

The Forgiveness Equation

Matthew 18:21-35

Linda and I are experiencing our second round of children – we had our 2 children and now 2 grandchildren. Our granddaughter, Lydia, is starting kindergarten and grandson, Tommie, will soon be 2. So, Tommie is in that age where he is all over the place, climbing, getting into anything he can. He is curious and interactive and loves it when others join him for playtime – especially his big sister. He loves books being read over and over to him, rolling or tossing balls back and forth and back and forth, and building towers which he knocks down, again and again and again. Both our children and grandchildren loved the same simple activities over and over, hearing the same stories over and over – to the point where you wonder, “When will this end?”...We humans seemed to be wired for a certain level of repetition even from a young age. But that easy going acceptance of repetition seems to snag and get held up when issues of injustice and suffering are concerned. How many times in the scriptures do we hear someone asking when will it end? When will the injustice and suffering end!? The Psalmist cries out How long, O LORD? How long will you hide your face from me? (Psalm 13), Habakkuk laments O LORD, how long shall I cry for help?(Habakkuk 1:2) And even God gets in on the act of impatience with injustice over and over again asking how long will these people despise me and harden their hearts? (Numbers 14:11).

It's no wonder, then, that in today's text we find Peter also asking for a definite number, to a question of justice: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?” To understand where this question is coming from we must remember that Peter is fresh off the conversation about community procedures for accountability (how to hold someone accountable) that is found in the first part of Matthew 18. There Jesus was speaking with the disciples on how to work with each other in the midst of the community when things go wrong – “If your brother sins, go and point out their fault, then take witnesses, take it to the church...Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Apparently, Peter is still mulling all this over in his mind. He seems to have the process down... now he just needs to know the magic number of how many times he's required to go through the process before he has officially fulfilled his duty on the forgiveness front.

Now, Peter has been around Jesus long enough to know that Jesus works a bit outside of the box when it comes to explaining kingdom standards and expectations. Peter gets that about Jesus, and so he offers to Jesus what must seem, at least to Peter, like an extraordinarily generous number of times to offer forgiveness. "Seven?" Can you imagine the same person offending or harming you seven different times and forgiving him each of those times?

Well, Jesus replies, "No, not seven times." I like to pause here and envision Peter gleeful for just a brief second thinking he has finally surpassed Jesus' expectations with his suggestion of 7 offerings of forgiveness...that's more generous than even Jesus would suggest...But then Jesus goes on..."No, not seven times; I tell you seventy times seven."

And this is where Peter's jaw drops. At first he's wondering if he has heard right, what did Jesus just say?? Offer forgiveness seventy times? No, no, that's not what he said...he said seventy times seven. Now Peter's quickly working out the equation in his head, but it's so big he needs to write it down so he grabs a stick and starts drawing in the dirt...seventy times seven...zero, nine, four...and all the while Jesus is just patiently standing back and looking at him in the usual way...the way that says, you're not really getting this at all, but I can see that you're really, really trying.

What Peter isn't getting yet, is that Jesus' equation of seventy times seven isn't a magic forgiveness equation, it isn't even an equation that works out to a number - it is a request to throw all the numbers out - to stop counting wrongs and reconciliations and to start living forgiveness in all things, all the time.

Seeing that Peter is going to need a little help grasping this one, Jesus goes on and offers a parable. While the parable he offers may not be one of the more cryptic/veiled parables in Jesus' repertoire, it may be one of the most mind-boggling in scope, and he wastes no time in telling it:

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

The stage is set, the kingdom of heaven is like a ruler who has the power to settle accounts, to draw things in line. The solution for the account in this situation is obvious to the ruler. This debtor/the servant owes Ten thousand bags of gold or in today's value tens of millions of dollars; that is more money than could be repaid in several lifetimes. There won't be an option for full repayment and so the ruler makes the choice to get what can possibly be gotten - a foreclosure is ordered, not just on the servant's property, but also on himself and his family.

This, of course, gets the indebted servant's attention, his actions and choices...whatever the situation is that has brought him to this place of insurmountable debt has now spilled over into a whole new level of indebtedness - he must now pay with his own life...and his wife and children are also to be placed on the auction block alongside him. In this moment, awareness of the full magnitude of his debt starts to sink in. Or perhaps his response springs forth from deep desperation, because when he hears the verdict:

"...the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything'."

