

MATTHEW 18:21-35

ONE MORNING A WOMAN WAS WORKING IN THE KITCHEN WHEN SHE HEARD HER SEVEN YEAR OLD SON SCREAM FROM THE NEXT ROOM.

WHEN SHE ENTERED SHE SAW HER TWO YEAR OLD DAUGHTER WITH A FIRM GRIP ON HER BROTHER'S HAIR, PULLING IT.

THE MOM SEPARATED HER CHILDREN, TOLD HER TWO YEAR OLD "NO, WE DON'T PULL HAIR."

THEN SHE COMFORTED HER SON AND EXPLAINED TO THE BOY HIS SISTER WASN'T TRYING TO HURT HIM, BUT SHE DOES NOT KNOW HOW MUCH IT HURTS TO HAVE YOUR HAIR PULLED.

ONCE THE CHILDREN WERE CALM, SHE LEFT THEM, ONLY TO HEAR A MOMENT LATER THE TWO YEAR OLD SCREAM AND BEGIN TO CRY.

SHE HELD THE CHILD AND THEN ASKED HER BROTHER WHAT HAPPENED. HE CALMLY EXPLAINED THAT NOW HIS SISTER KNOWS HOW MUCH IT HURTS TO HAVE HER HAIR PULLED.

THE IMPULSE TO GIVE BACK AS GOOD AS WE HAVE GOTTEN WHEN SOMEONE HURTS US IS ONLY HUMAN.

EVEN WHEN WE GROW OLD ENOUGH AND WISE ENOUGH TO CONTROL OUR IMPULSE TO RETALIATE IN THE WAY THE BOY DID TO HIS SISTER, FOR MANY THE DESIRE IS THERE.

AND IN FACT, IF ONE RELIES ON OLD TESTAMENT LAW, AN EYE FOR AN EYE AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH, RETALIATION IS TECHNICALLY BIBLICAL.

HOWEVER JESUS CALLS US TO A DIFFERENT KIND OF RESPONSE.

BUT TO BE HONEST, MOST OF US ARE LESS LIKELY TO DESIRE TO SHOW MERCY TO THE SAME DEGREE AS WE DESIRE TO GET JUSTICE, EVEN WHEN WE HAVE RECEIVED MERCY OURSELVES.

THIS BRINGS US TO TODAY'S PARABLE AND THE CONVERSATION THAT LEAD UP TO IT.

JEWISH RABBINICAL TRADITION TAUGHT THAT YOU SHOULD FORGIVE SOMEONE UP TO THREE TIMES, AND AFTER THAT THERE WAS NO REQUIREMENT TO FORGIVE.

PETER, BY THIS TIME HAD BEEN AROUND JESUS ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT HE CHALLENGED THEM TO GO BEYOND THE MINIMUM.

SO PETER ASKED JESUS IF SEVEN TIMES WAS ENOUGH TO FORGIVE, BEFORE GIVING UP ON SOMEONE WHO WRONGED OR HURT YOU.

THE SAVIOR RESPONDED WITH A NUMBER THAT SYMBOLIZED UNLIMITED FORGIVENESS.

JESUS' TEACHING FROM THE BEATITUDES - "BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL, FOR THEY SHALL OBTAIN MERCY", ALSO COMES TO MIND IN HIS RESPONSE TO PETER.

A BIBLE DICTIONARY DEFINES MERCY AS "A CONCEPT INTEGRAL TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S DEALINGS WITH HUMANKIND."

IT GOES ON TO CLARIFY THAT THE WORD "MERCIFUL" IS A QUALITY OF GOD THAT GOD REQUIRES OF HIS PEOPLE.

JESUS SHARED A PARABLE ABOUT A SERVANT WHO RECEIVED MERCY, AND YET WAS UNMERCIFUL TOWARDS OTHERS, TO EXPLAIN WHAT HE MEANT.

