

The Kingdom Movement *The Gospel of Matthew*

The First Sign of a Fading Faith: Lack of Forgiveness *Matthew 18:21 – 35*

Introduction: Signs of America's Fading Christianity

Since at least the 1960's, Christians and non-Christians alike have said that the influence of Christianity on America has been in decline. What are the symptoms of that? Some see the steady erosion of civil rights gains since the Civil Rights Movement as the loss of a Christian vision about race relations. That includes the Trayvon Martin – George Zimmerman case. Others point to the Sexual Revolution of the 1960's as the loss of a Christian morality about sex and the family. Everyone can now point to declining membership and attendance at churches. I would agree that Christian influence is declining. But I would trace the symptoms differently. I think an even deeper problem is unforgiveness. Because the more that Christians feel like our influence is declining, the more unforgiving we seem to become towards the forces and the people connected to that decline!

Let's take one example of unforgiveness. Just weeks ago, there was an outcry in Massachusetts that the body of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the older of two brothers who bombed the Boston Marathon in April 2013, not be buried here in Massachusetts.¹ His body, after he was killed in a police pursuit days after the bombings, went unclaimed for nearly two weeks. Now Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh was cremated, as were mass murderers Adam Lanza, Dylan Klebold, and Ted Bundy. But Muslims strictly forbid cremation. That's where the challenge began. Tamerlan's estranged wife Katherine Russell in Rhode Island refused his body. His parents in Russia said they could not fly his body back to Russia for burial because of passport problems. Massachusetts state law says, 'every dead body of a human being dying within the commonwealth ... shall be decently buried, entombed in a mausoleum, vault or tomb or cremated within a reasonable time after death.'² In fact, Albert DeSalvo, who was known as the Boston Strangler and linked to numerous murders and rapes in the 1960s, was buried in Peabody, MA after being stabbed to death in prison. But the city manager of Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Tsarnaev lived, said he would not allow Tsarnaev to be buried in the city, asserting that possible protests and media coverage would disrupt the community. A funeral home in Worcester – about 40 miles west of downtown Boston – accepted Tsarnaev's body from the police for a while. But protesters in Worcester made it clear they didn't want the body buried there, with one holding a sign that read, 'Bury the garbage in the landfill.' U.S. House of Reps for Massachusetts Edward J. Markey, who will now take John Kerry's U.S. Senate seat, said he opposed burying Tsarnaev's body anywhere in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I assume Mr. Markey knows the law of his own state, yet he appears unwilling to uphold the law. He is also Roman Catholic, so I'm puzzled how he explains to Jesus what it means to forgive and love your enemy. In the end, a 'private Virginia citizen' and licensed counselor named Martha Mullen 'quietly coordinated efforts to resolve the problem of where to bury Tsarnaev's remains.' She e-mailed representatives of her church, as well as local Muslim, Jewish and Hindu representatives. She contacted Worcester police 'after receiving an offer of a burial plot from the administration of the Islamic Funeral Services of Virginia,' the society said. Mullen also talked with her local pastor about the moral implications of her spearheading the effort. 'Jesus tells us, 'Love your enemies,' she said, 'Not to hate them, even after they are dead.'³ I agree with Martha Mullen's take on the situation and on Jesus. I thank God that the Muslim community in the U.S. and the world had a witness to Jesus' love and forgiveness in Martha Mullen. If not for her, what impressions would they have of Christians, and of Christ?

¹ Tanya D. Marsh, *Burying Mass Murderers: The Problem of Tamerlan Tsarnaev*, May 5, 2013; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tanya-d-marsh/burying-tamerlantsarnaev_b_3215892.html

² M.G.L.A. 114 § 43M; Massachusetts law also states that each town shall provide one or more "suitable places" for people dying within town limits (M.G.L.A. 114 § 10). Dr. Tanya Marsh says, 'Although no case interprets this statute to provide that town cemeteries must accept the remains of any person who died within town limits, it is a reasonable interpretation. Tsarnaev's death certificate indicates that he died at 1:35 a.m. It is unclear whether he died on the street in Watertown, in the ambulance, or at the hospital in Boston. If the funeral director can confirm where he died, his strongest argument is that Massachusetts law requires that town's cemetery to accept Tsarnaev's remains.'

