

The Power of Forgiving

Matthew 18:21-35

Exodus 14:19-31

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During the height of the civil rights struggle, Martin Luther King said, “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. Anyone is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this we are less prone to hate our enemies.”

They say, forgiveness is a virtue but it’s also an obligation.

A husband and wife went to church every Sunday. On the way home she said, “You sing all the hymns and recite the Apostle’s Creed, why aren’t you praying the Lord’s Prayer? You haven’t for the past couple weeks.” He replied, “I have my reasons.” She asked, “Does this have anything to do with that spat you had with your brother?”

By the look on his face she could tell it did have something to do with his brother. He admitted, “I can’t pray, ‘forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,’ because I’m not ready to forgive him.”

Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, if a member of the church sins against you, how many times must I forgive him, seven times?”

I don’t think this was a theoretical question. Most likely someone in the church hurt Peter more than seven times. Was Peter asking Jesus if there’s a limit for repeat offenders who overspend their forgiveness card?

You know what it’s like when someone thinks they can continue behaving badly with impunity. Someone at work, a member of your family, or the neighbor across the street keeps doing or saying things to hurt you. You’re fed up being abused but there’s no sign of it letting up.

So why should you forgive someone who doesn’t want to be forgiven?

Here’s the hard answer. Being forgiven is linked to forgiving others. That’s why Jesus answered Peter, “Not seven times but seventy times seven times.” $70 \times 7 = 490$. We can calculate that in our heads.

But the number seven in Jesus’ day symbolized infinity. Peter wanted Jesus to put a cap on forgiveness. Instead, Jesus told Peter if he expected to receive forgiveness from God he had to forgive his neighbor.

Jesus immediately followed up with a parable, one of his earthly stories with a heavenly meaning, to drive home the point that forgiving others is not an option in the Kingdom of God.

A royal steward owed his king tons of money, ten thousand talents, the equivalent of fifteen years' wages. The official begged his king to forgive the debt, not for his sake but for his wife and children. The king showed extraordinary grace and completely forgave the debt.

Soon afterward, a coworker approached the steward and begged him to forgive his debt, which was a mere bag of shells compared to the steward's debt to the king. Unfortunately, the steward squandered an opportunity to be gracious and threw the poor man into prison.

When the king got word of this injustice, he had the steward hauled before him. He demanded, "Should not you have shown mercy to your fellow slave as I had shown to you?" Angered by the steward's cruelty, the king handed him over to be tortured until he could pay his debt.

Then Jesus gave the parable's punchline, "So my heavenly father will also do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother and sister from your heart."

That last verse can be put in the category of one of the hard sayings of Jesus. You can imagine an earthly king handing someone over to tormentors, but would the King of Heaven do the same?

If not, why did Jesus say God will punish us if we don't forgive as we have been forgiven?

Maybe this story will help. An eighty-year old woman was insulted sixty years earlier by her cousin. She never forgave her. Whenever she remembered the slight, which was often, all the resentments and bitterness she felt then was as fresh as yesterday. So, she became a lonely, miserable, crotchety old lady who lived in the clutches of her tormentors for sixty years.

Festering resentments can be mistaken for a badge of honor. You tell yourself you have the right to be angry, you're justified in holding your grudges. But who are you really punishing? The person who hurt you... or you?

Let me tell you a story about myself. There was a time when I was not ready to forgive someone in the church who intentionally and consistently wounded me.

I hurt so much, I couldn't let go of my resentments. Every time I saw my offender my stomach twisted up. In retrospect, by not forgiving him I was only hurting myself while he went on off on his merry way.

A clergy friend of mine said, "Harry, you have to forgive him if you're ever going to find peace." Intellectually I knew he was right but emotionally it seemed unreasonable. I asked, "What would you do in my place?" He said, "I'd start praying for so-and-so and also pray that God forgives me."

“Forgive me? Why do I have to be forgiven?” He said, “God can’t forgive you your debts until you forgive your debtor.”

This was a difficult assignment. My offender never asked for forgiveness. He’d deny he ever did anything wrong. Knowing that made it even harder.

“Harry,” my friend said, “It’s not all about him, it’s all about you. You need to get right with God before you can find any peace.”

I didn’t find it hard asking God to forgive me but it was hard praying for me to forgive this guy.

Anyway, my friend’s advice was taken. I prayed for my offender and asked God to forgive me. And you know what, it worked! My resentments slowly dissipated until I came to the point I could finally forgive him. It took a long time but as they say, “the journey is just as important as the destination.”

