

THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:21-35

September 13, 2020

“I forgive you.” Are there any more difficult words to speak? Is there anything that raises the “red flag” of emotions in our lives more quickly? This is a big one for most Christians. Where to start to get a handle on it? Maybe no one has ever modeled it for them growing up. But few things in life have the power to liberate and set free like forgiveness – or for those who cannot, a life of misery and anger awaits.

The good news is, God gives us a choice. Today’s gospel lessons features Jesus and Peter. Some important things have already happened in their relationship. Jesus had just set Peter apart from the other disciples, giving him a special role: “You are Peter”, Jesus said, “and on this rock I will build my church . . . I will give you the keys to the kingdom.” (Mt. 16) Talk about pressure. Then, after swearing them to secrecy, Jesus told the disciples that he would suffer in terrible ways and die.

Peter protested, saying this must not happen to the leader he loved so much. Jesus turned to him and said in no uncertain terms, “Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God but of men.” Peter moves from “hero” to “zero” in a flash. Both of these things happened with just a few verses of each other. But that’s what we love about Peter. He’s so human . . . so fallible . . . magnanimous one moment, and putting his foot in his mouth the next. We can relate to Peter.

A little later on Peter would ask a simple question, and the answer from Jesus was more than he bargained for. It showed that he was still in the dark. "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" He thought he was being generous. He had his bases covered.

Rabbinic law stipulated that one was obligated to forgive a brother or sister up to three times – but no more. Peter felt a bit cocky. But Jesus responds: “I do not say to you seven times, Peter, but seventy times seven.” That’s a grand total of 490 times, in case you’re counting. Peter’s real concern wasn’t forgiveness, but the annoyance of someone sinning against him. “How much of this do I have to take?” Peter wondered. Perhaps Peter had reached his maximum forgiveness quotient. How about you? What is your number when it comes to forgiving others?

Five years ago, our nation mourned the great tragedy of the nine people who were murdered at the Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, SC during the middle of a bible study. Not long after the shooting, some family members of the victims said they forgave the man who was charged. It prompted a lot of discussion. Some said it was the right thing to do. But others in the community said that offering forgiveness so quickly may be presumptuous.

What about you? Did you wrestle with it? Many teachings today on forgiveness believe it is an internal process, and it happens in stages. It's like climbing a mountain. It takes a while. Is the one who forgives fully aware of what he or she is doing? If not, it could come across as what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," which can happen if you forgive too quickly without due process in your heart and mind.

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Over twenty years ago, my wife and I started a new church in the Sacramento area. There were a lot of young Christians in the congregations, new members who had not been to church before, and most of whom were under thirty. There were a couple people who did some things that were deeply divisive and hurtful to the church. Some members left. Some who remained found it difficult to trust again and hurt feelings remained. I was not able to forgive immediately.

It was complicated by the fact that it was done to God's church – the body of Christ. But I was finally let it go. It took 5 years, but I finally did it. I finally came to the point of saying, "God, I'm going to allow you to take this burden off of my shoulders and the church's shoulders and place it in your hands." And that's what God did. As far as I know, Jesus never gave a timeline about forgiveness. He just said to do it. It would have been better if it happened sooner rather than later, but the important thing is that it happens in your lifetime and mine. It's never too late.

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Jesus told numerous stories about forgiveness. He said, there was a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One servant in particular owed him a great deal -- over 10,000 talents. The servant was not able to pay, and so the king ordered that everything he had – even his wife and family – be sold in order that the may might pay off his debts. But the servant fell on his knees and humbly begged for mercy ... for time and patience in order that he may repay his debt. The master had mercy on him, and cancelled his debts.

But that same servant went out, and ran across a fellow slave who owed him a much smaller debt. He seized him by the throat and demanded, "Pay what you owe!" The fellow slave fell on his knees and pleaded in a similar vein – "Please have patience, give me time, and I will repay." But the first servant would not hear of it. He threw him into prison until he could pay the debt.

