

“Forgive?”  
Ephesians 4:21-32;  
Matthew 18:15-22

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Here we have Peter again coming to ask another question. He seems to have asked quite a few questions as we've gone through—anything from “Can I get out on the water with you?” to “I don't think that's the way you should do it.” That's not a question; he's telling Jesus what to do. At this point he's not trying to tell Jesus what to do. Perhaps he's back to thinking about what it's going to be like for him to be a rabbi once he's learned everything from Jesus. As a teacher, what is he supposed to present to the folks about what Jesus taught?

Peter recognizes that Jesus has been talking about forgiveness in some form or another. So comes to Jesus and he says, “How many times do I have to do this? Do I have to do it seven times?” Now he didn't say “have to.” I just put that in there because it feels that way to me, that he's asking how many times he has to do this. Or maybe he's coming and asking “If I do this seven times, will that be enough to make me look magnanimous? Is that enough to make me look like a great guy?” I wish I knew what Jesus' inflection was when he responded. That would give us a sense of whether he was sad, exasperated, or another sign of how he felt when he said, “Not seven times, but seventy seven times.” It's an interesting interchange, isn't it? We're not sure exactly why Peter asked the question, but it is in this context of Jesus talking about the way to deal with somebody who has wronged you. After all, we wouldn't need forgiveness at all if we never felt wronged, would we.

So forgiveness, first of all, is dealing with the wrong that we feel in some way. This text starts out with a description of how we might go about dealing with that wrong. First, the idea is you go to the one who you feel has wronged you. It's a good thing to make sure that they understand how you feel wronged. That's one part of it. The other is if they recognize that they have wronged you, and you come to them, they have a chance to try to change. He says if they do change, then you have a friend again.

But that doesn't always work. You go again and have one or two people with you to present your side. If it still doesn't work, then bring them to the community that you are a part of and let the community be part of trying to heal the relationship. If that doesn't work, then you have to step away and treat that one as a Gentile (recognize that you've got a broken relationship) and a tax collector. I would suggest that what Jesus means by tax collector is one who needs to be healed. If you read elsewhere, why did Jesus come? He's a physician to the tax collectors. There's a sense of the relationship being broken and healing that needs to take place. But I step away from it.

It's interesting to think about what the word “forgiveness” actually means. As I was looking it up in Greek, there were three phrases that stuck out in the way they defined it. The first was “let be,” then “leave behind,” and “let go.” So think about forgiveness in those terms: let be, leave behind, and let go. We have often thought about forgiveness

as leaving something behind, but sometimes when we forgive someone, we say “Oh, it’s all right.” I don’t think that’s what forgiveness says. It doesn’t say it was all right. It says I’m going to let it be, leave it behind, and let it go. It doesn’t say it’s all right. It’s interesting to begin to think about what forgiveness is. Letting go, leaving behind, letting be. There’s a sense of movement on our part. When something has hurt us, what do we do with it?

It’s amazing how important this must be, because Jesus goes directly from talking about trying to heal the relationship to “what’s bound on earth will be bound in heaven. What’s loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven.” There’s a way in which heaven and earth are bound up in the relationship that we have and the ways they work. It’s mind-boggling to me to think what that must mean. It’s important.

It’s important, so I want to think more about what that means that first Jesus wants us to try to heal the relationship and if that doesn’t work, then we have to step away. It doesn’t mean that we don’t want something to change. It’s a recognition on our part that we can’t make that change and we are not going to be controlled by the need for that change.

When we’ve had a wrong done to us, what do we do to those who wronged us? I think we turn our backs on them. But when we’re in a relationship with somebody and we have our back turned to them, we are still connected and to try to move in that circumstance is pretty hard because we are going in opposite directions. What is forgiveness? Forgiveness is to begin to let go. If I let go, I can make it so that we can turn toward each other. There had to be some movement. The idea is that in the end, you can go forward together. That’s the description Jesus gives us of what we’re supposed to do. Sometimes I can make this movement, but they don’t move. They won’t let me move, so what happens instead? I have to let go. In the letting go, there’s also a sense of forgiveness. I tried to make the movement within the relationship, but if I can’t do that then I have to let go. It doesn’t mean that I don’t want something to work, but it means that I’m not in control and I have to let go.

There are times when we have to let go of a relationship because we can’t make it work. We are leaving it be, leaving it behind, and letting it go, and I think at that point there’s a sense of letting God, because at that point we have to let God do the work.

I’ve read through this passage a lot of times. I was taken by the pattern that Jesus gave us and the idea that we actually have to step away from some relationships. We have to let the Gentile/tax collector thing happen. That is, to recognize the brokenness and recognize the need for healing but that we can’t hold on to it. Our forgiving is letting go of the animosity, the hurt, the wrong that has been done to us, and moving on. We can hold on to that stuff and it will control us. But once we let it go we can move into newness of life. If we think about this in relationship to what God does with us, God forgives—that means God says this relationship of animosity has no effect on me; I forgive, I let go of it. It doesn’t control the way I (God) relate to you.

That's only a piece. That's God's forgiveness. The second piece is God's grace, which is the surprising gift of love that God gives us. Not only does God say "I'm not going to be caught in this relationship of animosity with you, but I love you." Now that's what's offered, but there's another piece to that. Getting everything straightened out takes cooperation. We can know about forgiveness and we can know about God's grace, but unless we turn and embrace it then we can't enable the relationship to work. It's that turning and embracing that allows us to follow Christ. It's the same thing Christ is asking of us, to let go of things that are wrong, try to heal them (it doesn't mean they weren't wrong; they are and there needs to be healing), and to turn to each other and then turn together into life through the grace and love of God.

God encourages us to forgive. If that's not hard enough, how many times do we forgive? Seven times? Is it just about doing something a few times so we can feel good about it? When Jesus says, "Not seven times, but seventy seven times," he's really saying "You're going to lose track. It's going to be a way of life."

We are invited, as we turn to God's forgiveness and God's grace, to also turn ourselves into those who can forgive and give grace, and learn that in the love we share we will find the fullness of life. And it becomes a way of life—not something we just have to do a few times to make sure that we've done our duty, not just something we do a few times to make ourselves look a certain way, but part of who we are as followers of Christ, for it is the very forgiveness and grace of God that leads us to the wonder and fullness of life. We are invited to share that with one another. Amen.

Gracious God, we recognize that you have forgiven us and that you invite us to forgive one another. We recognize that it is not easy to begin to try to turn and solve and heal relationships or to even let go and let the hurt be behind us and move on to the new life with you. Lord, indeed, you are really leading us towards reconciliation, a life together. We regain our friendships. We regain the community of shared life together. Lord, we are thankful that you call us into such a wonderful place for in it and through it you lead us to life, and life abundantly. Thank you, Lord. Amen.