

August 30, 2020

"Parables: The Mathematics of Forgiveness"

[Matthew 18:21-35](#)

I was pretty honest last week about how flaky I was as a college student. Looking back, it started happening my junior year of high school – especially in my trigonometry class. I just didn't see why any of it mattered or connected with real life. What did all of those formulas and symbols, sine and cosine, have to do with anything? Do we really need the quadratic equation? Some of my really, smart classmates who loved this honors math class told me that engineers used this stuff all the time. And right then and there, I was convinced there would be no need to take calculus my senior year. It's funny that, several years later, God would lead me into a lifelong love affair with a math teacher, who is STILL teaching and taking math classes.

What I'm about to say isn't just to make Shelly happy . . . but it will: MATH MATTERS! It does. And we need it for all sorts of practical things; things that make life work and help people move forward. Math is part of what's helping us figure out how to navigate this pandemic. Percentages matter. Math even helps us understand the Kingdom of God and the radical call of God to be a forgiven and forgiving people.

Here in Matthew 18, there are numbers, algebraic formulas, ratios and proportions all over the place. And some of these numbers are staggering! What they all add up to in the end is a deep and difficult lesson on forgiveness; one of the toughest callings/commands of the Christian faith.

After a short discourse on church discipline and the procedures of accountability and confrontation for the family of God (see Matthew 18:15-20) – which is essentially acknowledging the fact that sin is also a problem inside the Church – Peter asks Jesus a question: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" (Matthew 18:21)

Here's our first number. Why 7? My guess is that Peter is doing his math. He doesn't pull out scratch paper or a calculator (or slide ruler) to get seven. Instead, he uses the Old Testament scriptures and juggles some numbers in his head. Through the prophet Amos the Lord declared that, "For three sins, and for four sins, I will not revoke punishment." He uses this formula again and again to cast judgment on other nations and, finally, on the people of Israel. From these passages many Jewish people had wrongly come to believe that God was willing to forgive three times for the same offense but drew the line at number 4. In the minds of people like Peter, 3 was a LOT of times to forgive.

If Peter is thinking along these lines, we can assume he used simple algebra to arrive at seven. He took the number three – a huge number of times to forgive someone – and doubled it. Then he added one more just to be sure. That's $2x+1=7$. He's been hanging around Jesus for a while now and starting to see how some of the old paradigms are being blown wide open. But he's still

a little short-sighted. Dale Bruner calculates Peter's question like this: "The virtue in Peter's question is the desire to be a frequently forgiving person – Peter has learned *something* from Jesus. The weakness in Peter's question is the notion that even forgiveness has limits, that he (Peter) should be frequently forgiving but not forever forgiving." (Dale Bruner in *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28*) Peter on the right track but he's way off!

So now it's time for Jesus to do some math of His own. "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:22) Some translate it seventy times seven. 490. Maybe Jesus meant it exponentially: 7^7 . . . which equals 823,543. Peter guesses high at 7, and Jesus blows him away by basically saying we must forgive one another infinitely.

And then the great storyteller tells us another parable. And the numbers He starts off with are astronomical . . . you could say exaggerated. A man owes 10,000 talents to the king. Last week we talked about the currency referred to as a denarius – the equivalent of one day's wages. A talent is worth 6,000 denarii; more than 15 years of common, daily wages. And this guy owes 10,000 times that! What Jesus is saying is that this guy owes 'zillions' of dollars, which is clearly an impossible amount to pay.

And this guy falls on his knees and begs for more time; as if he could ever work hard enough or earn enough to repay the king. He's not really paying attention to the numbers. Clearly, Jesus is trying to tell us something more than the mathematics of compounded interest; He's making a statement about the human condition and the way things work in His Kingdom. ALL OF US are impoverished and unable to pay the price we owe. We are, ALL OF US, indebted to the King beyond anything we could ever cover with our own resources. None of us can come up with 'what we need' on our own to satisfy a righteous and perfect God's request for obedience and holiness. Our only choice is to fall on our knees and ask for (debt) forgiveness.

And that's what this man gets; pure grace. "Out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt." (Matthew 18:27) And then, for the rest of his life he models the same grace and mercy to others? Nope! The shock of being forgiven wears off pretty quickly because, as he leaves the king's presence, he "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.' " (Matthew 18:28) Clearly Jesus wants to get a reaction from His listeners. 'Who would do that? Who would turn around after being forgiven so much and be so petty and unforgiving to others?' Then it dawns on us that, oftentimes, we are JUST LIKE this unforgiving servant.

Forgiveness is a tough one, isn't it? It's definitely hard to pull off on our own.

Although Jesus ends this parable with a clear, ethical call to forgive (which we'll get to in a minute), I don't think Jesus tells this story to simply communicate that we've got to 'try harder.' I think He tells this story (and uses crazy-big numbers) to help us see how much we've been forgiven SO THAT gratitude would fill our hearts, enabling mercy and forgiveness to naturally

flow from our lives. Jesus wants us to see how we get even more from God than we dare "ask for or imagine" – to use Paul's language in Ephesians 3. Dale Bruner points out that, "The servant gets infinitely more than he asked: he asked for patience and the chance to repay his debt; he got amnesty and complete remission of debt. He got a forgiveness that he had not dared to request." (Dale Bruner in *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28*) The man is beyond surprised. We, too, can surprise others with an unexpected forgiveness – which comes to us from the Holy Spirit and is meant to flow through us to others.

