

## **Pentecost 16 - Matthew 18:21-35**

Perhaps there is no more controversial subject than forgiveness—in and out of Christian circles. Who among us has not been confronted with a situation (or countless ones) where we were wronged or offended by another...or did the wronging and offending? The controversy comes not as we struggle with a theoretical concept. Rather, forgiveness is a deeply personal (even in community) and practical issue we face routinely.

Any relationship that lasts a long time involves people who have forgiven one another multiple times. Broken relationships cannot be mended without forgiveness for whatever caused the break, even when a superficial reconciliation takes place. Harboring unforgiveness within our hearts is corrosive and damaging for us and can long outlast the repercussion of the original offense. Forgiveness is hard work, it is good for us, and we struggle with it.

And here is Peter asking a question many of us can identify with: when is enough...enough?

He phrases it differently, but that is the question...and the struggle. How many times do we have to forgive the same people for the same thing? Peter's question is both general and specific. He does not ask about a particular situation or person, although he might be thinking of one, so the inquiry is general. But, he wants a number. Is seven a good, aspirational number? In Hebrew, numbers have meaning beyond numeric value. Seven is the number of completion. Surely, Peter cannot imagine having to forgive more than that. Shouldn't completion be enough?

Jesus responds by giving him a number and a story. The number is a multiple of seven—seventy-seven times, Jesus tells Peter. Whatever you think is enough, Jesus suggests, needs to be multiplied to an inconceivable amount of times. The story Jesus tells has numbers included as well to amplify the point.

The enslaved person in the story could not have owed a larger debt. His need for forgiveness could not have been greater. The one he seeks forgiveness from has no obligation to him. The king does not have to do anything. Yet, he responds from compassion after the slave pleads with him for patience and humbles himself by falling to his knees.

This is a parable, a story designed to make a point. The point is not the story, and to get too preoccupied with the details misses the point. Jesus uses the most extreme examples of inequality in relationship to illustrate his response to Peter. It's not an endorsement of every action taken by either party. Rather, it's to demonstrate truths through the unfolding events. Peter and the rest of the audience listening to Jesus' answer would have understood the relational dynamics. They would have known that the request for mercy from the king was an act of desperation without much hope. Yet, the king in this story is not moved by revenge or retribution but by compassion. He witnesses the suffering of his servant, and his heart is moved to forgiveness.

That heart is like the heart of God. Unfortunately, the servant does not share it. When he immediately encounters someone who owes him a mere fraction of the debt which he has just had forgiven, the servant's response is harsh and cruel. Other

servants, who presumably also had knowledge of his debt forgiveness, are appalled when they see him treat one of their own in a worse manner than the king treated him.

While it is true that some find receiving forgiveness difficult, that is often because they have not forgiven themselves. For most, extending forgiveness proves more challenging than receiving it. Jesus illustrates that truth in this portion of the story. The hypocrisy in that reveals itself as the servant dismisses the exact same plea he uttered to the king when he holds an obligation to be paid to him. Forgiveness is tricky when we face the truth that we want it for ourselves even when we willfully deny it to others.

The king hears from the witnesses who waste no time in letting the king know that his merciful act was not replicated by the recipient of it. That arouses the king's anger seemingly more than the original offense.

The emphasis on the practice of forgiveness continues with the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23–35). The point is straightforward in establishing forgiveness as a communal norm—God's forgiveness requires disciples to forgive one another.

Forgiveness does not only impact the two parties involved. The community is an interested party. Imagine how the other servants responded to the king's act of mercy. Some of them may have held debts too. They may have received courage to approach a king who demonstrated compassion in order to reconcile their obligations. It cannot be surprising that the servant's lack of mercy enraged them. They approached the king because the king showed himself to be approachable. They trusted him once they saw his heart. Forgiveness blessed the king, the servant, and the community.

Unforgiveness, on the other hand, broke trust in the community and ultimately harmed the one who withheld mercy. It's important to note again that if we get too caught up in the details, we miss the point. The point is not that God will punish us for our unforgiveness like the king who has his servant abused until the debt is repaid. He ends up tortured in a prison of his own making. Harboring unforgiveness is a destructive act that impacts the one who refuses to release the debt.

What is forgiveness then if not releasing the debt and the debtor? It is not the same as reconciliation, which includes restoring the relationship. In the most ideal scenarios, forgiveness and reconciliation companion on the journey to restoration. That is the way of the incarnation, the cross, and the empty tomb. That is the example and high bar that Jesus sets. At the same time, God meets us where we can be met. Forgiveness—as just letting go—is a good first step. We release and are released by it.

*Anna Case-Winters* writes, “Jesus didn’t ignore ordinary human feelings; this Gospel begins and ends with a God who enters our godforsaken places. Jesus shows what our resentments look like from God’s perspective. Yes, you were hurt, but by holding on to your bitterness, by allowing the resentments to fester like a colony of streptococcal bacteria, your life has become sick. Jesus is saying, “Please, for my sake, for your sake, for the sake of the world, let it go. Let your offender go just as I am willing to let you go.”<sup>1</sup>

Thanks be to God for the release. Forgiveness. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Case-Winters, Anna. *Matthew: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Belief: a Theological Commentary on the Bible)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.