

Admitting our need of forgiveness – and accepting forgiveness – is not easy. Receiving complete forgiveness of our debts is a matchless blessing. But it takes more than rote words in a prayer. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we make an outrageous bargain with God: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Our first mistake is thinking that forgiveness is something that is ours to grant to or withhold from another person. Forgiveness is God's domain. Our next mistake is glossing over the first half of the bargain, "forgive our debts;" seriously, we don't have any real debts, do we? And our third mistake is glibly promising that we ever actually forgive our debtors. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Do we stop to think what we are bargaining? Do we actually want God to forgive us to the same extent that we forgive others? Here is how Jesus turns our assumption inside-out. Only as we accept that *we* need God's pardon do we recognize that God wants us to pardon *others*. For Jewish-Christians at the turn of the 1st century, forgiving others was a God-ordained obligation. Wrongs committed within the family of faith were serious violations of the good order God intended for God's people, east of Eden, a transgression against God's will, against the Reign of God. An offense was a burden the offender carried until it was relieved by the offended party's forgiveness. The offended party as often as not was God. And Hebrew scriptures accept that God's forgiveness is not a given.

Particularly offensive to God are offenses against Torah, the divine teachings. Offending Torah happens really easily. In fact, it is impossible to follow Torah perfectly. Remember last week's lesson?

- You shall worship God and God alone.
- You shall not worship idols.
- You shall not swear by God's name.
- You shall consecrate the day of Sabbath.
- You shall honor mother and father, and their mothers and fathers.
- You shall not commit murder, or adultery, or theft.
- You shall not testify falsely against your neighbor, nor covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

It's really easy to slip up. One of the great biblical examples of pardon is Joseph and his 11 brothers, who carried a great burden of guilt for attempting to murder Joseph back in the day. That's a multiple offense against Torah. But Joseph rises to prominence in Egypt thanks to his own innate abilities. By chance, he meets his brothers who are unaware that Joseph is even alive, much less powerful. He could punish them severely. But he extends to them total pardon instead. Forgiveness does not erase Joseph's memory of their offenses. Forgiveness does not mitigate the seriousness of their offenses against Joseph. Forgiveness does not imply that Joseph accepts even partial responsibility for their offenses. What Joseph's forgiveness says to his brothers is, "For the sake of restoring order to our family, your offenses no longer stand in the way of our relationship."

"What God wants to do about your offenses is up to God."

"But what I want is for us again to be brothers, sons of our common father, Jacob."

Had Joseph imprisoned the wrongdoers, which he had every right to do, the loss would not only have been to Jacob's family, but also to God's family. The impulse to forgive originates with God. In its way, each forgiveness of debts restores God's reign on earth. That sense of restoration lies behind Jesus' stark parable of the Unforgiving Slave. It's easy to miss the restoration, the story moves so quickly. But for a moment, master and slave achieve a parity that hints at life in the Reign of God. Let's slow the action down, like a news report. Eyewitness News catches the forgiven slave on the steps outside the king's palace. "What was it like for you, being forgiven such an enormous debt?"

Who says it was a debt, snipes the slave.

The king can afford to write it off.

It's a paper loss.

Besides, it's the king's fault

for letting the account get so far in arrears that a body could never pay it up.

The reporter takes another tack:

"What did the king say when you thanked him?"

Who says I thanked him? What for?

He was never gonna get that money outa me.

The slave fails to pay forgiveness forward.

Cringe at the gall of the unrepentant slave, if you wish, but we are right there with him.

Forgive us our debts? What debts?

Like fish unaware that they live in water, we are unaware of our own moral debts.

In the parable, the debt owed the king is enormous, greater than the debt of a whole nation.

Ten thousand talents

represents millions of lifetimes of labor.

But the financial value is beside the point.

The point is systemic injustice,

the injustice of an economic system

that puts master and slave

in an untenable, disordered relationship.

A slave is no more than chattel to the master.

Even the slave's wife and children are chattel.

The relationship is based on power,

the power of ownership.

A surprise twist in the parable

is that the chattel, the slave,

seems to express something like repentance.

Slaves are not supposed to have feelings.

Slaves are not expected to have a conscience.

But on bended knee this slave begs,

"Have patience with me,

and I will pay you everything."

Though it's a power relationship,

this slave appeals to Reign-of-God principles.

Confronting his imminent sale

to make a fictitious dent in the debt he owes,

the slave repents and negotiates.

By offering to repay the debt, even for a moment,

the slave assumes the master's burden.

Assumption of burden is Biblical forgiveness.

