



Everywhere we turn there is evil and injustice. Pakistani Taliban killed 132 children the week before Christmas. They burned a teacher alive and made the students watch. I don't need to recite a long list of such atrocities for you to know how real they are. Thankfully we are largely insulated from these but we are not ignorant of them.

But not only do we see injustice from around the world but we have experienced it ourselves. Some of you have been hurt very badly. It is very real and profound. Sometimes we are just overly sensitive and hold onto hurt that we never should have taken on. And then there is everything else in between. With all of our accumulated hurt in mind, we come upon some of the most difficult passage in all of Scripture. The last two messages were about loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. That can be challenging enough at times but this last section of chapter 12 lays down the impossible command to love our enemies. Why would God ask us to do such a thing? While it may be the most difficult command in Scripture, it also illustrates the gospel like nothing else.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

1. Trust in the gospel to cover your sins.

I said that this passage is about loving your enemies and our first point is that loving enemies is rooted in the gospel. However, at first glance, this passage does not mention the gospel nor does it even use the word love. So let me explain how we get from this passage to love and the gospel.

Verse fourteen is clearly grounded in Jesus' teaching.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Compare Paul's command to that of Jesus.

Matt 5.44- *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*

Luke 6.27-28- *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*

You can clearly see the connections here. Moreover, is it possible to genuinely bless someone if you do not first love them? If you have any hatred or bitterness toward them, you will be tempted to offer a curse instead of a blessing. Now by "curse" we don't mean what they do in pagan and tribal cultures where a witch doctor literally places a curse on a person. This verse would clearly prohibit such a thing but our curse is simply wishing ill upon someone.

Verse fifteen helps to explain what a blessing actually looks like. *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.* We talked about this in some depth two weeks ago. True compassion results in being glad when another person has success and being mournful when another person is struggling. It's hard enough not to let ordinary jealousy take over even among people whom we like. Even with our closest friends, there is a temptation to covet what they have--their relationships, their success, even their stuff.

Now how much more difficult is this when the other person is your enemy? Can you see why Paul said it twice? *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.* We stop after reading the first command: bless those who persecute you. "What? Are you kidding Paul? Do you really intend for me to bless the guy who is actively persecuting me and causing me harm? Is that what you meant Paul?" Just in case there were any doubt, Paul added the second phrase: "bless and do not curse them."

In order to bless a person, we must first love them. It just has to be that way, otherwise any "blessing" we offer will be forced and not genuine. A blessing in the absence of love will be spoken through clenched teeth. A blessing without love is forced and hypocritical. Let me be clear--do not bless someone unless you really mean it. You know what flattery feels like, don't you? It feels so fake and so forced. It just feels wrong because it is wrong. The same thing goes for a forced blessing. Don't do it just because the Bible tells you to do it. Do it because you have a supernatural love toward your enemy which then allows you to truly bless them. Do you see that a genuine blessing is the outflow of genuine love. So when we are commanded to bless, the command itself assumes love as the foundation. Blessing is the application of love which already exists.

But how in the world do we get a supernatural love for our enemy? This is where the gospel comes into play. Like love is to blessing, the gospel is more implicit than explicit in this passage.

But the gospel is very explicit in Jesus' teaching on the same subject. Remember we were in Luke 6:27-28- *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.* If you drop down a few verses in Luke you see the reason behind and the power for offering love and blessing. *Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful* (Luke 6:36). God was merciful to you and the expectation is that you will in turn be merciful to others. This is the gospel. This is what 1 John 4:19 says. "We love because he first loved us."

We are to love our enemies. There are only two problems with this command. It is impossible and it seems completely unfair. It's impossible--I don't have the ability to love my enemies. It's unfair--why should my enemies get love from me when all I got from them was abuse and persecution? We should know that God understands this. He knows his command to love our enemies is impossible and seems unfair. That's why these commands are never in a vacuum. He doesn't just say "love your enemies" and that's that. He may as well ask us to fly to the moon by only flapping our arms. It's impossible and unfair to tell us to fly to the moon by flapping our arms like a chicken. But God never gives a command without giving a reason. "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

My favorite illustration for God's mercy is the parable of the unmerciful servant. I was going to just summarize it but then I decided I didn't want to leave anything out.

21 Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

23 "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

I have always heard the 10,000 talents put in terms of money. A rough estimate of this amount in our day is that 10,000 talents would be equal to \$10 billion dollars. Obviously, that's a staggering sum of money. If you are Bill Gates or Warren Buffet, you could pay your debt and go home, but this was written in a day where wealth creation was not like it is in our country. It is amazing that we live in a nation and a time when a college dropout can become one of the richest men in the world. This was not true in Jesus' day.

