SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN

MATTHEW 18:21-35
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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I've talked a lot about love in my sermons over the last few months. This is kind of an occupational hazard, I suppose. Someone once told me that a preacher could do far worse than getting up every Sunday and saying, "God loves you and you're supposed to love other people."

But maybe there have been times over these last few months, when I've started to wander down familiar trails, when you've thought something like, "Ok, sounds great, but what does that actually *mean*? What does love look like? How do we practice at it? How do we get better at love?"

Many of us (myself included) find it very easy to talk about love, to tell others to love, to place love at the center of our understanding of who God is and what God wants for the world.

Statements like "God is love" can easily become rather vague and fuzzy. Kind of like saying, "I like puppies." Who *doesn't* like puppies? Who *wouldn't* agree that God is love and that we should love others?

I am convinced that our theme for this morning is one of the most important places where the rubber meets the road, so to speak, in the Christian life.

Last week I said that love is the church's curriculum. In today's passage, Jesus shows us just how demanding this curriculum is.

The text begins, as is so often the case in the gospels, with someone asking Jesus a question.

Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who sins against him? Up to seven times. Peter probably thinks he is impressing Jesus with this statement. Seven is a big number.

It's easy to shake our heads at poor, misguided Peter, always full of big pronouncements and confident declarations—"Others may desert you but I never will!" "Let's build some shelters up here and stay on this mountain!" "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!"—but how many of us are willing to forgive seven times?

At any rate, Jesus "explodes Peter's arithmetic of forgiveness," as one commentator put it.[1] I tell you, not seven times, but, seventy-seven times. Some translations say, "Seventy times seven."

Either way, the point is that we're not supposed to be puzzling over the math but recognizing that we are called to a forgiveness that is beyond scorekeeping.

As Jesus so often does, he tells a parable to illustrate.

A servant owes a king ten thousand talents. This is an absurdly high number – most scholars agree that would be the equivalent of around two hundred years labour.

He can't pay, obviously. And so the king orders that the servant and his family be sold in order to repay the debt.

The servant wisely pleads for mercy. What else could he do? And, incredibly, he receives mercy. The king wipes out his debt and sets him free.

Then the servant does something very unwise. He goes out and finds one of his fellow servants who owes him what would have been around a day's wages (the contrast between the two sums is meant to be ridiculous).

[1] https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1496

His fellow servant also pleads for mercy. But the first servant refuses, and throws him into jail.

Word gets back to the king who is understandably irate. *How could you, who were shown such staggering mercy, not show mercy to your fellow man?* He throws the servant in jail to be tortured.

If you're like me, you have two immediate reactions to this parable.

First, I suspect most of us hear the story and think, "How could that servant be so stupid? After all he had been forgiven?! How could he not have been brimming with gratitude and good will when he left the king? How could he not have been eager to respond in kind?"

We can understand the king's response. The guy got was coming to him. If he couldn't even find it within himself to forgive a paltry debt after having a fortune canceled for him? Well, then he deserved what he got.

We're supposed to recognize the wickedness of the servant's response and the gap between what was forgiven and what was withheld. And we do.

The second response is different. Perhaps you found yourself squirming a bit around verse 35, after the king has sent the servant away to be tortured until he can repay the 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."*

Ouch.

Is Jesus saying that God will torture us if we don't forgive those who sin against us?! This sounds kind of violent and not very Jesus-y!

We much prefer when Jesus tells other stories that compare God to the father who waits at the gate for his lost son to return home, or of the shepherd who goes out looking for the one sheep that wandered astray.

And aside from the violent nature of the king's response to the unforgiving servant, what do we make of his last statement itself?

How are you supposed to forgive someone "from the heart" when it seems like you're actually forgiving them to avoid punishment? Isn't that kind of the *opposite* of forgiving from the heart?

It calls to mind the parent in the grocery store settling a dispute between warring children, barking at them, "Now you say you're sorry, or else!" I often wonder just how sincere the mumbled apologies that follow can be.

This language makes us uncomfortable. We look for a way to soften it to preserve our ideas of a gentler Jesus.

Some speculate that Matthew added verse 35—that Jesus didn't actually say those words. But pitting Jesus against Matthew isn't much of a solution for many of us.

The words are there and we have to deal with them. How?

The first thing to say is that this is a parable. Jesus is responding to Peter's question about how far forgiveness has to go. He's telling an extreme story to make a point.

Parables are stories that are meant to grab people's attention, to surprise them, to upend expectations, to invite people into new ways of looking at things.

Parables are not theological treatises or doctrinal statements. They often speak in hyperbole. They shock us. They grab us by the shirt and shake us into a new way of looking at something we thought we understood.

And this parable did precisely that.

The story is extreme and exaggerated at every point. Whether it's the vast sum of money the servant is forgiven (what servant could even accumulate that kind of debt?), or the extreme measures the king takes (sell his entire family?! how are they supposed to pay off their debt when they're imprisoned?!) or the last verse that makes us squirm.

Jesus could be just using really blunt and forceful language to make a point. This makes some sense to me and it makes me pause before interpreting verse 35 as a literal description of what God will do if we don't forgive.

