

Series: Key Moments

January 18, 2015

## **Title: “All Is Forgiven”**

**Text: Matthew 18:21-35**

### **When Things Go (Very) Wrong...**

#### **Encore:**

This past Wednesday the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo published its first issue after the horrific attack on its offices in Paris by Islamic extremists. The extremists attacked not only the creators of the comics that they found so offensive, but also a Jewish kosher grocery store in Paris. When it was all over, 17 innocent people had lost their lives as well as three attackers. Millions marched in solidarity against the attacks, many carrying the now familiar posters proclaiming, “Je suis Charlie” – “I am Charlie.” So how would Charlie Hebdo respond?

The cover on Wednesday’s publication featured – once again – a cartoon drawing of the Prophet. But this time he was holding one of those posters: “Je suis Charlie.” A single tear fell from his face. And above his turban were the words: “Tout est pardonne” – “All is forgiven.” When asked about the offer of forgiveness, Editor-in-chief Gerard Biard explained:

“It is we who forgive, not Muhammad.”

- Gérard Biard, editor in chief of Charlie Hebdo (as cited by FoxNews.com – Jan. 13, 2015)

#### **A Way Forward:**

Imagine what it must have been like for the surviving journalists who gathered to put together the first issue of Charlie Hebdo after the massacre. They knew that the whole world was watching. They certainly could have used the cover of that issue to vent their rage and attack their foes. They could have retreated into bitterness and spite.

Instead, they chose what is in actuality the *only way forward*. They chose to say, “Tout est pardonne,” “All is forgiven.” Any other path would have trapped them forever – and constituted a victory for the terrorists. Sure, we would have all understood their rage, but they would have become just another partisan publication. There would be no more “Charlie” for anyone to be.

### **When Things Go (Very) Wrong...**

This irreverent, very irreligious group of cartoonists points the way to what we must do when things go very wrong in our lives and in our world. They point us to the hardest path we ever take when wronged, betrayed, and treated unjustly. They also point us to the only path for personal redemption when we are the ones who have failed and have inflicted hurt and harm on others.

It is a path that Jesus made the centerpiece of His prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*” It is the only way forward.

## **A Story about Forgiveness**

### **Peter’s Question:**

One day Peter raised the question of forgiveness to Jesus.

*Matthew 18:21 NIV*

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”*

In asking if he should forgive “up to seven times,” Peter was using the Jewish number of fullness and completion. In other words, he was trying to grasp what it would be like to go as far as one could in the face of being offended by someone else.

Jesus answers by upping the ante:

*Matthew 18:22 NIV*

*Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”*

Seven on steroids! In other words, Jesus was saying that forgiving was not to be some exceptional thing that we strive to do once in awhile. Instead, it was to be the very heartbeat of a whole new way of living.

### **Jesus’ Story, Part 1:**

To help Peter – and us – understand what forgiveness really looks like, and how essential it is for followers of Jesus, Jesus tells a little story. It begins with a man who has wronged his king and is in deep trouble:

*Matthew 18:23-25 ESV*

*“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten*

*thousand talents.*<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>25</sup> *And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.”*

The offense: a vast, unpayable debt.

The offender: a servant or official in the kingdom who has mismanaged the king’s wealth to an almost unimaginable degree.

The “solution”: selling the offender and his family into a lifetime of slavery.

But then comes the first surprise in the story:

*Matthew 18:26-27 ESV*

*“So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’<sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.”*

It’s certainly not surprising that the servant, caught in his misdeeds, begs for mercy. His promise to pay everything back is a hollow one. There is no way that he would ever be able to do so.

What *is* surprising is the response of the king. He does three things:

- First of all, he *takes pity* on the servant. He *empathizes* with this person who has deeply wronged him. He takes the time to feel what it must be like to be in his shoes.
- Second, he *releases* him. He lets him go. No arrest; no charges; no selling of the man or his family into slavery. He sets him free.
- Third, he *forgives* the debt, the offense. He wipes it off the books, once and for all.

### **The Three Steps to Forgiveness:**

So what was it that made it possible for the king to forgive such a huge offense? The secret lies in the thing he did first. Instead of obsessing on the monstrous debt or the gross misbehavior of his servant, he made the choice to focus on the servant. He temporarily set the offense aside and took the effort to empathize with the offender. The term Matthew uses to describe this act of empathy describes a literally “gut-wrenching” response.

