

**As We Forgive**  
Matthew 18:21-35

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As I faced the Gospel text this week, I found it both familiar and unsettling. I remember well the instructions of Jesus to Peter where the Lord tells his disciple that he must forgive his brother not seven times, but seventy-seven (or seventy times seven) times – that is, you must forgive your brother even after you lose count. But I found myself unsettled by Jesus’ instructions and the parable that follows because I am not sure what I really know about forgiving.

On the one hand, I know a good deal about repentance and receiving forgiveness. I could name a laundry list of things I have done that are hurtful to God or hurtful to others. When those things come to my attention, I generally try to make apologies and set things right. I remember vividly apologizing to my cousin many weeks after she suffered a third miscarriage. For weeks, I had not called because I did not know what to say. It was a selfish choice, and I felt relieved when I finally did call her and offer an apology along with my very late condolences.

Repentance, uncomfortable as it is to do, is more familiar turf than forgiveness. It is odd, really. Repentance and forgiveness go hand in hand, and yet I am much more comfortable with the former. Maybe this is because repentance leaves me in control of my own actions so that even while I am in the wrong, I am still in control and able to set things right. Forgiveness, it seems, is harder to control. You can offer it, and the receiver may or may not repent. You can wish to forgive, but still find those dark feelings of hurt and anger lingering in the corners of the heart.

As I wrote down my thoughts for this morning, I struggled to think of more than one or two concrete examples of forgiveness that I have extended to some who has hurt me. I would like to think that this is because I have forgiven so fully that I cannot even remember the wrong anymore. In some cases, that is probably true, where the hurts were insignificant compared to the love and trust in the relationship.

I considered the possibility that I am uncomfortable with forgiveness because forgiveness requires admitting vulnerability, admitting that someone else has the ability to hurt you. I remember the scene in the movie *Pretty Woman* where Richard Gere and Julia Roberts are talking about his past and he says, “I was very angry with my father. It cost me \$10,000 in therapy to say that sentence ‘I was very angry with him.’” In some ways, it is easier to bury our anger or hurt than to admit to those vulnerable places. In order to get comfortable with forgiveness, you have to acknowledge pain and vulnerability. If repentance is about control, forgiveness is about weakness.

On another level, I know that I am uncomfortable with forgiveness because I have never really been hurt in that deep, soul-shattering, life-altering way. Last week, Pastor Steve shared a little about his father, whom he never met, and the path to forgiving him. I have never needed to

extend forgiveness like that. On some level, I wonder if I would or could. I do not know – a truth for which I am grateful.

So in my own soul-searching on the topic of forgiveness, I find that I come up short. They say preachers are not supposed to be quite this personal in sermons, but it felt disingenuous to preach on forgiveness without honesty about my own experience. I suspect there are one or two of you out there who identify with me, and probably one or two others who know a lot about forgiveness, either because you have granted it or because you still struggle to do so.

If preachers are not supposed to be this personal, there is something we are supposed to do – that is to lift up the gospel. Thank goodness that when I find myself coming up short on forgiveness or any other topic, the Scriptures offer teachings and stories to speak the truth into my feeble experience.

When Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive, I guess Jesus already knows that Peter is coming up short on this idea of forgiveness, because Jesus tells a story – a parable to be specific. I would like to retell that parable to you now, but I am going to switch out the talents and denarii for modern day dollars and cents. I think it will take on even greater significance:

The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of five billion dollars. He couldn't pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market. The poor wretch threw himself at the king's feet and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten thousand dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, 'Pay up. Now!' The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' But he wouldn't do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid.

When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king. The king summoned the man and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt [five billion dollars] when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?'

Peter is worried about forgiving seven or eight times; and here comes Jesus telling a story about a king who forgives a five billion dollar debt and a servant who cannot forgive the relatively small debt of \$10,000.

I suppose the point for me is that I know as much about forgiveness as I know about five billion dollars. I can tell you that five billion is about the amount the state of South Carolina will spend

this year.<sup>1</sup> I can do some math and figure out that it would take me something like 80,000 years to earn five billion dollars. Five billion dollars is nearly twice the net worth of Oprah!<sup>2</sup>

Whatever you or I know or will ever learn about forgiving others pales in comparison to the size and depth of God's forgiveness and mercy extended to us. Any hope we have of learning how to forgive must be rooted in the knowledge and acceptance of that mercy. Anything else is like Peter's small and calculated efforts - rooted in rule-following instead of growing out of a thankful heart.

This is not to say that learning to forgive others will ever be easy. It will still require admitting that we are vulnerable and subject to being hurt by others - as individuals and even as a nation on this significant anniversary. Forgiveness will still require us to wrestle with difficult emotions like anger, grief, and disappointment. Forgiveness does not mean the ones who have hurt us will themselves repent or change. What forgiveness means is that we are changed from the inside out by the abundant and extravagant mercy of God.

The question then for the Christians and the church is not, "How much should we forgive," but "How much have we already been forgiven?" More than I can count. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.postandcourier.com/news/2010/sep/26/if-you-think-its-bad-now-just-wait/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/wealth/billionaires/list?page=5>