³ Greg Botelho and Paula Newton, CNN. To locals' surprise, Tamerlan Tsarnaev buried in Virginia cemetery, Sat May 11, 2013; <http://www.cnn.com/2013/05/10/us/virginia-boston-suspect-burial>; Even so, Virginia resident interviewed by CNN Rhonda Richardson was upset. She thought the body should have been taken to where his parents are in southern Russia. 'He killed Americans on American soil, therefore he shouldn't be buried here.'

Context:

Jesus indicates that unforgiveness is one of the first signs of a faith that is weakening and perhaps in the process of being lost. We are in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus is taking his disciples step by step on a journey into his mission to the whole world. In this section, Matthew 14 – 18, Jesus is taking his disciples between Jewish community and Gentile community, back and forth, so they can learn how to call people into Jesus' kingdom and mentor them in the faith. In this section, Jesus is teaching them how to teach others, especially new Christians. The running theme had been, 'If a brother sins...' So Jesus explains how we are to do that, and how he is personally present in any process of teaching, correction, accountability, and restoration.

What If the Sin is Against Me? v.21

Peter (don't you love him?) immediately pipes up and makes this personal: 'What if a brother sins against me? Shouldn't I forgive him a lot of times?' Look at v.21 – 22: ²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?'

Now where does Peter's question come from? It is connected to what went before? Is it a non-sequitur? Jesus had just talked about 'When a brother sins' in general (18:15). Peter now thinks of the situation when a brother 'sins against me' (18:21). Peter was getting Jesus. Canaanites were the ancestral enemies of the Jews, and there was no love between them. Yet Jesus reached out to the Canaanite woman and welcomed her to the table (Mt.15:21 – 28). The Romans occupied the Jewish homeland and crushed all resistance by military rule. Yet Jesus said to a Roman centurion that he had great faith and healed a servant in the centurion's household (Mt.8:5 – 13). The Persians were the threat to the east, who had ruled over the Jews centuries ago and currently sandwiched the Jews against the Romans. Yet Jesus surely wanted to reach them and disciple them into the kingdom, too. So Peter knows it's not going to be easy.

I have mentored new Christians, and while it can be a lot of fun, it can also require lots of forgiveness. On one occasion when I had told a story to college students about black and white American Christians who had stood up against the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, including the impact of the internment on my dad and his family, afterwards a young white guy approached me afterwards and said, 'I wrote a paper in favor of the internment.' I was about to sarcastically point out that the U.S. apologized officially for that. I wanted to also point out that every historian I've encountered roundly condemned that event as racist, unnecessary, and unconstitutional. But, to deal with that young man required forgiveness on my part. And there are a whole bunch of lesser sins: I've mentored younger Christians who always wanted to meet with me, where it was a little draining, and a few who forgot to show up to our meetings; they blew me off. The thing is, I can look back and see that when I was a young Christian, I acted the same way.

I'm sure you've had to forgive, over and over. I was really impressed with my friend Carla (July 13, 2013) after I read this exchange on Facebook today about the trial of George Zimmerman:

'DM': The law is not messed up. That's based on your opinion just because it hurts your feelings doesn't make it wrong the fact is the defence in this case had solid emotionless evidence to prove it's point

'CW': it's funny under the same law and system in florida they gave a black woman 20yrs for firing a warning shot at her abusive spouse.

Carla Booker: @ Dan, regardless of where you stand on the outcome of the case, it would seem a measure of sensitivity is called for in terms of how you express yourself. A young life has been lost, people are grieving.

'DM': No I'm good lady who doesn't know me.

Carla Booker: Do I need to know you to note an insensitive comment?

'DM': Lady I see brave men and women risk and sometimes lose their lives daily and are barely mentioned on the 5 o'clock news, so pardon me if I feel little for some pot head kid who pick a fight with the wrong guy

Carla Booker: I will absolutely pardon you.

