

Once again it turned out to be Peter who spoke up and asked the question others might be thinking, but were too embarrassed to ask. Jesus has been talking for a while about the importance of community. He has been talking about how they should not let conflict, or disagreements, or sins get in the way of being part of his family.

The discussion about resolving conflicts started Peter thinking about the whole matter of forgiveness, so he asked the question: “How many times must I forgive? Is (biblical) seven enough?” Peter probably thought he was being very generous in suggesting the number seven. It seemed like a pretty good suggestion. How much is enough Jesus? But Jesus rejected the idea that we could set limit on forgiving.

“No,” Jesus said, “I tell you you should forgive seventy times seven.” In his culture seven was the number for completeness, it was like saying you should forgive without counting, without keeping score. That you would never get to the point where you were finished forgiving.

Peter was probably thinking, “But that’s impossible”. And we’d probably say the same thing. We can’t imagine allowing ourselves to be taken advantage of, or getting our feelings hurt 490 times and still be in the mood to forgive the other person. Human nature just doesn’t work that way. After a while it would start to feel abusive.

It’s very clear what Jesus was NOT saying here;
He wasn’t saying that we should put up with, or forgive, abusive behaviour.
He wasn’t saying we should take whatever comes our way and keep going.
He wasn’t saying that we should never set healthy boundaries with another person.

He wasn’t saying anyone should stay in an abusive relationship. (Though in some Christian churches his words are interpreted this way. A dangerous thing.)

As he often did, Jesus went on to answer Peter’s question by telling a story, a parable. If Peter was confused or shocked by Jesus’ admonition to be ready to forgive 490 times, then maybe this parable didn’t help much.
It’s hard to interpret. It seems to start out well and then end very badly.

We're reminded of a couple of things. The first is that this particular parable/spiritual lesson (which is meant to shock and to challenge us), is an exercise in excess, in hyperbole... exaggerated statements, not to be taken literally. We shouldn't use up a lot of energy trying to figure out who/what each of the main characters is supposed to stand for. It's also a parable that is unique to Matthew's gospel, and as some interpreters have noted, in Matthew's gospel-parable often end with someone having to pay or get punished.

It's the story of a king who decided to settle accounts one day. He summoned all those who owed him money, probably starting at the top of the debt list. The first servant who appeared before the king owed him a total of ten thousand talents (or ten thousand bags of gold). As nearly as we can calculate, it would be about \$1.5 billion today. There's no way the servant could pay back a sum that astronomical. Even if he worked for free for 40 hours a week it would take him 150,000 years to pay it all back. So although the king knew he would never get his money back, he decided he could at least cut his losses and he ordered the servant (and his entire family), to be sold. The servant fell on his knees and begged for some patience and promised he would repay all of his debts. Then, for reasons known only to the king, his royal highness decided to cancel the debt and set the servant free.

You'd think having such a huge burden lifted from your shoulders would make you grateful, would make you feel like paying it forward and being generous yourself. But it didn't happen this way.

On his way home the servant came upon another servant who owed him a much smaller amount—something closer to three hundred dollars. But instead of forgiving the much smaller debt, the first servant grabbed his neighbour by the throat and demanded his \$300. And when the second servant fell down on his knees and begged for mercy, (using the exact same words the first servant had spoken to the king,) it didn't do any good. The first servant had his neighbour arrested and thrown in jail.

Human beings do not react well to one another when we practice 'indebtedness.' (owing money -ness.) We turn violent, and mean. Even when our own debts are forgiven, we still want what is owed to us. The need to get more and more wealth is a problem. Forgive us our debts.

When the rest of the village heard about this they went back to the king and complained about the wicked servant, the king then ordered him to be jailed. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the real problem is that the first servant totally missed the significance of what had happened to him. “Somehow,” she writes, “when the king released him and forgave him his debt, he did not get it. He thought he had gotten away with something. He thought he had pulled a fast one. He thought the king was soft in the head. He missed the experience of forgiveness altogether.” That the servant would fail to appreciate what really happened to him isn’t that surprising. Most of what we call “forgiveness” is actually counterfeit. It’s forgiveness in name only. “I’ll say I forgive you, but I don’t really mean it”

We make excuses for others and call that forgiveness.
We say we forgive them but we don’t stop keeping score.
We say we let go of the hurt but some part of us doesn’t want to trust again.
We say we forgive so that the past won’t have such a hold on us, but we have a hard time really letting go, we have a hard time really forgetting.

I tried to think of a time when someone genuinely, totally forgave me -“from the heart” as Jesus said -or when I was able to genuinely forgive someone else. I admit that most of the conflicts I have been involved in have ended rather imperfectly. (badly)

That’s the point of the parable. Our own understanding of forgiveness is feeble at best. We’re much more comfortable with keeping score. We’re much more used to keeping track of the debt that is owed to us.
But God doesn’t keep score.

We often fail to recognize true, abundant grace when it comes our way. It’s hard for us to forgive because it’s so hard for us to accept that we are forgiven – completely, totally, utterly forgiven.
The debt is cancelled. The scoreboard erased.
I think it’s also because we find it so hard to forgive our-selves.
This is what happened to the wicked servant. He had missed out on his own forgiveness so he was unable to forgive anyone else. He failed to understand the enormity of the king’s generosity and so he was unable to be generous with anyone else. He ended up in jail, the king’s sentence was a legal technicality.

We could argue that the wicked servant was already in jail, a prison of his own making. A place where no one else could be trusted.

A place where all he thought about was keeping score.
A place where all he could focus on was how much everyone else owed to him. There is no escaping that kind of prison.

One of the greatest leaders of our time was Nelson Mandela, a man who spent twenty-seven years in prison. But even while he was still in prison, he began working on the dream of bringing together the various ethnic groups in his beloved South Africa.

To do this he would need to know and understand the white supremacists who had put him in jail in the first place. When he was finally released from prison he was repeatedly asked about his attitude toward those who had imprisoned him. Many expected him to seek revenge once he was finally out. But he responded by saying, “Forgiveness liberates the soul. It removes fear. That’s why it is such a powerful weapon.” When asked about his jailers, he responded that forgiving them was a choice to set himself free.

Apartheid came to an end in South Africa peacefully and Nelson Mandela became the leader of all South Africans –black, white and colored –and as a nation they began to let go of their racist past in large part because of his ability to demonstrate genuine forgiveness and grace. It’s an ongoing process.

Maybe we won’t ever need to demonstrate as much courage or as much wisdom as he did. But we all have opportunities in our lives to be truly forgiving....because we understand how completely we have been forgiven.

Maybe the ultimate way to peace is to forgive debts. Maybe that’s why we pray for a forgiveness of debts as a part of “...your kingdom come on earth...” Maybe it’s why we pray to forgive other’s debts. This is why Hebrew people practiced a year of jubilee; forgiving all debts and freeing all slaves. Peace comes once indebtedness ceases.

Let us pray; Generous-Without-Limits God,
we try to find ways to thank you.
You give; we receive,
You forgive; we receive.
You cancel all debts; we receive.
Please help us find a way to offer everything we have to you.
Amen.