

## FORGETTING YOU WON THE LOTTERY

Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
Columbia, Tennessee  
September 14, 2008

Matthew 18:21-35

“Dear Mr. Williamson,

We are pleased to inform you that the numbers on your lottery ticket matched up with the winning numbers for last week’s Powerball lottery. Since your ticket was the only one in the nation which correctly picked all the numbers, the total prize will be yours alone. The total award coming to you will be 100 million jillion bazillion dollars. You will soon be receiving a cashier’s check for that amount. Congratulations.

Sincerely,

The National Lottery Commission

P.S. Don’t forget to tithe your winnings to your church.”

Actually I did not receive a letter like that. I guess I’d actually have to be crazy enough to play the lottery to have a chance at these riches. But we can always dream.

Suppose, though, that I had received such a letter. For the rest of the day I’d be in a daze over it. And then suppose, coming down here to the church, someone would come in asking for \$10 for gas. And suppose I told them No, and to get out of my office. If you heard about it you’d be astonished: “He won the lottery and he can’t give someone ten dollars?” When you win that kind of money, it changes your whole view of the world and especially your view of money. What sort of person would get a windfall like that, and still be stingy?

That’s a rather poor attempt to get at what is going on in Jesus’ parable. A slave incurs a debt of ten thousand talents. That is a gigantic debt, billions of dollars in today’s currency. It would take a day laborer in Bible times something like 300,000 years to earn that much. Winning 100 million jillion bazillion dollars in the Powerball lottery is not far off.

So the slave asks for mercy: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” And astonishingly, the king forgives the debt. 10,000 talents off the books just like that.

So the slave leaves the king's chambers, surely as dazed over his good fortune as we would be at winning the lottery. On the steps outside the building he spots another slave who owes him 100 denarii from last night's poker game. His total demeanor changes. He's hardly out of the king's chamber, where he heard this great word of forgiveness, and now he seizes the other by the throat and demands that he pay. The other slave asks for mercy, and what he says is not just close, but exactly the phrase which the first slave had used to plead with the king just a few minutes earlier: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But the slave who had such a huge debt forgiven refuses to see the connection between being forgiven and extending forgiveness, and demands that this other one be thrown in jail. And when the king hears of this behavior, he puts the debt back on, and orders that this man be tortured until he pays. Not a very happy conclusion.

A little later in the service we will pray these words: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." There is a connection between the way we forgive and the way God forgives us. Do not misunderstand. This is not a bargain we strike with God: "God, I forgave three people today, so now, God, you owe me three units of forgiveness back." If we look at it that way, forgiveness becomes a matter of keeping score.

That's the way Simon Peter saw it in the question he asked Jesus: "Lord, how many times should another sin against me, and I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter thinks he is being generous. There was a saying in that day: "If a person sins once, twice, or three times, you are to forgive. But if that person sins a fourth time, you do not forgive."<sup>1</sup> You forgive three times for the same offense. I don't know about you, but that's about my limit. Write me a bad check three times; stand me up at the restaurant three times, and I've had it. So Peter's idea of more than doubling that standard to seven times is beyond what most of us can manage.

So the response of Jesus is startling: "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." If we're in a scorekeeping frame of mind, if we're keeping careful account of the wrongs done us, then 77 times is plainly impossible.

That's the way so much of the time we keep account of wrongs. We keep score. Lake Wobegon's Garrison Keillor tells of his church denomination, the Church of the Brethren:

We were "exclusive" Brethren, a branch that believed in keeping itself pure. Once having tasted the pleasure of being Correct . . . they kept right on and broke up at every opportunity, until, by the time I came along, there were dozens of tiny Brethren groups, none of which were speaking to any of the others.

Patching up was not a Brethren talent. As my Grandpa once said of another group of Brethren, "Anytime they want to come to us and admit their mistake, we're perfectly happy to sit and listen to them."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> F. W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 381.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Patrick Willson in his sermon at Shades Valley Presbyterian Church, February 7, 1993.

A preacher friend who lives in another community told me this week of watching his child play in a T-ball game. Also watching were the parents of another child, but the parents were divorced. So in that fairly small gathering, the wife sat over here and the husband over there, and they were obliged to ignore each other through the whole game. Maybe that's the sort of self-imposed torture that the passage speaks of.

We know this, of course, but we also know that forgiveness is hard. The fact is that people hurt us by their words and actions. Sometimes the hurts are gigantic times of abuse or injury. But for most of us on most days it's the little picks and pokes that get under our skin: the person who forgets an appointment and wastes my time, the one who takes the big piece of chicken that I had my eye on at the pot luck supper, the one who beats me to the choice parking spot at Krogers, the one whose air of superiority makes me feel foolish or stupid or small. Forgive them? I'm not sure I want to.

So Jesus tells this parable to give us another way to deal with these times besides keeping score. And that way is this: remember. Remember who you belong to. Remember what has been done for you. Remember the 100-million-jillion-bazillion-sized sin that God has forgiven you.

Let's do it this way: Think of some act of forgiveness that you need to extend. Is it hard to do so? Then consider this: "One would hardly die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare to die. But God shows great love for us in this: While we were sinners, Christ died for us."

Think of someone from whom you are separated. Then consider this: "He was wounded for our transgression; he was bruised for our iniquity. Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed."

Think of some offense that you just can't bring yourself to forgive, then consider this: "When they came to the place called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there. Then Jesus said: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."<sup>3</sup>

I'll tell you what my problem is with these words. Maybe it's your problem too. My problem is not that I don't know these words. In fact, I've got them pretty much memorized—as you do.

My problem is that I forget. We will conclude this service, then I will go back and take off this robe and go back into a world that is dominated by the likes of Clint "Make My Day" Eastwood, where the rallying cry of our age is "Don't get mad, get even," where revenge is not just sweet, but so much fun. Out in that world I forget what we have said here.

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 5:7-8, Isaiah 53:5, Luke 23:33-34.

My problem is that in my haste to get even, or to enjoy a little revenge, I will lose sight of the fact that in the process I have cut off any chance of being in relationship with the one who offended me.

My problem is that, like the servant in the parable, I have this scriptural amnesia that kicks in at the worst times, so that I forget that I have been in the presence of the king, the very king who has forgiven me the incalculable debt of my life.

My problem is that too often when I leave this place I forget the cross, so that while I'm fussing about how hard it is to forgive someone, I have forgotten about the one whose body was broken and whose blood was shed for me.

My problem is that I forget that when I celebrate God's forgiveness toward me, I know that I am also called to be forgiving toward others.

The slave was forgiven and forgot. And so do I.

So your assignment—and mine—when you leave here today is simply to remember. When forgiveness is hard, remember that you have been forgiven, over and over again, through no merit of your own. Remember that there is someone who loves you very much and wants to love you some more. Remember what it costs you—some pride, some ego—to forgive someone else, and remember what it cost God to forgive you. Once you let that kind of forgiveness sink into your heart, how can you pass up a single chance to do the same?<sup>4</sup>✠

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 98.