

## Mile 19: Seventy Times Seven

February 28, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### Matthew 18:21-35

During this season of Lent we are continuing our journey through Matthew's gospel. We started this journey back in January and explored some of the happy, feel-good stories of early Matthew, but then beginning a couple of weeks ago with the story of the Transfiguration, we saw that Jesus's teachings start to get quite a bit more challenging the closer he gets to the cross.

Last week we drew the comparison between the hard challenges of this Lenten season – especially Lent *this year* when we are all walking into this season a little bit weary and bedraggled after almost a full year of pandemic – and miles 18-23 of a marathon. That really hard stretch when you are tired and just ready to be done, but there's still 5 or 6 or 7 or 8 miles left to go and you wonder where in the world that strength is going to come from. And then you are hit with a headwind and an unexpected hill. That's kind-of what some of these stories feel like. We are already tired, and then Jesus starts talking about taking up our cross and cutting off our right hand if it causes us to sin, and we're like...I'm not sure I have the emotional bandwidth even to go there right now.

But because it is often times through the hard seasons of life that we see God most clearly, we are going there with Jesus this Lent. Sitting with him in the hard teachings and maybe learning something profoundly real about God in this journey to the cross and then beyond the cross to the empty tomb.

Two weeks ago we saw Jesus reprimanding know-it-all Peter and then telling his disciples that if any want to follow him, they must take up their cross. "For whoever wants to find their life – their *psuche* – their soul – their innermost self – they must lose it. And whoever loses themselves for my sake will find themselves."

Last week the disciples got into a squabble about who among them would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and who would be least. And Jesus brought a young child – one of the most vulnerable and dependent and powerless people in all of society – and set that child before them and said "any who want to be great must humble themselves and become like this child." Stop trying to prop yourselves up and elevate yourselves at the expense of others, and stop trying to play God with your own lives. Let God be God and you do the hard work of showing compassion and grace and love to one another. And in practicing humility, you will finally discover what true greatness is.

Today we are continuing our way through Matthew chapter 18 and we basically begin today where we left off last week. Last week Jesus began the conversation with the

disciples about relationships, and today we continue that conversation. Jesus has just gone off on a tangent about what to do if you have an issue with somebody.

- First, as we saw last week, begin from a position of humility. Remember that the other person is a beloved child of God too, and assume that they likely have their own reasons for saying and doing what they do. Start with an openness to *being* changed – not just changing the mind of the other person.
- Then, you address them privately and directly. None of this whispering to your friends over lunch business or gossiping about them over coffee or posting about them on Facebook. If you have an issue with them, then your issue is with *them*, and the solution is through them.
- If that conversation goes nowhere, then take two or three people with you to address them – so that there are witnesses to protect both you and them.
- And then if even that does not resolve the conflict then and only then can the community get involved.
- And it is only then that it is okay to consider letting that relationship go – once you have made every effort both on your own and with the help of others – to repair what has been broken.

Now, all of this sounds great. Hard to put into practice – *incredibly* hard. But it at least sounds good, on paper, or in a textbook. And it makes sense.

And the disciples think it makes sense too. But Peter has some follow-up questions. Namely, what about that person who just gets under my skin, over and over and over and over again? And we work things out, and it seems like we both get on the same page, and we do the hard work of repairing the relationship, but then, they do it again. They go back to their old ways. And it's like we have to start the whole process over again. Is there a limit? How many times must we forgive? One? Two? Three? Seven?

“Not seven,” Jesus says, “but seventy times seven. Basically, as long as they seek that forgiveness, you are to offer it.”

And then he tells a story. There was once a king who had several servants. Now, these servants were servants because they had borrowed money and racked up some pretty serious debts, and now they were working to pay off their debts. But the king wants to settle the accounts and so he brings them in to cut a deal with them. And the first servant he calls in is so deeply in debt that he will basically never be able to work long enough to pay it all off, so the king orders that all of his family and his possessions also be sold.

And the man panics and begs the king, “please, just be patient with me, and I will pay you what I owe you.”

So, to truly get how absolutely ridiculous this story is, we need to do a little bit of math.

- The servant owes the king ten thousand talents.
- One talent was roughly equivalent to 15 years' wages in an average job. So, in today's money, figure an average blue-collar worker earns roughly \$40,000 a year. 15 years salary at \$40,000 a year comes out to \$600,000. Or just over ½ Million dollars. That is roughly equivalent to one talent.
- This man owes the king 10,000 talents. Or roughly 6 BILLION dollars in today's money. That's more than George Lucas's total net worth. That is 13 TIMES the net worth of the Queen of England.
- This is how much this servant OWES the king. How in the world can one person fall THAT deeply in debt? Working as a servant for the king, it would take him 150,000 years to pay off his debt. 150,000 YEARS.

So when the servant falls down before the king and says, "have patience, my king, and I will pay you what I owe you..." both he and the king know fully well that that would be physically impossible. It's doubtful that even the king himself would have that much money. The man would have to live roughly 3,000 lifetimes to pay it all off.

