



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION

WASHINGTON, DC

COMMON GRACE

Matthew 18:21-35

Dan Claire

March 3, 2019

When Jesus taught us how to pray, he gave us a prayer of one promise and six petitions. He said to pray like this:

*Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (Matthew 6:9-13)*

Six petitions we ask of God, day after day, throughout our lives. One promise that we reaffirm daily: *as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

Jesus was an expert regarding the human condition. He knew that the pledge we all need to make daily is to forgive. In fact, this was of such great importance to Jesus that, after teaching the Lord's Prayer, he added this stern warning:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15)

Of all the things that Jesus taught us, forgiveness may be the most important. It also may be the hardest. Whenever the topic comes up, I feel like the man who said, "Lord I believe. Help my unbelief!" We need his help to take up this important and difficult responsibility.

Jesus gave us the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-35) to help us. Through it, he shows us how to grow in grace by forgiving others as he has forgiven us. That's what this message is about.

WHAT FORGIVENESS DOESN'T MEAN

Take a moment to remember a time when you were wronged. Most all of us are aware of at least someone who has hurt us badly enough that we just can't let it go, because whenever we remember what happened the sting returns. Bring that person or those persons to mind.

Whenever I think about such people, I am well aware that it is my duty as a Christian to forgive them. However, I'm often stymied when I think about the consequences. I have legitimate concerns about bad things that may happen if I do the good deed of forgiveness. Just as we need to pull up any weeds before we plant any seeds, so also we need to talk about what forgiveness *isn't* before we talk about what it *is*. Here are three important qualifications:

1) *Forgiveness doesn't mean feeling happy about what happened.* It's okay to be angry and sad over what they did to you. God doesn't want you to feel good about something bad. In the Bible, there are many, many examples of God himself being angry and sad about sin. There's nothing wrong with feeling these feelings; it's what you do in response to them that matters. Paul tells the Ephesians, "In your anger, do not sin" (Eph 4:26), and that's where you should draw the line. However, you don't have to feel happy about what happened.

2) *Forgiveness doesn't mean that there won't be consequences for what happened.* Sometimes Christian forgiveness results in complete restoration. That's always wonderful when it happens, but it's not always the outcome. Sometimes the harm done has permanent consequences, and you can never put things back the way they were. For example, when Dylann Roof murdered 9 of our brothers and sisters gathered for a prayer meeting in Charleston in 2015, some of their family members publicly forgave him as Christians. This did not imply, however, that Roof shouldn't be punished for the murders. Forgiving those who hurt you doesn't necessarily mean that there won't be consequences for what happened.

3) *Forgiveness doesn't mean putting yourself back in harm's way.* For example, if you were profoundly abused and traumatized by someone, you can forgive, but you mustn't forget. Jesus isn't asking you to put yourself back into a situation in which you can be abused and traumatized by that person again.

My aim in making these qualifications is not to contradict Jesus. I'm merely pointing out that Jesus' teaching on forgiveness was part of a much larger ethical framework that included *justice* as well as mercy, *wisdom* as well as love. In Matthew 18 in particular, Jesus was deeply concerned for the welfare of the little ones, be they children or lost sheep or our Christian brothers and sisters. In forgiving others, Jesus doesn't want us putting the little ones back in harm's way. Thus, forgiveness is central to the kingdom ethics of Jesus, and it's also interconnected with wisdom and justice and common sense.

With these qualifications in mind, let's talk about what forgiveness *is*.

FORGIVENESS IS A PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. (Mt 18:21-22)

Over the last couple of chapters in Matthew's story, Peter has been piecing together who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do. We have a word that summarizes what Peter was learning: *gospel* (Gr. *euangelion* = good news). In those days, *gospel* meant the announcement of a new king whose reign would be a boon to his people. Every day, with each new adventure, Peter was learning the gospel of Jesus, i.e. that Jesus came to be king and to establish God's eternal kingdom, bringing justice and peace to all the world.

In Mt 18:21, Peter's question shows that he's starting to comprehend Jesus' message about the kingdom of God. Peter has the right idea when he suggests forgiving people as many as seven times. Then as now, common sense dictated a two strikes and you're out approach to forgiveness. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me a twice, shame on me." So when Peter proposes forgiving someone up to seven times, it shows that he's really starting to "get" Jesus' radical generosity.

However, Jesus takes Peter's generosity much, much further. In 18:22, Jesus says: not seven times, or seventy times, but seventy-sevenfold times (or seven times seventy times). It was a huge number, and a biblically symbolic number. It would have been immediately recognized by all those who had learned the Torah. It was the number from Lamech's song.

