

March 10, 2019
What Are Christians For?
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Matthew 18:15-35

[Reproving Another Who Sins]

¹⁵ “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

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?” ²² Jesus 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. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

²⁸ But 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.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

There once was a billionaire who shook down his neighbor – threatened his life! – for a tiny debt, for one six-hundred-thousandth of the amount he had already inherited that same day. For his wickedness the billionaire was arrested and given a life sentence of hard labor. The story is made up, of course, by Jesus. He called it a parable of what the

kingdom of God is like. He told it in response to Peter's question about exactly how forgiving Jesus expects church people to be toward one another. Jesus told a made-up story, and church people have been working the numbers ever since.

Let's pray that grace might come to us like rain, soaking us through, saturating every nook and cranny of our existence, overwhelming our capacity to keep any kind of count – grace that never, ever thins or grows scarce. Abundance, O God, that abundance might be our mindset and our heart's resting place, so we need not cling, in jealousy, resentment or pride to what we can, by your abundant grace, let go. Thick skins, O God, help us grow them. Tender hearts, O God, help us keep them. Amen.

Only Matthew tells this parable (with its long introduction!), Jesus reciting Deuteronomy 19:15, mixing in church language, to talk about community, essentially. What to do when someone in the community is stirring the pot? Ruffling feathers. Causing trouble, maybe, like Carl's Aunt Pearl. She makes chess pie and then gets her feelings hurt when no one except Carl and Janet eats it because it really is icky like raw eggs. So you invite her to make a different dish – but she keeps making the icky eggy pie and then getting all mad and ugly about how folks don't eat it – even though Carl and Janet are just slurping it up every month.

So then, Jesus says, a couple of people should go, talk about it, see if something can be worked out. If it is still something that can't be lived with, the whole congregation asks her to reconsider how she is about her pie (it's not about pie – she's a bully!) and if she won't, and the church body can't live with the situation, the third step: church her. Tell her, her attitude about the pie situation is poisoning church fellowship. Request that she change or leave. Then enforce it.

Where two or three are gathered, I am there, Jesus says – a text we generally use to reassure ourselves of God's presence in small groups, when maybe Jesus was pointing out that just one person never gets to speak for God. But the thread Peter pulls from all that is . . . ? *How much of that pie do I have to stomach? How many times?* Peter wants to know, *as many as seven?*

Folks who know the Torah hear Peter pretending not to know the Torah only requires three – one of those “teacher's pet moves” of his. We definitely know better. This is not our first day in Jesus math. *Not seven*, says Jesus. *Seventy-seven* – or *490*, depending on which ancient manuscript one prefers. Does he say forgive 77 times? or 70 x 7 times = 490 times? I've heard Bible study arguments about this so fierce you'd have thought the moon and stars hung in the balance.

Jesus math is crazy because it is not numerical – it's moral. Ethical. Spiritual. And always, always, always – hyperbole. Thus, the billionaire. It doesn't even sound like a parable until the currency is converted. Ten thousand talents equals ten million first-century dollars, which equals \$7 billion currently. 100 denarii equals \$20 first-century or \$11,000

currently. On the Forbes list of the 400 richest, numbers 63-73 are in the \$7 billion range. Any guesses? Christy Walton. Jim Jones. Ralph Lauren. Meijer Foods. David Green of Hobby Lobby. My two favorites: an engineer who invented a one-piece car bumper; and a scientist who invented a pancreatic cancer drug. However, at my salary \$7 billion equals 140,000 working years. \$11,000 equals 3.5 months.

To talk about sin – or guilt – of all the metaphors he might choose, Jesus chooses debt. Debt is numerical; you can write it down like a number. But God knows it feels moral. And what else? What does debt FEEL like? sickness? threatening? endless? deadly? embarrassing? shameful?

In Jesus' parable the debt is monetized. But are there other kinds of debt? Anybody here owe your boss anything? An e-mail? A report? What about your professor – or your students? Have you got your grades caught up? Are any folks waiting to hear back from you about anything? Got anything around your house you told your spouse you'd take care of? Do you love having this brought up? Just how much do you expect me to let go and go and go, God? And yet, what is so interesting is that Peter asks, as if he is the king. As if he is the one owed \$7 billion. Is he?

Is that how Jesus means him to hear it? Okay Peter. Okay church. Here's how forgiveness works in the kingdom of God. The king of the kingdom gives you more life than you could ever earn in one hundred thousand lifetimes. Free and clear. You didn't earn it. You don't deserve it. And yet, he wants you to have it. It's yours. Go – have it. Live it. Enjoy it. Of the three, he does one. He goes. But he doesn't live – at least not the one-hundred-thousand-lives kind of life he has just been given. And he doesn't take any joy in it. Apparently, all he can feel is exactly what he felt before – as if he is still owed something more, when he believed there was debt to be paid: afraid; deprived; disadvantaged; without; wanting; needing; poor; empty; abandoned; knee-deep in a river dying of thirst (as the song goes).

\$7 billion. 140,000 lifetimes. He declines to believe it. So deep is his attachment to – what? His own ego? His own need to prove that he CAN? Rather than accept that he simply IS – loved, worthy. He happens upon a client, a customer – one who owes him one-six-hundred-thousandth the amount he's just been forgiven.

One-six-hundred-thousandth. It's like owing someone the dirt on a penny. He threatens to kill him. How poor does a person this rich have to feel to kill another over money? But debt? It's all debt, isn't it? All the greed and fear and injustice and corruption. It's all a matter of us being so sure we are owed something that we simply cannot do without. And if we are believers, if we are Peter, or if we are the church, it is our utter and complete failure to believe the gospel that by the work of God in Jesus Christ, all those accounts are long settled. We are free. And being free, we are owed Not One Thing – From Anyone Ever. Amen, friends? Amen.

But whether or not we live like we believe it is entirely up to us. The Bible billionaire didn't. His fellow members were appalled. They told the king, and back to prison he goes. Not for the debt this time, mind you, but for being a jerk. The Voice (a translation I sometimes check – sort of like the Amplified Bible) reads, “You slovenly scum, you begged me to forgive your debt, and I did. Surely you should have shown the same charity to a friend who was in your debt.”

Slovenly scum! Do you think Peter realized Jesus was talking about him? Do we? Christian brothers and sisters, having been forgiven a debt we could not pay in ten thousand lifetimes, asking Jesus straight-faced how many times he expects us to forgive one another. *Is seven okay, Jesus? Would seven suit you?* And Jesus says, “How about 77? Or 490?” As if to say, *there is no end to my expectations; I expect you to forgive each other again and again and again and again. Because, there is no end to the well of forgiveness I have set down in my kingdom. It's not money. It's not food. It doesn't lose value and it doesn't spoil. There is absolutely, positively no end to it ever.*

But only if we live like it. And friends, if we don't, then what are we doing here? If not for the distribution and delivery of grace, what are Christians even for? If not for the exchange of the gospel between us, the grace of God in Christ Jesus, why go through all this business of pretending? To pacify our pride? To convince ourselves of virtue?

Honestly, I'd really rather travel. Or read. Or stay home and sew and pet my dog. Because people drive me crazy. I love them. And they drive me crazy. And I love them. But by God's grace, we are bound here for good reason. Because we have been more than set free just for ourselves and for one another. We are set free for a world that has no idea yet, how good God has been to it. It's our privilege to be the ones to show them. Would you pray with me?