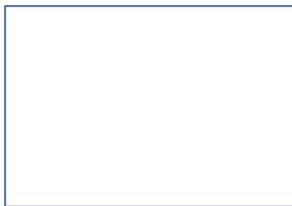
But rather than put the 10,000 talents in terms of money, let me put it in terms of time. In Jesus' day, the average person received one denarius for one day's work. It would take a man 20 years of daily work just to pay off one talent of debt. Therefore, 10,000 talents would be equivalent to more than 3000 lifetimes of daily labor. Notice I did not say 3000 years of work but 3000 lifetimes. If you started working at age ten and worked every day until you were 80 years old, it would take you 3,000 lifetimes of labor to repay this debt. This works out to 200,000 years of daily labor. That puts it into perspective, doesn't it?

25 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. 26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went out, he

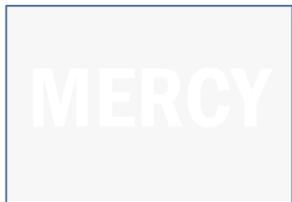
found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.

God represents the king in this parable. His mercy toward us is represented by the 3000 lifetimes of labor. We can see hints of hell in this parable. If God forgives us 200,000 years of debt, that begins to look like the removal of eternal punishment, doesn't it? Because the 10,000 talents was in insurmountable debt, we really aren't supposed to figure out how much or how long this represents. It was meant to have "wow factor." We are supposed to conclude that the debt could never be repaid. So in this sense, it really does represent eternal punishment. But you can't tell a parable where one guy owes the other guy an eternal debt. That just doesn't communicate well, does it? You owe me \$200 but I owe you an eternal sum of money. So 10,000 talents stands in for eternity. This fact is driven home by verse 34. *And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.* So the man owes 200,000 years of debt to the king but if he is in jail, he can't work to pay off the debt. In other words, if such a thing were possible, he would literally spend an eternity in prison. Therefore, a 10,000 talent debt is eternal punishment.

Such is the King's mercy. All human debts owed to us pales into comparison to what we owe him. If you don't get this, you will never understand the gospel. The eternal debt we owe is the backdrop of God's mercy. If we think our debt was small than our perception of God's mercy will likewise be small.



For example, can you see anything written inside of this box? I guarantee you there is something written inside the box because I typed it myself. So why can't you see it? it's only when the background is darkened slightly can you start to see what's in there. Finally, when the background is completely dark the word *mercy* jumps off the page.



So it is with God's mercy. The varying shades of background represents our varying perceptions of our sinful condition apart from Christ. Everyone knows that they are not perfect. Everyone knows they fall short at times. Even unbelievers know this and some of them are willing to label it what it is--SIN. They may even recognize that God has been



merciful to them. You probably all admit that as well. God is merciful. God is love. But to what extent? Without Christ, how sinful were you? How merciful did God need to be to overcome your sinfulness? It's only when you see your sin as infinite will you see God's mercy as infinite. The darker your perception of your sin becomes the more God's mercy stands out in bold contrast.

This is exactly what this parable is all about. The point of the parable is to place God's mercy on full display, in sharp contrast to an absence of mercy. And it's also why the unmerciful servant is seen as so wretchedly unmerciful. He was forgiven an infinite debt but then choked the first guy he found who owed him a few bucks.

Now here's where the unmerciful servant has an advantage over most of us. He was painfully aware of his debt. He knew the significance of a 10,000 talent debt. So then why did he try to choke a few dollars out of this other man? For whatever reason, he failed to understand the king's mercy. My own interpretation is that he thought it was too good to be true. After all, no one would ever possibly forgive such a debt, right? The servant probably assumed that the king was in a particularly good mood that day and said what he did. But eventually, the king would change his mind and come after him. The offer of mercy was just too good to be true. The servant didn't really believe he was forgiven at all. Maybe you have a different explanation but this one seems to fit the circumstances. It explains why he rushed out to find a small debtor. Had he truly believed the mercy of the king, it would have been inconceivable for him to have acted in this way.

So there are two ways to diminish God's mercy. The first way is like the backdrop of mercy. This first person says:

1. "I'm really not that bad."

Their perception of their sin is small, therefore their perception of God's mercy is correspondingly small.

The second way that we diminish God's mercy is illustrated in the unmerciful servant who said:

2. God isn't really that good.

Maybe some of you are like this. You say to yourself, "You don't know the bad things I have done." Maybe you never committed murder but you know in your heart that you have hurt others deeply. You feel that what you have done is beyond God's forgiveness. Like the unmerciful servant, you see such an offer of mercy as simply too good to be true.

Out of these two ways to diminish God's mercy, which one do you think is most common? I can't necessarily prove it but I am convinced, at least in our Western culture, that the first reason is overwhelmingly predominant. We just don't see or perhaps don't want to admit the depth of our sin. We are not even given a chance to say that God's mercy is too good to be true because we are not aware that we need this much mercy.

