

## RED LETTER CHALLENGE – Week 2

**FORGIVENESS: MORE THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE**

The handwriting was shaky. The stationery was lined loose-leaf paper. The note was addressed to the U.S. Government.

“I am sending ten dollars for blankets I stole while I was in the Army. My mind could not rest. Sorry I’m late.” It was signed, “an ex-GI.” Then there was this postscript, “I want to be ready to meet God.”

This man was not alone in his guilt. His letter is one of literally TONS of letters that have been sent to the US Government since it began collecting and storing the letters in 1811. Since that time, over \$3.5 MILLION dollars has been deposited in what is called the Conscience Fund.

One man sent \$50 to cover the cost of two pair of boots, two pair of trousers, one case of KC rations and 30 pounds of frozen meat he stole from the Army between 1943 – 1946.

In some instances the amounts are small; only the remorse is big. A Colorado woman sent in two 8 cent stamps to make up for having used one stamp twice – for some reason the stamp hadn’t been cancelled the first time. A former IRS employee mailed in \$1 for 4 pens she had never returned to the office.

A Salem, Ohio man submitted one dollar with the following note: “When I was a boy, I put a few pennies on the railroad track and the train flattened them. I also used a dime or a quarter in a silver coating experiment in high school. I understand there is a law against defacing our money. I have not seen it, but I want to be a law-abiding citizen.”

Anxiety over a 30 year old mistake? Regret over mashed pennies? A guilty conscience because of pens? It is common to struggle to have a clean conscience that is at peace with yourself, and at peace with God. We all feel that anxiety, which makes these letters not funny, but desperate.

What do you do with your failures? Our mistakes are like stones. We place them in a bag, put it on our back, and carry it around – often for years.

Nothing is so back-breaking as a load of failures. If you could do it all over again, you'd do it differently. You'd be a different person. You'd be more patient. You'd control your tongue. You'd finish what you started. You'd turn the other cheek instead of slapping his. You'd get married first. You'd be honest. You'd resist the temptation. You'd run with a different crowd.

But you can't do it over again differently this time. So you have to live with it. What's done, can't be undone.

That's part of what Paul meant when he wrote in the Bible, "***The wages of sin is death.***" He didn't say, "The wages of sin is a bad mood." Or, "The wages of sin is a hard day." He didn't say, "The wages of sin is depression." God used Paul to write it down clearly for us: "The wages of sin is death. Sin is final."

So, can *anything* be done with it?

Your therapist tells you to talk about it. So you do. You pull your load into his office and pour out the stones on his floor and analyze each one. And it's helpful. It feels good to talk since he's so nice. But when the hour is up, you have to pack up all the rocks and carry them out with you.

Your friends tell you not to feel bad. "Everyone slips now and then" they tell you. Not very comforting, because you still have all of your load to carry.

Religion based on works – tells you to work off the weight. A candle for every stone of guilt. A prayer for every sin. Sounds logical, but what if you run out of time? Or what if you didn't count correctly?

What *DO* you do with all your wrongs and mistakes? How can you be rid of guilt? How can you be at peace with yourself and at peace with God?

Jesus told a parable about God's forgiveness. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. We heard the parable a moment ago.

The parable is about a king who decides to settle accounts with his servants. One servant, though, was a crook and a thief.

***"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 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.*** Matthew 18:23-25

He was bleeding the king dry - 10,000 talents in today's money would be over 100 million dollars. That may not seem like a lot of money to us. It seems like everyday we hear of someone winning a lottery jackpot worth 300 million, or a sports star signing a multi-year contract for more than \$100 million. Building projects and road construction cost hundreds of millions.

But let's unpack this a little bit more. One talent was equal to 6,000 days or almost 16½ years of pay. And when you considered that an adult male in those days rarely lived past 50 – it doesn't take a math Einstein to figure out this man's debt from his mismanagement was un-repayable. UN-REPAYABLE! That's 165,000 YEARS of hard work to pay off a debt that huge!

He could work the rest of his life, turn over everything he earned, and still not pay this debt back. In the end, his home, his land, his wife, his children, and grandchildren – everything was legally going to be forfeited, and would be lost! His family would be slaves and he would die in prison. It's not hard to understand the desperateness of the man's situation.

