

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

OUT OF PITY, AND OUT OF PITY

Matthew 18:21-35

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Analysis by Eric W. Evers

21Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow

slave, as I had mercy on you?’ 34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Author’s Note: I believe we cannot ignore the fact that this is the assigned text for the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. How do we talk about forgiveness in the light of tremendous violence done to us, and tremendous loss suffered by us? What are the social and spiritual implications of unforgiveness? I will leave it to those more insightful than myself to discern whether or not the increased polarization in our culture (and often in our churches) finds some source in the trauma of 9/11. I do not think we can deny the anger so prevalent around us, however. And this tension certainly finds an echo in the defensiveness and violence found in our text.

DIAGNOSIS: Mired in Conflict

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Protecting Ourselves*

“How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” (v. 21). Whether it is in church, in our families, or simply in our wider world, there always seems to be another need for forgiveness: another offense given, a new fault found, an old bitterness stirred up again. Peter knows this, and his question betrays a defensive attitude about it. “Just how many times do I have to forgive?” He’s looking for a limit, a way to protect himself. We understand this. Forgiveness is costly. Graciousness can feel like powerlessness. And in a media world fueled by outrage and driven by grievances, forgiveness is of no real advantage. So how many times, really, do we have to do it? Can’t we draw a line and, for our own sakes; say “enough is enough”? What

happens when our reserves of pity run out?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Violence in the Heart*

“Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave?” (v. 33). We know the answer to this question. Even as we cling to our grudges with a stranglehold, we know we should forgive. We should, but we won’t. It’s not how our hearts are turned. We can try, but will it come “from the heart”? Maybe, sometimes. But nowhere near as much as it should. Yes, we concede in our minds (and with our lips) to the truth that what God has forgiven us infinitely dwarfs whatever minor trespasses have been committed against us (in the same way that ten thousand talents vastly exceed a mere hundred denarii). It doesn’t matter, though. Whatever gratitude we might feel melts away at the slightest perceived offense. And Jesus’ parable paints the picture more vividly than we would like. The unmerciful slave’s actions go beyond Peter’s mere defensiveness into full-blown violence. He grabs his fellow slave by the throat and “throws” him into prison. Why is this character so aggressive? To illustrate the violent nature of our own hearts. We cannot, we will not forgive because of this nature. What is at the root of it? This is the pastoral question. In a post-9/11 world, it is a question of cultural analysis as well. We do not disagree with other people over social issues; we demonize them. On television, radio, and the internet, division and grievance and rage permeate our discourse. The pastor must discern the pathways of resentment and anger in the flock in order to provide care for souls. The reasons are many: psychological, social, cultural. But at the root, the problem is theological. We run out of pity for others because our hearts would rather fight for self-protection than suffer in love. Why is forgiveness such a chore for us? Because there is so little grace in our souls.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Against God*

This violence directed at fellow human beings reflects, of course, a deeper conflict with God. It may be God's will that we forgive, but we do not want it! And so we do not want God. We are lavished with forgiveness ourselves, but the gift evokes from us no gratitude or compassion for others. The unforgiving slave found his own violence turned back on him by his lord who "handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt" (v. 34). So it will be with us, Jesus warns (v. 35). As unforgiving people, we earn unforgiving treatment from God.

PROGNOSIS: Placed in Community

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Out of Pity*

Having been thrust into the torture of needing to forgive, but being unable to, and having this unforgiveness exposed as sin against God, we are seemingly left hopeless by this parable. But no one parable tells the whole story. The warning is real. The threat is there. But in the Cross, there is a promise for something more than simply what we earn. There is the good news that, even when we are all out of pity, then, moved by compassion, out of pity for us, the true Lord will have mercy on us unmerciful slaves. Our pity? It is pitifully limited. But his grace? It is unending.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *From Your Heart*

It is a mystery, but somehow, sometimes, that unending grace gets through. No matter how badly we want to perpetuate the cycle of grievance, wrongly believing it protects us, God's even more unrelenting grace can stop us in our tracks. The fact of Christ's cross and resurrection makes something new possible. Forgiveness is no longer something we, like Peter, can talk about hypothetically. It is there, in front of us, for us. And with that new horizon opened, we begin to have a new heart. We are given a soul that can give mercy because it has received mercy. For us, it is impossible. But the never-ending grace of

Jesus creates the possibilities we cannot dream of.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *A New Culture*

This new heart that forgives cannot live in a culture of enemies and grievances. It does not dwell in a conditional system, in which one final offense can sever relationships. The heart recreated by grace lives with brothers and sisters (the adelphoi of Peter's question in v. 21 and Jesus' warning in v. 35). This is a community of connection and love. It is not fueled by grievance, but by grace. It is a place where sinners belong together. In this family, instead of reacting out of defensiveness, we can respond gently, out of mercy, to the wrongs of others. And perhaps through our Spirit-created actions of grace, God will open up the horizon of forgiveness for others as well. Perhaps we can be the agents of creating a new culture, defined not by the trauma of 9/11, but by the even greater tragedy, and even more glorious triumph, of the Gospel. May it be so!