

Matthew 18:21-35 10,000 Talents

The definition of an exaggeration is, “a statement that represents something as better or worse than it really is.” An exaggeration is an overstatement or an understatement. It is a device used to make a point, draw attention to something, or even just to entertain. Often, when Jesus told parables, he used exaggerated imagery to make a point about the gospel or as he put it, the “kingdom of heaven.” Such is the case in the parable we have read today.

Peter has asked Jesus how many times must one forgive when another has wronged them. He wonders if 7 times is enough. Jesus says, “77 times,” or in some versions, “70 x 7,” which is 490, but in neither case is the specific amount really the point.

The Setup

The story Jesus tells is meant to catch one's attention because of its exaggeration. A king wants to settle up accounts with his servants. He begins with a man who owed him 10,000 talents. A talent represents a very large sum of money. It is actually a weight, 33kg, or about 75 lbs. The price of gold this past week was about \$1350 per ounce, which adds up to about 1.6 million for one talent. When multiplying that by 10000 one gets a little over 16 billion in today's dollars.

Another way is just to say that talent equals a 10000 denarius, which is one day's wage. If we use \$100 for a day's wage, then a talent is one million dollars, multiplied by 10000 gives us about 10 billion dollars. The footnote in the NIV which says, “millions of dollars,” is not enough.

Another way of thinking about it is more general and also exaggerated. Some estimates are that in all the world there is about 100 trillion dollars in combined wealth. That is more than can be imagined. In the time of Jesus 10,000 talents was more wealth than could be imagined. I think of Star Wars, when Luke tries to convince Han to rescue Leia, “More wealth than you can imagine.” There is really no way to overstate the case.

Questions

There are two very pertinent questions that arise just in the setup to the story Jesus is telling. The audience will be distracted by these two questions, as in this sermon I have been, if they are left unanswered, as Jesus does.

How is it possible for someone to accumulate such an extraordinary amount of debt? And,

What kind of person would lend out this much debt.?

Given human nature as sinful and driven to excess, the more astonishing of these two questions regards the lender who gave out this preposterous loan to one of his servants.

The Hook

If one fails to be astonished up to this point in the story, it is simply hard not to be taken aback by what happens next. When it turns out that the servant is unable to pay, making the outlandish claim that if he is given time he will pay it all back, the master in this story *cancel*s the debt, forgives the whole thing.

Now we are surely hooked. The overly generous benefactor who makes a loan no banker in his right mind would ever make goes to settle accounts with an extravagantly irresponsible servant who has no chance in the world of paying the debt, *and so he cancel*s it. But this is still just the setup.

The Turn

The turn comes when this newly liberated servant decides to settle accounts with his debtors and begins with someone who owes him a car loan, 100 denarius, a significant amount but not exaggerated or overwhelming, one possible to pay if given time.

When the debtor is unable to pay the 100 denarius, the “unmerciful” servant refuses to cancel the debt and has

the man thrown in prison, until he could pay the debt. Words are not sufficient to express the absurd level of astonishment one feels at the hardness of the unmerciful servant.

We are meant to believe someone gave out that loan and forgave it. We are meant to believe that someone took that loan and when unable to pay, failed to forgive the debt of someone who owed much less. We are meant to see the difference between the large debt and the small one. We are meant to stand speechless in our tracks at the spectacle of it. No exaggeration is sufficient to catch in words this level of absurdity. Needless to say, there is no hope for the unmerciful servant.

Theology

It is clear in the parable that the financial illustration is meant to be taken as a metaphor, grace and sin. God is meant to be identified with the outrageous king whose generosity knows no bound and whose grace is endless.

The servant is meant to be seen as someone who has carelessly and irresponsibly accumulated a debt no one could possibly pay.

Grace is generous.

Sin is preposterous.

In life, God has given us a priceless gift. There is no paying for it. Sin is to work against that life. People are and have been and will continue to be imaginative and creative in finding ways to sin. One way to be unforgiving towards others.

It is an extension of the grace of God that in addition to the life given, God also forgives the sin that is the universal human response. The grace of life is already priceless, forgiveness and redemption makes it all more valuable still. There is no way to exaggerate this value.

God is the king who settles accounts and cancels debt; We are the ones whose sin is forgiven and in our relation to one another, to others, we also sin and are sinned against, only the wrongs pale in comparison to what we have done in relation to God. To be unforgiving is unacceptable to God. I might add that when we forgive we experience an amazing liberation.

Yet we still struggle with it. Sometimes we experience the wrong-doing of others in such extreme ways that to forgive seems impossible. To be sure, *it is* impossible for us. But for God, all things are possible, and there is no exaggerating the point.

While conceptually we can see that God forgives in us far more than we will ever be required to forgive in others, from the perspective of our weakness, what we

are required to forgive sometimes, at least once everyone's lifetime, seems too much to ask.

Seventy-seven or 490

In this wonderful parable Jesus makes a powerful suggestion as well as a challenge. Forgive a little everyday. How many times? Peter asks. Just keep on forgiving.

Every day confess your sin and ask it to be forgiven. And everyday, think for a second of the wrongs done to you, and ask for the grace to be able to forgive, as this parable suggests we should.

From time-to-time take stock of the situation and I am sure that you will find that the miracle is greater and the task easier than you ever imagined.

For the person struggling with sin and guilt and condemnation, the message of this parable is liberating and inspiring. For the person struggling to forgive those who in their experience have wronged them, this parable is challenging, but it is also very liberating because the weight of the grudge is debilitating, and when it is released a great burden is lifted, and we can live again.

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