

## The Kingdom's System

*Matthew 18: 21-35*

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?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his land administrators. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, 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.

So the administrator fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that administrator released him and forgave him the debt. But that same guy, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow administrators who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow official fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

When his fellow administrators saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked administrator! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow shareholder, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Ask someone about the most difficult subject to hear about in church, and they would probably say money. But truthfully, the most difficult subject which makes us a bit squirmy is forgiveness. Money is difficult to part with, but so are our wounds. So hearing that we are to forgive someone who has hurt us is a complicated process which is always more complex than a bible story or a twelve minute sermon. So after Jesus talks about the process of bringing the lost offender back into the fold, Peter struggles with the subject of forgiveness as well. He asks, "How often should I forgive? Seven times?" Which is a rather generous amount if you ask me. After all, first time shame on you, second time...shame on me! But Jesus says, "No, not seven times," Jesus says, "Seventy-seven times!" So let's take a deeper dive into why Jesus keeps bringing the subject up and why he pairs it with this horrible parable!

So let's start by asking Peter's question: how often are we to forgive? At what point does forgiveness seem impractical or like we are just enabling someone's harmful behavior? I mean, isn't life too short to keep forgiving a toxic person? No one would ask anyone to stay in an abusive relationship. Or ask someone to place themselves in harm's way. And although forgiveness is very different than staying in toxic situations, it often gets interpreted or heard this way. How many times does someone forgive a person who keeps repeating offenses? How often does a person of color forgive the system they are asked to contribute to when the system skews

in white people's favor over and over again? After all, first time shame on you; second time...shame on me! It's a practical question: how often are we supposed to forgive?

Well, Peter says seven times. But Jesus corrects him by saying seventy-seven. The two numbers show up side by side early in the book of Genesis. After Cain kills Able, Cain is worried about someone taking revenge against him. God says, "whoever takes revenge will bear the vengeance seven-fold." So it's not an eye for an eye, but Cain's life for seven lives. Well, then Cain has children and by the time it gets to Lamech, five-generations later, it is Lamech's life for seventy-seven lives. Vengeance has escalated and is spiraling out of control. So when Lamech has a son, Noah, we see things have reached a point where God wants to reset humanity and force us into being a new creation through a flood. So when Peter—who is the rock upon which the church is built—asks about forgiving someone seven times—a reference to Cain, Jesus references Lamech saying that it isn't about a number. But about undoing the spiral of violence in human history. That is why we are to handle conflict the way we do. That is why we go after the lost sheep who is the offender. We have to undo the mechanism of vengeance and violence as gospel people.

But then to drive home the importance of forgiveness, Jesus uses a crass parable. It's not an easy parable to understand, but here we go: we have a king. As is often the case with Jesus' parables about the kingdom, the king is not a good guy. But the king has a kingdom to run so he cares about his operation running smoothly. He has administrators under him who have purchased the rights to some of the kingdom's land. These administrators then divide their land and sell the rights to other administrators who want to make some money as well. Kind of like a Mary Kay pyramid business who keep making money off of the people who are beneath them. There is a system which has to run smoothly if the pyramid is going to work for everyone.

Except, one of the higher up administrators runs into a problem: the crops were not good that year. Maybe there was a famine or Covid or global warming. And when it comes time for the king to collect his taxes—10k talents!—which to give you an idea one talent is worth 15 years of labor which is equal to 150,000 years of work!—the administrator can't pay up. So the king says, "You put your house and family down as collateral (how awful!), we will just take what you have and move on. But the administrator begs and asks for more time. He says he will pay it all back next year when the crops are hopefully better. So the king agrees and rolls over the debt which has now become a loan. After all, the king's main concern is that the enterprise runs as smoothly as possible.

But here's the thing: when the relieved administrator leaves the king's chambers he bumps into a lower administrator under him who owes him about 100 days of wages. His crops were no good that year as well. But what does the administrator do? He refuses, tosses the guy in prison until he pays off his debt and here comes the interesting part. The other administrators hear about it and they go to the king to complain. Why? Not because the guy is being a jerk, but because he didn't turn the debt into a loan. He takes a major player out of the order of the chain and it can clog up the whole machine. Or worse the whole system might crash. Have you all heard about the auto industry strike? All three major U.S. auto makers are on strike at the same time. They are shutting down the order of things to get pay raises and some benefits and those who sit on the top know that it can jeopardize the entire economy, unless they come to an agreement. It's what the

other administrators are doing when they hear about the guy who is jeopardizing their entire operation. So they go to complain to the head honcho king.

Well, the king calls the guy back and says, “I just turned your debt into a loan to keep this system we all need to run smoothly going. Why aren’t you doing the same?” So he has the administrator tortured (again awful) to find out where he stashed away some money, and that’s it. That’s the parable. Except Jesus adds, “So my heavenly father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your fellow human from your heart.” OMG. So if we don’t forgive is God going to torture us? Can you see why forgiveness is not our favorite subject to preach on! And this parable does not put our hearts at ease!

But here’s the point: the kingdom of God has a system. And if those who are administrators of the system don’t work on forgiving one another, it has the potential to jeopardize the whole operation. Worse, the church has the potential of becoming the exact opposite of what the church is called to be. Without forgiveness being at the center we can easily fall into the trap of supporting cycles of vengeance and “othering” rather than undoing it. We can end up mimicking the ways of the oppressor and then we are no longer free.

So how do we know we are in the ballpark of forgiveness? I don’t think it means we no longer have feelings of hurt or that we “get over it.” Maybe it is when we can honestly say, “I don’t approve of what you’ve done. But I wish you well. I wish you happiness and safety. It doesn’t mean we have to stay in harmful situations. But it does mean we try and undo the spiral of vengeance and othering which created the situation in the first place.

So, kingdom of God administrators, maybe we have someone or a situation in mind. Maybe we practice the loving kindness prayer, wishing them well so that forgiveness continues to flow. It doesn’t mean we stop resisting injustice or doing our work. It doesn’t mean we stay in toxic situations. It means as we practice the art of forgiveness—or to wish others well—as many times as it takes. Why? Because it might just be that the kingdom of God depends on it. And with the power of the Holy Spirit, may it be so until the spiral is undone and we are all free. Amen.