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A Tale of Two Stalls

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Matthew 6:12 & 18:23-35

“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Matthew 6:12

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents (An absurd, unpayable amount, more than \$17.4 billion) was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. (not all that much) He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ But the man refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” Matthew 18:23—35

About 8 Christmas’s ago, a wonderful woman from our last church named Char Hammond told me that her daughter had come home from her freshman year at Ann Arbor and announced to her family that she didn’t believe in Jesus or Christianity, and she was embracing atheism. And in one of the best parenting moves I’ve ever seen, Char told her daughter “That’s fine. But what will *you* be doing Christmas morning when the rest of us are opening presents for His birthday?” ☺ Well, Brooke decided maybe there *was* something to it after all...she wound up plugging in and bringing a lot of life to our church. You see, it really does make a difference what you base your life around. (And I’m not just talking about the holidays throughout the year).

We’ve been looking at the fact that some of us are stalled: some on the side of the highway, some in our driveways, and some of us are stalling. We know what God wants our next step to be. But we stall. And like Brooke, we’re the ones who miss out.

If there’s one thing that stalls more people than any other, it’s their inability to forgive. Oh, they wouldn’t put it that way; they’d say they know about forgiveness. They go around using it like a weapon. Instead of basing their life around forgiveness, they go around collecting debts, to make up for the fact that *they* had to be forgiven. Here’s how it usually plays out in my life: I get stalled out when I’m upset with someone, or someone’s upset with me. First you try the egg shells approach, then it turns into frustration and more confrontations, and then you eventually learn to go on with life (still not healed), just sidetracked and stalled. That’s when you begin the maddening game we call emotional ping-pong with the people around you, trying to “one-up” the other person. What does it look like? You help her catch up on laundry, or with kids, which would be fine, but you say “Now she’ll really owe me.” And when I have to cook dinner, nobody’s happy! I think in terms of nothing but trading off debt.

After that builds up, you're so frustrated and mad that you take it out in all the *wrong* ways on all the wrong people. You begin thinking "If I'm miserable, you have to be too!" which only stalls and imprisons *them*. And after *that* doesn't work, you find you've no energy left to make it work, even in the right way. And your relationship just stalls out. It becomes little more than back and forth, trading tit for tat, until you stall out completely, and wind up with side by side stalls, like this....(outhouse slide). And no matter how you paint it, it stinks.

Because many of us don't base our lives around God coming to the humble stall in Bethlehem and changing the world through His ultimate act of forgiveness, most of us are somewhere along that slow descent into a stall: going back and forth, owing and being owed, until most of our relationships are stalled. A few of us are so stalled we don't remember what a truly healthy relationship looks like.

What is it we think we're after? Getting even? Storing up who owes us what, like we're some kind of debt-collector? Let me say clearly: It doesn't work. Your life will stall. Here's why: You will be plagued by guilt and resentment. You will live stalled and rotting in a prison house where you will find yourself tortured by all manner of inner emotional conflicts. Here's why:

The world is made for forgiveness; it is made for grace; it is made for love, in all of life. The need for these has been built into our structure as persons. It is in every cell of our bodies, in every interpersonal relationship. *We* are made for grace and love and acceptance, movement and growth. Not stalling. It's the whole reason Jesus came to the stall 2000 years ago.

Jesus, whose birth we remember at Christmas, was the only normal and perfectly sane person who has ever lived. We, on the other hand, *have sins as friends.* We insulate and isolate ourselves to the point that our only ones who really know us are our secret sins. Is that you? Have you settled for your sins to be your friends?

Listen to what the only normal and perfectly sane person says. Matthew records in 18:23-35 how one time Jesus told a parable about a servant who did not realize he was completely forgiven a huge debt. There was no way he could ever repay it. But he thought he still had to go around collecting money from the servants who owed *him* so he could pay back his debt to the king - a debt that had been canceled. So he grabbed the first guy he saw by the throat, and said, "Pay me what you owe me. Give me my \$20 bucks." The king hears of it and throws him in prison to be tormented. Jesus says "*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*" Matthew 18. This is powerful.

Here's what the guy couldn't see: The king's mercy in forgiving the guy his debt wasn't just to give him more time to pay it back. **God's mercy isn't just for more time on your debt.** Let me say that again. *God's* mercy isn't just God stalling... But we sure treat *each other* that way, don't we? "I forgive you, but I'm going to let it build up and then you're gonna owe me really big one day." Or even more sick: we use this forgiveness as a weapon: "I'll forgive you, so that you'll owe me. And maybe I'll finally get mine." (That's not forgiveness, BTW)

Rather, the debt is completely forgiven. Gone. Zippo. Jesus is counseling us to realize that His forgiveness, mercy, and grace is not just an extension of time and patience from God. It's done. We don't get that you can't pay grace back. You can't pay mercy back. You don't get more time on it, because your debt doesn't exist any longer.