But most of us are born again believers in this room. We know we were great sinners and we know that God freely gave us great mercy to cover that sin. We don't fall into either of these two ways of diminishing God's mercy. before you draw that conclusion about yourself, let's first bring this parable to its conclusion. I left off the last verse of this passage. After going into brutal detail about the servant's utter lack of mercy, Jesus concluded the parable this way.

35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

This is what I call the "Shock and Awe" verse in this parable. Everything else led up to this final conclusion. This was the coup de grace. This is the application that was meant to run us through like a sword through our heart. *So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*"

"So hang on, are you saying that if I don't forgive my enemy--the guy who did me so much harm, the man who abused me, the people who persecuted and bullied me--if I don't forgive him that God won't forgive me?" Well if you want to get technical, I didn't say that, Jesus said that. Bless those who persecute you. Love your enemies. As I said before, not only are these commands impossible for us and seemingly so unfair, but if you don't do them, then God won't forgive you. If you don't offer them mercy and love, then God will withhold his mercy and love from you. And where does that leave you? That leaves you in prison until you can repay the debt. That's eternal punishment. That's hell.

"So hang on, are you saying that if I don't forgive my enemy that God will send me to hell?" Again, these are Jesus' words. That's why they are supposed to be so shocking to us. They are supposed to frighten us. They were meant to force us to ponder deeply. They are here so that we can apply them in the most personal of ways. Jesus told this parable 2000 years ago so that this morning you could sit here and ask yourself, "Am I holding unforgiveness in my heart against anyone?" By the way, that's the key word that Jesus used, isn't it? The heart. *So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother **from your heart.***" Do you see why this matters? It matters because anyone can mouth the words "I forgive you." Anyone can claim that they love their enemy, but the heart always tells the truth--*if* you are willing to listen to your own heart.

"So hang on, are you saying God will forgive me on the basis of whether or not I forgive my worst enemy?" No, I am not saying that nor is Jesus making this claim. Let me stop and make an extremely important theological and Biblical distinction. God does not forgive us because we have forgiven others. That would be works based salvation, wouldn't it? You are right to reject this idea. If I am good enough to forgive someone, then God will consider me worthy of his forgiveness. That would turn the entire gospel and the entire Bible on its head, even though that is the way hundreds of millions of people view God.

Like all other examples of good works, the "good work" of forgiving someone is the fruit of having been forgiven. If you were given 10 billion dollars but refused to pay your electric bill, that would be really bizarre, right? There would be no logical explanation for such an act. If we have been given 10 billion dollars worth of forgiveness and mercy from God and yet we refuse to hand out 50 dollars of mercy to our enemy, such a response is equally bizarre. So then why do you think we would refuse to love our enemy? Why would we ever refuse to forgive? It is because we have not been forgiven. We can't give out 50 dollars worth of mercy because we have none to give. Not only is your mercy bank empty, it is in arrears. You are a mercy debtor not mercy billionaire. And this is true because you are not saved.

"So hang on, are you saying that if I struggle to forgive my enemy--a command that you admitted was impossible--that I am not saved?" No, that's not what I am saying. Everyone struggles to forgive. Even with God's infinite mercy in our mercy bank, it's a hard and difficult

work. If you *don't* struggle through the process of forgiveness, then you might just be faking it. Forgiveness will usually be a struggle as you figure out how the gospel applies to each situation. Forgiveness will be a struggle because before you forgive someone, you first must love them. Most people skip over that part. I have four more points in my outline so next week we will work through more fully how to *struggle* through forgiveness together. So I am not saying that if you struggle to forgive that you are not saved. But I am saying that if you refuse to forgive you may not be saved. And Jesus is saying that if you persistently refuse to forgive others until your dying day, then you most definitely are not saved. *So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.*” Frightening, isn't it? It is meant to be so.

If you have listened carefully this morning, you will leave here with one of three possible conclusions.

1. You will leave gratefully because, by God's grace, you know you have trusted Christ alone for salvation and you have seen the fruit of this over the years through the genuine love for your enemies. You see how the Father's mercy toward you must be given to others. Praise the Lord. Next Sunday we'll talk some more about how to keep struggling through this in the future.
2. You thought you were saved but your refusal or reluctance to forgive others has left you wondering. I am not trying to get you to doubt your salvation. We should have assurance of our faith but we should not have a false assurance.
3. You are fairly certain you are not saved due to your persistent refusal to offer mercy to your enemies. Your very soul is in danger but you are not without hope. the answer is not to forgive the person who has harmed you but to ask Christ to forgive you. You need his mercy before you can offer it to others.

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December 28, 2014