

Forgiveness from the Heart  
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**Genesis 50:15-21**

<sup>15</sup> Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?' <sup>16</sup> So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, <sup>17</sup> "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup> Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. <sup>21</sup> So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

**Matthew 18:21-35**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

<sup>23</sup> 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> 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." <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Is this possibly the most difficult expectation of being a follower of Christ – forgiving? Give the hungry food, give the thirsty drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned<sup>1</sup> – we might agree it would be easier to do all of these all day long and find them to be less challenging, certainly less trying, than to offer forgiveness for that same amount of time. Peter thought he was being pretty smart, feeling like he was catching on, asking Jesus "how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" The number seven had a great deal of significance in the Jewish faith – think

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 25:35-36.

the seven days of creation; seven was a holy number, a perfect number.<sup>2</sup> I imagine Peter looking for a pat on the head: of course, you should forgive perfectly, Jesus would say with a smile. Poor Peter. “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times,” Jesus says. Then he goes on to explain what that would look like.

A king is collecting debts and he brings before him a slave who owes ten thousand talents. Not using talents as our currency, we don’t really have an understanding of this amount. You may have heard that ten thousand talents is a sum which no slave would have ever been able to borrow, nor ever been able to pay back. Roughly, ten thousand talents today is equivalent to 150,000 years of wages.<sup>3</sup> A denarius was a day’s wages so one hundred denarii would be 100 days’ wages.<sup>4</sup> The king forgives a debt of 150,000 years’ wages, or 54,750,000 days’ wages, and the one forgiven will not forgive a debt of 100 days’ wages, one 1.8-millionth<sup>5</sup> of the amount he owed. That gives you a sense of how absurd the numbers were. Shortly before this parable, Jesus tells the parable of the shepherd who goes in search of one lost sheep, leaving ninety-nine behind in his searching. Our God is an absurd God, beyond all human reason!

We hear how God forgives such enormous debts. And then we receive not exactly a threat but a statement that we will be handed over to be tortured until we pay our entire debt if we do not forgive our brother or sister from our heart. Matthew makes forgiveness of others an unquestionable response to the forgiveness of God. How do we understand that in context with God’s forgiveness as referenced in our reading from Genesis?

Joseph’s brothers beg him for forgiveness for intending to kill him and for selling him into slavery instead, saying, “please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph says in response, “Am I in the place of God?” That’s it. There is no spoken absolution but, instead, a theological exposition on how God can take the bad we do and still work good from it. That’s another sermon in and of itself. For now, we seek to understand what Joseph could have meant in his reply. It seems to me that Joseph is not relinquishing forgiveness to God alone but judgment. Joseph isn’t saying, by omission, he won’t forgive them but that he dares not judge what they have done – that is for God alone. Joseph only looks to continue working with God for good.

If God is the only one with the right to judge and God chooses to find us guilty and owing yet still write off our debts, who are we to do the opposite, judging where we should not and withholding forgiveness for things so incredibly insignificant? I honestly don’t know how to understand the idea of

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<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.answers.com/Q/How\\_much\\_is\\_10000\\_talents\\_worth](http://www.answers.com/Q/How_much_is_10000_talents_worth).

<sup>4</sup> <http://text.watv.org/english/qna/view.html?id=1573>.

<sup>5</sup>  $0.00000183 = 100/54,750,000$ .

God torturing us until our debt is repaid in the greater context of a God who is always working to bring good out of bad, including, and especially out of the bad we bring about. That will remain a mystery to me for now.

How do we step back from judgment when our whole civilization is founded on judgment and the ideal of justice? We may not be able to escape the judging but we can acknowledge that our judgment is not the one that matters nor does our judgment prove a worthy impediment to forgiveness. Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn names some truths of these impediments: “We may resist forgiving another because we think that the person who hurt us ought to do or say something to mend the hurt, or repay us for what we have experienced.”<sup>6</sup> She continues by quoting the Reverend Marjorie Thompson, who wisely wrote: “To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment may be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem. . . . Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the *punitive consequences* they deserve because of their behavior. The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned.”<sup>7</sup>

As far as the forgiver is concerned. You may have heard “holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.” As far as the forgiver is concerned. Do you know of anyone who has become a better person as a result of someone withholding forgiveness from them? I do not. As far as the forgiver is concerned? That I do. When we choose to forgive that person, however justified our anger may be, we become more whole, more at peace, more loving, more like God created us. The deepest hurts for me to forgive are those which came about because someone was not living up to an expectation I had of him or her. When I expect people to be persons they are not, whether they are not interested in being that person or cannot be that person or wouldn’t even know how to be that person, I am guaranteed to experience frustration. When that frustration happens repeatedly, if I am not careful, I begin to think the situation causing the frustration is willfully produced by that person, without care for the frustration I feel. Sometimes that frustration is unjustified; sometimes it is justified. Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn also writes, “Forgiveness is also not a matter of putting other persons on probation, waiting for them to do something wrong so we can take it back.”<sup>8</sup> She has written this directly to me, I think.

As far as the forgiver is concerned. When I choose to forgive someone, give them permission to be exactly who they are, a person with debts like me, a person who unknowingly hurts others like me

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<sup>6</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 70.

just by being me, release my judgment of them for the crime of being themselves, then my heart is undoubtedly changed. And when I do not? Perhaps that is the torture which remains with me until I pay my debt of forgiveness of others. Am I in the place of God? It is my hope and my life's effort to offer less judgment and more forgiveness as the God whom I serve. So may it be for us all.

Let us pray: God of judgment and mercy, return us to your image, we pray. Amen.