I know Carla's sense of humor, so it's easy for me to sense her posture when it's in writing like this. But of course there are times that the situation is not funny in the slightest. When forgiveness gets tough, we start counting. Is there someone you count the number of sins done against you? When Peter says, 'Up to seven times,' he is using

the special number seven, the number that means completion in the biblical story. Seven days of creation in Genesis 1:1 – 2:3, seven days in a week, seven feasts in Israel’s calendar year in Leviticus 23, and so on. Seven means completion. So when Peter says, ‘Up to seven times,’ he is probably using that number to mean this: ‘Even when someone else completely sins against me?’ Like they are just completely ignorant and insensitive? You’d be generous if you stayed in relationship with a person while he or she sinned seven times against you.

Jesus – Stop Counting Forgiveness: v.22

But in v.22, Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’ Four hundred and ninety times. That would be an awful lot of times that someone can sin against you. It’s as if Jesus is saying, ‘Not just when people are completely ignorant and insensitive, but when they are intentional and knowingly hurtful, when their sin against you is more than complete and total, when it runs over into the pages of your seventh journal this week. Forgive them, always.’ And another way of thinking of this is, ‘Let your forgiveness always be bigger than their sins. Let your spiritual capacity in Christ and with Christ be always larger than their capacity for sin.’ Seventy times seven is a lot to count. It’s Jesus’ way of saying, ‘Don’t even count.’

Now you might ask, ‘Well, won’t you get abused in the process?’ There may need to be some adjustments to your relationship with this person. You may put up some boundaries. And based on the wisdom of God, there may need to be compensation for there to be true justice and reconciliation. But internally, Jesus calls for forgiveness to always reign.

Jesus’ Parable – Forgiveness of Sin Cannot Be Counted: v.23 – 35

Now to help punctuate his point, Jesus tells a parable. I’m going to read it all at once for impact, and then talk about three lessons that I think come through. This is v.23 – 35: ²³ ‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ ²⁷ And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ ²⁹ So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ ³⁰ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. ³¹ So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. ³² Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. ³⁵ My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.’

What are some questions we have about it? Most likely: How did the guy get so much in debt? Can God just forgive debts like that? What about the idea of Jesus paying our debt to God? Did this guy really accept the forgiveness of the lord, or was he still trying to pay it back? Does God take forgiveness away? Should our motivation be the fear of having our debt reinstated? Who are the torturers? Does God torture? And where does the analogy break down? Recall that parables are meant to highlight only 1 or 2 main ideas. For example, the parable of the lost sheep (Mt.18:12 – 13 or Lk.15:1 – 7) is great at illustrating the heart of God as a shepherd looking for us as the lost sheep. But it does not describe human free will, which is a reality. As we try to answer these questions, let’s first ask how would Simon Peter and the other disciples have heard this? I’ll break it down to the biggest 3 lessons.

Lesson #1: Your debt to God, if we think of it that way, is way more massive than anyone else’s debt to you.

Jesus’ comparison is between ten thousand talents and a hundred denarii. One hundred denarii ranges from about \$1000 to \$2100.⁴ But ten thousand talents would be about \$3 billion. ‘A talent is the largest monetary unit (20.4 kg

⁴ The denarius was first introduced in the late Roman Republic (about 211 BC) and was initially worth 10 donkeys. It weighed 3.9 grams. The size of the coin seems to have stayed basically the same, but Nero lowered the silver content of the coin. It was the main coin of the Roman Empire until the antonianus coin was introduced in the 3rd century AD. Its purchasing power in

of silver), equal to 6,000 drachmas, the wages of a manual laborer for fifteen years. “Ten thousand” (muriav’, murias, “myriad”) is the largest possible number. Thus the combination is the largest figure that can be given. The annual tax income for all of Herod the Great’s territories was 900 talents per year. Ten thousand talents would exceed the taxes for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria. The amount is fantastic, beyond all calculation.’ If Jesus was referring to talents of gold, which is likely, he’s saying about \$3 billion.⁵

