

Matthew 18:23-35
Parable of Great Forgiveness
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One of the most succulent thoughts a person can dwell upon, perhaps you have a time or two, is the delicious possibility of exacting just the right revenge at just the right moment upon someone who has wronged you. Have you ever rehearsed these little plays in your head? At just the right moment, I will unleash the zinger of all zingers, you will dodge and then hit them with the upper-cut. Sometimes these orchestrations come too little too late.

As was the case for George Costanza, who, as he sat in a conference room in the Yankee Club house, was stuffing his face with delicious shrimp cocktail and was caught completely off guard. “Hey, George, the ocean called. They’re running out of shrimp.” Befuddled and without retort, George set to conspiring for the rest of the episode of *Seinfeld* what would be his perfect revenge. Revenge that would involve him traveling across country to this former co-worker’s new place of employment to deliver his perfect comeback. “Oh, yeah? Well the jerk store called, and they’re running out of you.”

There’s a French term that describes this moment (*L’esprit de l’escalier*) when the revenge you plan and orchestrate in your mind falls short in real life. Some of you know from experience that forgiveness can be difficult. It’s so much easier to entertain these little revenge plays in our minds, isn’t it? And yet, somehow, that revenge never quite lives up to the hopes we have for it in our minds.

For those who follow Jesus, among the very most important things we are taught is to forgive. We have been looking at stories Jesus told his followers, and in the stories he tells, he paints pictures of what God looks like. Very often, those pictures are different from the ones we carry around in our own minds, and they can be vastly different from the stories our culture tells us. Especially when so much of the media we consume and television shows we watch have titles like Scandal, Revenge, and Keeping Up with the Kardashians (shudder).

Jesus tells these stories about God, because if we are not careful, having the wrong picture of who God is can keep us stuck where we’re not supposed to be—as enemies of others, and therefore enemies of our true selves.

The story that Kale read so masterfully today for us is one in which people come to Jesus and ask a question that goes like this: “Jesus, how should we respond when a brother or sister injures us – maybe with their actions, maybe with their words – what should be our response?” Now interestingly, this comes after a series of questions from the disciples on topics like: What does a true follower look like? What is the most important virtue in God’s kingdom? In other words, how can we be seen as good and faithful followers?

The disciples are looking for the key to what a faithful follower of Jesus looks like, and they think it will be something like: pray a lot; put in lots of hours of community service or mission trips; never miss church; raise your hands and close your eyes when you’re in worship and

appear very holy. Interestingly, when he's asked this question he responds by telling a story about forgiveness. We don't often hear someone ask this question: do I live with unforgiveness?

Here Peter asks Jesus about a scenario that is all too common for every one of us, someone has wronged us in some way, and we face the question of how we should respond. We all have these people. So did Peter. So he asks this question: how often should I forgive? Seven times? Now Peter is trying to be tricky here because he knows two things: that seven is the number of completion, so forgiving seven times would seem to be complete forgiveness. And two, the Old Testament dictated that a person was only obliged to forgive three times. Through the prophet Amos, God says for three transgressions and for four I will forgive. Peter is doubling those figures—surely that would be what the Lord requires.

But Jesus says, “not seven times, but seventy times seven” or in other cases seventy seven times—implying that forgiveness is ongoing and infinite.

Forgiveness is among the most important things Jesus speaks about. But before we continue, I want to say a few things about what forgiveness is and is not. Forgiveness is not pretending that some wrong didn't happen, sweeping it under the rug. Forgiveness begins when we acknowledge that there has been a breach of justice, some wrong has happened.

Secondly is the choice that you will not deal with a wrongdoer according to their actions. To choose not to retaliate, not to exact revenge, is to choose to deal with a person apart from their actions. The person is not the sum of their actions.

Step three is to release that person from their debt—I will not take from that person what they took from me. What it also means—and this is even more challenging—is to make the conscious decision to be the last person injured. And I know that there are those out there who, when you think about forgiveness, shudder at the thought because someone has hurt you so badly that you can barely speak of it. That is real, and living with that hurt is real. But Jesus' way means that when forgiveness takes place, we acknowledge that the last hurt will remain with us.

Step four: no longer hold the person's debt over their head. You are no longer going to play the revenge reel over and over again, but will see this person differently. And that is very difficult to do, but this is what Jesus says is among the very most important virtues he invites his followers to pursue—challenging as it may be. And I know it's challenging and there are probably some of you who are thinking to yourself, “Right now, I'm having a hard time imagining that such a thing is possible.” That's ok, we don't do it alone, not under our own power, that's why Jesus tells us this story.

A King wishes to settle his accounts. There are outstanding debts out there. And rightly and justly, the king wants to square the books. He begins the reckoning. There is a man who owed him ten thousand talents, and he calls in the debt, and the man—who cannot pay—learns that he will be sold, along with his family, until payment can be made. Now when we hear this we think, this guy's trying to do right, he wants to square up. But if we look a little closer, we will see just how absurd this notion is—it's so ridiculous it's comical.

