

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Unforgiveness and The Kingdom of God

by Dan Trygg

“Thus says Yahweh, ‘For three transgressions of Damascus and for four I will not revoke its punishment, because they threshed Gilead with implements of sharp iron...’ ⁶ Thus says Yahweh, ‘For three transgressions of Gaza and for four I will not revoke its punishment, because they deported an entire population to deliver it up to Edom...’ ¹¹ Thus says Yahweh, ‘For three transgressions of Edom and for four I will not revoke its punishment, because he pursued his brother with the sword, while he stifled his compassion. His anger also tore continually, and he maintained his fury relentlessly.’” Amos 1:3,6,11

“Then Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’” ²² Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. ²³ For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves... So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.’” Matthew 18:21-23,35

There seems to have been a controversy among the disciples, probably caused by what appeared to be a special advancement of Peter from among the other disciples. We don’t know exactly what was going on, whether some of the other disciples were envious of Peter, and were taking some verbal pot shots at him, or whether Peter was letting recent events go to his head and stirred up controversy by being arrogant and acting as though he were superior toward the others. What we do know is that a controversy began along the roadway, while they were traveling, regarding which of them was the greatest (Mk. 9:33-37; Matt. 18:1-5). When they finally came to Capernaum, they openly brought the question to Jesus, although He was already well aware of their foolish disputations. He took a child and stood him in the midst, and told them that they needed a reality check. They were arguing about who was the greatest in the kingdom, but unless they turned and changed their self-focus, they would not even enter the kingdom. Instead of squabbling over position, and trying to climb over one another for first place, they needed to become as humble and unpretentious as a little child. The world often disregards, abuses and is not mindful of the true needs of children, the weak and the powerless, but those who are aligned with God’s kingdom will value, welcome, and watch out for such “little ones”. In that spirit, we ought to watch out for one another, attempting to help and restore a brother or sister who has wandered away or has become entangled in sin. If such a person has injured me, and I attempt to rectify the problem, but he or she does not acknowledge my concerns, I am not to judge or reject them, but wisely put some emotional distance between us. That person is still my brother or sister, even though they are not considerate of my preferences at the present time (Matt. 18:15-17).

Not quite willing to let the issue die, Peter piped in, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” In saying this, Peter was being magnanimous, since the rabbis had interpreted Amos (1:3,6,9,11,13; 2:1,4,6) as indicating that the divine rule was that if someone sinned against you up to three times, you overlook their sin, but after that you no longer cut them any slack. Of course, that is not really what the passages in Amos say. The point of what God revealed there was that the judgment He was about to bring upon these offenders was not a knee jerk reaction after one offense, but was initiated after *much* transgression. The scribes had turned the meaning of a *poetical statement* into a *literal formula* to justify unforgiveness. Peter was taking a position that was more than *twice* as permissive and gracious as was commonly accepted. (Perhaps a little dusting of the magnanimous grace of God in Christ was rubbing off on him!) He knew that the forgiveness he should show as a kingdom disciple should be much greater, ...even scandalously greater..., than what other people expected. While he thought he was more than going the extra mile for people, the limits of his understanding of grace are clearly exposed by Jesus’ response.

“I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven,” shot back Jesus. Peter’s so-called “magnanimous grace” was but a drop in the bucket compared to what God *expects* from us, ...and *enables us to do*..., as servants in His kingdom. This response would have brought a significant OT passage to the minds of the disciples. In Genesis 4, we have a genealogical record of the line of Cain, who murdered his brother. As part of his punishment, Cain was to be a vagrant and wanderer upon the earth, which meant that he could no longer be a farmer. He would have to make his living by herding animals, or by making and selling products, or by being a hired servant to his relatives. When Cain feared that someone would kill him for murdering Abel, God had put a mark upon him, warning that anyone who would kill him in revenge for Abel’s death would be judged by God with a sevenfold vengeance. It was clear that God was attempting to nip the sinful tendency to take revenge in the bud. Instead of accepting the wise judgment of God, however, Cain chose to build the first city, ...a stubborn, rebellious resistance to the divine will. The heritage of the continued rebellion and the unrepentant violence of Cain became evident four generations later, when Lamech became the first man to marry more than one wife, another significant departure from God’s original plan. He also arrogantly boasted in his violent character, telling his wives that he had killed a young man for merely

striking him. Instead of justice, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, ...and wound for wound” (Ex. 21:23-25; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21), **Lamech advocated unrestrained vengeance and retaliation, rage and unforgiveness expressed without limits.** In Matthew 18, ***Jesus totally turns that around to advocate unrestrained grace and limitless forgiveness.***

