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Exodus 14:19-31

Matthew 18:21-35

THE WAY FORWARD

Be reasonable, Jesus. Seventy-seven times?! Your expectations of us and for us are way too high! We thought forgiving the same person as many as seven times was extremely generous. Seven could be considered a holy number, a number for completeness. So, Jesus, you should be patting Peter on the back for suggesting that people of faith should forgive someone who sins against them as many as seven times. But instead you say seventy-seven?!

Why in heaven's name did Jesus set the bar that high? An initial answer may be that he wanted to bring to mind the story of Lamech in the Book of Genesis. You may remember that in its descriptive stories about human nature, the first book of the Bible tells about Cain killing his brother, Abel. Lamech is described as one of Cain's descendants, someone who lived by blood revenge. As Mister Tough Guy, he proudly tells his family that when someone might merely hit him, he would kill that person. He says, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold."¹ A gang-like mindset of unlimited vengeance toward someone who has brought injury is definitely not what Jesus sees as a way forward.

But some don't respond with violence – instead they internalize their hurt and descend into bitterness. Jesus was concerned not only about what could happen publicly, but also what could happen personally if a relationship shows no grace. Jailed unjustly for 27 years, Nelson Mandela reportedly said, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."² Jesus called upon his followers to not ingest the poison – that was not a way to move forward.

To help them to live differently, Jesus told a story about a slave who owed a king much, much more than he would ever be able to repay. In more recent terms, the story could be told this way: "There was a minimum wage custodian at Microsoft

who owed Bill Gates a billion dollars.” When the debt came due, it was clear it was un-payable. Nevertheless, the debtor ridiculously exclaimed, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” Bill Gates, realizing the value of the statement, responds in an even more preposterous way. With no threats or recriminations, as an expression of extravagant mercy, he forgives the huge debt – all of it. As the former debtor leaves, even as the words of forgiveness are still ringing in his ears, he runs into someone who owed him a much smaller amount. To make the math plain, it was over half a million times less than what he had owed. Does he invite the person over to his house to help him celebrate what had happened to him? No, he grabs the debtor by the throat and demands to be paid the small amount he was owed. The debtor pleads for patience and says he will pay. He uses the same words the first debtor had used, the only difference being that this debt was of a size that actually could be paid off. But the former debtor refuses to wait and has the man thrown into debtors’ prison. It boggles the mind that one who had been forgiven so much couldn’t find it in his heart to forgive even a small amount.

Jesus says, that’s how shocking it is for us to receive God’s generous forgiveness and not be willing to forgive others. When we hold other people to a strict accounting, treating them only on the basis of what we think they owe or merit, while forgetting that we ourselves have received unmerited grace and have had all our debts erased by the mercy of God, then we are just as clueless and thankless as the first debtor in the story. The difference between feeling forgiven and feeling justified is immense.

Traditionally Presbyterians have used the word ‘debts’ to refer to our sins in our version of the Lord’s Prayer. We have done so because ‘debts’ is the translation offered in the King James Version and the New Revised Standard Versions of the Lord’s Prayer found in Matthew and because of this parable. In focusing on the nature of sin and forgiveness, there are a couple of points where the concept of debts informs us. Referring to our sin as our debts implies assuming personal responsibility for them. Sin is a failure on our part to give to God what is due. The concept of indebtedness helps us understand that our sinfulness is not someone else’s fault, but is our own personal responsibility. Years ago a

comedian named Flip Wilson played a character who delighted in saying that the Devil had made him do whatever wrong he had done. ³ He never had to take responsibility. He wasn't at fault. But with each of us indebted to God, we begin to look at how we are responsible for our own sinfulness.

A second thought about debts and sins has to do with the burden of our debts because we can't pay them. If we had only broken taboo instead of sinning, perhaps we could find the right word which would free us of the curse. If we had only broken the law, we could serve our sentence. But when we are in debt to God and to our brothers and sisters because of our sin, what is a way forward?

It is at that point that we can ask for forgiveness. The abundance of God's mercy does not imply that our sin is unimportant or nonexistent. Rather, when we acknowledge our brokenness before God and repent or turn away from it, we are moving forward toward the wholeness God intends for us.

The Hebrews had long been slaves in Egypt when God delivered them. They thought they were on their way to freedom, when they realized their powerful enemy was right behind them and a sea was in front of them. They felt trapped, but God brought them through the waters. There may be something ominous behind us in our past, or even something within us that keeps us from moving forward. It's good to remember that God brought us through the waters when we were baptized. The grace expressed in the waters of the font can be reflected in our lives. There are powers beyond us and within us that can dominate and destroy. But there is an even greater power in the God who forgives, loves, and heals. We seek to identify ourselves with the greater power. Liberation is ours, if we live it.

But once we have been forgiven, what will we do in relation to others - unlimited vengeance, unlimited bitterness, or unlimited grace? Grace is a candle's light in darkness. Grace lifts up what weighs us down. It offers us freedom. When we recognize the grace that has come our way and when we are truly grateful for it, then we can move toward reflecting the goodness that has been shown to us. God's gift of grace is freedom to live large, not to be captured by one another's

shortcomings but to rejoice in God's astonishing acceptance and to share that extravagance with others.

To forgive does not mean we condone what was done to us. To forgive does not mean we jettison justice. To forgive means to refuse to let what happened destroy us and alienate us from God and from one another. There is a way forward. By God's grace, there is a way forward! What we breathe in from God's mercy we express to others. Inhale, exhale - forgive us, as we forgive - a basic part of God's gift of life. The God who loves sinners and hates grudges is the One who makes a way to move forward. Amen.

¹ Genesis 4:24

²<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/144557-resentment-is-like-drinking-poison-and-then-hoping-it-will>

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flip_Wilson