THIS SERVANT OWED HIS KING MORE MONEY THAN HE COULD EVER REPAY, OR EVEN HIS WHOLE FAMILY WORKING A LIFETIME, COULD REPAY.

WHEN THE KING DEMANDED PAYMENT, THE SERVANT BEGGED FOR MERCY, PROMISING TO PAY THE DEBT IN FULL IF HE HAD MORE TIME.

THE KING WAS COMPASSIONATE, AND KNOWING THERE WAS NO WAY THE MAN COULD REPAY HIS DEBT, FORGAVE IT ALL.

WE MIGHT EXPECT HE WOULD HAVE BEEN SO FILLED WITH GRATITUDE FOR THE KING'S MERCY TOWARDS HIM, IN FORGIVING HIS DEBT, HE WOULD SHOW IT.

BUT APPARENTLY, THE MAN WAS NOT AT ALL WILLING TO GIVE MERCY, EVEN AFTER RECEIVING IT.

HIS RESPONSE TO A FELLOW SERVANT WHO OWED HIM A SMALL AMOUNT OF MONEY CONFIRMS THE SAYING:

“IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO RECEIVE GOD'S MERCY, WE MUST BE TRANSFORMED BY IT.”

HOWEVER THE FIRST SERVANT WAS NOT, AS IS DEMONSTRATED BY HIS REACTION TO A MAN WHO OWED A DEBT TO HIM.

NOT ONLY DID THE FORGIVEN SERVANT NOT FORGIVE THE DEBT, HE DEMANDED IMMEDIATE PAYMENT.

NOW, IF HE HAD STILL OWED THE KING MONEY, IT WOULD BE UNDERSTANDABLE THAT UNDER THE STRESS OF HIS OWN DEBT, HE WOULD NOT HAVE PATIENCE WITH THOSE WHO OWED HIM MONEY HE DESPERATELY NEEDED.

BUT THIS, AS WE ALREADY KNOW, WAS NOT THE CASE. THE SERVANT COULD HAVE EASILY WAITED A WHILE LONGER TO BE PAID, BUT HE SHOWED NO MERCY.

INSTEAD HE EXERCISED HIS LEGAL RIGHT TO HAVE HIS FELLOW SERVANT THROWN INTO PRISON, UNTIL HE GOT HIS MONEY.

THUS WE SEE HOW THE GREAT MERCY HE WAS SHOWN BY HAVING HIS OWN DEBT FORGIVEN, HAD NO POSITIVE EFFECT ON HIM. IT DID NOT TRANSFORM HIM.

THE LAYMAN'S COMMENTARY OFFERS THIS REFLECTION ON THE MEANING OF THE STORY:

“THE ONE WHO SHUTS OUT MERCY SHOWS NO UNDERSTANDING OF THE LOVE OF GOD, AND OF THE EXTRAORDINARY PARDON RECEIVED FROM GOD.”

THIS CERTAINLY WAS ONE OF THE POINTS JESUS WAS MAKING BY TELLING THE STORY.

GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF US IS ONE EXAMPLE OF HIS MERCY, BUT WE ONLY TRULY RECEIVE IT WHEN WE ARE LED TO BE FORGIVING OF THOSE WHO ASK FOR OUR PARDON.

JESUS TAUGHT THIS MORE FULLY IN THE LORD'S PRAYER WHEN WE ARE TOLD TO PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS, AND THEN PROMISE TO FORGIVE OTHERS.

WHEN WE THINK OF FORGIVENESS IN THE CONTEXT OF PRAYER IT IS FITTING, BECAUSE THERE ARE TIMES WHEN WE NEED GOD'S HELP TO FORGIVE THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US.

THERE IS A SONG IN OUR HYMNAL THAT OFFERS PRAYERFUL LYRICS ABOUT GOD FORGIVING OUR DEBTS, AND WE FORGIVING OUR DEBTORS.