So, there’re practical reasons for, “forgiving as you have been forgiven.” The first reason has already been identified. If you never forgive you’ll be consumed by resentment which creates a blind spot. You can’t see you need to be forgiven for not forgiving.

As the old saying goes, “Refusing to forgive is like eating rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”

But there’s another reason. God wants us to be reconciled to one another, especially with members of the church. Remember, Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone in the church who sinned against him. Jesus wanted Peter to realize if you can’t forgive a brother or sister in Christ, how can you forgive people who aren’t members of the Church?

Forgiveness is the primary ministry of the Christ’s Church. Whenever you forgive, the other experiences liberation and redemption through the love and grace of God.

Let’s turn the tables and try to see this from a different angle. Try to remember a time you wronged someone and you needed to be forgiven.

Your relationship was broken, your heart was heavy with guilt and your feared being cut off. But when you heard those wonderful words, “I forgive you,” immediately your body, mind and spirit were released from your self inflicted pain and the relationship was restored.

That’s what the steward experienced when the king canceled out his debt. He was free, the balance book was cleared. But then, instead of passing the grace on, he refused to forgive the debt owed him.

Jesus made it clear, if you accept God’s forgiveness, you’re obligated to pass it on.

Another reason why forgiving is a necessary component of the Christian life: when you forgive your neighbor, you're submitting to God's will, which is good acceptable acceptable and perfect.

Jesus never said, "Do what I say and not what I do." On the contrary, Jesus entire life demonstrated a radical obedience to God's will.

We see this most clearly in the crucifixion. Jesus was beaten, mocked and nailed to the cross. He could've let his anger and resentment boil over and cry out, "God damn them all to hell!"

But he didn't. Instead he prayed for all of us when he said, "Father forgive them..."

We might be tempted to justify ourselves and say, "Well, I'm not Jesus. You can't expect me to be that perfect."

Without realizing it, that's what Peter thought, there's a limit to forgiving others. But Jesus didn't let Peter off the hook. If you're in Christ, you're expected to forgive seventy times seven times because you've been forgiven seventy times seven times.

Corrie Ten Boom lived in Holland during the Nazi occupation. She and her family were arrested for hiding Jews in their house. She was sent to the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. A clerical error caused her premature release. She barely survived the war while the rest of her family perished.

Ten Boom spent the rest of her life preaching Christ. One evening she was speaking at a church in Munich. Her topic was forgiveness. Halfway through her talk she noticed a man sitting in the back row. She recognized him from the camp. She could remember him wearing his SS uniform and the cruel look on his face. He was one of the most vicious guards and caused her to suffer multiple indignities.

She realized the man didn't recognize her when he came up to her after the lecture and said, "Thank you for your fine message."

Then he quoted her exact words, saying, "It's good to know that all of our sins are the bottom of the sea."

Ten Boom bristled.

Unexpectedly, he held out his hand, signaling for her to take it. But she couldn't. She was overcome with rage. The man kept his hand extended and said, "You mentioned Ravensbruck. I'm ashamed to admit I was a guard there...I still have a hard time forgiving myself for the cruel things I did. I can only hope God forgives me. Please, I need to hear from your lips that God forgives me."

Ten Boom wrote, “I stood there, I whose sins have been forgiven time and again, but I could not forgive him. It could not have been many seconds I stood there, but to me it seemed like hours. I wrestled with the most difficult thing I ever had to do. I knew I had to do it... It was that simple and that horrible... And so, woodenly, mechanically I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me.

As I did this, an incredible thing happened! The current started in my shoulder and down my arm into our clasped hands. Then this healing warmth flooded my whole being. Tears came into my eyes and I said, “I forgive you brother.” I cried, “With all my heart.”

For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I have never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.”

True stories like this, told in the context of the Parable of the Unjust Steward help us realize that forgiveness is possible if only because all things are possible with God.

A suggestion. If you ever find it impossible to forgive someone, try remembering a time when someone found it almost impossible to forgive you. Maybe that memory will take out the sting.

But better than that, it will remind you how the power of love destroys the power of resentment.

The night before Jesus embraced his cross he told his disciples, “I have sent you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” (John 13:15)

Earlier, Jesus put it in another way, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. (Matthew 7: 12)

In a few minutes when we say together that hard verse in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” keep in mind this is the type of prayer Jesus had in mind when he said, “Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find.” (Matthew 7:7)

There’s as much power in being forgiven as there is in forgiving others because both come from the same source. It’s a liberating power with Christ at the center holding all of us together as one. Embrace that power, and hear the Good News, “Through Jesus Christ we are all forgiven.” Amen.