Lamech's song is found in Genesis 4. In the beginning of the Bible, after humanity fell into sin in the garden, the very next episode (Genesis 4) describes the first murder, when Cain took his brother's life. Then Cain "went out from the presence of the Lord" and he built a city east of Eden (Gen 4:16). And the rest of Genesis 4 describes the culture of the kingdom that Cain built, a kingdom apart from the Lord. Seven generations after Adam, Lamech sang to his wives:

*"Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,
then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold." (Gen 4:23-24)*

Lamech's song tells us a lot about the kingdom that Cain built. Turning away from God, living life on their own, Cain's descendants had no law outside of themselves. There was no external authority to ensure law and order. Consequently, blood vengeance became a way of life.

It's in Lamech's song that we find the first "7x70" in the Bible. This expression was a Hebrew way of describing an infinite, complete and perfect amount. Lamech wasn't boasting about an infinity of blessings; he was boasting about revenge, total revenge, or what is often described as "sweet revenge." In the kingdom that Cain built, away from the presence of the Lord, vigilante justice prevailed and "sweet revenge" was the best thing anyone could look forward to. It was the seventy-sevenfold pinnacle. In a world without God, what could be better?

Jill Leovy is a veteran reporter for the LA Times and the author of the 2015 New York Times bestseller, *Ghettoside*. Her writing about South Central LA paints a picture of contemporary life in the kingdom that Cain built. In 2004, when most murders in Los Angeles didn't make the news, Leovy started the Homicide Report to record "a story for every victim," seeking to humanize the statistics. Through her reporting, she discovered that black men comprise 50% of the city's homicide victims even though they represent only 6% of the population. She also found that on the mean streets of the ghetto, fewer than 2 of every 5 murders leads to an arrest, much less to a conviction. She concluded that the preponderance of unsolved murders there perpetuates vigilante justice. In the absence of any external authority, it's every man for himself. Blood vengeance has become a way of life. It's simply what people do when they're wronged. For many, there's nothing better than "sweet revenge."

Blood vengeance may not be a way of life for many of us, but revenge certainly is. We all live east of Eden, in the kingdom that Cain built.

Consider our leaders, those who make the headlines every day. Living apart from the Lord, they have no higher authority than themselves, so they take their revenge against those who wrong them, murdering one another with words.

Consider our neighbors. Again, apart from the Lord, they are bitterly divided against one another, and increasingly prefer revenge over reconciliation. They choose leaders who would rather "settle the score" than compromise with their opponents.

What about us? Apart from the Lord, it feels more and more like there are enemies on every side—people with radically different values and beliefs, forcing their way of life on us. Apart from the Lord, there's no one to protect us. It's every man for himself. So we take revenge against those who wrong us, at work or at school or at home. It's up to us to settle the score. If we don't do it, who else will?

I have good (gospel) news. A new king has come, and his kingdom will bring peace and prosperity to all people. As Peter confessed on the road to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus is King: he's the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. On this solid rock confession Jesus is building an eternal kingdom, that even hell itself will not be able to topple!

Consider the kingdom that Jesus is building. No longer do we have to settle the score, because Christ is risen and is present among us. He's the higher authority who takes revenge

off our hands. So, instead of every man for himself, it's "blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Mt 5:7). And "blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons and daughters of God" (Mt 5:9). And, "a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another just as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

Isn't this truly good news? A wonderful new king has come. His eternal kingdom is growing and bringing peace and prosperity to all people. Someday the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the seas.

At present we live between the times. We live *in* Cain's kingdom, but we mustn't be *of* Cain's kingdom. We are the church, the vanguard of God's kingdom. Instead of bearing grudges and savoring sweet revenge, we must forgive one another from the heart. When we forgive, we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus: a new king has come, and his eternal kingdom is far better than the one Cain built. Isn't that truly good news?

Indeed, whenever and wherever Christian forgiveness is practiced, the Gospel of Jesus is proclaimed, and his kingdom grows. I have witnessed this firsthand in Rwanda, where Christian family members of genocide victims have forgiven those who murdered their loved ones, and a community of peace has sprung up out of the ashes. It's amazing and wonderful to see.

Now imagine what it would be like to see the same thing on Capitol Hill. Instead of bitter partisanship and murderous rhetoric, what if peace and reconciliation became commonplace? What if people started getting forgiven instead of getting even? Wouldn't that be a wonderful demonstration of the Gospel of Jesus? Wouldn't it be good news not only for our city, but for the whole world? We should dream and talk and pray for this. As an embassy of God's kingdom on Capitol Hill, we should also lead the way.

FORGIVENESS IS A PROPER ACCOUNTING OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS

But the question remains: *how* do we do it? Thinking back to the person or persons who wronged you, how can you ever forgive them? What they did hurt deeply. It's not going to be easy to forgive. In fact, it's a huge leap of faith even to consider it. How can we do it? By making a proper accounting of the Gospel of Jesus.

