

Matthew 18:21-35

In the passage immediately before this one, Jesus is discussing reconciliation within the faith community. And you can't have reconciliation without forgiveness, so Peter brings it up. He's no less human than the rest of us. He often doesn't want to forgive, but he knows Jesus expects it. So, how many times should a person be expected to forgive? Maybe 7 times? Seven is a good number. It's one of the numbers of "completeness or fullness or perfection" in the Hebrew mind.

And it was more than the rabbis of Jesus' day expected. They taught forgiveness to the same person for the same offense was only required three times. They based this off the prophecy of Amos, who used a repeated formula: "For three sins of _____, and even for four." The rabbis figured God forgave the first three times, but not the fourth, so that was the limit for forgiveness.

Jesus comes back with seventy times seven, or maybe 70 plus 7. Seventy was also a number of "perfection or fullness," so when you added or multiplied them, it was basically saying, "Without any limits." Ouch, Peter thought.

Jesus illustrates the principle with a story about a king settling accounts with his servants. These are his "satraps," regional governors. They might be well educated slaves or free men, but they were responsible for collecting taxes for the king from the districts of his kingdom. They got to keep some for themselves, but they had to turn over the king's portion to him each year.

And one of them owes him. A lot. Ten thousand talents. This is an intentionally ridiculous amount of money. A talent was 6000 denarii. The denarius was the daily wage for unskilled labor. If you want to translate it into today's money, you're talking roughly \$5 billion dollars. It's pretty much impossible for one person to be that far behind, especially considering that the average tax revenue for a district would be a few hundred talents, at most. For example, Herod the Great was recorded to have collected about 600 talents annually from his entire kingdom, which included Galilee, Samaria, Judea, Idumea, Perea, and Trachonitis. His son, Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee and Perea, only collected about 200 talents annually.

So the king is going to sell him and his family into slavery, which is not going to recover the debt. Even a valuable slave would only be worth a few thousand denarii, and it's hard to argue this guy is very valuable because he is clearly not good with money.

But he begs the king to give him time to pay it back, which is impossible. And in another ridiculous twist, the king forgives the whole debt. Jesus' listeners probably found the thought of this to be amusing. No one would forgive a debt that large!

Now sometimes kings and rich men did forgive debts, especially if there were difficult times like a drought. But they would be relatively small sums, something that could be written off without seriously affecting the bottom line. The reward for this was one's reputation. Then you got to be known as magnanimous, generous, gracious.

But this is a picture of God's grace toward us. He forgives a debt that we could never repay. He is gracious beyond our ability to understand.

And then the first servant finds the second, who owes him money, and he chokes him over one hundred denarii. About \$8000-10,000 in today's money. It's not an insignificant amount, until you compare it to the debt that the first man owed. One hundred denarii is about 1/500,000th of 10,000 talents. If you owed someone a million dollars, and the debt was forgiven, would you sweat over \$2?

He has the second servant thrown in jail. Jail was typically used for debtors in the first century world. It was motivation for your friends and family to come up with the money to pay off your debt.

The king is not happy. The actions of his servant reflect on him. The favor he gained by his graciousness is now lost. Likewise, our actions reflect on God. If we say we believe in a gracious God, but we are petty, hold onto our grudges, and refuse to forgive, it reflects poorly on God.

Grace is not just something we receive. It is a principle, a character trait, to be internalized. Don't just forgive but learn to be forgiving. If we are not gracious and forgiving, then we have no right to expect God to be gracious and forgiving toward us. That is a principle taught over and over through the New Testament. Jesus taught it in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." He taught it in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." He teaches it here. And it shows up again in other places in the New Testament, as well.

Forgiveness is necessary for reconciliation and restoration, but they are not the same thing.

Reconciliation is the ideal, but it requires two parties. Both sides have to be willing to forgive and be forgiven and be reconciled to each other. If you are willing to forgive, but the other person is not willing to receive your forgiveness, then reconciliation can't happen. In Romans, Paul reminds us that "so far as it depends on

you, live with at peace with everyone.” But it doesn’t just depend on us. Sometimes other people don’t want to live at peace with us. And we have to accept that. But it doesn’t mean that we don’t forgive. We must forgive, because God calls us to it.

Restoration also requires forgiveness, but there also needs to be a discernment process. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that we have to put a person back in the place to repeat the offense.

For example, if someone steals from an organization, we are called to forgive. But that doesn’t mean that we just put them back into a place of financial responsibility. There is also a matter of justice. Someone who steals should be required to restore what was stolen.

There was an unsettling story that came out earlier this summer. Robert Morris, who was the senior pastor at a large church in Texas, was forced to resign. It came out that he had molested a young girl at another church many years earlier.

After it came to light, he had been removed from ministry for a time, I think it was two years. But then he was restored. And when he spoke about the incident, he did so in a way that was... misleading. He said he had an inappropriate relationship with a young lady when the truth of the matter was that he had sexually abused a girl for five years, starting when she was eleven.

Should he be forgiven? Yes. But what was missing from the situation was justice. He had committed a crime, and the matter was never turned over to the authorities. There should have been a trial. Instead church leaders swept the matter under the rug, so to say.

Should he have been restored? Should he have been allowed to return to a position of authority and influence in the church? Probably not. And certainly not without justice taking place.

But forgiven? Absolutely. Because that’s the calling of Christ.

If we claim to believe in a gracious and forgiving God, then we must be gracious and forgiving people.