

Are you one of the 145 million people whose personal information may have been stolen through the lax security of the Equifax? According to what I read in the news, if any of us did any type of business that involved a credit application, on the buying or selling side, our information has probably been compromised. Equifax knew this 5 months ago in March, but waited until a few weeks ago to tell the public – just long enough for its senior executives to divest themselves of a massive amount of Equifax stock. Does that make you mad?

Equifax obviously thought that it would make many people mad, as evidenced by their initial response to their customers. If one went to the website in those first days after they released the news, that person was directed to Equifax's identity protection program, where they could be enrolled for free. But what Equifax didn't tell us was that, after one year, anyone who signed up would start being charged the regular monthly cost of the protection after one year. Equifax said nothing about that, but what they did say in the fine print of the free sign-up was that any signee to the protection would give up their right to sue the company and agree only to a settlement involving binding arbitration.

Equifax expected people to be angry about their carelessness, but the public became so enraged that members of Congress are now calling for an investigation. Equifax has responded by promising its customers that they can have the premium protection for life, and (supposedly) they have dropped the language of binding arbitration from the contract – but who knows, right? How much do we trust these massive corporations to do the right thing, and how often do we find a reason to be angry with them?

Some have called the current time in our culture “The Age of Rage,” and with good reason. It seems that anger has become the binding emotion for our nation – an anger

sourced in fear, frustration, and disappointment. If we are not angry about something, the primary question the culture asks us is, “Why not?” It’s not so much that the anger of this age is unreasonable – there are always things to be angry about – but unmanaged and unresolved anger has only two consequences, both of them very bad – rage, or depression. The two extreme actions that result from these emotional responses to anger are violence for rage, or suicide for depression; in between we find all kinds of harmful ways to act out our feelings, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Jesus of Nazareth was the calm eye of the storm in a maelstrom of emotions in a time, like ours, of great anger and unmanaged rage. Jesus’s community hated Rome to a level that is hard for us to comprehend. The anger against Rome was complicated by the attitudes of the spiritual leaders of Jerusalem, who saw themselves as little more than enforcers of the temple’s repressive religious laws. It is a fact that when a community centers its existence upon the legalistic enforcement of authority, oppression is not far behind.

The culture that surrounded Jesus had experienced the terror of legalistic oppression – both from Rome and Jerusalem, both secular and religious - and many within that culture were constantly trying to either bully or persuade Jesus to embrace their anger and take up their call for the violent overthrow of their enemies. In response, Jesus gathered around him an intimate community of followers to whom he taught a different way of living in an unjust world – a way guided not by self-destructing anger, but transcendent faith in the ultimate justice of a good and loving God.

No teaching of Christ exemplifies this way of living better than the parable of the unforgiving servant. The story is intentionally extreme in its elements. A king calls to

account his indebted slaves in order to settle their debts. The importance of Christ's introduction to the story is that the king is willing to negotiate with those who owe him, even though a regent has complete freedom to judge and punish. One of the servants who comes before the king owes a ridiculous amount of money, unrelated to any realistic debt. Ten thousand talents was the equivalent of 300 tons of silver, an unimaginable sum. The Greek word for "ten thousand" was *myria*, which was the largest number in the Greek language, thus the way we might translate the idea is that the slave owed the king "gillions of dollars."

The king's judgement in response to the debt is fair regarding both his authority and to the law – he orders the slave and his family to be sold, along with all of their possessions. It is basically a death sentence, as the family will be cast out into the street. But the slave begs for mercy and makes a ridiculous promise: if the king will just be patient, the slave will pay back everything that he owes. Of course, the disciples who heard Jesus' story knew that such a debt could never be repaid, and they would expect the king to justifiably scoff at such a ridiculous offer but, shockingly, the king accepts the settlement. Christ makes it clear that the motive of the king in forgiving such a huge and unpayable debt has nothing to do with the slave and everything to do with the compassionate nature of the king, who literally chooses love over justice.

Jesus could have ended the story at that point as a lesson on God's grace, but his parable is not just about God's nature – it is about our nature. No sooner does the slave leave the presence of the king than he runs into another slave who owes him a more realistic debt and one that is truly payable – one hundred denarii, which represents about three or four months wages. The slave grabs his debtor by the throat in an uncalled-for act

of rage, to which his debtor responds with a plea for mercy, using the exact words that the first slave used before the king – “Have patience with me and I will pay you.” In a twist that would shock the disciples, the slave eschews mercy and exacts justice according to the law, throwing his debtor into prison.

Though the first slave has done justice according to the law, the other slaves in the kingdom recognize the great injustice of his act in light of the mercy he received from the king – a mercy which transcends legalism and embraces compassion. When they tell the king of his slave’s actions, the king is clearly infuriated, and responds by punishing the slave, not for the debt that the king originally forgave, but for not reflecting the king’s remarkable mercy by showing a little mercy of his own: “And in anger his Lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.” Jesus concludes the shocking parable with an equally shocking conclusion: “So my Heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

While the disciples may not have completely understood Christ’s story at the time it was taught, they would have understood it after the death and resurrection of the Messiah, and we who believe in that Messiah are certainly without excuse. What Jesus accomplished on the cross leaves us with an unimaginable debt. The very essence of God as shown in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is one of compassion and mercy, especially in the face of injustice.

At the heart of the Lord’s Prayer is a very dangerous phrase: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” We say those words by rote, but do we truly understand what we are praying? What we are praying is the point of the parable of Unforgiving Servant: “Forgive us Lord in the same manner that we forgive others.”

Why would Christ ask us to do such a thing in such an unjust world? He asks it not only because compassion and mercy reflect the very nature of our creator and the essence of what it means to be created in God's image, but also because it is for us -for our spiritual, physical, and emotional health. 18<sup>th</sup> century Christian author and playwright Hannah More, who was raised in a strong Presbyterian family in England, wrote these eerily prescient words long before anyone understood the connection between emotional and physical health: "Forgiveness is the economy of the heart...forgiveness saves the expense of anger, the cost of hatred, the waste of spirits."

More's words are not hard for us to understand – forgiveness is as much for us as it is for those whom we forgive. Forgiveness is our final settlement, not with those who wrong us, but with the God who settled our massive debt through the love of Jesus Christ. Christ's parable is even stronger in making this point – we have no choice but to forgive. Forgiveness doesn't mean we stop trying to right wrongs or end injustice. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude."

Do we have that attitude – an attitude which is directly proportional to our settlement with God? If we accept God's gift of grace, then grace is what we owe to God and to God's creation. To do anything else leaves us in a situation best described by writer Anne Lamott: "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison, then waiting for the rat to die." Her point is well taken – hate poisons our hearts, but Christ has given us an antidote, an answer to this Age of Rage – forgiveness, compassion, and mercy. For followers of Christ, there is no other choice but settlement with God, because it is the one choice we can live with, not just now, but forever.