But the king is moved with compassion and mercy toward the man and – the king – not the man or his family – the king bore the burden of this great loss. The king completely forgave his debt. Somebody had to pay the debt. Who paid it? The KING paid the debt himself. The king suffered the loss of that incredible amount. The king, just forgave that un-repayable, more-than-can-be-imagined AMOUNT.

In that moment when the king forgave the HUGE debt, if you were that man, knowing you could NEVER repay, knowing you and your family deserve prison and slavery, feeling the hopelessness, the despair, like you're slipping down into a deep black pit, and you heard the king's words, "the debt's forgiven; you're free to go," – how would you feel? Now you have a new lease on life – now, suddenly, you got your life and your family back. Now you are no longer imprisoned by debt, but free, with a hope and a future. How would you feel? What would you think? It's amazing, isn't it?

Jesus' point is: This is how God has forgiven you. He has forgiven a debt that is more than you can imagine. He suffered the loss. He paid the debt Himself. He gave His Son, Jesus, to pay that debt, the amount of your wrongs and sins. Jesus gave up His life as He chose to suffer and die in your place, to pay the debt you owe. God has taken your massive, massive debt on Himself. And it has been paid in full. Jesus cried from the cross, "It is PAID."

I have often understood this story from Jesus to be all about our forgiving other people. The message has always been: You have a great debt of sin that God has forgiven, so won't you forgive the small debt of sin that another person owes you? Since God has forgiven you, you should forgive other people who hurt you.

And that's a good understanding of this story.

But let's not forget the first part or the 1<sup>st</sup> act in this drama: The crooked servant begged the king for patience to let him work off a debt that was more than he could ever repay. And instead the king FORGAVE the debt, and paid it all Himself.

The king was not crazy. The king didn't exaggerate what the servant owed. This is the actual amount that the guy owed. More than was manageable. More than we can really imagine.

I believe that we all, because of our nature, put a small price on the amount of our wrongs. Our basic human nature sees our sin and mistakes as just a minor flaw. We see it as something that we can take care of ourselves.

Like the story a few minutes ago of the man paying \$10 for a few Army blankets, or \$50 for the case of KC rations and frozen meat – we too, tend to put a price on what we think we owe God.

We commend and congratulate people who have the gumption to actually write a letter and send in money to make some restitution for their crimes against the government. We applaud them for their attempt to do something to gain a clear conscience. Yet the truth is, there is no way you can ever pay enough. Jesus is clear, the debt you owe is more than you imagine. More than you could ever hope to repay. There is nothing you can do to get a clear conscience.

This is what Lutheran theologians call the doctrine of total depravity. It means that the debt of sin you owe to God is more than you imagine, AND that your sinful nature has also ruined your will and desire to know God. In other words, you don't even have the ability to turn to God or the desire to trust in Jesus to find the forgiveness you need. It's like you owe a huge, huge debt, more than you have the ability to repay, AND to make matters worse, there is no bank that will give you a loan, no loan shark, you can't afford a lottery ticket to take your chance of winning it all, and not even the mob will lend you the money. You're completely, completely, completely SUNK. That's the doctrine of total depravity. You not only owe a huge debt to God, but you don't even have the ability or the desire to pay it off.

And that is why the king's gift is so amazing, so breathtaking. So surprising. The king – God – knows the amount of debt you owe. He knows you don't even WANT to trust Jesus to receive His forgiveness of your debt. You don't even want to turn to God. You're really in a hopeless spot. You're up the creek without a paddle.

But God, in pure mercy, pity for you -- God in sheer love for you – doesn't bargain with you the terms for you to try to repay the debt. Instead, surprise of all surprises, God pays the price Himself and FORGIVES your debt of sin. Fully. Finally. And Forever!

I want to ask you: will you just marvel at the magnitude of God's love for you -- to forgive you more than you can ever imagine, just because He loves you that much!

Psalm 103 says: ***"...So great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."***

Do you want to get the load of failures and mistakes off your back? Do you want to live in peace of mind, peace in your heart, and know you are at peace with God? Then just marvel, stand in awe that God loves YOU, yes YOU, so much that He takes every stone of guilt away. And because **SOMEBODY** had to carry your load, He put that heavy burden on His Son. A-maz-ing.

You are forgiven more than you can imagine! And forgiven people forgive. Are you tired of all the drama? Tired of all the anxiety over who hurt your feelings, who said what and to whom? I bet you are! We ALL are. Then let go of all that drama and anxiousness inside by forgiving everyone who wrongs you.

