

## **Parable of the unforgiving servant**

Exodus 14:19–31

Psalm 114

Romans 14:1–12

Matthew 18:21–35

### **Text: Matthew 18:21-22**

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’

### **Introduction**

The novelist and writer Anne Lamott said, in her typically blunt fashion, I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of the Christians who is heavily into forgiveness ... that I am one of the other kind. But even though it was funny, and actually true, it started to be too painful to stay this way ... In fact, not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.

1. It was apparent to the Apostle Peter for some time. Following Jesus meant forgiving his fellow disciples who sinned against him. Perhaps the implications of the prayer Jesus taught them to pray had become apparent or increasingly obvious—you know the line, “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” When Peter first heard Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son he may have been surprised—but the forgiveness of the father who welcomed the lost son home had to have warmed his heart with respect to the love of God for him that Jesus was asserting. And there was the way Jesus welcomed the sinner. Was Peter surprised or even a little uncertain about Jesus when Jesus called the tax collector Matthew to join the crew of disciples? And then there was Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and she was now in the company of disciples as Jesus was travelling bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.

It may have been that Peter wasn’t, as Anne Lamott said of herself, heavily into forgiveness. You can imagine some of the things that cropped up between these disciples; recall the argument they got into over who among them would be the big cheese when Jesus came into his kingdom. Yet it is apparent to Peter and the rest, given how Jesus treats them and others, that Jesus expects them to forgive one another the hurts of the treatment that erupts from sinful hearts. So finally, Peter asks the question they all want to ask. (Peter is often the spokesperson for the group when asking about something they all wanted to know; and I am grateful for Peter who was bold to ask.) ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’

The question Peter asks is literally, “if a brother of mine sins against me?” Our NRSV translates this as “if another member of the church” because the context shows that the word “brother” is used generically to mean ‘those walking in company with Jesus.’ Matthew’s gospel, written years after the event, relates this teaching as instruction for the church having included it with the teaching that precedes it on resolving these sorts of problems that arise in the community of Christ’s followers.

You note that Peter asks how often he should forgive and proposes a number, “as many as seven times?” I am sure that Peter thinks he is being quite generous when he proposes ‘seven times.’ Do you not, along with Peter, find that forgiveness is not easy and that your personal limit is reached before you can count to seven? And Jesus’ answer sounds way too demanding, ‘seventy-seven times’ or, more likely, ‘seventy times seven times.’ Jesus’ point with Peter and us is that this business with regard to forgiveness isn’t a matter of calculation. Calculation isn’t how to understand or think about forgiveness.

Forgiving one another needs to be thought of in a different way; the nature of forgiveness is determined not with scales and measures but in the heart of God; and Jesus proceeds to help us in this regard with a story about an unforgiving servant. “For this reason,” said Jesus—because it isn’t a matter of calculation—“the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.” The general thrust of the parable is that apprehension of the impossible debt for which God has forgiven the believer calls the believer to lead a life of forgiving these lesser debts owed us. In light of the reception God accords us, what is our response to be? What is our responsibility, our task? What attitude and act on our part reflects God’s attitude and act concerning us? It’s this: we who have been drenched in God’s mercy—the cross—are now to extend a similar mercy, pardon, forgiveness to those who offend us

2. Soren Kierkegaard maintained that human existence is ‘a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal.’ He uses the word eternal to mean God. By ‘a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal’ he does not mean a hybrid of the human and the divine. He is not suggesting that we become divinized or semi-divine, or that human speculation can ever rise to consonance with God. He simply means that human existence at all times unfolds in relation to God. God can be fled, but God cannot be escaped, and therefore human existence always has to do with one’s relationship to God, and to be truly human is to acknowledge, embrace, and dwell in that relationship.<sup>1</sup>

According to the gospel, to live in right relationship with God—‘justified by faith’ is how Paul puts it—is to know yourself forgiven. While not a perfect analogy, the spiritual air from which the believer draws breath is the forgiveness of God. In thinking about how to live, experiencing God’s forgiveness is our starting point; it is the foundation upon which we build; it is the true north to which our life’s compass is oriented; it is the wind that is blowing into which we set our sails; it is that ballast that regulates stability in the seas of life; it is the assumption we make as we turn to embrace those whom Christ has turned to himself and then to one another. The forgiveness of God norms and forms everything about us as Christ’s followers.

As we probe the wonder of God’s forgiveness of our sin—sin being essentially our telling God to get lost, we can handle things on our own just fine—it becomes clear in the gospel that the only thing God could do with sin in humans was to forgive. God couldn’t excuse sin as no big deal. It wasn’t as if we simply forgot to pray once in a while—sin is to disdain the goodness of God. There was no negotiation that could fix it as if we could simply come to the bargaining table for a meeting of the minds between us and God. Sin has tainted everything about us. We humans have nothing to negotiate with; according to the gospel there is none righteous, no not one.

