

Ultimate Forgiveness: The parable of the unforgiving slave September 17.17

Again this week we hear about forgiveness, in fact this parable of the unforgiving slave is a continuation of our gospel reading from last week. This is one of those parables that takes a bit of explanation to understand it in the context of the times in which it was written—kind of like a cultural interpretation.

So, last week, we read from Matthew's gospel about Jesus telling the disciples how best to respond to those in the church who have sinned against another member of the church.

And Peter now asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him? Perhaps as many as seven times he wonders? Why would Peter use the number 7? Well, seven is considered a very special number, even a sacred or holy number in the bible. Here's some information I unearthed about the number 7.

The first use of the number 7 in the Bible relates to the creation week in Genesis chapter 1. God spends six days creating the heavens and the earth, and then rests on the seventh day. This is our template for the seven-day week, observed around the world to this day. The seventh day was to be "set apart" for Israel; the Sabbath was a holy day of rest (*Deuteronomy 5:12*).

Thus, right at the start of the Bible, the number 7 is identified with something being "finished" or "complete." From then on, that association continues, as 7 is often found in contexts involving completeness or divine perfection. So we see the command for animals to be at least seven days old before being used for sacrifice (*Exodus 22:30*), the command for leprous Naaman to bathe in the Jordan River seven times to effect complete cleansing (*2 Kings 5:10*), and the command for Joshua to march around Jericho for seven days (and on the seventh day to make seven circuits) and for seven priests blow seven trumpets outside the city walls (*Joshua 6:3–4*). In these instances, 7 signifies a completion of some kind: a divine mandate is fulfilled.

(In) the book of Revelation, the number 7 is used there more than fifty times in a variety of contexts: there are seven letters to seven churches in Asia and seven spirits before God's throne (*Revelation 1:4*), seven golden lampstands (*1:12*), seven stars in Christ's right hand (*1:16*), seven seals of God's judgment (*5:1*), seven angels with seven trumpets (*8:2*), etc. In all likelihood, the number 7 again represents completeness or totality.

In all, the number 7 is used in the Bible more than seven hundred times. If we also count the words related to *seven* (terms like *sevenfold* or *seventy* or *seven hundred*), the count is still higher.¹

So, it seems Peter's use of the number 7 is a good number to choose, and probably not a random choice! And Jesus says to Peter, no, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times, or maybe, as the Greek is translated in other bible versions, seventy times seven—either way, still an astounding number of times!

It seems Peter's getting the gist of this forgiveness, seven times, a holy number, a complete number, so 7 and done! But no, Jesus says, no limit on forgiveness—forgive seventy times seven—wow, that seems like endless forgiveness! Really Jesus? And to illustrate the point, Jesus tells them one of his kingdom of God parables, Matthew is full of these kingdom of God parables, and this one is a story full of hyperbole, wild exaggerations, so as to make the point; what has come to be known as "the parable of the unforgiving slave".

Now, here's another of those cultural things. It will help us to understand somewhat how the slave or servant system worked in Jesus' time. Here is an explanation from a professor of New Testament Studies.

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/number-7-seven.html> accessed September 12.17

Kings used agents like the ‘unmerciful servant’ to organize lower levels of agents, from tax-farmers to torturers (*Matthew 18:34*), who together made up a system that ensured the continuous flow of wealth, power, and honor to the top of the pyramid (who was the King). The unforgiving servant is apparently a manager of the highest level, effectively a CFO (chief financial officer) with control over the movement of vast wealth. The astronomical “debt” or “loan” he owes may represent the income he is responsible for producing from those lower on the pyramid of patronage. In the Mediterranean economy, the goal was to pass a steady, acceptable flow of wealth further up the pyramid, while retaining as much as one could get away with for oneself, to be used to grease one’s own way further up the pyramid. This slave, who works near or at the very top of the pyramid, may have taken too large a share for himself.²

And now he hasn’t got enough left to pay what he owes to the King. He owes 10 thousand talents, which is an exorbitant amount of money—1 talent is equivalent to about 20 years labour. So 10 thousand talents – 20 thousand years of labour--it’s like saying the debt is so huge, not in a million years could this slave pay back his master. And the King orders the slave’s wife, children and all his possessions sold to try and recoup some of the losses. The slave’s only recourse is to beg mercy from the King. And astoundingly, the King forgives the debt!