The talent was what a person would earn in wages over a 15 year span. This man owed the king 150,000 years of labor and he's promising to pay it back—he's lying, making yet another excuse. Have you ever had someone say some trite thing after they've harmed you? That's what this man is doing. He's saying that he is able and willing to work the 7,800,000 weeks it would take to repay this debt.

What this debtor needs is not patience; it's forgiveness.

What Jesus is doing with this picture he's painting for Peter is to show him how much God has forgiven him. He's doing this because he wants Peter to recognize how much he has been forgiven, before he asks how much he should forgive. How many of us when we read this story think that the point it's trying to make is how we go about the task of forgiving? He uses the absurdness of this scenario to shine the light on how needful we are of God's forgiveness and how much we have been forgiven. That is the starting point in this conversation.

The Bible is full of beautiful and evocative images from start to finish showing this patient, longsuffering, and forgiving God. The Bible points out how bad Israel is over and over again, to show us how good and loving God is towards them. The Yugoslavian theologian Miroslav Volf puts it this way: God doesn't reckon sin. We incur debt, but God puts nothing in the debit column; God covers sin, we've committed it but it's nowhere to be found; God puts our wrongdoing behind his back; God removes our transgression from us as far as the east is from the west; God blots out our sin, though we are like scarlet with the stains of sin, we will be white as snow; God sweeps away our sins like mist, at the dawn of a new day, the landscape of our soul is enveloped in cold thick wet mists of our failings. But then the sun of God's forgiveness comes up and the mists are gone. Then the miracle of miracles: God doesn't even remember our sins, they are gone, gone from reality, gone from memory.

Before Jesus teaches Peter how he is to do this, he wants Peter to know what has been done for him, and what has been done for you.

But then as the story continues, Jesus shows us how we can choose whether or not to do this. The man who was forgiven went out and soon another man who owed *him* something came upon him, and he grabbed him by the throat and demanded, "Pay me what you owe—one hundred denarii." But this other man could not, so the unforgiving master threw him in prison.

The ridiculousness of this story continues with this second sum. One hundred denarii was the equivalent of about 20 weeks' wages. So the man who was forgiven an unimaginable, infinitely greater sum (7,800,000 weeks' worth of wages) is unwilling to extend forgiveness to one owing him twenty. (At this point you should be laughing—that's what Jesus' audience would have done.) This is sheer rubbish; no, we're not in Britain and, yes, I just said rubbish.

This second man is in the position to extend forgiveness but chooses not to. Every one of us who chooses not to forgive will face very predictable consequences of their unforgiveness. Have you ever known someone who is always talking about that old hurt, who's always rehearsing that bad thing that happened to them, who is always soaking up all the attention and oxygen because things are so difficult for them because they were so horribly wounded?

Sociologists and psychologists say that when a person chooses unforgiveness, they become a person who is quick to demand their rights. If they've been hurt by one person, they shift that burden to everyone else, they compare themselves to others thinking that things are much worse for them than for everyone else around them. They have disdain for those around them who succeed, because they feel as though they've been taken advantage of. This person is likely to become someone who lives in the role as a victim, and they do it because it gives them a sense of power over the person who has wronged them, and it enables them to hold others captive with their complaints.

And researchers say that the very worst part about this is that when the victim sees their perpetrator punished or when they finally get their revenge – and this is universally noted – when this person sees their enemy punished, it never ever satisfies them like they hoped.

So unforgiveness is like a poison growing in your heart. It's something that fouls up our lives from the inside out. It's like a fog that descends upon our lives that permanently blocks out the sunlight of joy. It's like being stuck in a black room and every day you live in unforgiveness, it's like adding another coat of black paint to the windows, shutting you in and keeping others—especially God—from coming in to rescue you.

But you don't have to not forgive. You can do the challenging thing of moving toward forgiveness, beginning by acknowledging that the wrong has been done and seeing the one who has wounded you as more than the sum of their actions. Then you can do the very challenging thing with the help of God's Spirit, and that is to choose to let the final injury remain with you, and in that see that this is precisely what Jesus did for you and me. We can see that the debt that we owe that has been forgiven. 7,800,000 weeks is so much greater than the debt anyone owes to us of 20 weeks. God did not count our sins against us, but in Jesus, took the form of a servant, humbling himself, becoming obedient to the point of death on the cross of Calvary. And through his gift, through his forgiveness, we are set free to live joyfully in that reality.

The most joyful people you will see are not those who are so spiritually pure that they have nothing to be forgiven of; they are those who recognize the pervasiveness of their sin, and the infinitely greater gift of God's free grace. That is something to celebrate and join in sharing that good news to others. You are free to forgive, even though I know that can be so hard, you are free, not because you are so strong or that you are so good, but because Jesus Christ loved you that much that instead of calling the debt, reckoning what was owed to him, exacting revenge upon those who wronged him, chose to offer them life and not death, hope and not despair, and instead of justice and retribution having the last word, Jesus' last word to you and me always and forever will be grace.

Believe that good news today and go forth as bearers of this precious gift. Amen and amen.