

TITLE: "Our Greatest Debt"

TEXT: Matthew 18:21-38 (NT p. 20)

In today's terms, 10,000 talents would be about 4 billion dollars. 100 denarii would be about \$6,000. So, to get the impact of Jesus' Parable, I have inserted these figures.

²¹Peter came and said to [Jesus], "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 [4 billion dollars] 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 [6 thousand dollars]; 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."

Talent: A drachma was the coin usually paid for a day's laborer. There were 6,000 drachmas in a talent. In today's terms (using the minimum wage of \$7.25/hour and a 40 hour week) that would translate into \$347,800.00 (23.5 years at \$14,800/year).

A denarius was the Roman coin usually paid for a day's labor. (7.25/hour X 8 = \$58)

Introduction – Forgiveness

This morning we have another segment from the *Burt and I* series. This takes place in the Hancock County courtroom, the Honorable Judge Josiah Sayward presiding.

“Willis Byette, you have been arrested for drunkenness twice in a year and the law says I have to fine you five dollars.”

“Oh, that’s alright judge, I know your just doin’ your job. Do I get somethin’ to show for it?”

“Well, you’ve got a big head haven’t ya?”

“No, but I mean a piece of paper to show I’ve paid my fine.”

“Oh, you mean a receipt. We’ll give ya a receipt. What’s the matter, don’t you trust us?”

“Oh, I trust you judge. But, you and I are getting’ along in years, and soon we’ll be passin’ away meetin’ our Maker. And when I get to the pearly gates, St. Peter’s gonna ask me if I’ve ever been drunk; and I’ll say I have. And He’ll ask if I’ve ever been arrested; and I’ll say I was. And he’ll ask if I ever went to court; and I’ll say I did. And He’ll say, ‘Did you pay your fine?’ ...And judge, if I don’t have that receipt, they’ll be huntin’ all over hell for Judge Sayward to see if I’ve paid my fine.

A roundabout way to tell the judge where to go. When someone does something to us that we don’t like, it is human nature to want to strike back, to seek revenge. Jesus, on the other hand, says that we **MUST** forgive those who hurt us. Why? ...Because to live in heaven, we must **FORGIVE** those who have hurt us. And Jesus says that we may not just **THINK** about forgiveness, or **SAY** we forgive; to live heaven we must **FORGIVE** those who have hurt us from our **HEART**.

1. Revenge poisons those we love

This morning’s sermon revolves around 4 stories. The first is about revenge. Seeking revenge upon one who has hurt us may **SEEM** like it will make us feel better. But there are always side effects to revenge. One is that revenge poisons us ... and sooner or later it poisons those we love. This story is a legend from the Azores, which are a group of islands off the coast of Portugal.

There was a woman who baked bread for a rich family. She always made enough bread for her employers and her own family. She also baked a “charity loaf” as an offering to God for the safe return of her eldest son, who’d gone overseas to seek his fortune.

The charity loaf was collected daily by a crazy old man who lived in a shack. Instead of showing his gratitude with a prayer to God for the safe return of the woman’s son, the little man had an irritating way of snatching the bread and saying:

*The evil you do stays with you,
The good you do comes back to you.*

After years of having her daily charity scorned in this way, the woman could stand it no longer and she did a terrible thing. She put a fatal dose of poison in the loaf she was baking for the old man. “Today will be the last day I will ever have to listen to that wretched man,” she vowed.

As she took the loaf from the oven, she suddenly realized what she was about to do, and she shivered. Then she flung the poisoned bread into the fire. When the man came, she gave him one of her family’s loaves, not even resenting the inevitable words: *The evil you do stays with you, The good you do comes back to you.*

That night, the woman heard a tapping at her door. Her son was home again, tattered, penniless, and nearly dead from hunger. “It’s a miracle I’m here,” he said to his overjoyed mother. “A mile from home I started to faint. I hadn’t eaten for three days and didn’t have the strength to go another inch. But a little old man came along eating bread. When I asked him for a crust, he gave me the whole loaf. It was like giving me life again! ...Mother, why are you turning so pale?”

Revenge ALWAYS has side effects; for it not only poisons us, it poisons those we love.

2. Forgiveness brings life and light

Just as revenge poisons us and those we love, so forgiveness brings life and light to us and those we love; if, that is, we forgive those who have hurt us from our hearts.

When Leonardo DaVinci was painting *The Last Supper*, he had an intense, bitter argument with another artist. DaVinci was furious and kept thinking of ways to exact his revenge.

Finally he came up with a devious plan. He decided to paint the face of his enemy onto the face of Judas Iscariot so it would be captured for time immemorial. And that is exactly what he did.

When people came to look at his work in progress, they immediately knew who “Judas” was. DaVinci stood there relishing his revenge.

As he continued to work on the great painting of Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper, DaVinci finally came to the face he had saved for the very end—the face of Jesus. ...But he could not paint it. He tried and tried, but simply could not do it.

Then he began to be troubled by the fact that he had painted his enemy’s face on Judas Iscariot and he realized that his hatred and bitterness was keeping him from being able to face the very face of Jesus he was trying to paint.

So he went back to the image of Judas and painted it over with a nebulous face instead. Only then could he see the face of Jesus in his mind’s eye and only then he could face the face of Jesus as he painted it.

In John 1:4 we read: “What came into being in [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people.” Revenge brings poison and spiritual death to us and those we love. When we forgive those who have hurt us from our hearts, we restore our relationship with Jesus and Jesus gives LIFE and LIGHT to us and those we love.

