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## *“On Forgiveness”*

*Matthew 18:21-33*

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Matthew 18:21-33. <sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to [Jesus], ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> ‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?’

Along with “please” and “thank you,” saying sorry is probably one of the earliest phrases many of us learned as children. It’s an important nicety parents want to teach their kids. One child yanks another child’s toy out of her hands, and a parent scolds the one who took the toy —“What do you say to her? ... That’s right. Sorry.” “What do you say?” “Sorry.” It’s a call and



response common in many households. I can still hear my little brother's empty, almost sarcastic "Sorry" for taking the front seat when he knew it was my turn or sneaking the last Nutter Butter I'd be saving for my lunchbox. In a leadership class years ago, friends once shared with me that they think I say "I'm sorry" way too much. Girls, particularly girls raised in the South, are taught to be nice, polite, and compliant. So, for many of us, "I'm sorry" often slips out when we have nothing to apologize for. I realize it's a problem many women have; I'm working on it. Sometimes, our "sorry's" come out as a polite reflex. We throw the word around and ask our children to offer it constantly without really pausing to reflect on what it means or what we're apologizing for.

When do we truly understand the significance of apologies? When do we begin to understand giving and receiving forgiveness?

Peter wonders about it. He asks Jesus, "How often should I forgive?"

Peter wants a simple answer. I mean, who doesn't like a good formula? How many times should I forgive? "Seven times?" Peter asks aloud. Seven times sounds generous. He must think of this as a big number. It would be easy if I only had to forgive once. But seven?

Not Jesus responds, "Not seven, but seventy times seven." This forgiveness is beyond quantifying. It's not a one-time, or even seven-times thing.

True to Jesus' style, he follows Peter's question with a story. It's a parable about hypocrisy and not being who you ought to be—who you were made to be. It's a parable about what forgiveness is and why it's so difficult.

A king undertakes a review of the account books of all his enslaved servants. But the focus is on one servant, in particular, a highly placed administrator who has managed to accumulate a financial obligation of staggering size. His debt of 10,000 talents combines the largest monetary unit and the largest numerical value in the ancient Roman world. We might think conservatively of billions of dollars today.<sup>1</sup>

The servant, unable to pay what he owes and facing imprisonment (and even the forced sale of his family and possessions), pleads for more time. The master stuns the servant—and us—by canceling the debt! Extravagant compassion, not harsh judgment, prevails.

Immediately after his unexpected escape from catastrophe, the forgiven servant accosts a fellow servant who owes him a modest debt (100 denarii, amounting to something like four or five months of wages for a laborer). Despite the debtor's plea for more time (the same line that worked



on the king moments ago), the creditor-servant refuses even this request and has the man imprisoned.

This withholding of mercy distresses the other servants, and they file a complaint with the king. And the king's compassion gives way to rage. "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" (v33) he asks.

This is a difficult parable. The narrative swings back and forth between extreme mercy and severe judgment. Underneath it all, though, is a simple reality: forgiveness is not easy.

We know this to be true.

Sometimes, what others have done to us or people we love is so hurtful that we don't *want* to forgive them. Sometimes, people are so dependent on their guilt or shame that *they* don't want to be forgiven. It's tricky and it's hard.

But forgiveness is one of the things that the church does well, that Christians do—or ought to do—that very few other sectors in our society talk about. There is something counterintuitive about forgiveness. Before we dive in deeper into what forgiveness *is*, I want to address what forgiveness is *not*.

Forgiveness is not denial. Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending that what has happened doesn't matter, or that a wound doesn't hurt. Forgiveness isn't acting as though nothing needs to change, or assuming that God is so generous that God isn't grieved and angered by injustice.

Quite the opposite. The start of forgiveness is the acknowledgement of wrongdoing, of harm, of real violation. Sin wounds. Whenever we talk about the need for forgiveness, as Debie Thomas puts it, we must begin by recognizing and naming the extent of brokenness.<sup>ii</sup> At the same time, we must recognize we were created for more than this. We were created for good—for love, equality, tenderness, and wholeness. As image-bearers of God, we were made for a just and nurturing world that honors our dignity. When we experience anything other than that basic goodness, it is appropriate to react with horror.

There are not a lot of places where we hear about the power of forgiveness—sometimes a good novel or a good film can open up the theme—but forgiveness is one of the things people of faith do really well.<sup>iii</sup> In our faith, we learn that forgiveness can set us free from the things that haunt us. It can build communities that more than just function but thrive. Forgiveness is what God has done for us, and we should do it for others.



What examples of forgiveness have you witnessed or experienced in your own lives?

Consider these historical examples of incredible forgiveness...

- Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, SC, and the families of victims so generously offering forgiveness.
- The response of French Huguenots—when interviewed and asked why they had protected Jews in Nazi Europe, they didn't understand the question because they had practiced forgiveness and hospitality so much that it was a way of life and they could do nothing else.
- The Amish school shooting in Pennsylvania. Incredibly, immediately the community forgave.

