

An Eye For An Eye

By Pastor Greg
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Matthew 18:21-22

Bunkertown COB

(Sermon begins with Video *Anger*)

The attitude we see in this young man is one that can be seen in far too many people. Like this young man, many of us still live with the “Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” mentality. Someone hurts us, and then we hurt that person in return. What’s really strange (at least strange to me) is that most people who live their life this way never seem to realize that the moment they “fight fire with fire”; the moment they hurt someone back, the vicious cycle will continue. Husbands and wives live this way. Brothers and sisters live this way. Coworkers treat one another this way. Even those within the family of God live this way. But it is not the way a follower of Christ should be living.

Jesus corrects this attitude early in His ministry. During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.”¹ (Matthew 5:38-39). And, “But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!”² (Matthew 5:44). In effect, Jesus was teaching that the correct attitude is one of forgiveness, because a forgiving heart is one that disarms the conflict. This is a lesson the disciples needed to continually learn, and maybe you and I as well.

Peter, and a couple of other disciples, began acting as if they were more important than the rest. Soon, it appears that Peter, James, and John developed a pride issue. They had a self-made, self-centered authority that they wielded above the rest of the disciples. Questions of authority and leadership began to creep into the group. Eventually, hurtful words were spoken, and friendships began to decay. The whole group was coming apart because of a lack of humility and an unforgiving attitude.

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

²Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

Watching all of this unfold, Jesus begins to teach them a series of lessons on the importance of humility toward one another, the importance of relationships, and the importance of forgiveness; lessons that seemed particularly hard for Peter. As Peter listened to these lessons, his mind must have raced back to the hurtful things other must have said to him. He remembered the times he was right and every one else was wrong. Checking his ledger of offensives, Peter recalls what others said to him and the pain it caused. So he asks Jesus for legal advice.

²¹ Then Peter came to him and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” ²² “No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!” ³ (Matthew 16:21-22) In effect, Peter asks, “When is it okay for me to reach my breaking point with these idiots who have hurt me?” And Jesus responds by telling Peter that he has missed the point entirely. ²³ “Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. ²⁴ In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. ²⁵ He couldn’t pay, so his master ordered that he be sold - along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned - to pay the debt. ²⁶ “But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ ²⁷ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. ²⁸ “But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. ²⁹ “His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. ³⁰ But his creditor wouldn’t wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. ³¹ “When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. ³² Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his

³Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

entire debt. ³⁵ “That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.” ⁴ (Matthew 18:23-35)

I know the obvious lesson here is to learn that forgiving others comes by first understanding how much God has forgiven us. Jesus says, “I understand that when someone hurts you it can be very difficult to forgive them. If they hurt you over and over again, the pain can become immense. But you probably have trouble forgiving others because you don’t realize how much God has forgiven you.” (my paraphrase). However, I think there is more to this story than simply saying, “I forgive you” to the person who comes and says, “I’m Sorry”.

In this story there is a seldom-mentioned individual who I believe represents the attitude of most people. Notice in verse 24 that someone brought the debtor to the king. This person, it seems, was looking for those whose offences were enormous. This person brings the debtor before the king almost as an accuser. “Here Lord, look how much he owes!” you can almost hear him say. I wonder how this accuser felt when the King forgave the debt? How angry did he become?

The problem with most people is that we would rather bring debtors to the King. We would rather stand before God as an accuser, pointing a finger at those who have wronged us. With a list in our hands, we rattle off all the things they have done to hurt and wound us. What is it we expect the King to do? Do we expect Him to dispense wrath and judgment? With fire in our eyes, we shout, “Go get ‘em God!” How disappointed would we be when the King grants forgiveness? How angry would it make us feel?

A heart that truly understands God’s view of forgiveness will be willing to forgive countless times because this person understands the magnitude of God’s forgiveness. And a heart that is truly humble and broken will not only seek to be forgiving, but help a person find forgiveness. I believe to have true forgiveness in our heart is to bring that person to God not so they may pay their debt, but so that through Christ their debt may be forgiven.

This is the point Jesus was trying to get us to understand when He told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. His desire is for us to have a

⁴Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

heart that not only forgives, but to care enough about the other individual to make sure they find forgiveness from the Father as well. Because, remember, hurting another person and causing them to stumble in their faith is a major offence according to God's standards. And the person who has hurt or wounded us not only needs our forgiveness, but forgiveness from the Father as well.

The proper attitude of forgiveness that should be found within a Christian heart would never say, "I forgive you, but God will get you for what you've done to me". That's not forgiveness from the heart. That's merely bringing the debtor before the King in hopes that the King makes them pay. I want to leave you with a challenge this morning to really begin praying for those you have not truly forgiven. Get your heart right between yourself and the other individual. Be the one to end the vicious cycle of anger by bringing that person before the King in prayer.