

BaptistWay: Forgiveness in the Kingdom

January 14, 2016

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Jan. 31 focuses on Matthew 18:21-35.*

This week's passage discusses the nature of forgiveness. It begins with Peter, by far the boldest of the disciples, asking Jesus how many times he should forgive someone in the church who has wronged him.

He offers a generous answer, suggesting seven times (18:21). Further grace is extended when Peter does not ask for repentance from the offending party. Jesus, though, suggests a different number: "77 times" (18:22). In fact, the Greek for this number is a bit tricky, which means the number actually might be "70 times seven," or 490.

Settling accounts

Before Peter's reaction to this response can be registered, Jesus jumps into another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants" (18:23). One servant owed 10,000 talents (the NIV says "bags of gold"). This may be an exaggerated number in the parable.

In our context, it would be like saying that someone had \$100 billion. While the figure may be inexact, the point is received: This servant owes an immense, perhaps unrepayable, debt. Interestingly, the servant asks for more time (18:26), which may not be very much help in his situation. However, he receives more than he asked for when the king simply pardons the entire debt and lets him go (18:27).

The servant, now free of debt, attempts to shake down a fellow servant who

owes him money— a significant amount (“100 silver coins”), but tiny compared to what was just forgiven (18:28). Predictably, this second servant pleads for more time in order to repay the debt (18:29). However, rather than accepting this plea (and emulating the king who just pardoned him), the debt-free servant throws his comrade into prison (18:30).

Word of this event reaches the king, who confronts the servant and judges him harshly for receiving mercy but not sharing it with others. His fate becomes the same as his fellow servant (18:34). The parable ends with Jesus declaring, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister” (18:35).

A hard parable

This parable is hard. It is not hard because receiving forgiveness is difficult. It is hard because offering forgiveness often is very difficult. We have become very good at keeping score and holding grudges. Remembering those who have wronged us, we either deny them the opportunity to wrong us again or even seek revenge for the offense. When we are honest with ourselves, our lives are not shaped by the practice of forgiveness.

Clearly, we are supposed to see the grace in the king’s response to the servant. We also are supposed to see the lack of grace for the servant’s debtor. In fact, what we have in front of us is a failure to perform the words of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). There we are to pray, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (6:12).

These are quaint words we often say without much reflection, but the parable does not let us off the hook. The servant, who fails to forgive, ultimately is denied the forgiveness initially offered. In other words, while the king’s cancellation of the insurmountable debt appears to have no conditions attached, it seems there was one—that the same grace and

mercy would be offered to others indebted to the servant.

Cheap vs. costly grace

German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the difference between cheap grace and costly grace. Cheap grace does not transform and does not penetrate the fabric of our lives. It leaves us free to live in the same selfish manner as before receiving grace. Costly grace demands that our lives conform to Christ. The king's grace is costly because it means the servant's relationship to money and others is changed. He is not only free from debt, but he is free to be faithful to life in the kingdom.

This returns us to Peter and his initial question. It is significant that Peter is the one who asks. Remember, Peter is the rock on whom Jesus will build his church (Matthew 16:18) and also the first one to rebuke Jesus for his intention to die on Calvary (Matthew 16:21-23). He himself has already experienced the grace of forgiveness, even if he still does not entirely grasp Jesus' mission. As we already observed, Jesus response to the question itself is shocking. Is he telling us simply to keep score to a higher number (not seven, but 77 or 490)? Not likely.

In fact, Jesus' use of inflated numbers tells us that forgiveness should constantly characterize people of the kingdom of God. Peter's question was prompted by a discussion about addressing sin in the church. Sin is not merely a personal problem. Jesus sees it as a communal problem, threatening to fracture the body of Christ. Thus, confession of sin (both personal and corporate) and the constant offer of forgiveness are necessary for being the community God intends the church to be.

This will certainly be difficult, as Bonhoeffer notes, because it will require us to let go of our pride and self-centeredness in order to offer grace and mercy to others at all times and in all situations, regardless of what offense

has been committed. Moreover, we will need the same humility to name our own sins and to ask for and receive forgiveness from others. Yet, only by doing so can we live truthfully in community as a witness to the peace and wholeness of God's kingdom.