“FORGIVE OUR SINS AS WE FORGIVE, YOU TAUGHT US LORD TO PRAY, BUT YOU ALONE CAN GRANT US GRACE TO LIVE THE WORDS WE SAY.

HOW CAN YOUR PARDON REACH AND BLESS THE UNFORGIVING HEART, THAT BROODS ON WRONGS AND WILL NOT LET OLD BITTERNESS DEPART?

IN BLAZING LIGHT YOUR CROSS REVEALS THE TRUTH WE DIMLY KNEW, WHAT TRIVIAL DEBTS ARE OWED TO US, HOW GREAT OUR DEBT TO YOU!

LORD, CLEANSE THE DEPTHS WITHIN OUR SOULS, AND BID OUR RESENTMENT CEASE. THEN BOUND TO ALL IN BONDS OF LOVE, OUR LIVES WILL SPREAD YOUR PEACE.”

TRULY, THE BLESSING OF GOD'S MERCY IS SHOWN IN HIS FORGIVENESS OF US, WHICH EXCEEDS EVEN WHAT THE MOST OPEN MINDED PERSON WOULD VIEW AS REASONABLE.

THE CHALLENGE OF THIS BLESSING, THEREFORE, IS FOR US TO STRIVE TO EXTEND THE SAME DEGREE OF FORGIVENESS TOWARDS OTHERS.

THIS IS NOT ALWAYS EASY TO DO, ESPECIALLY WHEN OUR WOUNDS ARE DEEP.

AND, AS WE KNOW, WHEN IT COMES TO PHYSICAL CUTS, AND ESPECIALLY WITH DEEP WOUNDS, THEY REQUIRE CLEANSING IF THEY ARE TO HEAL PROPERLY.

ONE ASPECT OF HEALING OUR MENTAL OR EMOTIONAL WOUNDS IS BEING ABLE TO TALK ABOUT, AT THE VERY LEAST WITH GOD, IF NOT WITH OTHER PEOPLE.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT FACTOR IN THIS CLEANSING, IS TO FORGIVE, WHICH CAN BE MORE COMPLICATED WHEN THE ONE WHO HURTS US NEVER ADMITS DOING SO.

GOD, IN HIS MERCY, KNOWS ALL ABOUT THIS, WHICH IS WHY WE ARE CALLED TO PRAY ABOUT IT, AND SEEK GOD'S HELP TO HEAL OURSELVES.

THIS IS THE KIND OF HEALING THAT CAN LEAD TO HEALING WOUNDS IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS AND EVEN WITHIN SOCIETY. IT IS NOT THE WHOLE SOLUTION, BUT A SIGNIFICANT STEP.

THE APOSTLE PAUL WROTE TO THE CHRISTIANS OF COLOSSAE ABOUT THE TRAITS THAT HELP WITH TRANSFORMING THE WORLD AS CHRISTIANS.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-14 SAYS: "AS GOD'S CHOSEN ONES, HOLY AND BELOVED, CLOTHE YOURSELVES WITH COMPASSION, KINDNESS, HUMILITY, MEEKNESS, AND PATIENCE.

BEAR WITH ONE ANOTHER, AND IF ANY HAVE A COMPLAINT AGAINST ANOTHER, FORGIVE EACH OTHER, JUST AS THE LORD HAS FORGIVEN YOU, SO YOU MUST ALSO FORGIVE.

ABOVE ALL, CLOTHE YOURSELVES WITH LOVE, WHICH BINDS EVERYTHING TOGETHER IN PERFECT HARMONY."

WHEN WE FOLLOW PAUL'S ADVICE, WE ARE ABLE TO BEGIN TO GROW MORE MERCIFUL AS PEOPLE, SINCE MERCY ENCOMPASSES MORE THAN FORGIVENESS.

THINK ABOUT JESUS. HE SHOWED MERCY NOT ONLY BY FORGIVING, BUT ALSO BY HEALING AND FEEDING PEOPLE.

