

After almost 20 years of marriage, I have a list.
And if we are honest, we all have a list.
What kind of list is it?
It is a mental spreadsheet. Our Ledger of Life.
We all walk around with a hidden ledger,
writing down the wrongs, the debts others owe us in
respect, apologies, or behavioral changes.
a spouse forgetting a chore, friend not calling,
And as that list gets longer, our forgiveness gets shorter.

If last week was about navigating conflict,
this week in Matthew 18 is about reconciliation.
Without grace, reconciliation is impossible.
Through grace, Jesus tells us to keep
the door open to reconciliation. Over and over.
We don't write people off as irredeemable.
We don't throw people out because they keep making the same mistakes.
We expect people to grow, but we don't
give up on them when they don't grow
as fast as or in the ways we expect.
Peter is about to get this lesson firsthand.

21 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?"

"Hey, Jesus," Peter says, eager to show he has been listening,
"suppose someone in the family
does something really bad to me,
how often should I forgive?"
Then Peter plays his ace before Jesus can answer,
Should I forgive as many as seven times?"
But do you know what is funny about Peter's question?
Here's Peter, the one who needed personal forgiveness
on at least 7 different occasions himself,
being concerned with how many times
he had to forgive someone else.
He was trying to discover a mathematical formula for grace.
He had his life ledger ready.

Peter knew Rabbis taught that you had to forgive
someone three times to follow the law.
The fourth time you could retaliate and do whatever you liked.
In fact, they mistakenly taught that God only forgives three times.
Three strikes and you are out.

Peter doubled that and added one for good measure.
So, Peter goes way out on a limb and says seven times.
I can't help but think that he expected Jesus to say something like,
"Woah slow your roll.
Forgiveness is a good thing, but let's not get carried away.
I mean three is pretty good.
Four is out of the park. Seven? Don't be ridiculous!"

Being honest, forgiving someone seven times is commendable.
Most of us get frustrated if we have to forgive someone twice.
When you think about it, we all have some barriers
that keep us from giving the gift of forgiveness to others.
We have a threshold that we don't want to cross,
a ledger limit we won't go beyond.

I can think of at least three barriers of an unforgiving heart:

Revenge – "I'm going to get even!"

Resentment – "I'm going to stay angry!"

Remembering – "I'll never forget!"

Peter wanted Jesus to help him set limits on forgiveness.

Peter wanted to know when it's ok to say,
"That's it. You've messed up one too many times!"

But, as we know, that isn't what Jesus said.
He did math right there in Peter's face.

22 Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times."

it was the fuzzy forgiveness math of grace;
Peter had his calculator out, and Jesus wasn't
giving us a checklist, a counter so that whatever
high number we get to there is a limit on our ledger,
and once we reach it, then pow.
No, he was trying to talk in terms of infinite grace.
That there is a different way of keeping score.
Instead of measuring slights against us,
we begin living by grace offered.
Instead of counting the points of division,
we measure out the ways we can come together.

Then Jesus takes the time to explain why.
And he does it through a story.
And this one is a doozy.

"There is this slave," says Jesus, who owed ten thousand talents.

or the equivalent of 200,000 years of average wages.

It makes me wonder how a slave could have amassed such debt?

The answer is they couldn't have.

It's hyperbole, to say the least, to make a point.

The master orders the slave and his family to be sold.

But the real corker in this story is the debtor's comment:

"Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."

How is he possibly going to do that?

That asks for a whole lot of patience from the debt holder—
200,000 years' worth of patience.

And then, instead of patience, the master has pity.

His heart went out. In other words, he had empathy.

The master in the story knew there was no way
his servant could repay such a debt.

And rather than holding him accountable for such
an outrageous, unimaginable debt,
the master simply forgives him.

He wipes it away, as if it had never happened,
however that might have occurred.

But you know what I found interesting here?

The servant did not deserve this forgiveness;
it was purely an act of grace and mercy on the king's part.
it sounds rosy and cozy until the plot thickens...

**This man, who was forgiven such an outlandish debt,
grabs a fellow worker who owed him a hundred denarii.**

One hundred days of hard labor.

That's significant, until you lay it alongside 200,000 years.

Then it is microscopic and insignificant.

The servant had been forgiven a debt that would bankrupt nations,
so you would think that he would be
generous to the person who owed him.

Of course, he should forgive the smaller debt.

30 But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

He prosecutes this person to the fullest extent of the law.

