

The Virtue of Withholding Forgiveness  
Matthew 18:21-35  
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I want to confuse you a little bit tonight. Maybe that will not seem out of the ordinary for your Sunday nights at ECF, but tonight I am actually going to try! You see, the topic under consideration tonight is forgiveness, and forgiveness is confusing business indeed, but I want to add one more layer of complexity to it so you will have no excuse to not ponder it further when you leave tonight.

You will read and hear almost everywhere that withholding forgiveness is wrong. It will be called a sin at worst, or a terrible, life-crippling mistake at best. You will hear a multitude of stories of bitterness developed from years of holding a grudge, or of opportunities lost from a broken relationship that forgiveness might have mended. You will hear sayings like, “Forgiveness withheld is like drinking poison and waiting for the offender to die” or that “to withhold forgiveness is to choose to continue to remain the victim.” Yes, you will hear everywhere about the evils of withholding forgiveness, but almost nowhere, except at ECF tonight, will you hear someone tell you that not only is it OK to withhold forgiveness, but that it might even be a virtue, and a gift as well. All that common sense wisdom about extending forgiveness is, of course, true, even if it is only partly Biblical. It is good advice, and I strongly encourage you to take it – under the right circumstances. But a blanket expectation to forgive those who have wronged you, no matter the

circumstances, may be doing you and everyone else a disservice, and may be turning the Biblical worldview of forgiveness and justice into another episode of one of those self-help, psychobabble television shows. Confused yet? Good.

“How many times,” that faithful disciple Peter asks, “how many times must I forgive my brother who sins against me? As many as seven times?” – seven being one of the commonly held numbers of perfection, as if Peter would have held up his end of the bargain perfectly by forgiving up to seven times. And Jesus, ever one to clear the water by throwing mud into it, says, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy seven times,” or as some translations calculate it, seventy times seven, or 490 times for the math challenged among us. Nothing like a little divine hyperbole to get the topic back on track. Indeed, Jesus *is* saying there is no limit to the number of times you should forgive someone. Just as God’s capacity to forgive is limitless, so should be ours. Having been forgiven by God our sins, our debts, our trespasses, there can be no withholding of forgiveness when others have sinned against us, indebted themselves to us, trespassed upon us in some way. The hyperbole of Jesus’ number tells us that to stop forgiving it is not even negotiable, that to even think about it is like that old saying that if you have to ask how much something costs, you can’t afford it.

However, however. All of that applies only if the person who has sinned against you is an equal, someone of the same social standing or lower. Here’s where it gets interesting. Jesus responds to Matthew’s question about what to do

when a member of the church sins against you, and what is implied in that question is the equality among members of the body of Christ. And between persons of equal stature, forgiveness was not only recommended, but virtually obligatory. Otherwise, there would be an unnecessary obstacle between the two people, and their relationship would be threatened, and with it, the harmony of the community. Remember that we are talking mainly about small town agrarian life where everybody knows everybody else and everybody depends on everybody else. To maintain a grudge, and the distance it creates, was to put the harvest at risk, or to bring in a smaller catch of fish, if you couldn't get over whatever was bugging you. You had to work together in those days, or life got very difficult in a hurry.

It is a different story, however, New Testament-wise, when you are talking about people of different social standings, and different economic classes. That is when this forgiveness business gets more complicated. You see, in those days, and in the Bible, the norm was that only people of equal or higher social standing had the right and obligation to forgive a wrong done against them. Let me back up just a moment to say that sin in those days was seen very much like a financial debt, and treated like one. If you sinned against God or someone else, it was seen as something that had to be paid off, either by a sacrifice at the altar, or by some other form of repayment or restitution to the individual. Despite the fact that sin could be perpetrated by anyone against anyone, it was the norm of the time that only some people had to pay it off. We can see this downward-only dynamic in the parable of