In the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus teaches us *how* to forgive. It turns out that forgiveness isn't an aptitude that some people are born with and others aren't. It's more like a skill that we develop, or a muscle that gets stronger through use. The way to get started is by learning how to make a proper accounting of the Gospel. The parable of the unforgiving servant teaches us how in three acts.

Act I. Grace. (Matt 18:23-27)

The servant in question owed the king ten thousand talents. The talent was a very large sum of money, roughly equivalent to twenty years of manual labor. According to the historian Josephus, the total amount in taxes that Judea, Samaria and Idumea sent to imperial Rome in those days was six hundred talents per year. Thus, the amount that the servant more than ten times the taxes for the entire region. It was a vast fortune, unimaginably and ridiculously enormous, i.e. seventy-sevenfold huge.

Since there was no way that the servant could pay it, the king ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, until the debt was paid. Repayment would require about sixty million days of manual labor!

The servant fell on his knees and begged for the king's patience to pay off the debt. Then, in a stupendous turn of events, not only did the king have mercy, but he graciously forgave the entire debt. Incredible! No wealthy leader in the kingdom of Cain would do such a thing. The kingdom of God is wonderful!

Act II. Severity. (Matt 18:28-30)

In the ancient world the servant in question would not have been an isolated individual owing this much, but instead probably a senior manager of the treasury, like a CFO. What he owed the king would have been the sum total of all the revenue streams he oversaw. When the king completely forgave the servant's debt, it would have had the same effect down the chain to all the clients who were indebted to the servant. In other words, the king's grace would have extended to all the lower level servants as well, such that everyone was off the hook. It would have meant common grace for everyone, a year of jubilee for them all.

It is the promise of common grace that makes the servant's behavior so despicable. Instead of running out to extend the king's grace to everyone, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, seized him, and began to choke him, saying, "Pay what you owe." The debt of this fellow servant wasn't infinitely huge, but it wasn't inconsequential either. It was the equivalent of about 4-5 months of manual labor. Nevertheless, the king had declared a jubilee. It was the first servant's duty to extend common grace to everyone.

Just as the first servant had done, the other servant fell down and begged, "Have patience with me and I will pay you." At this point, the first servant should have been gracious to his fellow servant, as the King had been to him. Instead, the first servant put his fellow servant in prison until he should pay the debt. Instead of common grace, he acted with severity.

Act III. Justice. (Matt 18:31-35)

Distressed by the man's behavior, the other servants told the king. Then the king summoned the first servant and said, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Why didn't you go and do likewise for your fellow servant?" Then the king delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. In other words, because the first servant did

not extend the king's grace to his fellow servants, the king gave him the justice he deserved. And in conclusion Jesus added, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

This sounds like really bad news, doesn't it? How can we learn to forgive like this? By making a proper accounting.

You may have done some pretty impressive things in your life. I have too. We all have. But "who shall ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who doesn't trust in idols or swear by false gods." Ps 24:3-4

What's your record when it comes to sin? How clean are your hands? How pure your heart? Have you always loved the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Have you always loved your neighbor as yourself? Have you given thanks to the Lord for every gift, every accomplishment, every provision, every meal, every breath? Have you worshiped him alone, every moment of every day?

Of course not. Not even close. None of us can stand before the Lord on our own merits. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We owe him more than we could ever pay back in sixty million lifetimes of work. Yet we aren't without hope, because at the center of Jesus' kingdom is the King himself. When we fall before him seeking his forgiveness, he offers us his lavish, seventy-sevenfold grace. There is no other way to enter his kingdom; only by his forgiving our debts do we enter in. By grace we are saved.

If you're a Christian, then, you have been forgiven far more than 10,000 talents. Your debt, of far more than the gold in Fort Knox, has been cancelled. You ought to wake up every day, saying, "I'm rich. I've won the lottery! I'm blessed beyond measure!"

In light of this jubilee, now do the numbers regarding those who hurt you. How much do they owe? Perhaps quite a lot. It wouldn't hurt this bad if they hadn't cost you deeply. Is it \$10,000? \$100,000? \$1M? Yet no matter what it is, it's still not as much as what the King has forgiven us.

When we make a proper accounting of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we find that no matter how much we've been hurt, it's pocket change in the king's economy. His amazing grace is a river that will never run dry. As we share his grace with others, not only does he refill whatever we pour out, but our own capacity as vessels of his grace begins to grow.

So that's how we forgive. That's how to do it. We make a proper accounting of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And in so doing, we find seventy-sevenfold riches, so much so that we can be generous in forgiving those who have hurt us. And the more we forgive, the more capacity we have for forgiveness.

Now, here's the question: will you do it? Given the infinity of riches you have in Christ, will you take the leap of faith and forgive whoever it is who has hurt you? It will be hard, but it will be so good.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Psalm 95:7.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. Proverbs 3:5.

Forgive one another as the Lord has forgiven you. Colossians 3:13.