

Matthew 18:21-35: Forgiveness in the Church

Introduction:

Today's passage is totally tied to last week's. Last week, Jesus spoke to the Church; today's passage is for us, too. And it continues with some really reasonable questions that come up if we take last week's passage seriously.

Immediately before Peter speaks today, Jesus outlined a strategy for the Church, that community of siblings that we are, that helps us restore our relationships with each other when they get broken by sin.

It's a strategy that's useful for anyone with the smallest amount of goodwill and affection, the smallest openness to the Holy Spirit. It's one that is oriented toward empowering the abused, not the abuser; the sinned-against, not the sinner. It's one that ultimately treats an unrepentant person, committed to a permanently broken relationship, with genuine care and concern. And Jesus reminded us, at the end of it, that we're meant to be like him in the world, and use our power and privilege in the ways he used his.

And then Peter speaks up. Let's pray, and we'll talk about Peter's concern.

Prayer:

Savvy:

So Jesus gets done laying out this way for us to be reconciled, this way for the disempowered, sinned-against, abused person to invite the one who has hurt them back into a right relationship.

And Peter asks a really savvy question:

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

It’s a good question, right? I mean, what if I’m gossiping about you, and you follow that path toward reconciliation Jesus gives us, and I’m so repentant, and apologize, and say I won’t do it again...and I do. What do we do, right, when we are serially sinned against.

We’ve heard, probably, how Peter’s being generous here. Seven times is more than the standard. He sees what Jesus is trying to do, he’s trying to think about what it means to be gracious and generous and forgiving in this way. Seven times.

But Jesus blows it up:

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.[g]"

This is, maybe, one of the most famous bits of Bible with translation problems. We don't know if Jesus is saying seventy-seven times or seventy-times-seven times (so, 490 times, you know?) Either way, it's ok, and his point isn't that we stop at 77, or at 490; his point is that Peter doesn't get it, not really. Peter is thinking in minimalist terms: What's the most we have to do?; What's the least we can get away with?; When can we stop forgiving a brother or sister? And so Jesus redirects him.

He does what Jesus always does--so predictable, Messiah! He tells a story:

A Story About An Unreflective Dope:

I'm going to call this a story about an unreflective dope. I dunno. He's being a dope. All the headers say, "the parable of the unmerciful servant." Oh. Yes. Quite. I want to make it really clear to us that this guy isn't our role model. He may not be a dope, but he's acting like one. And as we go, we see... he's not so much clueless, un-selfaware, as he is malevolent.

23 “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold[h] was brought to him. 25 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.

26 “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ 27 The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

28 “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.[i] He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

29 “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

30 “But he refused. Instead, he went off and

had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32 “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Yikes! Right?!

So there’s a guy. The guy owes ten thousand talents to a king. A talent was, give or take, 20 years worth of income. Let’s start there. 10,000 bags of gold is a terrible way to translate this; almost every way to make this relatable fails. They guys owes 200,000 years worth of salary, right?

Ridiculous. It's immediately ridiculous, and immediately gets our attention. What has he been buying? What kind of Pay Day loan has this guy been manipulated into, you know? What's going on? Interesting to talk about, but irrelevant: The master--maybe the King, maybe the chief steward--is going to sell the guy into slavery, him and his family, but it's not like that's going to pay off the debt, right? People are cheap, then and now. Lives are cheap. You'd need a few of my hometowns working all their lives to pay back what this guy owes.

The guy freaks out, begs, says--hear him: "Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything." By magic, I guess. But the king has pity on him. He knows the guy's a fool, right? Lying, self-deluded, whatever else he is, he's desperate, and so the king forgives him.

Free!

And on his way out the door, the guy, free--free: Imagine it. No more 200,000 years worth of debt. No more threat. Just...himself and his family, free. This guy, on his way out the door, the guy sees another servant. Equal status, you know, except that servant still owes, and he owes the guy a chunk of change. Something like three months worth of income. Not 200,000 years, but "real money," right?

And the newly-forgiven servant chokes the guy and says “Pay back what you owe me!” The other guy, who owes three months, chokes out “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.” It’s the same thing the forgiven servant begged. We hear that. Peter and the Twelve heard it.

The forgiven servant doesn’t hear it. He tosses the man in debtors’ prison until he can pay off the loan. And you never pay off a loan in debtors’ prison. We know that, right? It’s why they’re so, so terrible, workhouses of unpaid labor for whoever runs the prison. We see that this guy isn't a dope; he's... he's a bad guy. He's the antagonist.

The others run to the chief steward, tell him what happened, because they are appalled, and so is he:

32 “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

Just A Story...