the unforgiving servant which Jesus tells as a follow-up to his hyperbole of seventy-seven times. In that story, one of the king's servants was indebted to him for a great deal of money, and could not pay, and was in peril for his life and freedom. But the king of the story was merciful, and forgave him his debt. But just having been forgiven, this servant finds someone who owes him money, and demands that he pay, and when he cannot, he does not do as the King has done for him, but instead throws the man in debtor's prison and goes on his merry way. Now, what you may have missed there in the reading of the story is that the forgiven servant, after he leaves forgiven, comes not upon another king, or landowner, who owed him money, but a fellow slave, someone of identical social standing, and he refuses to forgive him his debt, even when his equal has pleaded for mercy. It is for this reason that he is subsequently condemned, because the one he refused to forgive was in that category of people he could not refuse to forgive, especially in light of the mercy he had just received. It is something like what we know about hospitality in that time and place, that a traveler coming to your home was never to be refused a meal and shelter, for to do so could mean the death of that traveler. In the social network system of the time, we see the King doing the right thing, being higher up than the first slave, but that same slave refusing his obligation.

Now when the roles are reversed, it is a different story. Throughout the New Testament world, you never see a person of lower social standing offering

forgiveness to someone of a higher social standing who has sinned against them. It was just unheard of. It would have been an insult of the highest order for a slave to offer forgiveness to his master, because it implied that the master had done something wrong and was in fact indebted to the slave and not the other way around. It implied that the master was somehow inferior to the slave, a grave challenge to the master's honor, even if it was true. Of course, despite the fact that sinning against someone does put you in a position of debt, it was not seen that way due to the power structures of the time. The rich and powerful always had a right to do as they pleased to the poor and weak. You can see this dynamic at work in Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus in the Gospel of Luke, the one where a poor beggar named Lazarus lay outside the gate of the home of a rich man, but never received anything from him. It says that the dogs would come to lick Lazarus's sores, but it doesn't say that the rich man gave him any food. Well both men die, and the rich man finds himself in torment in Hades and looks up and sees Lazarus comforted in Heaven at Abraham's side. And so he calls out for mercy, for just a few drops of cool water for his burning tongue, and is denied. What is important for us tonight is the direction of the rich man's plea for mercy. Rather than call out to Lazarus himself for mercy, to bring him water, he calls out to Abraham to send Lazarus with water. He calls out not to his inferior, even though that inferior is the one to whom he is actually indebted, but to his superior, the one he knows has the obligation to forgive. He does this, I think, because he knows that

Lazarus will not forgive him, or have mercy on him, because he doesn't have to, because the direction of the flow of forgiveness is not upwards, but downwards. Though Lazarus holds the rich man's debt, he is under no obligation to forgive it, and more importantly, no condemnation if he does not.

Now, I know all of this may sound like so much Middle Eastern minutiae, but there is a point to it. The point is this, at least according to scholars far more knowledgeable than I: that "from the point of view of the New Testament, interpersonal forgiveness is possible only when, within the context of the interaction in which the question of forgiveness arises, the forgiver is more powerful than, or at least an equal of, the person being forgiven. In particular, it is not possible from the point of view of the New Testament for one person to forgive another person of greater power."<sup>1</sup> That meant a tenant did not forgive a landlord, a wife her husband, a child his or her father, and so on, and there was nothing wrong with that. Anytime there is an unequal power relationship, the issue of forgiveness veers away from a simple and blanket statement that we must forgive.

Now, you may be wondering why Jesus doesn't just come right out and say that, and why I need to lead you through all of these hoops of understanding. But that's just the point. For Jesus and his disciples, this one directional flow of forgiveness was a cultural norm, a way of being so ingrained and natural you didn't need to refer to it, like saving face in Costa Rica, or speaking your mind in

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/articles/Structures-of-Forgiveness.pdf>

the US. But we are strangers in the strange land of the Bible, and we need a heads up on what is going on here, if we are to understand it fully. You see, this is a case in which, for God's purposes, a cultural norm is put to divine use, and Jesus is guiding us to it. And it is very clearly related to what comes just before our passage in Matthew.

The eighteenth chapter of Matthew begins with a challenge, one that has vexed disciples since Jesus first offered it: "Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." This is one of those so-called "hard teachings" of Jesus, one hard to wrap our minds around. Why would we want to become like children who have a limited capacity for reason, no earning power, and no independence? Why would we want to go back to such a position of weakness and vulnerability? We have often spiritualized this idea, saying that we need to have childlike hearts, open to God, as we observe that children have, that we need to put aside the cares of the world that adults have to receive the spiritual benefits of the kingdom. And while that is probably true, it is more likely that Jesus is being a little more materialistic than we might be comfortable with. It is likely that Jesus is making a commentary on the same social standing and power relationships that come into play when we are talking about debt and sin, and who must forgive and who doesn't need to forgive. The reason we are to become like children is so that those we have sinned against may recognize us as equals or as lower than they are, and forgive us. A child occupied

the lowest rung on the social ladder, and therefore put everyone else in a position to forgive, as many as seventy-seven times. And we all need forgiveness, do we not?

