

Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness. Our Old Testament and New Testament readings are all about it. What is it? The Greek word is *Aphiemi*, means “to release.”

We might see, in our mind’s eye, an image of a jail cell opening up and a prisoner being released, set free. To forgive is to release someone from the deserved consequence or judgment of their own actions.

And already we see why this is a task we are not good at. From when we were 2 years old, to us overgrown 2 year olds, we scream “that’s not fair!”

To forgive is unfair. It is to release someone from what they deserve. Which is why the statement you sometimes hear is, “After what they did to me - they don’t deserve for me to forgive them!”

But that statement is redundant! Of course they don’t deserve it. If someone has wronged you they deserve judgment and justice, not forgiveness, forgiveness chooses to release a person anyway and it is by definition undeserved. Because if they didn’t need to be forgiven, that would mean they have done nothing to harm you.

This also means that when you forgive someone, it is NOT saying that what they did to you is “No big deal.” Not at all. If what they did to you is no big deal, then they wouldn’t need to be forgiven. To forgive someone is to say that what they did hurt – maybe a whole lot, but you will release them nonetheless.

Sometimes people think Christianity, with it’s talk of sin and forgiveness is so impractical, philosophical even. “Oh Jesus died to take my sins away, well, that’s nice but I still have bills to pay.” Which is why I think it’s wonderful how in our parable, Jesus attaches a value and practical repercussions to the forgiveness.

This is not just some made up doctrine. The first guy in our parable owes the King, and I am not joking, 60 million day's wages. That's around 150 thousand years of salary. And the guy says, "Just give me more time and I will pay it all!" No he won't. There's not enough time, it's impossible! And yet, this guy, is forgiven (released!) an impossible sum with very practical ramifications – namely he doesn't get him and his family thrown and sold into servitude.

But then, as we read, he turns and is quite literally shaking a guy down for 3 months, salary. Not nothing—we'd get angry over that much... that's not "no big deal," unless it's compared to what he owed first.

And we might think that, "OK, so forgiveness is valuable and practical in the parable, that doesn't mean it is in our lives." But that's not true. Without forgiveness we are cutting people out of our lives and that changes things! It changes who you hang out with, because its awkward in the friend group now, and now so-and-so isn't at Thanksgiving dinner anymore. It matters when families get torn up fighting over money, it matters when that relationship falls apart. Those are very real hurts.

And because it is so real, not because it's some made-up doctrine, but because these things are so real, is why this is so hard. The wrongs people have done to us really hurt and now you are supposed to release them? That hurts too!

To forgive someone is to let them hurt you twice.

The first hurt is whatever wrong they did to you. They lied about you, they called you a name, they stole from you, they abused you. That hurts. It's a big deal. It deserves judgment.

The second hurt is, as you work to forgive them, and trust me, sometimes that takes time, the second hurt is, as you work to forgive them, you are taking upon yourself the hurt of not being

able to see perfect “fair”ness in the situation. And that hurts too. We see evil on the news, we see the person get off scott-free and that hurts us doesn’t it? Justice has been dodged. And that hurts.

And so the person who wronged you, who really should be on their knees or struck by lightning, goes on their merry way, and you, perhaps because you heard Jesus say you should, you say, “Go, in peace, I release you from the anger and hate I hold and I wish you the best.” And it isn’t fair. And now you have to deal with that because of them.

Which leads to the question: But why would anyone do that for someone else? Why take someone who wronged you, and let them hurt you again by releasing them from what they deserve?

The answer is love. To forgive is to say “I love that person enough to be hurt twice by them. I would rather me be hurt again and they be set free.” That’s hard, especially when you are in pain, isn’t it?

But it is also a beautiful love. This is not of the world. The world says, “fool me once shame on me, fool me twice I cut you out of my life.” And our worlds get smaller and smaller and more lonely, and our ulcers and anxiety get larger and larger fueled by grudges, remembered hatred, and awkward exchanges. Love says “No. Even if you would hurt me again I’d still love you and wish you the best things.”

We should probably talk practicalities at this point. Some people have hurt us really bad. And many of them aren’t even sorry about it. Forgiveness does not mean you need to go interact with that abuser again or put yourself anywhere unsafe to be wronged with those first wrongs again. Forgiveness does not mean they have said their sorry yet, or ever will. Forgiveness means you

are willing to be hurt by them, by letting the hatred and retribution you hold against them go—you release them from that.

Practically, this means that there are times where you call the police on that person who has done such a wrong, and then you sit (when everyone is safe) and work through the unfair process of, even as they are in court or jail or whatever, the unfair process of love – to let the feelings go. And that's hard, it takes time and action, and sometimes looks like praying for the best thing for that person and sometimes that best thing is that they repent, see the pain they've caused, never want to do it again, and apologize. If you are struggling to forgive someone, start there.

But you can't control them. We aren't the King in the parable who can dole out the fair punishment on the unforgiving and hypocritical. But there is a King. And can we trust that, in the end, he will dole out justice and forgiveness rightly? Don't you worry about that. He will.

What he bids you worry about is not letting your heart be overcome by hatred and vengeance. But rather his desire that mercy, which triumphs over judgment, might go forth.

And when that is hard, when it hurts, when it seems so unfair (which it is), consider what this King has done for people like us.

Have we hurt him? Why is that cross there? Why was it needed if you can just do a little better, or do 10 good things—does that erase the wrong you've done? No. And we think we are pretty good people, but is that good enough? Does that overcome that grave?

So what can we do? Can we pay it off? Work 150k years, call up the billionaires, is that wiping out the bad and bringing you into life? Hebrews 9:22 – Without the shedding of blood there is NO forgiveness of sins.

Is God a monster, demanding blood? Or is that justice from the people who did the evil? And we've done it, don't lie, greed, pride, slander, lust, we got it. So we could start a bloodbank and hook us all up and throw our blood on that altar to pay the price, but, like the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, what would that look like? Thousands and thousands of pints, over and over again. It isn't pure enough!

So there is a cross. Jesus, true God, sinless, spotless, with blood incalculably priceless. He could pay it off.

But it will hurt him to do it.

We struggle to forgive those who betray us. He would have to be betrayed to forgive us. That would hurt.

We struggle to forgive those who lie about us or mock us. He would have to be lied about and mocked to forgive us. That would hurt.

We struggle to forgive those who abuse us. He would have to be abused, stripped, beaten, to forgive us. That would hurt.

We struggle to forgive God for the pain we see and experience. And yet Jesus would have to feel real pain as he is whipped, just once? Just twice? With that roman cat of nine tails with rock and bone... hurt how many times to forgive us? Again and again and again and again, not to mention the nails, the thorns, the cardiac arrest...

And now you think I am guilt tripping you, making you feel bad, but not at all. I am trying to show how beautifully you are loved. Because Jesus knew he would have to be hurt more than twice to forgive you. And then he looked at you, with your doubts and fears and sins and pride...

and if asked, “Do you love them enough to be hurt over and over for them?” he answered, “So much more.” And one might protest, “but Jesus, it’s unfair! They deserve the justice not you!”

He still responds, “No, I will take it that they may be released.”

And we know these were his answers because he went to that cross. It happened. And he isn’t taking it back. And he did it for you because he has promised it and it is not an accident you hear it proclaimed for you, now.

You are beautifully loved. You are forgiven in Christ. You are released from all eternal judgment before the Father. And fear not, you (unfairly, but truly!) are inheritors of a great Kingdom. God be praised. Amen.