How is this parable a response to Peter’s question? Clearly Jesus is saying, ‘Your debt to God is way more massive than anyone else’s debt to you, and God forgives you.’ But it goes a little bit deeper. Let’s explore the question, ‘How did the guy get so far in debt?’ This is an outrageous sum of money. No one can borrow and spend that kind of money just as a private person. And that’s part of the point. There is no sense counting the debt he owed to his king. He must have worked for the master and screwed up something big time. To put ourselves in his shoes, imagine that you bungled a major financial transaction for this king, tried to get it back but lost even more money. Then, you tried some clever accounting to hide the loss, then you stupidly embezzled money and tried to gamble with it but lost even more money and got into more debt. Then you had to face the king. You would be liable to being killed and having your family’s name be cursed forever.

Here’s what I think is going on: First, the closer you are to God, the more entrusted you are with representing Him. That means the more you could totally mess it up. Israel served God for centuries and racked up a big debt, so to speak. But in a sense, what each person owes God is their whole life. The longer we claim to represent God, the more mistakes we make and screw things up!! So this can apply to any follower of Jesus. Who has a high calling now? Christians. Is it the highest calling? Yes. What are we called to? To give all of ourselves to Jesus, and live 100% for him. Do we do that? Usually not. There’s always something we can think of in which we fail to love Jesus fully. So if Jesus were to take the difference between what he calls us to, and the level at which we live, how would that look? Pretty bad for us. But the truth is that Jesus doesn’t do that. Thank God!

But secondly, in an even deeper sense, the debt is just a metaphor, a device. Ten thousand talents, or three billion dollars, is an outrageously impossible debt. How outrageous it would be to try to quantify our sin in God’s eyes. Sin cannot be counted or quantified, fundamentally. And more than forgiveness can be counted, from Jesus’ position. Four hundred ninety times... is a ridiculous number to count to. And do you pay a price each time you forgive? Sure, but it’s nothing compared to the cost God paid to forgive you, if you want to speak of God paying something. But there is really no sense counting.

I want to explain why the debt is a metaphor, and why Jesus would use it. If you had children who contracted a disease that mutated some DNA cells so that they start lying to you and betraying you, it’s not something they can ‘pay’ for, because what they really need is a fresh infusion of your genetics, your healthy DNA, to fight off the disease in them. And that’s ultimately why God acquired a human body in the person of Jesus, to contract that disease of sin, but also perfect the antidotes to that disease by resisting it perfectly, and in his resurrection, giving us a restored genetics. So I don’t think God experiences our sin as simply a ‘debt.’ Sin is not fundamentally something that we can count, and God doesn’t count it on a ledger, either. But Jesus uses this motif of counting up a debt in this outrageous way to respond Simon Peter’s question. He used the metaphor of debt in a similar way in Luke 7:36 – 50 to point out some other ridiculous position someone else was making.

Keeping that qualification in mind, though, let’s ask the question: Why is it so easy to forget how evil our sin is to God, and how much God forgave us? Why do we sometimes think that God experiences our sin as if we owe Him a mere \$500 debt instead of \$500,000,000? We underestimate our own sin. Already most of us tend to think that other people’s wrongs are worse than ours.

Lesson #2: Receiving God’s forgiveness can be superficial

Let’s explore the question, ‘Did this guy really accept the forgiveness of the lord?’ The last thing he said was, ‘I will repay you everything’ in v.26. Does he think he still has to pay his lord back? That’s distinctly possible. It’s

terms of bread in the first century has been estimated at US \$21, from 2005, though it is very difficult to estimate because of the debasement of the silver and the difficulty in calculating purchasing power parity. With that qualification, 100 x \$21 = \$2100.
⁵ M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew* in Leander E. Kech, senior editor, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (NIB) Vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p.382.

not normal behavior to choke your fellow slave for an amount that is manageable, and fairly trivial compared to the bigger debt. The guy seems panicked that he still needs to repay every cent of the \$3billion he owes.