3. Forgiving 77 times

Jesus says we are to forgive Christian sisters and brothers time and time again.

When I was in seminary, I took a course in Pastoral Counseling. The professor had a doctorate in psychology, he had written several books and he was a Christian. As I recall, there were 2,000 pages of required reading, 6 short papers and 1 long paper due throughout the course.

When my first paper was returned, it had a red B on it; no other marks. This annoyed me because, at the time, I was considering going for a doctorate after seminary and for that I would need a 3.75 grade point average. So I called to make an appointment to see him. He was not available. Three more papers, three more Bs. Every day, he left right after class and when I called his office, he was unavailable because he was either at his private practice or out on his sail boat.

So, I talked with some of the others in the class and every other person, who was not a pastoral counseling major, had received a B on their paper and every student who was a pastoral counseling major had received an A. There were no other marks on any paper. My assumption was that he simply marked the papers without reading them. I, and all other non pastoral counseling majors, received Bs for the course.

Someday I would like to ASK him if he ever DID read any of my papers, but I'd have to hunt all over hell to try and find him. ...Seriously, it may seem like a small thing to some of you, but to me, it was a big thing at the time. In fact, when I became a pastoral ministry major, my gpa didn't matter as much, but as I was writing this, and now as I say it, I find I need to forgive Dr. Pendleton ...again.

Forgiveness is tough and we usually find we must forgive a person again and again over time. I worked with a guy and when he offered a cigarette to someone and the person said, "No thanks, I quit," he would say, "That's nothing. I've quite twelve times!" Jesus says we are to forgive our Christian brothers and sisters not only seven times, but 77 times!Dr. Pendleton, I forgive you yet again.

Conclusion – How great a debt

In this morning's parable, Jesus equates forgiveness with debt. And his point is that we cannot forgive those who have sinned against us unless we understand what it cost God to forgive us for our sins. How much DID it cost God to forgive our sins? ...Let me read you the final story ("God Tore the Curtain" – "Good Friday")

John Griffith's childhood ambition was to travel. He fantasized about it frequently, but that ambition crashed with the Great Depression of 1929. As the howling winds turned Oklahoma, his native state, into a dust bowl, this young man, with his wife and small child, packed his belongings in an old car and headed out to try and find a life somewhere else.

They made their way to Missouri, and as Dennis E. Hensley tells the story, John finally found a job as the controller of a great railroad bridge spanning the Mississippi river. Each day at certain hours, this massive bridge was raised so that barges and other ships might make their way down the broad Mississippi. At other times, the bridge was lowered so that the great freight and passenger trains could rush across. John found some delight in this because he often wondered what far places these people were visiting; and so he had some joy in their experience.

In the summer of 1937 John Griffith took his eight-year-old son, Greg, with him to work for the first time. Little Greg was understandably thrilled at the great railroad bridge and the stirring and exciting trains that roared across it. He marveled at the control house, filled with all sorts of levers over which his daddy had absolute, sovereign control. His father took him to an observation deck and told him that out here he could watch the boats and trains go by.

At noon, John Griffith put the bridge up to allow for some ships that were coming. Since there would not be a train for some while, he made his way along the catwalk to the observation deck. There he opened his brown bag and he and Greg had lunch. As they ate, John shared with his son some of the stories of various ships that had gone by and of the time the great flood had overflowed the banks of the Mississippi.

Just as John was telling his son that story, he was startled by the shrieking of a train whistle in the distance. He quickly looked at his watch. It was 1:07. He had forgotten the express for Memphis. With four hundred people on board, it would be roaring across the bridge in only a few moments. He leaped from the observation deck to the catwalk.

John raced back to the control tower. He placed his hand upon the massive iron controls and started to close the bridge. He glanced down under the bridge to see if there were any ships beneath it. A sight caught his eye that brought his heart leaping into his throat. Greg had slipped from the observation deck and fallen into the great gears that operated the bridge.

Greg's left leg was caught in the cogs of the two main gears. John knew if he pushed the lever, his son would be ground between four tons of whining, grinding steel. His mind whirled in panic and desperation. There was no way to free his son before the train would be upon the bridge. Again, the train whistle shrieked. He could hear the clicking of the locomotive wheels and rapid "puffing" of the approaching train. There were four hundred passengers on that train—four hundred souls!

John was a father, and this was his boy. He knew what he had to do. He heaved the lever of the massive gears. The Memphis Express thundered across the bridge.

John lifted his face, smeared with tears, and looked into the passing windows of the train. Businessmen were reading their afternoon papers, conductors were looking at their large vest-pocket watches and finely dressed ladies sipped coffee in the dining car, while children pushed long spoons into dishes of ice cream. With wrenching agony, John Griffith cried out to the train made of steel, "I sacrificed my son for you! Don't you care?"

Nobody heard. The train rushed by.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." How much do we OWE God for sacrificing his Son? ...We could no more repay God than any one of us could repay a debt of 4 billion dollars. ...But God HAS forgiven our debt through our faith in Jesus. So must we be willing to forgive the debts of those who have hurt us. And if we:

1. Stop clinging to revenge;
2. If we forgive those who have hurt us from our heart; and
3. If we forgive our Christian sisters and brothers as many as 77 times;

God, who has forgiven our IMMENSE debt, WILL welcome us into heaven and we will live with our Lord Jesus Christ forever and ever and ever.

Amen.