So the king looks at the man and has pity on him. He knows that the man is asking for the impossible. And so the king gives the man more than he even dreamed possible. Not only did he have mercy and not take his wife and kids into slavery and sell all of the man's possessions to pay off...what...1/10<sup>th</sup> of 1% of the debt? But he forgave the entire thing. And let the man walk away free.

But then, the story takes a turn. This man who had less than nothing, and who came within inches of losing what little he did have, had it not been for the radical and impossible grace of a merciful king – this man who had just been given *everything* that mattered in life, on his way out of the castle he sees another servant, being called in to come stand before the king and reckon with his debts. And this fellow servant happened to owe him 100 denarii.

- So, one denarius was roughly one day's wages. Or about \$110 in today's money. So 100 denarii would've been about \$11,000.
- Now, to most of us, \$11,000 is...quite a bit of money. If someone owed us that much, we would want to get it back.
- But if we had just been forgiven 6 billion dollars, all of a sudden that \$11,000 doesn't seem like very much anymore. But nevertheless, when this servant pleads for mercy the man won't hear of it, and he has the servant thrown into prison until his debt could be paid.

And the king gets wind of what had just happened. This former servant who the king had just forgiven a \$6 billion debt, had had a man thrown into prison over a mere \$11,000. Threw him into prison for 1/600,000<sup>th</sup> of what he himself had just been forgiven.

And the king is mad. Piping mad. His blood starts to boil and he has his former servant arrested, thrown into prison, and tortured until his \$6 billion debt could be paid. Which would be, never.

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you,” Jesus says, “if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

So, there is a threat here. And a serious one. But I really don't think the point of this story is the threat that Jesus makes at the end. The point of it is the radical, overwhelming, ridiculous, senseless grace and the *profound* forgiveness that each one of us has been given. “You owe a debt that you cannot pay,” Jesus tells his disciples. “God has given you *everything*. Life. Sustenance. Companionship. Protection. Purpose. The very breath that you breathe is only because God first breathed into you. The Spirit inside of you – your soul – your *psuche* – your innermost self – is itself a gift from God. And when, like the prodigal son, you squandered it all away, God was there to restore you.

If we set out to “pay God back” for everything that God has given to us, we would never get there. It would take 3,000 lifetimes or more. And even still, when we already owe everything that we have and everything that we are to God, God is still reared up and ready to go to the ends of the earth and back again – to the depths of the grave and back again – to hell and back, quite literally – to set us free. That is a depth of mercy so profound that we simply cannot wrap our minds around it. It is too big for us to take in.

So when Peter asks “how many times does God ask me to forgive?” Jesus' response is very simple. How much have you been forgiven? And how much has that forgiveness changed your life?

That doesn't mean that we become doormats, and that doesn't mean that we just let everything slide. But it does mean that where there is true potential for restoration, and healing, and wholeness; when a life can be changed and transformed for the better; when a small gesture of mercy could set somebody free to live life fully; when holding onto an old grudge or a debt or a slight is slowly poisoning *us* from the inside out, it's time to let that go. It's time to set ourselves and others free to start again. Because that is what God has done for us.

So each week during the season of Lent, as we explore some of these really hard, challenging, difficult-to-live-into teachings, we are also exploring some simple, practical exercises to help ready us for the race that we are running. Last week, our challenge – our workout – was to find ways to practice humility. This week, it is to practice forgiveness.

But as we see in today's story, forgiveness only truly becomes possible when we recognize how much we have been forgiven. We can only give out of what we have received. So in a very real sense, forgiveness begins first and foremost with gratitude. So here are some suggestions for each of us this week:

1. Every day this week, write down one thing that you have received, that you did not deserve. And then spend some time reflecting on that. How did that gift change your perspective on life? What did you learn about yourself through that experience of receiving something unmerited? And finally, offer a word of heartfelt thanks to God for that gift.
2. Is there something small that you are hanging onto right now, that you could let go of? Frustration after a disagreement with a friend or a co-worker; general grumpiness with a spouse or a child; anger with yourself over something that you have left un-done? We are not talking the big, 6-billion dollar things here. We're talking the little, 11-thousand dollar slights. Or even the tiny \$10 scuffles. The tiny things that over time build wedges if not dealt with and resolved. Take a deep breath and let something little go this week. Then, in that tiny little act of mercy, see if maybe *you* feel a little bit freer.
3. This one is going to be a little bit harder. Consider the bigger things in life – perhaps a major rift in a relationship. Somebody who you have perhaps hurt deeply, or somebody by whom you have been hurt. A grudge that you have been holding for years, or maybe somebody in your life who simply cannot forgive, no matter how many times you reach out and seek forgiveness. Today the invitation is not to simply “let it go,” because these big things are so much deeper and more complicated than that. But it is simply to name that person out loud, and imagine offering that person into the hands of God. To acknowledge that some brokenness is simply beyond our ability to fix, but that God can bring healing in ways that we cannot. And that starts with our willingness to bring our brokenness and our hurt and our fears before God – that we might one day be set free.