

We are people forgiven by God, and in turn we are called to be forgiving of others. We may be familiar with quick and easy slogans, such as “forgive and forget.” Yet we all know that forgiveness can be difficult at best, and forgetting can be practically impossible to do. Yet the Scriptures challenge us to forgive in the same way that God has forgiven us—without end.

Jesus and his disciples were all familiar with the Jewish law, and so it stands to reason that Peter knew the common practice was to forgive someone three times, that is, to forgive them for three wrongs. We say “three strikes and you’re out.” In the book of Amos, God proclaims “*for three crimes, and for four,*” suggesting that the people were forgiven for sinning against God three times, but if they kept at it a fourth time they would “earn” God’s wrath.

Peter, let’s remember, has been hanging around Jesus long enough to know that Jesus tends to stretch God’s law, and so, probably in an effort to look like he was “ahead of the game” on this compassion thing, he suggests that perhaps he ought to forgive someone...how many times? Seven times. “*No, not seven times,*” Jesus replied, “*but seventy times seven.*” Even if you read a Bible that renders the number as 77 (an alternative reading), the point is not to wait for the 78th or the 491st wrong and then stick it to the other person. Jesus seems to be suggesting something radically different. That we break the cycle of wrongs by offering forgiveness every time.

Now, often when people hear biblical commands about forgiveness, they tend to go on the defensive. We might seek to apply this to criminal matters, and say, “Well, you can’t forgive a mass murderer,” or “How do you forgive someone who is going to repeat a crime that hurts others?” It’s sometimes hard to take biblical law and apply it to living in our society today. But maybe the clue lies in Jesus’ parable.

Someone owed a massive debt, a debt so inconceivable it’s beyond funny. Jesus basically says, “A slave owed his master 100 trillion dollars.” Let’s face it, no one owes that kind of debt. But the slave tried everything to convince the master that he would try to repay it, and the master relents and forgives the debt. Nice story; but it’s not over. The slave bumps into someone who owes him a nickel, and he goes ballistic. Even when the second slave begs for mercy—it’s only a few cents, after all—the first, forgiven slave won’t hear of it, and throws the second slave into prison until he can pay the debt. (As an aside, one has to wonder how a person in jail will earn the money to pay off a debt.) When the master hears of this, he is understandably furious with the slave for not extending the same mercy the master extended.

“*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart,*” Jesus says. Strong stuff. This marvelous parable of Jesus from Matthew 18 is both a story of immeasurable grace and a profound warning, for the merciful master becomes, at the refusal of passed on forgiveness, the stern judge.

The petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*” is really a prayer for release from whatever prevents us from moving into the hopeful future made possible by Jesus Christ. Forgiveness among humans is not on the same order of God’s forgiveness, but more about freedom from the past. When we do not forgive others their debt to us, we are in fact not free ourselves, for we remain attached to them. And as we hold them bound, so we remain bound. The good news is that the forgiveness

we extend to others does not well up from our own goodness, but comes from our own experience of having been forgiven in the first place by God.

Forgiveness is God's answer to the fruitless cycles of hostility, violence, and revenge. This petition thus becomes a prayer for an end to wars, feuds, and grudges. It calls for restorative justice and mediation as ways of resolving conflict and dispute in peaceable ways that promote renewal and restoration of persons to their communities.

This summer Jayne and I took a wonderful trip to the Canadian Rockies, but speaking of rocks, the first leg of the trip had a rocky start. To preface my story, we have a friend in Texas who before our trip had posted on Facebook that he was through with Air Canada because of the disappointments he had experienced when traveling with that air carrier. We were booked to go from Pittsburgh to Toronto to Calgary on Air Canada.

We checked in, but at the gate before we left Pittsburgh, I was called to the desk and told there was a problem with my checked luggage. My bag had been erroneously checked under the name "Gary McDonald" who was an Air Canada passenger going to Moncton, New Brunswick, not Calgary, Alberta. My bag was pulled from the luggage cart in time and it sat all alone on the tarmac for the longest time. Finally, I was called back to the desk and given a ticket that did not look like the usual claim ticket for checked luggage.