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<sup>1</sup> Victor A. Shepherd, *The Committed Self: An Introduction to Existentialism for Christians*, BPS Books, 2015, p. 116

In the parable Jesus tells, the magnitude of debt that is forgiven the unforgiving servant is described in such a way that hearers knew the debt was impossible to be repaid no matter how long the servant had. Some might wonder why the king put the servant in a situation where he could run up so mountainous a debt; it's the king's fault. Don't we say that to God when we say, you made me like this, it's your fault. If you don't like sin, why did you put me in a place where I could run up such a debt? The gospel insists we are culpable for our sin. In fact the most optimistic thing you can say about what ails us humans is that we are sinners because it was never intended to be this way and God has provided all that is needed to turn from sin and know life as he intended for us.

With respect to the magnitude of the debt, as we have noted on other occasions, we cannot comprehend in a complete way what sin means to God. At the cross Father and Son bear the profoundest alienation that sin eventuates in the eternality of God's own being; hear the cry of dereliction on Jesus' lips, "My God, My God, what have you forsaken me." He experienced godforsakenness—the penalty of sin—so we would never have to. Jesus speaks pointedly of the peril of a human heart so calcified in the rebellious attitude that tells God to get lost to point where God gives what one wants, forsakenness. The scripture teaches us that, "the Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made". (Psalm 145:9) Humanity, though sinful, has not been abandoned by God.

And it isn't just at the cross where we catch a glimpse of sin's utter sinfulness that issues in death. Recall Jesus in the garden praying 'not my will, but thine be done.' Not the Jesus we see depicted in the picture of him quietly kneeling by a rock piously praying with hands folded and a shaft of heavenly light flooding upon him. Instead go to the gospels that describe him as agitated, staggering, sweating, writhing, falling to the ground as he contemplates the horror of what is before him; in Luke's gospel it says his sweat was like great drops of blood. When I contemplate the magnitude of my sin's debt and what it cost God to forgive; the garden prayer that insisted there was no other way and the dereliction borne at the cross by Father and Son; this good news of God's forgiveness is the narrative for my life that informs how I ought to regard these occasions when hurt may come as someone may sin against me. Or as Jesus taught us to pray, 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.'

3. I want to be clear that Jesus is not denigrating the hurts that we experience as someone—in the words of Peter—might sin against us. In emphasising the magnitude of the impossible debt for which we are forgiven by God, in comparison with the much smaller and lesser debts of someone's sin against us, Jesus is not saying something like, "don't sweat the small stuff." No. Jesus never treats sin as a trivial matter.

There's nothing in the world more difficult than forgiving someone who has hurt us; not irked us, not annoyed us, not pricked us, but stabbed us. We are fallen creatures, and to fallen creatures there is nothing sweeter than revenge. We can spend hours fantasizing as to how we are going to even the score; how we can humiliate someone with the clever putdown. We can give no end of time and ardour to this, all the while telling ourselves that we have a right to it, even an obligation to defend our honour and save face. Let me say it again. There's nothing more difficult than forgiving someone who has wounded us. It can be likened only to

crossbearing. Still, we who are the beneficiaries of Christ's cross mustn't now try to shirk our own.

Forgiveness is not excusing. We excuse one another small stuff because it's small stuff and excusable. We excuse a baby crying in a grocery store because they are hungry; we excuse our spouse because they forgot to go and pick up an item at the store on their way home from work; these are not matters that require forgiveness. When an action is excusable, it doesn't require forgiveness. We forgive things that matter unspeakably because the only thing we can do with it is forgive. The crying child can be comforted; the forgetful spouse can quickly head out to the store and get what is needed. The hurt of sin can only be forgiven.

Forgiveness is not reconciling. Reconciliation is always the best-case scenario that happens after forgiveness of hurt; we always hope that relationships can be restored. Sometimes you forgive but relationship is not restored, especially if the experience was life-shattering and trust is removed. You can forgive the person who stole from you; this does not require you to now trust them with your wallet. The wonder of God's forgiveness is he has reconciled us to himself in Jesus. We are not God, but in light of God's reconciling work we can hope for reconciliation between one another.

4. In the parable the unforgiving servant looks bizarre—how could a person just released from a massive debt be so hard-hearted towards someone who owed him so little? His fellow servants were so disgusted they told the king. In the face of God's undeserved, oceanic mercy inundating us, we appear equally hard-hearted if we then insist on our pound of flesh. The final application by Jesus of the story gives pause; reflecting on the king's harsh reaction to the unforgiving servant Jesus said, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

How are we to hear this? I note with you that the Apostles', who heard Jesus give this teaching, do not preach sermons suggesting that God is going to torture you in some prison until you pay some debt. I do hear them preach things like, "God opposes the proud," and "if you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh." I would hear this word of Jesus telling us that God knows how to oppose an unforgiving heart—maybe even rough us up to get our attention. Better that we heed the import of Jesus' parable.

I think it clear that Jesus calls us never to treat the forgiveness of God as a trivial matter because sin is never a trivial matter. Further, Jesus never calls us to generate forgiveness out of our own resources; we are simply not to put a crimp in the hose but allow the forgiveness of God to flow through us. I note that sin disrupts and destroys relationships. When Jesus calls us to forgive our brother and sisters from the heart, it must mean that God treasures our relationships of love for one another as his people as something of high importance.

Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'