In all these stories, there is some sense that forgiveness has been a particular community's practice, that they didn't even have to think about it. For them, forgiveness is a way of life.

Twenty years after the Rwandan genocide, photographer Pieter Hugo traveled to the country and captured a series of unlikely, almost unthinkable tableaux. A portion of his project is shared in a 2014 New York Times Magazine article, and in one image, “a woman rests her hand on the shoulder of the man who killed her father and brothers. In another, a woman poses with a casually reclining man who looted her property and whose father helped murder her husband and children. In many of these photos, there is little evident warmth between the pairs, and yet there they are, together. In each, the perpetrator is a Hutu who was granted pardon by the Tutsi survivor of his crime.”<sup>iv</sup>

The people who agreed to be photographed for this series are part of a continuing national effort toward reconciliation and worked closely with a nonprofit organization called AMI (Association Modeste et Innocent). In this program, small groups of Hutus and Tutsis are counseled over many months, culminating in the perpetrator's formal request for forgiveness. If forgiveness is granted by the survivor, the perpetrator and his family and friends typically bring a basket of offerings, usually food and sorghum or banana beer. The accord is sealed with song and dance.

The pairs photographed in Hugo's portraits were interviewed and shared their experience of the freeing power of forgiveness. One perpetrator said, “I burned her house. I attacked her in order to kill her and her children, but God protected them, and they escaped. When I was released from



jail, if I saw her, I would run and hide. Then [I started the] trainings. I decided to ask her for forgiveness.”

The survivor replied, “I used to hate him. When he came to my house and knelt down before me and asked for forgiveness, I was moved by his sincerity. Now, if I cry for help, he comes to rescue me. When I face any issue, I call him.”

Another perpetrator said, “My conscience was not quiet, and when I would see her I was very ashamed. After being trained about unity and reconciliation, I went to her house and asked for forgiveness. Then I shook her hand. So far, we are on good terms.”

His survivor replied, “He killed my father and three brothers. He did these killings with other people, but he came alone to me and asked for pardon. He and a group of other offenders who had been in prison helped me build a house with a covered roof. I was afraid of him—now I have granted him pardon, things have become normal, and in my mind I feel clear.”

Another survivor said, “...I have started to feel better. I was like a dry stick; now I feel peaceful in my heart, and I share this peace with my neighbors.”

Incredible images and stories of forgiveness.

To be completely honest, I don’t know if I could forgive like this. I have never been so utterly wronged and devastated as these survivors have been. So, I don’t know. But I do know I am in awe and grateful beyond measure to see that it’s possible. I hope I can come to such a point of peace.

Matthew tells us that in some way, Jesus’ parable, sometimes called “the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant” shows us the reign of God. In God’s kingdom, forgiveness like this is possible. So much of what we see modeled in the world around us is revenge, spite, and vindictiveness. But Anne Lamott writes that withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. Nora Gallagher writes, “Forgiveness is a way to unburden oneself from the constant pressure of rewriting the past.” Henri Nouwen writes, “Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly, and so we need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. Forgiveness is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.”<sup>v</sup>

If these writers are correct, then forgiveness means choosing love instead of resentment. If I’m consumed with my own pain, if I’ve made injury my identity. If I insist on weaponizing my well-deserved anger in every interaction I have with people who hurt me, then I’m drinking poison,



and the poison will kill me long before it does anything to my abusers. To choose forgiveness is to release myself from the tyranny of my bitterness.

And so, I have to ask myself, we ought to ask ourselves, where is it that we're holding onto something that we need to let go of? How do we model forgiveness as individuals? As a community of faith?

Forgiveness is a transformed way of seeing. It's a way of seeing that is forward-focused, future-focused, kingdom-focused. With God, there is always another turn, another chapter, another path, another grace. Because God loves us, we don't have to forgive out of scarcity. We can forgive out of God's great abundance.

“How often should I forgive?” “Seventy times seven.”

Forgiveness is hard. It doesn't come cheap, and it doesn't ignore injustice. But it does come from God. And it is a gift we receive—acknowledging it in worship every Sunday, and proclaiming it in the Good News of Jesus Christ. May we take up the hard work of forgiveness for the sake of a broken and desperate world.

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<sup>i</sup> John T. Carroll, “Commentary on Matthew 18:21-35” for WorkingPreacher.org (September 17, 2023), [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>ii</sup> Debie Thomas, “Unpacking Forgiveness,” for JourneyWithJesus.net (September 6, 2020), [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net).

<sup>iii</sup> Matt Skinner, Sermon Brainwave Podcast #921: 16th Sunday after Pentecost (Ord. 24A) – Sept. 17, 2023 (September 11, 2023).

<sup>iv</sup> Photographs by Pieter Hugo, Text by Susan Dominus, “Portraits of Reconciliation,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 6, 2014.

<sup>v</sup> Thomas, 2020.

