wage for a typical worker. This is no trifling debt, but neither is it earth-shattering and impossible to repay.

To put the comparative debts equation simply, in the eyes of the sinner (i.e. the unforgiving slave), 100 coins are more precious than the life of another human being; in the eyes of God 54,750,000 coins (the equivalent value of 10,000 talents in denarii) are nothing to be considered next to the fate of the sinner. Forgiveness, as laid out in this parable, is extravagant in the extreme, and more precious by far than the wages of sin.

Forgiveness in the Gospel of Matthew is not only relational; it is reciprocal. When teaching his disciples to pray Jesus includes the following petition: "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). This fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer is echoed in the lesson of this parable about the kingdom; we ought to forgive as our King has forgiven us.

Jesus teaches the disciples that forgiveness — both the giving and the receiving of it — is reciprocal, one cannot have it without doing it. "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). In answering Peter's request for help in understanding how far forgiveness needs to go Jesus teaches that God's forgiveness surpasses both our deserving and our comprehension of it; we who have first been forgiven must, therefore, forgive those who have wronged us so much more lightly.

The point of this parable is clear--forgiveness lies at the heart of our faith in God and our love of one another. Forgiveness, which we receive from God our King in the person of Jesus is what our King expects from his subjects in their dealings with each other. Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors; as a prayer this puts the emphasis on what we will receive in turn for the forgiveness we have offered. Forgive your brother or sister from your heart; the parable turns the tables, teaching us that we have been first forgiven and encouraging us to forgive in turn. Taken together, this is a composite picture of the kingdom of heaven, and the kingdom we practice, both of which are driven by forgiveness