

## “As We Forgive Those”

Matthew 18:21-35

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In our Gospel text last week, Jesus gave us some instruction on how we should go about the process of reconciliation when someone sins against us. As soon as Jesus gets done with his teaching, one of my favorite characters in the Bible, Peter, steps up to the plate.

Peter understood what Jesus was saying about reconciliation, and he started thinking about how to actually live out what Jesus was instructing. I imagine Peter thinking, “well that’s all and good, Jesus, but what about people who repeatedly sin against me? How in the world do I put your teaching into action with those people?”

Thus, our Gospel text for today begins with Peter’s question, “Lord, if someone sins against me, how often should I forgive?” And Peter thinks he’s got a good answer to his own question when he says, “As many as seven times?”

I think that’s a pretty good guess. Forgiving someone seven times would be a significant number. It certainly goes above and beyond. Remember the saying “fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me”? When someone does something bad to us, we tend to have a pretty low level of tolerance before we’re unwilling to put up with them anymore. You say something bad about me, maybe I’ll put up with it once. Maybe even twice. I’m not sure I could give you seven chances at it like Peter was willing to.

And when we think about the historical context, Peter’s suggestion of seven times seems extravagant. According to William Barclay, “It was Rabbinic teaching that a person must forgive another *three* times. Rabbi Jose ben Jehuda said: ‘If a man commits an offence once, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offence a third time, they forgive him; the fourth time they do not forgive.’”

“The biblical proof that this was correct was taken from Amos. In the opening chapters of Amos, there is a series of condemnations on the various nations *for three transgressions and for four*. From this it was deduced that God’s forgiveness extends to three offences and that he visits the sinner with punishment at the fourth. It was not to be thought that people could be more gracious than God, so forgiveness was limited to three times.

“Peter thought that he was going very far, for he takes the Rabbinic three times, multiplies it by two, for good measure adds one, and suggests, with eager self-satisfaction, that it will be enough if he forgives seven times. Peter expected to be warmly commended.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay. “The Gospel of Matthew: Volume II” Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. p. 225.

So how does Jesus respond? “No, Peter, not seven times. Seventy-seven times.” This number, as written in the original Greek, can also be translated as seventy times seven times, or 490 times! But, that’s not the point. If you’re counting the number of times you’ve forgiven someone, and simply biding your time until you don’t have to forgive any more, you really haven’t forgiven at all, have you? What Jesus is saying here is that the kind of forgiveness called for goes beyond all calculation.

As Jesus does for many of his teachings, he tells a parable to illustrate his point.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a king who is settling accounts with his servants. One servant owed him 10,000 talents. Now a talent was the equivalent of fifteen years wages, so 10,000 talents would be the equivalent of 150,000 years wages! It might be helpful to put this in today’s realm of dollars and cents. If the servant made \$50,000 per year, his debt to the king would have been \$7.5 million!

Of course, there was no way the servant could pay that debt back! And that’s just the point Jesus was trying to make.

Well the king decided that the only way to get some of his money back was to have the man, his wife, and his children sold into slavery, and to sell all of the man’s possessions. The servant fell on his knees and begged for mercy. Lucky for him, the king had pity upon him and forgave the entire debt. All \$7.5 million!

After the servant left the king, he met up with another servant who owed him 100 denarii. A denarii was the equivalent of about a day’s wages, so this man owed him 100 days wages. Again if we go back to the \$50,000 per year rate, the amount in today’s dollars and cents would be around \$20,000. Still a pretty large sum, but \$20,000 is but a fraction of a percent of the \$7.5 million the servant had just been forgiven. The contrast Jesus is making is between an incredibly huge amount and something much smaller, but the small amount is still pretty significant. The first debt is completely unreasonable to expect to repay. The second debt has a possibility of being repaid.

So does the servant who has just been forgiven of his debt extend the same forgiveness to the man who owes him? Nope. He grabs the man by the throat, demands his debt be repaid, and then throws the man into jail until he can be repaid.

Well, the other servants see this happen, and they don’t like it, so they tell the king. The king summons the servant back and says, “I forgave you, I showed you mercy. Shouldn’t you do the same? Shouldn’t you have forgiven as I forgave you? Because you didn’t, I’m sending you to jail until you repay your debt in full.” Of course, this was a life sentence, because he could never have paid him back in full.

And then comes the part of the parable that I would love to avoid. I even toyed with the idea of not addressing it during today’s sermon, because Jesus says something that is hard to hear and hard for us to comprehend based on our understanding of God.

Jesus concludes the parable by saying, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." Jesus is saying here that God's forgiveness of us is dependent upon our forgiveness of others. Remember, at the beginning of the parable, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like the king. Jesus is comparing God to the king in the parable, saying that God will essentially take away our forgiveness if we are unwilling to forgive others. It's a tough word to hear. This isn't the only place we find this thought coming from Jesus' mouth though.