But it doesn't explain verse 35 away. Even if Jesus is exaggerating to make a point, we're still left with Jesus saying something like, "Forgive, or else!"

And this isn't the only verse where Jesus talks about forgiveness like this. This theme is found throughout the gospels and the rest of the NT. A few examples:

Matthew 6:14-16:

> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Luke 6:37:

> Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven… for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

Luke 7:4:

> And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."

Colossians 3:13:

> Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Each one of these passages links *being* forgiven to *extending* forgiveness. If you fail to do the latter you should not expect the former.

So perhaps given the prominence of this "forgive or else" theme in the NT, we should examine our negative reactions a bit. Why does it make us uncomfortable?

Our reaction to verse 35 might say more about us than it does about God. We like the idea of a God who never judges, who expects little of us and whose mercy makes up for all of our failures.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a phrase for this: "cheap grace." He was extremely critical of those who ignored or softened the hard teachings of Jesus to preserve an idea of a nice, kindly, inoffensive God who did little more than pat his people on the head.

Whatever else we might make of the ending of this passage, one thing is clear: **Jesus is saying that God takes forgiveness very, *very* seriously.** Our lives might just depend upon our willingness to forgive.

Some of you will recall the 2006 murder of six Amish girls in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. The community made headlines around the world for forgiving the perpetrators, even attending the funeral of the shooter. Many held it up as an example of what Christ like forgiveness looks like. And it was.

But Thomas Yoder Neufeld makes the point that the Amish responded the way they did not because of a mushy sentimental view of God, but because they had been formed by a lifetime of praying, "forgive us our sins *as we forgive those who sin against us*."

In explaining their response, they appealed to this very passage. "If we do not forgive, how can we expect to be forgiven?"[2]

They knew that it was "forgive, or else."

Forgiveness and mercy should saturate our lives as followers of Jesus. We *must* forgive because the consequences of not forgiving are dire.

We do it for two other reasons.

First, forgiveness is good for us.

The psychological, social, and relational benefits of forgiveness are well-known.

[2] Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 55.

When we hold on to rage and bitterness and a lust for vengeance, when we meticulously keep score of wrongs committed, it is corrosive to our souls.

When we forgive, we let go. We refuse to allow wrongs done to us or the people that committed them to define us.

One verse I didn't mention earlier is Mark 11.25 where Jesus says this:

> Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.

I was struck by the absence of one party in Jesus' command here. Jesus talks about me and he talks about my Father. But he doesn't talk about the person I'm supposed to forgive.

This is surely an oversight, right? Surely there's a missing clause that belongs after "against anyone"—something like, "If you have anything against anyone, *and* if they have demonstrated appropriate remorse and penitence..."

But, Jesus will not tolerate our qualifications of forgiveness.

He will not allow us to measure out forgiveness according to the merits of our neighbour. He will not let forgiveness be a reward that we bestow.

It's not that the wrongs and injustices done to us don't matter. They do, clearly. It's just that there's something that matters more.

The criterion for forgiveness, it seems, is *my* having something against someone.

This is the poison to be removed; this is the disease to be cured. Jesus knows that we must forgive for the sake of our own souls.

When I do weddings, or meet with couples before weddings, very often 1 Corinthians 13 makes an appearance. The "love passage."

I often find myself mentally pausing during one portion of Paul's famous words:

> Love keeps no record of wrongs.

You'll want to pay attention to that one, I often find myself thinking to the blissful dewy-eyed couple. That one can save a marriage.

It can save a family. It can save a friendship or a workplace. It can save a church.

Love doesn't keep score. And choosing to forgive is one of the best way to resist the impulse to keep score.

Second, forgiveness is one of the primary ways in which we imitate God

In Ephesians, Paul says these words.

> Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you… be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Be imitators of God, Paul says. Which apparently involves putting away many of the things that come so naturally and greedily to us (bitterness, wrath, anger) and being like God.

Kind. Tenderhearted. Forgiving.

Live in love, Paul says, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.

Which brings us to the cross, where Jesus uttered these words as he was gasping his last few breaths:

> Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.

They don't know why they cling to wrongs perpetrated against them the way they do, imagining that they offer some protection or insurance in a world so saturated with wrong-doing.

They don't know why kindness so often seems such a small and feeble thing to them, when it can in fact change the world.

They don't know why their hearts so easily harden rather than softening into the tender organs that the world so desperately needs.

They don't know the countless ways in which they inflict wounds upon each other.

They don't know how desperately necessary it is to forgive one another.

There is so much that they don't know. So I ask you to forgive them their sins, before it ever occurs to them to ask for it or to even recognize their need for it.

And maybe, in being forgiven this extravagantly, they will begin to learn of the things that are possible in this world when forgiveness is freely offered.

In his famous *Essay on Criticism*, Alexander Pope famously said "To err is human, to forgive, divine." Yes, it certainly is.

When we cling to wrongs, when we allow real or imagined injustices done toward us to define our reactions, when we withhold from others the mercy that could set them free and turn them toward God, we are acting in very human ways.

Predictable, uninspiring. Business as usual in a world addicted to keeping score.

When we forgive, we are acting like God.

Be imitators of God as dearly loved children.

Amen.

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