

As We Forgive Our Debtors
Matthew 18:21-25

“There is nothing particularly Christian about the practice of forgiveness. Whatever our religion or non-religion, we must request and grant forgiveness almost every day of our lives” (Interpretation 215-216).

And yet I fear discussion of this crucial topic has been neglected in much Christian conversation. That doesn't surprise me. Like many of you, I inherited a doctrine of forgiveness that just doesn't sit well with me today.

Talk of forgiving and being forgiven can become sentimental, and often seems to diminish the experience of one who has been wronged. Throughout the ages, women in particular have been chastised to forgive the debts brought against them: the debt of humiliation and subordination, the debt of abuse, of betrayal. “Forgive and forget” remains the instruction of some well-meaning but misguided clergy. Accept the offender's apology, even when the trespass is intentional or repeated.

It's not only women who have been tormented by this unrealistic and harmful understanding of forgiveness. Most of us have been frustrated by this bad theology to the point that this morning you may be tempted to catch up on your hymnal-reading... but don't tune out just yet.

In my opinion, what many of us have heard about forgiveness is just another act of spiritual abuse, and it needs to be forgiven in order for us to heal.



Because I take this subject deeply to heart, I'm going to give you my own definition of forgiveness straight out – so get your pencils ready folks.

Forgiveness is an act of loving yourself.

Forgiveness is an act of loving yourself... and neighbor... and through self and neighbor, God.

“But wait (you may be thinking), isn't forgiveness about another's action against me? And so, isn't it at least about the other making amends?”

Allow me to answer with a parable. You may have heard this one:

A king began a reckoning of his accounts, and one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. As the servant could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment be made. So the servant fell to his knees, ‘Have patience with me and I will pay you everything’. And the lord released him and forgave him the debt”.

You may have noticed that discussions of forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament often take on the form of legal contracts. Each week we pray “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”. This parable uses the same language to answer Peter's question, “how many times must I forgive?” But what Peter would have automatically caught on to, and what we miss through centuries of cultural distance, are the implications of Jesus' word choices.

The *numbers* Jesus uses here are meant to invoke an *infinite cost*:

Ten Thousand Talents. A talent itself is the largest monetary unit of the period, worth more than *15 years'* wages. Not only that, but 10,000 is the *largest possible number* (also translated as myriad).

This debt is, therefore, UNPAYABLE.

Redemption is utterly impossible.

Nothing the debtor can do will repay the indebted.

Even if he and his family and his possessions were sold, they wouldn't cover the cost.

The only purpose in the selling would be punitive.

Again: redemption is utterly impossible from the debtor's side.

Nothing the offender can do will heal the offended.

When we have been sinned against or have need to forgive, we must find the means of releasing *ourselves* from what binds us – the hurt, the anger – another cannot do it for us.

Consider some of the worst violations we can think of: child abuse, the murder of a loved one.

The pain of such acts against our very spirits is immense.

There is no way a perpetrator can make payment on such a debt. Nothing, not an apology or a death sentence, will return an innocent childhood or a dead beloved.

And there is no restitution anyone can make to cause healing in our own lives after such an event. Nobody else can choose to release us from what we now hold within: hurt, anger, sadness, resentment, loss.

But let's take it down a notch.

Most of us haven't experienced such forms of violence.

Our more common hurt, anger and loss come in the form of

slights from siblings or in-laws;

rejection by children;

betrayal of lovers;

dismissal by community;

and spiritual abuse through some organized religion.

Everyday need for forgiveness comes even more often:

someone is late through their own negligence;

another driver cuts you off, making you get stuck behind the train;

a family member forgets to take out the trash because her own stuff took precedence.

As much as they apologize or feel badly it'll be another whole week before that smelly bin gets out of the garage.

These particular acts can never be undone.

Getting those 5 minutes back from the train is impossible.

But letting ourselves be free of the binding resentment is not.

The emotions of a particular event don't need to stay with us, if forgiveness is an act of loving ourselves.

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Our culture has adopted love as something we can measure via pop-magazine quizzes and express in sappy love songs. Love has become a *feeling*, and yet, how impossible is it for us to "love our enemies" if love is a *feeling*? I certainly would fail.

But just 4 chapters from today's reading is a key – *the key*. Chapter 22 offers Matthew's rendition of the greatest commandments: You shall love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. On these hang all the law and the prophets.

“How do I live?” is the question. “Live in love” is the answer. All the law and the prophets – every bit of scripture points toward loving God, self and other.