But that's easier said than done, right? If we were any good at forgiveness, this world would be a different place; and the Church would be different too.

To release someone from a debt of any kind isn't easy to do – even once, let alone 7 or 490 times. To forgive someone who has hurt you – or someone you love – is difficult. It's risky. It goes against everything that our society tells us about lawsuits and keeping score and not just 'getting mad, but getting even.'

To forgive someone:

There must be a relinquishing of certain rights. We have to put aside our demands and desires to see the other person hurt a little; or at least grovel. This is clearly NOT a trend in our society.

There needs to be a form of confrontation and clear communication about the wrong that was suffered. In order to forgive someone, the sin or the debt has to be addressed. "I forgive you for gossiping behind my back or lying to my face." "I forgive you for trampling on our marital vows." "I forgive you for blatantly disrespecting me in front of others." "I forgive you for disregarding our business deal." I don't know about you, but confrontation doesn't come easily for me. The picture of confrontation and discipline in the Church – which Jesus discusses just before Peter's question – makes us squirm.

When we forgive someone, we choose to release them from the burden of indebtedness. We are giving them a huge gift of freedom. We are 'taking our hands off their throats.' (see Matthew 18:28) To forgive a debt is truly an act of grace.

Most of the time we don't really forgive one another. We say, "It's okay" but keep holding grudges; we keep a hidden notebook of debits and credits; we manipulate conversations until we get someone to grovel and apologize. Then, of course, we forgive them . . . for now.

Forgiveness is difficult. But Jesus demands it as a response (not a precursor) to His forgiveness of our sin/debt. What does He teach us to pray? "Forgive us our debts AS WE FORGIVE our debtors." At the end of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew's gospel, Jesus goes on to say, "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 you." (Matthew 6:14-15)

There is a clear echo of that here at the end of this parable. After the man who was forgiven so much chooses NOT to forgive his co-worker, others go straight to the king and tell him the sad turn of events after his unbelievable debt forgiveness. "I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy . . . as I had mercy on you? And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured . . . So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matthew 18:32-35)

If you're like me, several bells and whistles are going off right now; and a few red flags. Doesn't that sound so conditional? I thought we couldn't earn God's forgiveness?! We can't. But Jesus is also being clear: IF WE HAVE TRULY RECEIVED GOD'S FORGIVENESS AS THE HUGE GIFT THAT IT IS, IT WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO BECOME AN INCREASINGLY FORGIVING PERSON. That doesn't mean forgiveness will be easy. In some cases – forgiving another person will be a lifelong process (struggle). Some hurts take years (decades) to finally forgive. Even the desire to forgive takes time in some cases. And God gets that. Jesus knows that too. But if we are flat-out refusing to forgive someone or even entertain the possibility that – with God's grace in our lives – we can get there somehow, someday . . . [if we're dead set on NOT forgiving someone] then we must ask: Have we really recognized the debt of our own sin or God's decision to pay the penalty for us?

Jesus is saying (to use more mathematical language) that it just doesn't ADD UP, if we willingly and willfully keep our hands on another person's throat with no intention of letting go AND we claim to be living under the mercy of God; He is telling us that there's something wrong with the equation. If Christ is in us, then we are beloved children of God who are called to represent Him and the ways of His Kingdom on this earth.

Paul writes, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore 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." (Ephesians 4:32-5:2) FORGIVENESS IS HARD BUT BEAUTIFUL WHEN IT HAPPENS . . .

[Here I tell the story of pastor, professor and author Walter Wangerin; and his wife, Thanne. Their marriage was dead in the water due to his love affair with his church. After years of disregarding her, giving her his leftovers, and being there for everyone else first, he attempts to make amends . . . by apologizing to her and offering her a rose . . . during a sermon! He broke her spirit and their marriage went cold. And then one day, after weeks of silence and sadness, Thanne walked into his study and forgave him. THE LONGER STORY CAN BE READ IN HIS BOOK, *As For Me And My House: Crafting Your Marriage To Last*; p.90-91]

Aren't you glad God was willing to offer forgiveness to us at an incalculable cost? And that He gives us the strength to offer that same forgiveness to others?

Who might you need to forgive? Or at least who might you need to talk about with God, asking Him to give you the grace and strength and resolve it will take to move toward forgiveness with that person; as hard as it might be and as long as it might take?

Questions for Personal Reflection & Small Group Discussion

1. How do you balance limitless forgiveness with relational boundaries?
2. On a regular basis, how overwhelmed are you with God's forgiveness of your debt/sin? Do you see yourself as someone who "owes such a large sum" or (if you're honest) a person who is "not as indebted as other people who are really bad"?
3. Look again at the end of page 3 through the middle of page 4. In what ways do you struggle with the "conditional language" Jesus uses at the end of this parable and the end of His teaching on prayer in Matthew 6:14-15? How do grace and judgment fit together?
4. Who have you needed to forgive in the past, and who do you need to forgive now? What's the first step you need to take?
5. What does this parable have to do with being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, [and] Branching Out To Serve Others"?