When we arrived in Toronto I asked an Air Canada agent if my bag was on its way to Calgary too, since there was confusion before our departure. I was assured that it was. Once we arrived at Calgary, when the luggage carousel came to a stop guess who had no bag? I marched into the baggage customer service office and gave the agent my ticket. "That's not a baggage claim ticket" he said. "I've never seen anything like that" he said and handed back the ticket. At that point I became more than a little perturbed with this agent and I said to him (probably shouted at him), "This IS my claim ticket and I'm not going to hand it over to you again, because you're not to be trusted, but I'll be glad to read you the numbers."

About then, Jayne took my arm and pulled me back, and said, "Let me talk to him and explain this." I was going to demand to talk to his supervisor, but fortunately another agent was listening as Jayne told our tale of woe and suggested that the first agent enter the numbers from my ticket into his computer anyway. Voilà. My luggage had found its way to Calgary after all. It just hadn't come through normal channels or made it to the baggage claim yet.

It flashed in my mind that the Christ-like thing to do would be to apologize to the agent for flying off the handle, but what I really wanted to tell this guy was how close I came to strangling him before Jayne intervened and his co-worker suggested that he just look up the bag number. "I'm sorry," would have been a very good thing to say at the moment. It is often the only thing that clears away animosity between people. Anyhow, I quietly forgave that man, but I missed the opportunity to be forgiven by him. At least I'm thankful to be married to a level headed woman who is a Christian peacemaker.

I'll grant that not all situations turn out that well. Yet I think Jesus is suggesting that if we look hard enough, we can find ways to move through patterns of wrong with forgiveness. We often miss the opportunity to forgive or be forgiven, as I did. We can harbor grudges, and not want to be forgiving, or we can have the courage to say, "Let's stop this. Let's find a way to get along."

In the biblical translation *The Message*, the familiar statement about forgiveness from John 20:23 (where Jesus says, “*If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven*”) is rendered, “*If you don’t forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?*”

Jewish tradition connects the Hebrew people’s freedom from slavery in Egypt to their desire to rejoice in their new-found freedom. But when they began to rejoice, God scolded them and told them to be quiet. “Do you not know that some of my children have died? I am glad to give you freedom—but know that it has not come cheaply.”

I think the same can be said of forgiveness. Forgiveness never comes cheaply. Yet, the cost of not granting someone forgiveness can be very great. We can let things fester and nag at us, or we can find a way to move beyond the hurt, and not let them stand in the way of our relationships.

Forget? Maybe not. Forgive? Most definitely.

In a section of C.S. Lewis’ classic book *Mere Christianity* Lewis addresses Christian virtues. He writes, “The main thing we learn from a serious attempt to practice [any of] the Christian virtues is that we fail. If there was any idea that God had set us a sort of exam, and that we might get good marks by deserving them, has to be wiped out. If there was any idea of a sort of bargain—any idea that we could perform our side of the contract and thus put God in our debt so that it was up to Him, through mere justice, to perform His side—that has to be wiped out.

I think everyone who has some vague belief in God, until he becomes a Christian, has the idea of an exam, or of a bargain in his mind. The first result of real Christianity is to blow that idea to bits. When they find it blown to bits, some people think this means that Christianity is a failure and give up. They seem to imagine that God is very simple-minded. In fact, of course, He knows all about this. One of the very things Christianity was designed to do was to blow this idea to bits. God has been waiting for the moment at which you discover that there is no question of earning a passing mark in this exam or putting Him in your debt.

Then comes another discovery. Every faculty you have, your power of thinking or of moving your limbs from moment to moment, is given to you by God. If you devoted every moment of your whole life exclusively to His service you could not give Him anything that was not in a sense His own already.

So that when we talk of a man doing anything for God or giving anything to God, I will tell you what it is really like. It is like a small child going to its father and saying, “Daddy, give me six-pence to buy you a birthday present.” Of course, the father does, and he is pleased with the child’s present. It is all very nice and proper, but only an idiot would think that the father is sixpence to the good on the transaction.”

“*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*” The prayer does NOT say “forgive us our indebtedness” because we will always remain in God’s debt. We owe to God a debt so inconceivable it’s beyond funny. It’s ridiculous.

But going by Jesus’ parable, we know our debt has been forgiven.

God help us to forgive the debts of others and to mend things that are broken. God give us new hearts. Amen.