But can I love my neighbor if he’s a known sexual offender?

You can’t if we’re talking about a feeling. You can if we’re talking about actions.

The love Jesus speaks of, agape, is not how I *feel* toward others; it’s how I *behave* toward others.

Love is a verb. An action.

I can’t say I’d feel too sweet on folks whose car alarm goes off at 3am each night. But I can say with some confidence that I won’t go out and introduce their windshield to my baseball bat. Action. Not feeling.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Forgiveness is an act of loving self.

And neighbor. Because by loving ourselves,

by releasing the hold we have on our response to a trespass,

by unbinding the cords that hold us to a particular person, place, time or event,

we are giving ourselves permission to move on, to go forward, to leave the pain of the past where it belongs... behind us.

And by forgiving,

by loving ourselves that much,

we are also giving the other, the offender,

an opportunity to move forward accepting the pain they have caused,
and hopefully to become whole again.

That may or may not happen, but through forgiveness we can hope, hope for the other.

We also have the opportunity – if we choose – to take a next step: the step of reconciliation.



By now, many of you are familiar with the phenomenon called Harry Potter. For those of you who have not read the books, have no fear – I will give away nothing.

This series of books shares the story of Harry,

a young wizard whose parents were murdered by the most evil wizard ever known, Lord Voldemort.

Voldemort also tried killing Harry, the child prophesied to be the Dark Lord’s downfall;

but Harry was protected by his mother’s love.

She stood before her child and died saving him. This *love*, in turn, became Harry’s greatest protection.

It entered his very skin, and since has foiled Voldemort’s further murderous attempts,

even when he tries to use Harry’s love for a friend against him.

Harry’s mentor and teacher (Dumbledore) has expressed many times that this love is the greatest

power in the world, and it is *this* that will eventually vanquish the Dark Lord once and for all.

Love will conquer him, because Voldemort knows nothing about love. He never had family, nor friends, and cannot even begin to understand what love can do. ...

So I have a theory (well, it’s actually another member of the church’s theory, but I’ve been pondering it since we spoke last week).

The final Harry Potter book comes out next year, and this is my theory for how it should end.

Harry must face Voldemort in order to defeat evil. But Harry *cannot* use

hatred

or revenge

or even “right”

as the value to triumph, if *love* has been his greatest protection and the greatest power.

Even if he won on those platforms, Harry would never be free of his own anger and loss ... They would instead bind him to his act of revenge.

Rather, I think Harry must come to *forgive* Voldemort for all that he has done.

THAT DOES NOT NEGATE THE EVIL.

None of the Dark Lord's actions can be undone, and none of them can be repaid. But in order for Harry to heal, to release his resentment, anger, loss, he must forgive.

Harry must love himself to the point that his whole life will not be consumed by the evil done to him. And his defeat of evil must be an act of love.

Reconciliation will probably never happen between Harry and his mortal enemy, because reconciliation takes two. After forgiveness the offended one can try to seek new relationship *only if the other is willing* to make admission of and show remorse for the offense.

But even without that, Harry can act in love by no longer letting the other do him harm. That's love.

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Now, those of you who listened to Harry *Halac* read the whole scripture passage are perhaps wondering how I reconcile the end of the parable.

That same servant who was forgiven his debt goes out and does NOT act in love, and it comes back to bite him.

He is thrown into prison to be tortured until his debt is paid – which, as I mentioned earlier, is hopeless. How does this affect the king, then?

Forgiveness had begun the process of letting go and moving on,  
releasing him of his attachment to his loss.

But now his anger has returned, binding him to his servant's actions.

Will the king feel better about retribution without restitution?

I don't believe it is ever possible to be healed through retribution – the offense always remains, and the satisfaction is another way of holding on to the debt... it's not release.

And so the king has lost his money AND must house and feed another lifelong prisoner. He is a participant in his continued loss. And he himself remains imprisoned.

Forgiveness is hard. And it is a process, not just a one-time thing.

But God has given us the means to forgive: It is love.

And it is made easier by the fact that it is *ourselves* we must choose to love first.

Yet through the whole, hard process, we are also loving God.

By loving ourselves enough to unbind us from pain,  
we are acting in love towards God's own beloved child.

By loving others enough to refuse their continued trespass against us,  
we are acting in love toward God's own creation.

Through forgiveness we are making the ultimate act of love,  
and loving God.

May we always know such love.

Amen.