Forgiven people forgive -- because we have first been forgiven by Jesus. God says in the Bible, "***Forgive as the Lord forgave you.***" *Colossians 3:14*

Forgiving someone is difficult. Our anger and hurt can get in the way. And honestly when they do – we don't "feel" very forgiving.

Even when we do forgive the first time – most of us find it impossible to forgive repeated offenses a second or third time.

But we forgiven people – because of God's constant forgiving grace to us, -- make the choice of GRACE. We choose to have the accounts of the sins against us, settled in the very same place by the very same Jesus who settled our sin debts with God. We turn other people's sins against us, over to Jesus to let Him forgive.

Because God forgives us without limits, in the same way we forgive without limits. Peter once asked Jesus a question, "***The Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, 'I tell you not seven times but seventy-seven times.'***"

Matthew 18:21-22

Is 7 times enough Jesus? I can forgive them once, twice even three and four times with grace – but there's got to be some limit Jesus - when does my obligation of love to forgive get to stop? Isn't there a time when I can stop forgiving and let them have it with both barrels? Isn't there a time when I get to spew out justice? Isn't there a time when they MUST pay for what they've done?

Jesus responded to Peter, not 7 times but 70 x 7 - in other words keep on forgiving. Forgive a whole lot. Don't keep track. Don't keep a record of forgiving other people. Ask yourself this question - How often does God through His son Jesus forgive you and me? Does He ever stop forgiving us – when we confess,

“Hello Lord, It’s me again, it’s the same sin again – please forgive me and help me to change my ways.” NO, God never stops forgiving. That’s how GREAT God’s love and forgiveness to you is! And now you, simply, joyfully, extravagantly, frequently, repeatedly, graciously forgive like Jesus forgives you and me.

God says it this way in his Word, ***“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”*** Ephesians 4:31-32

Jesus’ story of the man who the king forgave his huge debt, however, doesn’t end with this guy set free. Instead, Jesus continues the story by telling us that this forgiven man, now set free by the king’s amazing forgiveness, this guy happens to meet a coworker who owed him several thousand dollars. It’s a sizable amount, but nowhere near the amount the king had just forgiven him. As Jesus tells the story – this coworker speaks to the forgiven servant in the exact same words that the first man used with the king when he was forgiven.

And how does first man – the one the king forgave so much – how does he respond? What should he do? People who are blessed, should BE a blessing to others. Forgiven people forgive, right?

Well, listen to Jesus’ words and take in the details of the parable, ***“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. (just over 3 months wages) 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 he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.”*** Matthew 18:26-31

Let me ask you this – if you worked with this guy and saw what the king did for him – How would you think that he should respond? If you were this man whom the king set free – how do you think you should respond in these circumstances when forgiven people are expected to forgive? So here’s what happens next as Jesus tells his story, ***“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."*** Matthew 18:31-34

Pretty serious stuff isn't it? Was the master fair in revoking his act of forgiveness based upon how this servant was treating someone else who owed so much less? And we might add – owed part of the debt perhaps that the king had forgiven?

You and I are forgiven people – and forgiven people are called to forgive – to set people free to live in the joy and freedom of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A couple that wasn't getting along. They were fighting all the time. One day in a heated argument, the husband gave his wife a list he had written down. He said, "There, since you can't ever remember what things you need to change about yourself, here's the list."

She was so mad that she crumpled up the list and threw it in the back of a dresser drawer and slammed the drawer shut.

Soon that marriage ended in divorce, and the husband's list of demands was forgotten.

Years went by. The woman met a man, a Christian. They fell in love and married. But this husband put her first, before himself. This man understood how much God had forgiven him, and so he easily and graciously forgave his wife, and put her needs before his own demands, just as Christ has done for you and me.

One day, while putting things away in the dresser, the woman came upon this crumpled up piece of paper in the back of the drawer. Her heart sank. She immediately remembered what that was. She set down the things in her arms, picked up the paper, unfolded it, and read it.

But as she read that list of demands, this time she realized that everything on the list she was already doing for her new husband. She was doing them not because she had to, but

because he first loved her with the love from God, and so she willingly, naturally, wanted to just love him back.

Friends, when you know God's forgiveness of all your wrongs which is more than imaginable, when the load of mistakes has been lifted off your back and placed on Jesus and carried to the cross, THEN, you will willingly, naturally, want to forgive other people too.

You are God's forgiven person. And **forgiven people learn to forgive.** In Jesus' name. Amen!