Few other choices are available to the servant in this moment, but to throw caution to the wind and ask, and not **just ask** but **beg**, for patience and mercy so that the debt can be repaid **without sacrificing the lives of his family**. In the allegory to the kingdom that is being offered by Jesus in this parable, the next small sentence seems pretty important, it tells us that all characters in the kingdom of God have a voice, and that the **use** of that voice can have a powerful impact.

The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

This is where we start to get the bigger picture of the kingdom that Jesus is describing. The ruler of this kingdom doesn't wield power for gain, but is a ruler who willingly listens to the request of the indebted servant and is moved with pity. This is a relational ruler, one who values and is moved to action by the participation of kingdom citizens...One commentary I read used the word **kin-dom** and not kingdom; the **kin dom** Jesus describes is not based on the authority and power of one being, it is a **kin dom** that welcomes the participation of all, valuing and granting power to relationship.

In this moment, the **power of relationship** moves the ruler to action. The king is not only moved with pity, the king takes the extraordinary action of completely writing off the servant's debt. This is extravagant forgiveness...It is extravagant forgiveness that is offered without hesitation and without condition. This is seventy times seven forgiveness – forgiveness without hesitation and without any conditions.

Forgiveness like this is challenging to us because it doesn't necessarily involve any resolution or what **we** might consider to be justice. Instead, forgiveness like this makes the choice to revere **life and relationship** above the wrongdoing – yet without ignoring the wrongdoing.

Dr Alexander Evans, Senior Pastor at Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA puts it this way: “To forgive does not mean we condone what was done to us. To forgive does not mean we acquiesce or deny justice. To forgive means to refuse to let what happened destroy us and alienate us from God and from one another.” Or to think of it in another way: “Forgiveness allows us to actually let go of the pain in the memory, and if we let go of the pain in the memory, we can have the memory, but it doesn’t control us.” Forgiveness like this allows us to break the cycle of revenge in favor of love and relationship. It is revolutionary not reactionary.

Jesus’ parable doesn’t let us witness the response of the indebted servant to this unimaginable pardon. We can only guess at the joy and exhilaration, relief and shock that must have coursed through his body in that moment when this revolutionary forgiveness was extended. Instead, Jesus reminds us just how easy it is to accept forgiveness but that the real forgiveness equation of the kingdom is **learning how to extend it in kind.**

The story goes on:

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt”.

Forgiveness is an act that we must choose...it is the kingdom way to offer extravagant forgiveness, but the choice to forgive comes at the expense of letting go of our underlying drive for repayment and revenge. Now that is a challenging notion. Even when we have experienced the grace of forgiveness for ourselves... letting go of our underlying drive for repayment and revenge is a pretty hard to do isn’t it?

Peter's initial question in this whole conversation was "how many times must I forgive a brother or a sister that does me wrong?" The question itself points out that we are creatures with the capacity to hurt and be hurt by each other over and over and over again. Jesus, through this parable, calls us to responses that are revolutionary instead of reactionary. We are called to be people who revere life and are empowered through relationship to choose forgiveness first and to choose it over and over and over again.

This is not a new lesson to Peter, Jesus had already impressed upon the disciples the importance and nature of forgiveness when he taught them (and us) to pray "forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors." (Matthew 6:12) To understand the full power of forgiveness and to let go of our notions and instinct for revenge may seem a high price to pay, but the implications of clinging to resentment becomes stark as Jesus' parable continues:

"When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (You remember the Lord's prayer Forgive our debts as we forgive debtors).

This is not a threat from a vengeful and angry God, it is a call to the revolutionary justice of kingdom living. A **kin**-dom which invites participation from and listens to its citizens.

We are collaborators in the kingdom and we are called to free ourselves from the self-imposed imprisonment of held on to/retained resentments by extending forgiveness to others as has been extravagantly extended to us.

From a young age, like our grandkids, we come equipped with the power to knock down, but with time, learning, and practice, we gain the ability to build up. May God grant us the courage to choose love and relationship again and again that we may learn to forgive again and again. Amen.

Let your lives witness to Christ's love.

Let your words bring reconciliation.

Let your thoughts be of peace.

Let your touch bring healing.

Let your actions count for justice.

Be a sign of hope and a beacon of joy.

Go and may God's blessing go with you.