This is just a story. Funny, ridiculous at first. A comedy. And then it turns into a tragedy. The punishment the master places on the unforgiving debtor at the end of it is...shocking. It's meant to shock. We read it and notice that the king didn't allow this individual's careless unforgiveness affect his child and wife, but it doesn't make it read much easier.

This story is unnuanced. Because Jesus' point isn't to nuance, here. His point is to wake Peter and the Twelve and the Church-to-Come up to what sin is like. In every parable we're forced to ask who Jesus means us to be. Who, in the parable, are we supposed to see ourselves as?

And we're supposed to see ourselves as this forgiven servant, right? We're like people who have had 200,000 years of income that we owe forgiven. We are people who do things, all the time, and whether or not we do them against someone else, we do them against creation, against ourselves, against others: We're agents, acting in the world, and much of our action is sin. Jesus suggests that we're the ones who've been forgiven an immeasurable, ridiculous, unimaginably large amount of sinful behavior. And guess what? People have sinned against us. These are

both truths.

If we've been forgiven something like 200,000 years worth of income, we're also owed something like 3 months by some people. That is, people have sinned against us in real ways. And Jesus needs Peter to realize--needs us to realize--that forgiving others ought to be very, very reasonable, when we realize what we've been forgiven. Forgiving others ought to be very, very reasonable, when we realize what we've been forgiven.

Dependancies:

And that ominous ending? Remember it? "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." He's laying out for Peter, the rest of them: Our forgiveness depends on the forgiveness we offer others.

We've seen this before in Matthew. In Matthew 6, after teaching us to pray that our forgiveness be linked to how much or how little we forgive others, Jesus says:

14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

There's something about being Jesus' disciples that makes it impossible to be both a person who doesn't forgive and someone who expects God's forgiveness. It is impossible for us to be someone who receives something like 200,000 years of income forgiven, and demands payment for three months that's owed to us.

Making It Up To People:

Today's parable, and Jesus' prayer, makes something clear: Sin is like debt...but it's not debt. It's only like it.

We can pay back debts, right? Sort of, I guess; usury, charging interest, which the Church used to call sin and now embraces as a way to make cash, makes it harder. Even in today's passage, the forgiven servant can't really pay back 200,000 years of income, and that's the whole point.

But if Sin is like debt, it's unlike debt in this major way: We can't make up for our wrongs. "Making up" for something is made-up. You can't pay restitution for a hurt, even though if you looked at our legal trials, that's what you'd think. Fundamentally, our entire society is built around the idea that every aspect, part, emotion of a person has an equivalent cash value. But that's just not true; people are priceless.

To forgive someone a debt is to make them not pay back what they owe. To forgive someone a sin is to make them not make up for their sin against us. And good, right, because you can never make up for sin. We don't go back in time. We can't erase the hurts we cause. To be a person is to move forward in time. You never, ever make up for the hurts you cause someone, no matter how much cash a court says you're owed because your hurt is worth so much.

Practicing forgiveness is a great gift, ultimately, because it helps us face the truth that when it comes to the hurts and sins that have been done against us, no amount of money can ever pay them back, no restitution can be made. We're always absorbing hurt and pain in this life. It's a fiction that you can make up for anything in the world; forgiveness is, in the end, our only option: to accept the Lord's, and dole it out.

Jesus assumes we who follow him are people who forgive--let go of--whatever restitution is owed to us. We are people who let go of whatever restitution is owed us. Debt or making up for a wrong. We forgive it. We don't demand people make up for their sins against us, but forgive them, we don't demand people pay us back, but we forgive them.

...if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. is “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Our forgiveness depends on our willingness to forgive others. If sin is something like a debt to be paid back, the punishment for sin is something like trying to pay back an unpayable debt.

Withholding Undoes Receiving:

If we withhold forgiveness, we don't receive it. That's the message of today's parable, and it's an incredibly difficult message to hear. Peter doesn't get just how forgiven he is; if he did, his “Seven whole times!?” would strike him as ridiculous as the behavior of the guy forgiven 200,000 years of income.

Because that amount of debt is like our amount of sin: It can't be paid back, it can't be made up for, it can only be forgiven. And we've been forgiven it. We're being forgiven it. We will be forgiven it.

An Ominous Ending:

But what if, because we've withheld forgiveness from others, we're asked to make up for it instead? That's the ominous ending to today's passage, which ends in a tragedy.

The parable ends with the forgiveness given to the first debtor retracted, taken back, because he didn't offer forgiveness to the one who owed him so little by comparison.