What happens is, when we receive Christ, he forgives us completely, 100%, from top to bottom. But somehow we stall out before we realize it. Maybe we think he's only forgiven the loveable part of us - the part that is two inches above our gut. We don't realize he's forgiven even the really ugly, dark, damaged part of us as well. **So we go through life feeling like we still owe, and if we still owe, then we better get what we can from other people.** It stalls you out. It stalls your ability to experience joy. It stalls your relationships out. A debt like this can accumulate and stall out an entire family for multiple generations.

Jesus is saying that when we fail to accept this and fail receive God's total grace and total forgiveness, we also fail to give forgiveness and grace to other people. And this results in a breakdown in our relationships. Jesus showed us in this Parable of the Unmerciful Servant how the vicious circle becomes more vicious. The

unaccepted are the unaccepting. The unforgiven are the unforgiving. Emotional conflicts and broken relationships are the result. Think of how you apply this in your *own* life.

Do you go around thinking that all the significant people in your life owe you a debt? Those who hurt you, those who failed you, teased you, betrayed you, or rejected you. Are you a debt collector? Is your marriage made up of two takers? Two collectors with nothing to collect? The vicious circle becomes more vicious as both of you are stuck in those little stalls. Emotional conflicts and broken relationships are the result.

How many people owe you a debt? Parents, siblings, friend, boyfriend or girlfriend, spouse... These people hurt you, let you down, failed you, teased you, and put you down. They *owe* you affection and love, security and affirmation, but they *failed* you. And since you see yourself as unforgiven and unacceptable, since you feel indebted and guilty, resentful, insecure, and anxious, you in turn become unforgiving and unaccepting. As you feel tormented, you hurt others.

As David Seamands points out, **many married people fail to allow God to do for them what only God can do. Then they ask other people, their spouses, to do what they cannot possibly do.** If they work at it (really hard), men make good husbands, and women make good wives. But they make lousy gods. All the promises people make on their wedding day “I promise to love, comfort, honor, and keep you, in sickness and in health, etc, etc...” are only possible when a heart is secure in God’s love, grace, and care. Only a forgiven and graced soul can keep such promises. What the person *usually* means in those vows is... “I have a lot of terrific inner needs and inner emptiness and debts to pay and I’m going to give you a marvelous opportunity to fill my Grand Canyon and take care of me. Aren’t I wonderful? By the way, I’ve got a beautiful stall that needs painting.” And think of the tragedy when *both* partners are debt-collectors.

So quit saying “Pay me what you owe me, old man.” Why? Because Our debt has been fully cancelled. It’s over. The new reality is your debt is canceled and there is nothing left. Quit going back to your stall! (After all, you know the only thing left!) God has torn up the note at Calvary.

The scriptural way of dealing with all these hurts from our past is part of God’s miracle. God’s way goes far beyond forgiving and surrendering your resentment. God takes your sins, failures, hurts that happened earlier in your life and wraps His loving purposes around them to change them.

- Look at the cross. There God took from a human standpoint was the worst injustice and tragedy and turned it into the most amazing gift humanity has ever known: the gift of salvation.
- Joseph, so brutally wronged by his 11 brothers, became a ruler in Egypt. He had the chance to make them pay. And the amazing thing was there was no debt-collecting in the end. Instead, he said “*Have no fear; for I am in God’s place. True enough, you planned evil against me, but God planned it for good, to bring about what today is in fact, the keeping alive of much people.*” Gen. 50:19-20
- Are you part of a debt-free community of Christians? Is your marriage free of debt-collecting? Your family? Your church? The Master paid the debt in full, and tore up the note.

Charles Wesley, brother of John, is the cofounder of the people called Methodist. Probably the second most well-known Methodist hymn written by Charles Wesley, the brother of John, who together founded the Methodist movement in the 1700s, right after “Hark the Herald Angel Sings” is “O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing.” In the 4th verse of the old Methodist hymn “O For 1000 Tongues to Sing,” there is a verse that we plow through that I think we need to stop and applaud: “*He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free, his blood can make the foulest clean, his blood availed for me!*” When you choose to remain stalled out, you are living under the power of canceled sin! The sin that is powerless to keep you from heaven because of Jesus is running and ruining your life!

It makes a difference what you base your life around. You want to have a good Christmas holiday season? Build your life around Him. Turn to Jesus, the wounded healer, to break that power of canceled sin! Don’t you want to be set free? Imagine if every one of us got out of the stall we’re in. Imagine if you and I stopped debt collecting. Imagine the freedom that could seep into our families and the way we could be a light in a world of stalled out people. Imagine the good that could be accomplished when we allow the One who was born in a stall to free them and us in order to make the world a better place... Amen.