

Matthew 18:21-35

"Sinning is easy; forgiving is hard."

Then 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. "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. "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. 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. 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."

We know that Jesus cares about our relationships, and He wants us to be actively forgiving and loving each other. Peter knew that Jesus would have very high expectations, even beyond the strict interpretations of Old Testament law. Since they required forgiving three times, Peter probably guessed that Jesus might double that. He asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus floored him when He answered, "No, not seven times, but seventy times seven."

It is important to remember that Peter was just "plain old folks" like us. He was fully aware of how hard it is to forgive someone, even once!

There is hardly anything in life more difficult than asking, offering, and receiving forgiveness. The difficulty is not limited to the "offering." One of the things that keeps many people away from the Christian faith is the insistence of humans to stand on their own self-righteousness and reject Christ's forgiveness. Those who won't ask or receive it from Him certainly don't want it from each other. There is much talk about needing and granting forgiveness, and there are plenty of people who don't want to hear any of it.

It is obvious that Jesus did not intend for us to keep a record of our forgiving and call a halt to it at offense number 78 or number 491. It is also obvious that He links our forgiveness from Him to the way we forgive each other. We can stop forgiving when HE stops forgiving. And since his is always ready to forgive, so must we. Yet it remains much easier to sin than it is to forgive.

Jesus told a parable about a servant who owed millions of dollars to a king. He begged the king not to sell him, his wife and children into slavery. He promised to pay back everything if the king would only be patient. The king had compassion, not just patience, and forgave him the entire debt. He didn't just give him more time. He wiped it out.

Shortly after that, the same man met a fellow servant who owed him a few bucks. The servant begged him for patience but, unlike the king, the one who had just benefitted from having his huge debt forgiven had neither patience nor compassion. He had the man jailed until his family would pay back the petty debt.

When the king heard about the incident, he immediately called the unforgiving scoundrel back in. The king was furious. He said, "You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you." Then the king had the man jailed until the entire debt was paid.

Where was a servant to get the kind of money the first one owed to the king? The parable implies it was an impossible debt -- just as OUR debt to God was beyond our capacity to pay. The hard words of Jesus at the close of the parable ought to make us sit up and take notice: "That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. It is the same situation which we pray over and over again in the Lord's Prayer.

Forgiving is never easy. People are ready to overlook or ignore minor offenses. Forgiveness is completely different.

How many times have we heard, or have we said, "You have to draw the line someplace." It sounds so rational, natural, and even pious, but who says so? Who says that we are to measure offenses by either their frequency or size? It wasn't Jesus. The parable tells us that the only thing that can be held against us is refusing to forgive someone else!

There are two big issues in our relations with others. One is that we often don't know when our words or deeds have hurt someone. We cannot always see the consequence of our words or actions.

The second is that we assume someone has said or done something to hurt us. We harbor our own little conspiracy theories. But how do we know what is in another's heart? How can we be so certain that their intention was evil or harmful? Either way, all we need is a lack of communication to transform a mouse-sized misunderstanding to make it into an elephant-sized problem.

My wife of 47 years is nearly perfect, but she is a foot swinger. When seated, she will swing her foot, sometimes barely, sometimes not so barely. Well guess who she ends up kicking? It doesn't really hurt, but it could wear out my pants! After many years of being kicked, I am convinced – first -- that she does not plan to do it at all. Second – that she does not do it to harm me, even though I was suspicious for a long time that it was either one or the other.

It would be wonderful if we human beings could just learn to erase certain things from our memories. We need the "delete" button we have on our computers! Lacking that, we could use some adult education about forgiveness. As little children, we confused "getting off" or getting out of some punishment with forgiveness. We don't learn the difference until we get older and have some perspective. We may think we "got off" because we put on our really sad face, and we pleaded, or blubbered or begged.

We then think it was our behavior, not Mom or Dad's mercy, that spared our being punished. Some adults don't know if they are "repentant enough" to receive God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness comes only as a result of His grace and mercy. We think, wrongly, that He forgives us because we put on the proper show of repentance.

We think that God forgives us because we groveled so great!

Of course repentance has its place. In the most famous example of God's forgiveness, repentance came AFTER the forgiveness was offered. From the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing." The Roman execution squad was not repentant for what they were doing, but our Lord offered them forgiveness before they knew they needed it.

All of mankind, and NOT God, should have died that Good Friday. This was not a matter of some minor offense, just stepping on the Father's toe. It was the Victim, not the murderers, who got the death sentence. And note carefully that after the resurrection, Jesus still did not get into payback of any kind. He did not visit Pilate, Herod, or Caiaphas to sing the familiar song, "Nah, na-nah, na-nah, nah." God carries no grudges.

PEOPLE carry grudges. In Robert Harling's play and movie, "Steel Magnolias," one of the characters says, "I'm not crazy -- I've just been in a bad mood for 40 years." I think I've met her. At least I've met men and women like her. They have a monkey on their backs far worse than drugs or alcohol. Unlike addiction, it is a monkey that will simply die and fall off if they just stop feeding it and encouraging it.

One of the most difficult aspects of sharing the Gospel, whether it's across a backyard fence or across cultures, is that people prefer recognition to forgiveness. We trust our own accomplishments more than we trust God's grace. We want to pay our debts, not have them forgiven. We want to do enough good stuff that it outweighs the bad stuff. We want to deserve God's blessings and, arrogant as it might be, we think we can.

The issue in the parable is clear in our lives - - just because God forgives does not mean we want the forgiveness. The first servant left the king, thinking that the king had done just as he had asked -- that the king would wait for him to pay the debt because he was "good for it." He was such a "good person" that the king could count on him to repay. The unbelievable arrogance of that is that the debt was WAY too huge for him to ever repay.

That same servant apparently decided that his fellow servant was not a "good person." The fellow servant had to be jailed. The first one refused to BE forgiven, so he refused to forgive.

I don't like the way this parable ends. It sounds as if I won't be forgiven by God unless I forgive others. That's what the Lord's prayer says as well. "Forgive us our trespasses AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US. It does speak of God's expectations for me, and for you.

I am more confident than ever, that my salvation does not depend on my forgiving those I need to forgive. But as for JOY, I am more confident that ever that I cannot expect to appreciate and celebrate the forgiveness I have through Jesus Christ until I am ready to forgive others – for both the little things, and for the big things.

As I look at this Gospel lesson, I see a bunch of bodies scattered about, or at least a bunch of unhappy people. I see Peter, amazed at Jesus' expectation that he not keep track of the times he must forgive. I see a king whose good deed leads to disaster. I see two servants whose situation at the end of the parable is much worse than at the start. There is no joy to be found, because forgiveness is either not offered or not accepted.

Discover the joy that comes with knowing the one who speaks this parable. Discover the joy in receiving the forgiveness he offers freely, and then, discover the joy that comes with offering forgiveness and receiving forgiveness from others. Throw your calculator away. Amen.

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