Now, just fresh from having been forgiven for a monstrous-sized debt, our top of the pyramid slave runs across another slave lower down the chain who owes him money, 100 denarii. One denarii was equal to a day’s wage, so this slave owes about 1/3 of a year’s wages—so roughly \$20,000.00 dollars in today’s money. He grabs this fellow by the throat and demands payment. The threatened slave pleads for mercy and is refused, by the slave who had his immense debt forgiven him! And so he has the slave thrown into debtor’s prison. Well, not surprisingly, this news gets back to the king, who is astounded at the first slave’s treatment of his fellow slave after himself having just been pardoned for his huge amount, and as the story goes, the King has him “tortured until he would pay his entire debt.” And as the first slave could never in a million years have paid off that debt, well that would have meant he would be tortured forever; which just caps off this wonderfully hyperbolic story of forgiveness and retribution with even more exaggeration. Remember these stories are told as illustrations, they are not to be taken literally!

Ok, so having heard all this, what are we to take from it?

Forgiveness is difficult, it’s really hard! When you’ve been sinned against, been hurt by someone, the last thing you want to do is forgive the one who hurt you. We are justifiably angry, like the King in our story was. He had been wronged, he had a right to be angry. And he lashed out at his slave, the one he had trusted. Our first instinct is to hurt back—to do to them, what they did to you, a kind of reverse golden rule! And that is not Jesus’ way, that was not the example Jesus taught, or lived, and as Christians we *know* that. But just knowing that doesn’t make it any easier to forgive, does it? Forgiving doesn’t mean forgetting that the sin happened. Some events or situations shouldn’t be forgotten--the Holocaust, slavery, abuse of women and children, infidelities, or lies or betrayals that have turned your life upside down.³ Nor should we deny that that the pain that comes from being sinned against isn’t there. That only makes it worse. Hanging onto it gives us, in one way, a feeling of control—we have been wronged, sinned against, our anger is justified, we have the right to feel this way. And yes, in a way that’s true. The anger, the hurt is real, our feelings are real. But what does that holding onto the hurt do to us? Denying what has happened or denying the hurt

² Stanley Saunders (Columbia Theological Seminary, Atlanta Ga)

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3393 accessed September 12.17:

³ Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn in *Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol 4* Pastoral Perspective for Matthew 18. 21-35 page 71

only buries it deeper, it doesn't heal it. Instead it just festers there, now and again raising its ugly head, forcing us to deal with it again and again—like a boil that doesn't go away. God doesn't torture us when we hold onto resentments, even justifiable resentment. We do a great job of that to ourselves! When we forgive, letting go of the hurt or resentment releases us from the pain it has caused—rather like finally getting to the splinter of wood that caused the boil to start in the first place. It really is a control thing. But what does that desire for control and judgement cost us, the need we have to hang on to the resentment, the hurt the anger; maybe so we can feel justified in our anger to hurt back the one who hurt us?

Let me end by sharing this lovely explanation I came across from Marjorie Thompson, a Presbyterian minister, writer and retreat leader:

To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgement may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem. ... Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the *punitive consequences* they deserve because of their behaviour. The behaviour remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound's power to hold us is trapped, is broken.⁴

It's hard to let go, to let go of the control of feeling justified in our anger, the need we have to want to judge others. But it's hard on us when we hang onto it, it can trap us in a tortuous circle of never ending blame and desire for retaliation, which only causes its own circle of pain.

To forgive is the ultimate "letting go and letting God." And with the strength of Jesus to support us, it is possible. It can take time, and repeated tries, but we also know that with God's power working within us, we can do even more than we could ever imagine.

Amen.

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⁴ Marjorie Thompson quoted by Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn in Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol 4 Pastoral Perspective for Matthew 18. 21-35 page 71-72

