

Matthew 18:21-35

21 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?'
²²Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.
23 'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, 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. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But 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." ²⁹Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Smelling Like a Rose

There was a smell that many of us guys can certainly remember; it was the smell of a men's locker room in high school. Do you remember? Perhaps the first few weeks of school it smelled okay, but then something would start to wreak – usually it was an unclaimed towel or sock or something that got tossed into a locker and forgotten...until you began to notice the odor. As I think about those who do not forgive, I think of those odors. Because people who don't forgive are people we end up avoiding. It may play out something like this: Ralph borrows my lawnmower and breaks it, but doesn't tell me it's broken when he returns it. I get angry with Ralph, who claims that he did not break it and won't pay for it to be repaired. From now on, I vow never to lend anything to Ralph. Furthermore I advise others not to lend things to Ralph and tell them the story of how he returned a broken lawnmower. I avoid Ralph as much as I can. But now people are talking about Ralph breaking the pastor's lawnmower, which Ralph denies. What has happened is that I have put a wall between myself and Ralph, but I've also put a wall between myself and others, because now they know not to ask the pastor to

borrow anything lest they break it and incur my wrath. I come out smelling like a dirty gym sock. But forgiveness has a very pleasant aroma. Forgiveness draws people to you. Forgiveness encourages people to be honest around you. Forgiveness creates an aura of peace around you. The one who readily forgives experiences true peace, unlike the one who cannot forgive who perpetuates conflict and ends up isolating himself.

One of the doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants is over the doctrine of Purgatory. For those of you familiar with Catholic doctrine you know that Purgatory is a place where some souls go in order to be “purged” of all sinfulness before going to heaven. Protestants say that this doctrine has no base in scripture, which is not a valid argument among Catholics because Protestants do not consider the book describing Purgatory (2 Maccabees) to be part of the Bible while Catholics *do*. John Wesley, while he dismissed the notion of Purgatory, nonetheless believed that there was a place or time between death and final judgment where believers would continue to “grow in holiness.”¹

Perhaps John Wesley was looking at passages like today’s when he conceived that idea. Jesus explains the importance of forgiving others their debts through this parable of a merciless slave whose debt is forgiven by his master, but when the slave fails to forgive the debt of another slave, the master calls the first slave back, berates him for being unforgiving, and hands him over to be tortured(!) until the debt is paid, and Jesus says, “My Father will do the same to you if you do not forgive others from your hearts.” Jesus gives the sinner some wiggle room with that word “until.” It implies that the unforgiving person will not suffer eternally, but only until the debt is paid. Sounds like purgatory to me.

I’m not a big fan of speculating on the afterlife – since the living have little if any experience being there and no one I know who has been there has come back to talk about it. I’m more concerned about getting there than seeing what it’s like; I’ll be happy to get in the door, and won’t really care about color that the walls are painted. But I agree with my Catholic friends as well as with John Wesley that we cannot enter God’s eternal kingdom without taking a bath first, without getting clean, with being *purged* of our sin, and it **stands to reason that the more dirt we carry with us to the end of our lives, the more soap will be required to get us cleaned up**, or to use a different metaphor, the less *pure* we are, the more fire will be necessary to burn out the dross, to refine us, to make us pure. And so the sooner we get started on the process the less painful the final phase will be. I’ve seen too many people approaching death with that horrified look on

¹ *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* by Ted Campbell. 1999

their face who are desperate for immediate soul-cleansing because the guilt and the shame of their past sins is finally catching up with them, and I don't want anyone in this church to be of that mindset when the sun is setting on them. **Our faith is not about *getting ready* for some mysterious future. Our faith is about how we live today, and if we have our act together today we have no need to fear what happens when our lives end; in fact we have no reason to fear tomorrow, because we have confidence that we are on that road that leads to eternity with God.**

You see, if we put off discipleship, if we do not commit our lives to living as Jesus calls us to live, we're taking a huge gamble, at least according to today's text, because if we fail to forgive our brothers and sisters *from our hearts*, at the very least we're looking at some unpleasant experiences ahead of us. Human pride may lead us to ask, "How can a loving God allow me to experience torture? That's preposterous." To that I answer, "If you are expecting to spend your eternity with a pure and righteous God, and in the fellowship of clean of righteous saints, you need to be clean." You need to wash behind your ears. And the longer you decide to remain dirty, the longer it will take to get you cleaned up. That's just common sense.

But I told you that I don't like to think that all Jesus came to do was to tell us how to get ourselves ready for the afterlife; Jesus came to get us in line during this life, and I believe that the torture that Jesus is referencing in today's text is a torture that many people endure in the here and now. There is a price you pay now for your failure to forgive someone from your heart. And you keep paying it as long as you are determined not to forgive someone. Because as long as you fail to forgive, you sustain conflict. You may think that you can simply avoid the ones you can't forgive, but then you are restricted on where you go and what you do, and even then you might run into the one who you can't forgive.

Some people don't forgive because they think it's a way to get even; they want the person to really feel bad about the sin they've committed. They want to torture the one that offended them. This hardly opens the door for forgiveness but instead hardens the offender as well as the offended. The offender now accuses the offended of "blowing things out of proportion." And now the one who fails to forgive is in need of forgiveness from the one who originally offended them.

So much of the conflict that occurs in this world is the result of people who feel offended by the actions of another and will not forgive. And as long as both sides cannot forgive, the conflict continues.

I thought about all the conflict in this world, all the enemies that people have; religious enemies, national enemies, business enemies, church enemies, *personal* enemies. I thought how it's all these enemies that are responsible for all the hatred and violence and slander and mental sickness in this world. And I thought, "Matt, what is the best way you can lead people to free themselves of enemies?" And the answer came to me as clear as day. **"Lead them to Christ."** Lead them to the one who could look down from the cross at those who would betray, deny, humiliate and torture and kill and still pray, "Father, forgive them." And the proof of that forgiveness, thank God, came on Easter morning. "Matt, lead them to one who takes away the sins of the world."

And so I do my best to do that, and I'm learning how to do it better. I'm leaning how to urge people to take immediate action, to really, really surrender their lives to Jesus Christ, because I know that when you do a miracle occurs, that your eyes are opened, and that you gain this wonderful glimpse of God's kingdom, because you do realize that your sins are forgiven, and you sense the joy in that, and at the same time you wish that joy upon all others, including those you used to classify as your enemies, and you forgive them. Chances are that when your eyes are opened you will also see a few extra sins that you need to be forgiven of, and because you are now living for Christ and not for yourself you won't have that cumbersome ego that keeps you from asking for forgiveness, that keeps you from healing a relationship, that keeps you from loving another person.

I've discovered that there are no shortcuts that I know of, that surrender to Christ is the only remedy to our human pride that leads us to hatred, spitefulness, backstabbing, petty behavior that holds you down. And because I believe that sincerely I'm going to ask you to do something right now. I want you to pray, and to commit your life to Jesus Christ. If you have done so already, I want you to re-commit your life to Jesus Christ. We call him "Lord" after all, but let's be honest; are we really making him Lord? If we're refusing to forgive others, we are NOT. If we are not forgiving ourselves, we're not accepting the forgiveness that he is offering us, and we are choosing to live apart from his love and grace. So I urge you to pray that Christ would free you from all bondage; bondage to anger, bondage to shame, bondage to sin. God has certainly proved to you his love and his desire to forgive. May the Holy Spirit communicate that message to you and empower you to surrender all things to the Savior of the World.