Let me be honest here. I don't think, based on what we know about Jesus, that we're meant to leave today's parable in fear. We aren't supposed to be waiting for God to torture us if we're hanging onto unforgiveness. It is a parable; full of theology, but a metaphor still, and it can be stretched too far. In the parable, the unforgiving servant is given over to tormentors--technically, prison guards who got testimony out of prisoners in a turn-off-the-cameras sort of way. Torment or torture; the image isn't pretty. But the point of the metaphor is that if we expect for ourselves what we won't give to others, then that's a problem. It's most likely, in this parable, that what's being taken out of the guy is just how he spent 200,000 years worth of income. He's being forced to explain himself. One author says this ending points out

the “moral seriousness” that forgiveness is tangled up in. It gets our attention.

I really, really don't want us to read this and take away some weird conclusion that God condones torture, or will torture us until, in some magic way, we've “made up” for the sin we've done in our lives.

Torture makes sense in one way, and one way only: If you believe experiencing pain makes up for the pain you've caused others. Some people do. Some people do believe causing pain in others makes up for the pain that they've experienced. Deep in their hearts, they believe that the only way to make up for pain is to cause pain, and so retributive violence, paying people back in a pain-causing way, simply makes sense for them. Some of them are wracked, knowing the pain that they've caused, they sabotage and hurt themselves, driven by their guilty conscience to “make up for it.”

Some people see God as an evil accountant, taking notes, a horror film puppet, counting up screams. For every one we've caused, God himself is owed too, and will spend eternity enjoying them from those who haven't taken the pay-off he offers. Look, this is bad theology, and not biblical. It confuses metaphors for

reality, and ignores the fact that God's ways, which aren't ours, are more merciful than ours. If the only point in following Jesus is to stave-off a God hungry for our blood and pain, then I'm done, and if I'm wrong...I guess I'll be screaming for eternity. Hurts and wrongs can never be paid back. Revenge and torture may help us vent our rage, but they never fill in the gouges hurt has made in our souls; and God is not full of rage, but full of mercy.

Sin is not debt; sin is like debt. And you can't "make up for sin," period. You can't pay back parts of a soul. Certain ways of thinking about what Jesus has done for us have especially confused this, have done an amazing job of making sure that people realize how sinful they are, without teaching us that you can't pay back sin. We take parables as literal: Sin IS Debt. And then, we offer no way to pay off the debt we owe. We're told Jesus "paid it all," but we forget that whatever our songs might say, the Bible says Jesus paid our ransom, not our debt; he set us free from bondage to death and enslavement to sin, not paid off a God who was waiting to toss us into debtor's prison. Our theology, in practice, makes it sound like Jesus bought our sin off God on some divine derivatives market, and now owns us, and we're all just hoping he doesn't short his own stock. What that has to do with

mercy, with forgiveness, with compassion I'm not sure. But if it's true, it misses the great point in today's passage:

When we understand what we've been freed from, and the enormity of our failure to live up to love, then how can we not forgive the failures of others? Not once or twice, not seven times, not 490 times, but, really, always...because to be forgiven means to forgive. We've been freed from the hopeless effort of making up for things we can't make up for; and so we give others the same freedom.

What it isn't:

Forgiveness isn't excusing others. They wrong and hurt us. It's not to pretend that we have not been hurt. It's not the same as forgetting something; to give someone who has repeatedly hurt us the same access to hurt us again is foolishness, not Christian love. Forgetting is passive; we're called to actively deal with the sins against us and ensure we're not sinned against. Forgiveness has nothing to do with how we feel; to feel good about being wronged or terrorized or lied to is self-deception and dangerous. Forgiveness isn't reconciliation. And while reconciliation is something we should pursue in the church, it's just simply the case that not one of us can control anyone

else. And this is important, because forgiveness is up to us, reconciliation is not. Forgiveness is up to us; reconciliation is not. Forgiving someone who has wronged us does not mean that we will remain in a relationship with them, because that's simply not up to us, and may not be wise anyway.

A Choice:

But forgiveness is a choice. It is an act of will. In fact, forgiving someone may be one of the most empowering choices we can make in the world. The world has a way of creating victims and victimizers, people who are under people's feet and the people who walk all over them. Genuine forgiveness is something that can't be forced from us. Only we have the power to forgive another person. And so to forgive someone is to act with a personal power no one else in the world has but us. If I wrong you, I cannot force you to forgive me. If you choose to, you have taken a power that God has only given you, and acted with it.

But it's not an optional power for we who are the forgiven, the body of Christ. It's our mandate. We've been set free from something we could never make up for.

How is forgiveness going? Reveling it; it's freedom, it's

power, the awareness that we've been set free from all the things we can't make up for anyway? Do you walk tall? Is your conscience free? Are you empowered in this truth, or locked up in something else?

How is forgiving others going? Because while it's not an easy thing to do, it's everything that we've been made for, love in action, the full marker of who we are as Christians. Our forgiveness depends on it.

What might God be asking of us, I wonder?