That has got to be Jesus' point. The first servant didn't believe the king. He's thinking, 'I've got to pay this back! I can't really trust that anyone would forgive me. I can't believe that. It's impossible. So it must not be true.'

Lesson #3: The opposite of forgiveness is torture

There was one year when the federal government sent me a letter about my taxes. They said that I miscalculated my taxes and that I owed them \$85,000. That was when I was making about \$40,000 a year and Ming wasn't working outside the home. For a moment, I completely panicked. I realized later that they had made a mistake in how they counted something. But for that brief time period, I had different scenarios run through my mind. One of them was that I need to collect everything from everyone who owes me anything.

How else could he have responded to his fellow slave? First, he could have said, 'Hey, I've got the rest of my life to pay back this debt, so I've got plenty of time. Can you pay me sometime in the next forty years?' Or better yet, second, he could have forgiven the entire debt also. That's the emotionally correct response, since he was just forgiven by the king a sum *three million times more than that*. But to seize and choke is to *torture*.

Did you catch that? The servant becomes a torturer. Not forgiving another person is your attempt to torture them. That is a sober truth. If this pertains to you: *Stop seizing them and choking them with guilt*. If that is God's word to you today, let it be so. But on a deeper level, you are torturing yourself by your own unbelief. If Peter had said, 'I can forgive up to seven times. The eighth time I will not forgive. And I do not expect to be forgiven by God an eighth time. So I will torture myself by my unbelief.' If you limit forgiveness to someone else, you are giving yourself just enough rope to hang yourself. That is why the 'seventy times seven' really means 'stop counting.' That is why the ten thousand talents really means 'stop counting.' God does not count your sin. Therefore, He does not count how many times He forgives you. Therefore He calls you to not count how many times you forgive others.

Caveat: Does God Torture?

But that brings up the question of torture. Does God potentially withhold forgiveness and hand people over to 'torturers'? Only in the sense that the torturers are *within the person*, and already part of the person. 'Torturers' in v.34 should be paralleled to the voices of anxiety and panic *inside the person*. If you get called out on a sin as Jesus outlined in Mt.18:15 – 20, and you resist Jesus' call to repent, you will be treated by the church as a non-Christian. You may deny your sin, but deep down, you feel like you have to pay back your debts, or cover them up and deny them. You will feel like there is no healing and no forgiveness and no starting over. You will be haunted by the voices of accusation. That is the torturer. Also, there are demonic forces out there that then accuse you of what you know are your shortcomings and hypocrisy. Being 'handed over to the torturers' is therefore not a picture of eternity. It can become that, eventually. But in the immediate context, it's part of an ongoing process in the life of the person during the time of the church but outside the relational circle of the church.

Similarly, Paul dealt with a man in unrepentant sexual sin in 1 Corinthians 5. Listen to Paul's motivation for excommunicating the man: ⁴ 'In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.' (1 Cor.5:4 – 6). Notice that Paul is not only concerned with the purity of the Christian community, but also the repentance of the person. He seems to believe that Satan (or 'the accuser') would propel the man by accusations and guilt back to the church. Perhaps 'his flesh' – that is, the corruption of sin in him – will become such a thorn in his own side that he'll want Jesus to save him from it! In that sense, and only in that sense, will 'the repayment be made' (Mt.18:25, 34)

Conclusion: The Witness Jesus Really Wants

So what the king wants of the servant is for the servant to be forgiving, like he is forgiving. And what Jesus wants of Peter and of us is for us to be forgiving, like he is forgiving. And that is why I think unforgiveness is a really important marker of spiritual health. I praise God that Dr. Martha Mullen was a good witness to the Muslim community. I praise God that my friend Carla leaves a trail of forgiveness on Facebook, even while she rightly calls out other people for being insensitive. Christians who are unforgiving will be short, testy, nasty, and either cut people out of their lives or make people cut them out of their lives. The Christians who will be effective in this

country, in our neighborhood, and even online are the Christians who are *forgiving from the heart*. And when it's genuinely from the heart, you won't count.