Again: **Assumption of burden**

**is Biblical forgiveness,**

Christ-like forgiveness.

Masters, too, are not supposed to have feelings.

Masters are not expected to have a conscience.

This master, sensing a power shift,

responds with admirable sympathy.

"You are set free from my service.

Anything you owe me is pardoned."

With that grand gesture, both parties  
are liberated to form a new relationship  
along the lines of classic discipleship.  
The master is free of an unjust system  
of exploiting labor.

The slave is free to follow (or not)  
the master's example.

Such is the power of repentance  
and the grace of forgiveness.

Eden is restored, if but for a moment.

Famed author Aldous Huxley and his wife

barely escaped with their lives

from a house fire that destroyed everything.

Manuscripts, correspondence with world figures,  
Huxley's entire library – all ashes.

"It was a hideous experience," Huxley confessed,

"but it did make me feel extraordinarily clean."

Perhaps that's how the master feels  
releasing the slave: clean, unburdened,  
at least for the time being.

But the slave fails to "pay it forward."

By the finale, the original power relationship  
is reinstated, even more harshly.

How fragile the state of grace is,  
unless God's gift of pardon is passed forward. ■

We may feel removed from the social norms  
of master and slave,

though it was true in this country  
but a few generations ago.

Indeed, for some farmworkers  
laboring today in America's fields,  
debt-bondage amounts to virtual enslavement.

We are keenly aware of abusive power,  
especially in political settings.

A former press secretary  
in the Johnson White House has written:

"No one should be allowed  
to work in the West Wing  
who has not suffered a major setback in life.

The responsibility there is too great  
to be entrusted to people  
who aren't painfully aware  
of how badly things can go wrong."

Experience of failure instills thoughtfulness  
when taking political actions that affect millions.  
I wonder what might happen if an elected official  
fell to his or her knees before the electorate  
and repented:

I will make amends for the failed policies  
of my predecessor.

I will atone for campaign promises  
that can never be fulfilled.

I will release my appointed officials  
from political patronage.

Have patience with me.

I will make everything right.

I will temper justice with mercy  
for the rest of my term.

And what if the electorate responded, in turn:

We admit some of the burden we place  
on an elected official is too idealistic.

We release you from unrealistic expectations.

We accept that some of the reasons we had  
for voting for you will never be realized.

We're not saying we don't care about promises,  
but we release you to exercise good judgment.

We trust you, because you are being honest.

We accept your change of heart  
and we forgive your shortcomings.

We will temper justice with mercy  
for the rest of your term.

Something like that actually happened  
in the Republic of South Africa after 1993,  
the end of apartheid.

The hard work of nation-building remained.

Racial suppression of the black majority  
had left deep-seated feelings of resentment.

Violent conflicts dating back to the 60s had resulted in human rights abuses by all sides. No section of society was unscathed. No side of the conflict was exempt. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process was the vision of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Through official committees with court-like powers, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigated thousands of complaints of abuses that took place between 1960 and 1994. Victims of gross human rights violations were referred to Reparation and Rehabilitation. Perpetrators could apply to a committee for amnesty regarding acts of violence if they truthfully confessed. The overall vision was to administer justice, tempered with mercy. When the final report was issued in 1997, it left considerable room for criticism. Nevertheless, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions are being set up in other nations which can benefit from the healing power of repentance and the unifying effects of forgiveness. ■

### **Conclusion**

*Accepting* pardon – even just admitting that we need pardon – can be difficult. *Granting* pardon can feel unnatural, especially when we have been wronged, or when we are sure we're in the right, or when the offender seems unwilling to repent. The roving peacemaker, Jimmy Carter, asks: "Doesn't Jesus mean that we should love our enemies even if we are sure that we will not be loved?" It's more natural to seek judgment. Jesus came to turn natural assumptions inside out, beginning with his Sermon on the Mount:  
 You have heard that it was said,  
 You shall love your neighbor

and hate your enemy,  
 But I say to you, Love your enemies  
 and pray for those who persecute you.  
 Judgment generates more judgment . . .  
 two wrongs don't make a right.  
 Truly it is more blessed to offer pardon.  
 Pardon generates pardon.  
 Admitting our need of forgiveness –  
 and accepting forgiveness – is not easy.  
 But receiving forgiveness of our debts  
 is a matchless blessing.  
 It cleanses the mind, frees the conscience,  
 releases the drive to keep living,  
 and restores relationships in a Godly way.  
 Jesus wants to turn our assumptions inside-out.  
 If we accept that we need pardon  
 then we can recognize that others need our  
 pardon.  
 Amen.