Earlier in Matthew's gospel in chapter 6, verses 9-13, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray. He says, "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one." We say that prayer every Sunday, if not more often.

The two verses immediately following the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's gospel are really interesting. In these two verses, Jesus chooses just one section of the Lord's Prayer to clarify. I guess Jesus thought the rest of the prayer could stand on its own, but we might need further clarification on one section of the prayer. Can you guess which section he clarifies?

In these two verses, Jesus says, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Forgiveness is vital, but it can be difficult. It's hard to forgive the person who has hurt you. Yes, forgiveness is hard, and it can sometimes take a while. Sometimes we can't help but to say, "I can't forgive you right now. I am that hurt. I've got to heal a bit before I will have the strength I'll need to forgive you."

One writer put it this way. If someone is mangled in a car accident, the first priority is to get the physical wounds healed. There may be mental wounds like post-traumatic stress disorder that will need to be healed with therapy eventually. But if you are a therapist who passes by the accident, you'd be a fool to kneel down next to the wrecked car and begin by saying, "Let's talk about this accident so you can deal with it in a healthy psychological way." Of course not! Even a therapist would need to grab a hankie and staunch the flow of blood first. Get to the other stuff later.

So it is also with great spiritual wounds: the immediate injuries need to be tended to first. Then, sometime later, you may be in a position to move on toward forgiving the one who inflicted the wounds. And, of course, there are any number of phenomena that can make forgiveness a long, tortured process. It is exceedingly hard to forgive people who refuse to admit they were wrong. It is very difficult to offer forgiveness to people who slap the gift of grace out of your hand saying, "Keep your forgiveness! I don't want it!" It is

difficult to forgive the person who won't speak with you, refuses to look at you or meet with you.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, forgiveness can be hard, but it is necessary if we are to fully live into Christ's call upon us. So what would the world be like if everyone practiced forgiveness as Jesus instructs? How much closer might we come to bringing the kingdom of God here on earth?

John D. Rockefeller built the great Standard Oil empire. Not surprisingly, Rockefeller was a man who demanded high performance from his executives. One day, one of those executives made a two million dollar mistake. Word of the man's enormous error quickly spread throughout the executive offices, and the other executives began to make themselves scarce, not wanting to cross his path. One man didn't have any choice, though, since he had an appointment with the boss. So he straightened his shoulders and walked into Rockefeller's office.

As he approached Rockefeller's desk, John D. Rockefeller looked up from the piece of paper on which he was writing. "I guess you've heard about the two million dollar mistake our friend made," he said abruptly. "Yes," the executive said, expecting Rockefeller to explode. Rockefeller said, "Well, I've been sitting here listing all of our friend's good qualities, and I've discovered that in the past he has made us many more times the amount he lost for us today by his one mistake. His good points far outweigh this one human error. So I think we ought to forgive him, don't you?"<sup>3</sup>

What if we practiced looking for the good in people instead of focusing on the mistakes others make? How might that change the world? How might that influence our ability to forgive them?

A couple who had been married for 15 years began having more than the usual amount of disagreements. They wanted to make their marriage work and agreed on an idea the wife had. They created his and hers "Fault" jars. For one month they dropped a slip in the other's "Fault" jar to let the other know about their daily irritations. The wife was diligent in her efforts and approach. He left the jelly top off the jar. He left wet towels on the shower floor. He didn't put his dirty socks in the hamper. And on and on until the end of the month. After dinner, at the end of the month, they exchanged jars. The husband looked at his stack of faults and reflected on what he had done wrong. Then the wife opened her jar and began reading. They were all the same, the message on each slip was, "I love you!"<sup>4</sup>

Friends, that is the kingdom of God. Jesus Christ came to preach a gospel of love, and love keeps no record of wrongs. God, through Christ, has a "Fault" jar with each of our names on it, overflowing with pieces of paper that say, "I love you!" "I love you!" "I love you!" "I love you!" "I love you!"

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen M. Crotts, "Grace: Letting the Sun Shine In" [esermos.com](http://esermos.com), accessed 9/10/08.

<sup>3</sup> Dale Galloway, "Two Million Dollar Mistake" [esermos.com](http://esermos.com), accessed 9/10/08.

<sup>4</sup> Unknown author, [esermos.com](http://esermos.com), accessed 9/10/08.

God has offered us ultimate forgiveness for a debt we have no way of paying back. If we are to receive that forgiveness, we must be willing to offer forgiveness. If we are to be followers of Christ, if we are to help bring the kingdom of God to earth today, right now, if we are to live lives of discipleship, we must find ways to forgive. We must live a gospel of love that keeps no record of wrongs. We must find ways to say to one another, “your good points far outweigh this error.” We must find ways to respond to the wrongs done to us by saying “I love you.” “I love you.” “I love you.” In that way, we will all be able to honestly pray that God would forgive us as we have forgiven those. May it be so. Amen.