

## Proper 19A 2020 Sermon

September 13, 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

*Peter came and said to Jesus, "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.*

*"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

Peter asks Jesus: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Now, the rabbis of Jesus' day taught that a good Jew should forgive three times. Peter knows that Jesus is an unusually forgiving man, so he ventures a more generous number of required times to forgive—seven. But Jesus is not interested in keeping accounts. "Not seven times," he responds to Peter, "but seventy-seven times."

And then Jesus tells a story about a king who has mercy on one of his servants, forgiving him a debt of 10,000 talents. Now **one** talent was equal to about 15 years' wages for an average day laborer; a debt of **10,000** talents was an *impossible* amount to repay – it would take the man 150,000 years! According to ancient **law**, this king would have had every right to sell this man and his whole family into slavery for the rest of their lives. There **is** no remedy afforded by justice. No future, no hope offered by the law for this man and his family. And yet, in one of the most beloved passages of the Old Testament, we read: "...I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord... plans to give you a future and

a hope.”<sup>1</sup> And so, instead of meting out justice, this king chooses instead an *extravagant* mercy, forgiving the entire amount his servant owed!

If we aren't *shocked* when we hear this parable, we aren't paying attention.

Now, with which character in this parable does Jesus want us to identify? I think it is clear that **we** are the servant who has been given extravagant mercy by the king, but has turned around and *refused* mercy to our fellow servant. Jesus tells us that we *must* forgive our brother or sister from our heart – seventy-seven times – *or we* will not be forgiven by God.

Now, this is not one of the more popular parables in the New Testament. It isn't on our Top 10 list, like the Parable of the of the Prodigal Son or the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We don't seem to resonate with it as much.

One reason, I believe, is that we tend to think of ourselves as good, law-abiding people, and *not* as sinners in need of forgiveness from God. I think President Trump expressed, with *admirable* honesty, the way a good many of us feel about sin and forgiveness. When questioned whether he has ever asked God for forgiveness for his actions, President Trump answered, “I am not sure I have. I just go on and try to do a better job from there... I think if I do something wrong, ... I just try and make it right. I don't bring God into that picture. I don't.”<sup>2</sup>

My friends, that's **me**, a good part of the time! I don't *see* myself as a sinner or a debtor or a trespasser in need of forgiveness or mercy from God. If I do something wrong, I try and make it right; I don't bring God into the picture. I am a self-contained individual, exercising my free will, independent, most of the time, of any need of help from God, perfectly capable of righting any wrongs I might commit. (And, I don't think that I commit many; and those I do commit are not egregious).

Do any of you feel the same way?

Now, don't get me wrong: I don't think we should go back to the bad ol' days when we beat our breasts and said, “There is no health in us.”<sup>3</sup> But, perhaps as an over-reaction against that Reformation doctrine of “total depravity,”<sup>4</sup> the pendulum has now swung too far the other way, and we say to ourselves, as it were, “There is no sin in us.” And *that* stance, that mindset, that consciousness of not having done anything that *warrants* forgiveness, can do two things: It can cut us off from the flow of God's mercy, God's grace, God's love; and, it can put us in an imagined morally superior position from which we can judge others who *are* sinners.

Earlier, in our General Confession, we prayed, “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.”<sup>5</sup> Stop and think of some thought you

have recently had, or some word you have recently spoken, that is uncharitable, judgmental, hypocritical, polarizing, hurtful, or vicious. If you can't think of *any* sinful thoughts you have had or words you have said, you are certainly a better person than I am.

“...we confess that we have sinned against you ...by what we have left undone.” Herein lie some of **my** most egregious sins. That smile I failed to give to that homeless person, that phone call I failed to make to a friend or relative whom I haven't called in years, that hurtful word for which I haven't apologized, that simple act of kindness left undone, that gratitude I have failed to express to God and others – I could go on and on about things I have left undone; and, perhaps, so could you.

And here's the thing: I will NEVER be able, on my own, to right all of the wrongs I have thought, said, done; nor will I be able to make up for all the things I have left undone. My debt of sin (or, if you prefer psychological language, my failure to face, and deal with, my shadow side) is equal to the debt that servant in our parable owed his king. When I think or say or do something wrong, or when I neglect to do something I should do, if I think that I can, on my own, make it right, without bringing God into that picture, I am mistaken. “To err is human; to forgive, divine,” wrote Alexander Pope. The power and energy to forgive, to grant mercy, to “make things right,” comes from God.

And it is intended to *flow*.

“Forgive us our trespasses **as** we forgive those who trespass against us.” As we open our hearts and minds to God, divine forgiveness flows *into* us from God **as** it flows out *from* us toward our neighbor. The moment I **stop** God's mercy and grace from flowing out *from* me *to* my neighbor, God's mercy and grace stop flowing *into* me, because **I** have blocked the flow, blocked the channel. It is not that God doesn't *want* to continue to pour divine mercy and grace into me; it's that God *can't* – because **I** have stopped the flow.

And so, I don't think that the moral of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is simply, “You must forgive your neighbor from your heart, seventy-seven times, or else God won't forgive you.” It is much bigger, deeper, more comprehensive than that. It begins with the awareness and confession that there is within each of us a shadow side: a selfish side, a hurtful side, an egotistical side, a self-righteous side, a condescending side, an unforgiving and unmerciful side – a sinful side. It isn't *all* that we are, by any means, for there is too much good in us; but it is there: our Shadow. And unless we face it, confess it, and bring God into the picture to help deal with it, we will continue under the illusion that our sins of thought, word, and deed, things done and left undone, are rare, minimal, and self-correctable. We needn't bring God into the picture. And so, we block the flow into us, and out from us, of God's mercy and grace and love.

O God, may we hear this parable, not only with our ears, but with our hearts and minds. Make us ever open to your Divine Flow of mercy, grace, and love!

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 29:11

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2015/07/18/politics/trump-has-never-sought-forgiveness/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> *1928 Book of Common Prayer*, General Confession, p. 6

<sup>4</sup> See “The Five Points of Calvinism,”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvinism#Five\\_points\\_of\\_Calvinism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvinism#Five_points_of_Calvinism)

<sup>5</sup> *1979 Book of Common Prayer*, p. 79