But this man made a critical mistake.

He threw his friend in prison in broad daylight.

32 His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. 33 Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’

Besides the bad behavior or bad decision-making
on the part of the first slave, what’s the point here?
That we’re all in debt?
Or that we’ve all been set free from a debt
that we couldn’t pay in 200,000 years? Yes and yes.
Salvation is being set free to live as though we were
already a part of the kin-dom of God, because we are.
In which case, our default ought to be forgiveness first.
We ought to lead with grace.
That’s the invitation that Jesus issues to us here.
not that we count how many times we should
forgive someone until we reach some magic number
that then allows us to walk away or, worse yet,
wreak some vengeance on them for being so mean to us.

CS Lewis said **‘To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.’**

It feels like a contrast, from the Exodus Sea of Reeds experience
and this conversation on forgiveness between Peter and Jesus.
One seems to advocate a final-solution approach
to dealing with oppressors like the Egyptians,
and the other rests on mercy—
not because it is easy, comfortable,
or even preferred, but because it is more like Christ.
But how does the story end? What is the moral that Jesus leaves us with?

34 His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt. 35 “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

It is hard not to hear those final verses as a threat.
you hear the Sea of Reeds crashing down over the Egyptian army.
This is the God who destroys, who punishes.
Those who seek divine judgment can find it and wield it
like a sword against enemies and oppressors. But look again.
This judgment is not about breaking the law.
It is about not showing mercy.
It is about learning how to forgive.

And I found an interesting twist about the story of Moses and the parting of the Red Sea.

There are stories from Rabbis in the Jewish faith
that accompany the Exodus passage and
cast a different light on the event.
Supposedly, while the Hebrew refugees were celebrating
their freedom on the far side of the Sea of Reeds,
God was weeping at the death of the Egyptians.
“Are they not my children too?” the grieving God declares.
It is not a perspective I have ever thought about. Have you?

“How many times must we forgive?”

This is one of those questions that we know
how we’re supposed to answer,
but it is harder to do in practice than in theory.
Even though Jesus showed us in his very last words.
We just keep forgiving until the end,
“Of course,” we think, “we worship a forgiving God,
and we know we need God’s forgiveness over and over again.”
But then we realize that this means we also must
be forgiving of those who offend us, again and again, perhaps.
And be ready to answer when God asks what have you done for me lately in forgiving?

Especially in these days when we aren’t living in forgiving times.
When we’re divided into us and them,
forgiveness rarely enters the conversation.
The answer we know from the gospel is love, and always love.
Love for our enemies and love for those who persecute us.

Jesus made it abundantly clear that we

, in debt to God’s grace, don’t get to decide
who is truly offering or asking for forgiveness for us or anyone else.
That is God’s business, and God will decide.
Would you like someone else to decide for you
if you receive God’s grace after what
you have done or haven’t done?
That is exactly what the second servant in the story did
and we saw how it turned out for him.
Our only job is offering forgiveness
not deciding who is deserving.

Can we call one another to set aside grudges
and suspicions and prejudices long enough
to even consider what it means to be forgiving?

And what if we could see the personal impact this grace would have on us and others around us?

My sister...

Since we're imperfect people,
we're bound to have trouble with forgiveness.

I'm convinced that relationships are
built not on a standard of perfection,
but on our ability to ask for forgiveness,
and upon our willingness to extend forgiveness.

I often say...

It is not the mistakes we make that mold who we are

It is what we do with them.

Forgiveness is costly –

it's not easy to ask for forgiveness, and it's certainly
not easy to extend forgiveness to those who've wronged us.

Forgiveness is the virtue we most enjoy and least employ.

There are at least two reasons
why we struggle with forgiveness:

Forgiveness is not natural.

That's why it's so hard to do.

And **forgiveness is not fair.**

Our sense of justice wants to be vindicated.

When we extend forgiveness,
we begin to experience the truth that all of us are fallible humans
in need of being forgiven – and in desperate need of grace.

Colossians 3:13 says: **“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”**

That should be our lead. We start with forgiveness; we lead with grace.

Do you need to ask someone for forgiveness?

Can you think of a person right now?

Is there someone you've wronged and you haven't owned up to it?

Do you need to extend grace and forgiveness to someone?

Have you been nursing a grudge?

Are you giving someone the silent treatment?

Are you ready to forgive the debt?

How many times? To infinity and beyond.