To drive His point home, Jesus tells a parable. He specifically says that *the kingdom of God can be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.* As he began to do this, **one slave was brought to him who owed him 10,000 talents of silver.** Obviously, this man had been a trusted servant of the king, one who was given a stewardship or great responsibility which he had squandered, or very poorly invested. **The amount he owed was incredible,** well over the ten million dollars which would be represented by the weight of the silver involved, although the buying power was much more. Think of that! This man owed his king over ten million dollars! To get some handle on the amount of money involved for the time, the entire taxation of the territories of Judea, Idumea and Samaria for one year was only 600 talents of silver, or six percent of what was owed. That means it would take almost 17 years of taxes from these three territories, without anything subtracted for maintenance or expenses, to pay up what was owed! **The size of the debt was truly impossible for this slave to even imagine that he could repay.** Yet, when the king ordered him, his family and all he owned to be sold to partially repay the debt, he cried out, “Please, be patient with me, and I will repay you everything.” Yeah, as if that was going to happen! Not only was the sum virtually impossible to raise, **the man’s track record surely indicated that he did not have the skill to profitably manage and increase the estate.** His claim was totally baseless. **Amazingly enough, however, the king felt compassion for his slave, and forgave him the entire amount!**

The slave should have been overwhelmed with joy, and with a grateful heart, went on his way. Instead of coming to grips with what just happened, however, he was still determined to prove that he was able to repay the amount owed. ***He was still fixated on paying the unpayable debt which had been so graciously forgiven.***

Going out, he sought out and found a fellow slave who owed him about the equivalent of three months wages for a common laborer. Seizing him by the throat, he throttled him, saying, “Pay if you owe me anything.” In other words, **he didn’t even know for sure if the man still owed him, or how much it was, that was how little concerned he had been about money before this day.** Since his encounter with the king, however, he was determined to collect on every debt. The poor fellow-slave did as his friend had done before the king. Falling to the ground, he pled for patience, and promised to pay back the relatively manageable amount that he owed. **The original slave was not willing to give him any extra time, nor was he compassionate as his master had been to him. Instead, he had his fellow slave put in prison until he should pay back his debt.**

Other fellow slaves had witnessed this man’s hard-heartedness, and were exceedingly grieved at what he had done. They reported these events to their master, the king, who summoned the original slave. He said, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **Was it not necessary for you to show mercy to your fellow slave as I showed mercy to you?”** And being angry, his master ***delivered him over to the torturers*** until he would repay his entire debt.

Jesus summarized the point by saying, ***“In the same way your heavenly Father will do to you, if ever each one does not forgive his brother from his heart.”***

What does this mean? Jesus does not spell it out. ***Some have suggested that the torturers are demons*** who find access into our lives through unforgiveness. That is not spelled out in this passage, and would therefore be inadvisable to teach as the meaning of this text. Nevertheless, that could be one scenario that would seem to fulfill the parameters of Jesus’ parable. Others could as well. ***The torturers could also refer to psychological or even psychosomatic afflictions.*** God did not make us to carry bitterness and unforgiveness for extended lengths of time. Bitter and unforgiving people are not happy or joyful people. These attitudes are like cancers which tend to grow and wear away at the person’s psyche and world view. Studies have also shown that these emotional attitudes are toxic to one’s physical health. People who are angry, bitter and resentful tend to develop physical afflictions at a much higher rate than the general population. ***Spiritually, Jesus tells us that those who do not forgive those who sin against them will not experience forgiveness from the Father for their sins*** (Matt. 6:14,15; 18:35). **The point of the parable is that we ought to treat others with a graciousness that corresponds to the grace God has offered to us.** Just as the fellow slaves recognized the evil choice of the forgiven slave, in the same way our unforgiveness does not demonstrate the love of Jesus, but the sinful retaliatory nature of man. ***If we are going to claim to follow Jesus, we must choose to forgive our brothers and sisters as often as God would show us His grace.*** If we understand His grace toward us, and really let it sink in, we cannot help but be gracious to others out of a grateful heart (Col. 3:12-15). The old hymn by Annie Johnson Flint goes, “His love has no limit, His grace has no measure, His pow’r has no boundary known unto men; For out of His infinite riches in Jesus, ...He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.” ***His limitless love and grace produced in us by the Holy Spirit can enable us to extend forgiveness again and again, ...as often as needed.***