HE ALSO WAS BEING MERCIFUL WHEN HE WELCOMED INTO HIS PRESENCE THOSE WHO WERE SOCIAL OR RELIGIOUS OUTCASTS.

FURTHERMORE, MERCY CAN ALSO BE UNDERSTOOD AS AN ATTITUDE TOWARDS OTHERS, AND PERHAPS EVEN OURSELVES.

BEING MERCIFUL IS HARD WORK, BECAUSE IT MEANS WE NOT ONLY HAVE TO FORGIVE SINS, BUT ALSO ACCEPT EACH OTHERS' IMPERFECTIONS AND IDIOSYNCRASIES.

THIS IS NOT AN ABANDONMENT OF THEIR NEED TO GROW AS CHRISTIANS, BUT AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF OUR MUTUAL NEED FOR GOD'S HELP.

A SUMMARY OF THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT SPEAKS ABOUT THE BROADER ISSUE JESUS WAS TEACHING BY TELLING IT.

THE EXPLANATION IS PRESENTED IN A REFLECTION ON THE STORY THAT SAYS:

"GOD IS LOVING, AND WANTS US TO BE LOVING.
GOD IS GRACIOUS AND WANTS US TO BE GRACIOUS.
GOD IS FORGIVING AND WANTS US TO BE FORGIVING.

GOD IS MERCIFUL AND WANTS US TO BE MERCIFUL.
GOD IS COMPASSIONATE AND WANTS US TO BE COMPASSIONATE."

THERE IS YET ONE MORE TRAIT THAT COULD BE ADDED TO THIS LIST, AND IT COMES FROM THE WORDS OF A CHILD.

REV. JAMES MOORE TELLS A STORY ABOUT VISITING THE HOME OF A COUPLE WHO HAD A LITTLE GIRL.

THE CHILD SHOWED HIM A BOOK OF BIBLE STORIES THAT INCLUDED MANY OF THE PARABLES JESUS TOLD.

HE ASKED HER IF SHE HAD A FAVORITE PARABLE, AND HER ANSWER SURPRISED HIM.

SHE SAID: "MY FAVORITE STORY IS WHERE THE KING FORGIVES THE SERVANT, BUT THE SERVANT DOESN'T FORGIVE HIS COWORKER."

WHEN ASKED WHY THAT PARTICULAR ONE WAS HER FAVORITE THE CHILD SAID:

"I LIKE THAT ONE BEST OF ALL BECAUSE IT TEACHES US THAT GOD IS NICE AND HE WANTS US TO BE NICE."

GOD IS NICE AND WANT US TO BE NICE TO OTHERS, MAY BE AN OVERSIMPLIFICATION OF JESUS' TEACHING, AND YET THERE IS TRUTH IN IT.

BEING NICE, ESPECIALLY TO THOSE WHO IRRITATE US OR DISAPPOINT US CAN BE VIEWED AS YET ANOTHER FORM OF MERCY.

AND LIKE WITH MERCY AND ALL OF THE CHRISTIAN VIRTUES AND CHARACTER TRAITS THE BIBLE CALLS US TO PURSUE AND EXHIBIT-THERE ARE TIMES WE NEED GOD'S HELP.

THE MUSIC THAT FOLLOWS THIS SERMON SPEAKS ABOUT WHAT WE CAN DO TO BETTER ENABLE OURSELVES TO BE WHO GOD CALLS US TO BE.

PART OF THE LYRICS DIRECTS US TO DRAW NEAR TO THE HEART OF GOD.

WHILE THE REST OF THE LYRICS USE THIS IMAGERY TO DESCRIBE A PLACE OF PEACE AND PROTECTION, DRAWING NEAR TO THE HEART OF GOD ALSO HELPS OUR CHARACTER.

IN THIS WAY THE CLOSER WE GET TO GOD'S HEART, AND THE MORE WE ALLOW GOD'S HEART TO TRANSFORM OUR HEARTS, THE MORE MERCIFUL WE WILL BECOME. AMEN

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