All too often, an offense causes us to *depersonalize* both the situation and the person who offended us. The divorced spouse no longer has a name. He or she is simply “The X.” The drug addict who holds up the convenience store is simply “The Perp.” The person is redefined as the embodiment of the problem.

Jesus, in this little story, points us down another path: one that dares us to remember that the other party, however wrong, is *still a human being made in the image of God*. But to remember that in a time of hurt or anger requires stepping out of *our feelings* and *into what it feels like to be them*.

Once the king has begun to empathize with the servant he can then make the choice to let the man go. Note: he is not saying that what the man did was good or acceptable. He is simply maintaining that crucial distinction between the offense and the offender, and choosing to let the offender go free.

Lastly, the king deals with the offense itself. Now, unburdened by rage or hurt, he looks at the reality of the situation. This debt is never going to be repaid. The money is lost forever. Time to move on. So, he forgives the debt.

What makes this spectacular act of forgiveness possible is that the king was determined to separate the offense from the offender. He chose to see the offender as a fellow human being – a person in deep trouble. Feelings of compassion took the place of feelings of revenge or anger. Once that happened, he could take a dispassionate look at the offense and make the only sensible decision – to forgive.

## **All Is Forgiven**

### **Of Debts and Debtors:**

Like the king and servant in the parable, we all find ourselves caught up in situations where there are “debts and debtors.” We may be the person with the unpayable debt. We may be the person who has been deeply wronged and feel a passionate need for things to be made right and for justice to be served.

Imagine what it must feel like to be the little band of surviving journalists who had to come up with last Wednesday’s issue of Charlie Hebdo? Nothing could bring their friends and colleagues back. But they made a choice to separate the offense from the offenders. They took the ultimate symbol of their attackers’ zeal and made the Prophet “one of them,” right down to a “Je suis Charlie” sign around his neck. They put their grief on his face, right down to a single tear. And then they wrote across the top of the page: “All is forgiven.” They refused to live in the fear and hate of an unimaginable crime. They refused to be redefined by their enemies.

We’re all debtors. We’re all owed debts. The debts can never be really repaid. Words said, actions taken, are impossible to undo. But Jesus commands us to separate the debt from the debtor. It’s the only way forward.

### **Jesus’ Story, Part 2:**

Jesus’ story isn’t finished. It has one more surprise. It turns out that the servant who was forgiven the unpayable debt goes out from the presence of the king and bumps into a fellow servant who owes him a small amount of money. But instead of doing for his fellow servant what was done for him, the servant throws the book at the other servant and has him put in prison!

Jesus concludes the story by telling how the other servants are so horrified at what this ungrateful servant did that they report his actions to the king. When the king hears this he retracts the forgiving of the debt and arrests the ungrateful servant.

Moral of the story: if you want to live in forgiveness, you must forgive! There is no other way forward.

### **All Is Forgiven!**

Forgiving someone who has hurt you terribly is possibly the hardest thing you will ever do. It doesn't just *happen* because you say the right words or have enough faith. When someone harms us or slanders us it is all too easy to connect the *person* with the *offense*. Think of a person wielding a gun: it's pretty hard to separate the person with their hand on the trigger from the trigger!

But when we've been hurt by someone it is essential that we put Jesus' little story into practice. Nothing will be gained by reliving the insult or injury for the rest of our lives! We need to take those three steps Jesus described:

1. Separate the offender from the offense and put ourselves in his or her shoes. Let yourself feel a tiny bit of the shame or fear that they might be feeling. See them as a real person *with a name*. See them as God sees them – a person bearing His image, however imperfectly.
2. Release the offender. It helps to say it out loud: "I release you, \_\_\_\_\_. I let you go free. I am not expecting you to fix this problem, undo what was said, make me happy."
3. Forgive the offense. The offense is most likely something that can't be undone. So what's the point of keeping the account open? Time to write it off. Time to forgive. Time to move on. Note: by forgiving you are *not* saying that what was done was okay! You are getting this hurtful, poisonous thing out of your heart and mind.

And where do you drop off that offense? It gets nailed to the Cross, along with all the other "sins of the world," including your own.

Remember what happened on that Cross the day Jesus died? The Romans put a sign over His head mocking Him as "King of the Jews." But the real sign He wore said, "Je suis vous." "I am *You!*" And in one of His last breaths He said: "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

"Tout est pardonne." "All is forgiven."