In that same eighteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus also says that “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” The stumbling block goes undefined, but it is clearly some kind of sin against an inferior, a sin that cannot be forgiven as long as an unequal power relationship remains. Jesus goes on to say, “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire.” Again, stumbling is sin, but the remedy is humbling oneself, lowering oneself into a position equal to or lower than those you hurt in your stumbling. A person without a hand or a foot was considered cursed or deficient, unable to serve in the temple. We are called to do whatever it takes to put ourselves in a position to receive forgiveness, no matter how humiliating it may be, because the alternative is even worse.

Perhaps one of the most compelling examples of this in our own day is in the clergy sexual abuse scandal rocking the Roman Catholic Church. Here is a situation in which there is clearly a hierarchy of power, clergy over lay people, adult men over children. Clearly, great sins have been perpetrated by those higher

up the social ladder, and they owe a debt to those they victimized. And yet, we hear repeated calls for the survivors of that abuse to forgive their aggressors, if they are to “move on,” or if the church is to heal. Meanwhile, in all but a very few cases, the perpetrators have been shielded from prosecution, both within the church and in the legal system, and have maintained their titles, pensions, and status as clergy. There has been very little done to require that the abusers fully repent and face the consequences and change their ways, very few stripped of their ordinations that they might become at least a little more equal with those they have damaged. And yet, that will be the only way they will be able to receive forgiveness from their victims, who should not have to be victimized a second time by being judged as unforgiving and who, in God’s eyes, will be under no obligation to forgive until things change.

Let me circle back around then to this idea of the virtue of withholding forgiveness, the lack of obligation on the part of the weak to forgive the powerful who have sinned against them. If we can remove our church colored glasses a moment, and step back from the notion that we are supposed to forgive everyone at all costs, we can see that this social convention is one which pursues God’s justice. You see, if the powerful who abuse the weak, and the rich who abuse the poor want to have their debts forgiven, they have two choices: they can seek forgiveness from God, who is their superior, or they can humble themselves to the position of their inferior with concrete acts of repentance and change, and thereby obligate

those they have sinned against to forgive them. To tell you the truth, I think there is really only one option because I am not sure God would do that for us unless we first went to the one we'd sinned against, and it as much as says so in Matthew 18. Be that as it may, it is all related to Jesus' radical challenge that the last shall be first, and that those who would save their life must lose it. This is the gift the poor give to the rich, the abused to the abusers even if they don't deserve it: that they hold the keys to our becoming human. In the end, all of this is related to justice. You see, the demands of justice are greater than the demand for forgiveness for this simple fact: that in a just world, a just society, in just relationships, forgiveness isn't needed quite as often. When we act with justice, God's justice, we sin less, and hurt others less. We take ourselves out of the position of being a debtor, and clear the way for authentic relationships, to work together without anything between us, to bring God's shalom into the world.

But here is the last twist, from tonight's reading. The twist is this: that all of this only works when God's people really do forgive, not just once, or seven times, or seventy-seven times, or even 490 times. Being in the position to withhold forgiveness is not a license to take hostages, to keep someone in our debt twisting in the wind until they satisfy our sense of woundedness or outrage. The parable of the unforgiving servant makes clear our need for vigilance to see when we are at that level when forgiveness is required, when the sinner has repented and humbled himself or herself and we find ourselves in that new position.

Let me offer one final thought for those who might wonder what happens if we are not forgiven by those we have wronged, even after we have repented, and given up our power, and become their equal. Don't worry about that! You see, it is God's job to forgive. It is our job to repent. In the end, we have no control over whether others forgive us. We can only give them the opportunity. But if we have done that hard work of repentance, we'll have clear consciences and nothing to worry about, and we can be sure that God will forgive us, as many as 490 times. May God help us all to forgive, and be forgiven. Amen.