Well, word got back to the king. "You wicked slave!" the king declared. I forgave all your debt because you pleaded with me, but you would not do likewise with a fellow servant. You did not have mercy on him as I had on you. With that, the unforgiving servant was handed over to be tortured. Jesus admonished, "the same will happen to you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

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Forgiving is hard work. Those who have suffered betrayals of trust or infidelity may wonder if forgiveness can ever be achieved in this lifetime. Maybe you've been the victim

of lies . . . malicious gossip . . . or abuse. Perhaps a father or a mother or a spouse keeps making promises - and then apologizes for not keeping them. Or a parent who always made promises to a child, but then at the last moment had to be somewhere else. Or a father who never stayed sober, and was never at home when they were needed. Or a boss who promised a promotion, only to hand it over to someone else. Or the person who constantly disappoints and even insults you, only to beg your forgiveness . . . but then goes on with the same offensive behavior again and again.

Just how often should you forgive? How much are you supposed to take? Like Peter, we have a lot of heavy lifting to do. One . . . two . . . three times . . . some finite number . . . we might be able to manage that when it comes to forgiveness . . . But to forgive so many times that we lose track? Forgiveness is one of the hardest things we are called to do as Christians – but also one of the most important.

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At some point, if we're serious about living a Christian life, we have to venture into the deep, murky waters of forgiveness. Sometimes it goes against our grain. Preacher and writer William Willimon writes, "The human animal is not supposed to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities. Therefore, we need to be anchored to God and experience God's power working through us in order to forgive.

Jesus suggests that in the story of the unmerciful servant that if you insist on what is due to you -- you will always end up with a deficit. But he also suggests in the story that if you have experienced how much mercy and grace God has poured out on your behalf, you *will* be able to forgive others. This is the message of the parable of the unmerciful servant for us today. God enables us to forgive so that we can be healed and get on with the life that God intended.

The New Testament word for forgiveness is *aphiemi*. It means to send away, to let go, or leave behind. Matthew uses this same word when he tells the disciples to "let go" or "abandon" their fishing nets when Jesus called them to follow him. (Mt. 4:20) It is the same word used by Matthew to describe Jesus as he neared death on the cross and offering no further resistance, he just "let go" of his earthly life, and gave it over to God, whom he trusted would receive him into a fuller life.

If you have trouble with the word forgiveness – think of "letting go" of that which has been a source of pain and brokenness in your life. We need to pray for God's active working in our lives so that we may experience the power of forgiveness – the power to let go. Don't try to carry it yourself, because if you do, you won't get very far. It would be like lugging around a 100 pound backpack while you are hiking in the woods through some rugged terrain.

Paul offers this practical advice to the Colossians on the matter. He writes: “*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you.*” (Col. 3:13)

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Before we end, let me be clear about what forgiveness it *not* —because forgiveness is not a license that allows someone to hurt us again or perpetuate non-Christ like behavior.

Lewis Sedes, in his book, The Art of Forgiving, lists a number of things that forgiveness is *not*:

- Forgiving someone who did us wrong does *not* mean that we tolerate the wrong.
- Forgiving does *not* mean that we excuse the person who did it.
- Forgiving does *not* mean that we take the edge off the evil that was done to us.
- Forgiving does *not* mean that we surrender our right to justice.
- Forgiving does *not* mean that we invite someone who hurt us to hurt us again.
- Forgiveness does not depend upon acceptance or remorse by another party.

At the end of the parable, the Master or “king” tells us that the one who was unwilling to forgive was dealt with “harshly” . . . he was turned over to the jailer, who in turn locked him in prison where he was tortured and tormented.

Sometimes we’re imprisoned by our anger. Sometimes we’re imprisoned by the burdens we carry. And sometimes we are imprisoned by the grudges we carry though life. We end up in a “jail” of our own making. A reporter asked Nelson Mandela when he was released from prison if he was able to forgive those who imprisoned him. He said, “If I didn’t I would still be in prison.” John Lewis said he forgave the officers who beat him and arrested him on the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Later on, he had a meeting with one of the officers, and they were reconciled.

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There is power in forgiveness. It does not come naturally or easily, but is a spiritual gift granted by God. Put the past behind you, and be healed. Allow forgiveness not to be a burden, but a blessing. What have you got to lose? Amen

Matthew 18:21-35

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.^[a]

²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold^[b] was brought to him. ²⁵ 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.

²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.^[c] He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."