

"Forgiving Each Other - It's Not Easy!"

Matthew 18:21-35
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Matthew 22:34-40
St. James UCC

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When Peter came to Jesus and asked how many times he should keep on forgiving his brother, he offered the number seven. Should I forgive him seven times? This was a generous offer on Peter's part, and I'm sure that he expected to be commended for being so generous in his willingness to forgive. Even the Talmud, which is a series of commentaries on the Jewish Law, suggested forgiving someone three times as an acceptable maximum - not a minimum but a maximum. We all know how hard it is to forgive someone when they repeatedly offend us. Seven times does seem like a lot. Peter was willing to bend over backwards... but it still wasn't enough. You all know the answer that Jesus gave. Not seven times, but seventy times seven.

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, in this answer Jesus was not trying to create a magic number. We can all do the math and come to the conclusion that seventy times seven is four hundred and ninety. But four hundred and ninety is no more a magic number than was three or seven. For Jesus is not trying to say to Peter that you forgive someone four hundred and ninety times and on the four hundred and ninety first tell them that you're sorry but you will not forgive them again. They've used up their quota.

Rather, by multiplying Peter's suggestion by seventy, Jesus was taking the discussion to a new plane. In offering a figure that was so exorbitantly high, Jesus was suggesting that we don't keep count, that forgiveness is not something which is done by the Law. I'm forgiving you only because the Law says that I have to, not because I want to. Forgiveness is not just a matter of record keeping, of checking off how many times so that you know when you're done. Rather, Jesus is suggesting something that is both radical and extremely powerful, for He is suggesting that forgiveness is a gift that we have received from God, a gift that requires that we share it, a gift that keeps on giving.

Jesus tells a wonderful parable about forgiveness. A king is checking on his accounts when one of his servants is brought in who owes him millions of dollars. The servant obviously does not have enough to pay his debt, so the king orders that he and his family be sold as slaves in order to pay off at least some of what he owes. But the servant pleads with the king for patience, saying that he will pay the king everything that he owes. In response, the king not only gives him more time, but forgives the debt and lets the servant go.

This servant then goes out and encounters one of his fellow servants who owes him a few dollars. Forcefully he demands immediate payment! When his fellow servant asks for a little more time, he refuses, instead having him thrown into jail until he pays his debt. (I must confess that the logic escapes me as to why it would help to throw someone into jail until they pay their debt. But, as we're all aware that was a common

practice during certain periods of history.)

The other servants are upset by this action and report to the king what has happened. He too is naturally upset and calls the servant before him, and then angrily sends the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the millions of dollars that he owes.

This is not just a nice little story that has no real relevance to our lives. Yes it does have a nice message about forgiveness and how we can't expect to receive forgiveness on the one hand while not being willing to offer it to others on the other hand. That is an extremely important concept for us to understand. We can't just take the forgiveness that is offered without being willing to give some in return.

But where Jesus really gets personal is at the very end of the parable when he says: "That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart!" This is not just a nice little story that we can enjoy and then forget if we choose. Jesus is in effect saying that the way we will spend eternity is on the line here.

You see, Jesus is reminding us that God has already forgiven each of us many times. In so many ways we are like the first servant. We owe this enormous debt to God, a debt that we will never be able to repay. I say that because we all make so many mistakes, no one of us is even close to being perfect, and so if left strictly to our own merits, none of us will be able to earn the gifts of salvation and eternal life. We will always fall short. We will never be able to earn them on our own.

But God is like the king, loving us and feeling sorry for us, and so God gives us freely that which we can never earn. Just as the king forgave the servants debt, so God forgives ours. God forgives us the debt of our sin, so that it's like it never happened.

Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross, was reminded one day of a vicious deed that someone had done to her years before. But she acted as if she had never heard of the incident. "Don't you remember it?" her friend asked. "No", came Barton's reply, "I distinctly remember forgetting it."

That's how God is with us. God forgives and forgets, wiping the slate clean, distinctly remembering forgetting those wrongs that we have done, so that it is indeed like they never happened.

The problem is that often we fail to get the message. We have been forgiven. We have received this precious gift of forgiveness, a gift that we have not deserved, and certainly could never have earned, but it has come to us nevertheless.

In the parable Jesus told the servant went out and had his fellow servant thrown in jail for his inability to pay a much smaller debt than the one which had just been forgiven of him. We too are often like that servant. People that we know offend or hurt us. They do something wrong, and we have trouble forgiving them. It's so much easier to hold a grudge, to nurse the anger and the hurt that we feel, and to keep holding it over their heads until they pay.

Yet somewhere, somehow we have forgotten about the gift that God has given us. We have forgotten that we have been forgiven generously and freely, that we have received this wonderful precious gift, and in receiving it have accepted the obligation of sharing it. Somehow we twist the message around so that it says something like: "I expect to be forgiven, particularly by God, but it's not my job to forgive someone else."

But it is our job! That is the responsibility that comes to us when we accept the gift of forgiveness - to pass the gift on, to share it with others.

In that sense forgiveness is a lot like love - the more you share it, the more it grows. It's one of those amazing gifts that doesn't get used up as we use it, but becomes stronger and better.

The reason of course is that forgiveness arises out of love. God loves us and out of that love forgives us, even when we act as people who don't deserve to be forgiven. God does not give up on us, even when we act as if we have given up on ourselves.

Jesus reminds us of our obligation in the great commandment when we are instructed to love God with all of our heart, with all of our soul, and with all of our mind, and then to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

That's the kicker. You see, we expect to be forgiven. We gratefully receive the gift when it is offered to us. Sometimes we even receive it not very gratefully, almost expecting it as something that is owed to us. But we all expect to receive the gift of forgiveness - from God, certainly, and we also expect to receive it from one another. For we know that we really aren't so bad. Once in a while we make mistakes, we do things that we regret, but we know how much we need to be forgiven, so that we can have another chance, and we expect that the opportunity will be given to us. It's ungrateful and ungracious of someone else to fail to forgive us, to fail to give us another chance.

Yet, Jesus commands that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. If we expect to be forgiven, if we expect to be given another chance, an opportunity to do better, then in love we can do no less than to give that same chance to those who sin against us. They too need to be forgiven, and to withhold the gift of forgiveness is to fail to love them as we love ourselves.

Sometimes it's very hard to forgive someone. It may well be the most difficult thing that we have ever been expected to do. Yet some of the hardest things that we do are also the most rewarding, and that's true in this case as well. What is at stake here is our relationship with God, and if that isn't worth a little pain and anguish, then we'd better look again, because somehow we have our priorities messed up.

God has first loved us and forgiven us, even when that hasn't been easy to do. God knows that sometimes we're pretty unlovable and difficult to forgive, but those gifts of love and forgiveness are always there for us, and there's only one thing that's asked of us in return - that we share those gifts freely with one another. So let us walk into the world as bearers of God's gifts of love and forgiveness, and as bearers of those priceless gifts, let us share them freely.

Amen.