

Proper 19A
Matthew 18:21-35

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Forgiveness Takes a Load Off Your Mind

21Then Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25and, 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. 26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28But 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.' 29Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

It was a gray fall day. The leaves were beginning their descents to the ground, prompted by a gentle but persistent autumn breeze. An elderly peasant woman was making her way to town with a portion of her potato harvest on her back. The load was obviously heavy, but her back had grown accustomed to carrying such loads over the years. A small, horse-drawn cart easily caught up with her and the young driver politely offered her a ride. A smile crossed her wrinkled face as she climbed, not too gracefully, into the back of the cart. They had traveled a half mile or so when the driver looked over his shoulder and noticed that the woman had not put her large sack down, but was sitting leaning forward with the potatoes on her back. "Why don't you take it easy and put your load down?" the driver asked. The woman replied, "You're so kind to give me a ride – you don't need to carry my potatoes, too."

The peasant woman's skewed logic may amuse us. After all, the cart was already carrying both her and the potatoes. She was only making it hard on herself by not putting the burden down. But there are times when all of us act in much the same way, continuing to carry a burden when there is no need to do so. I am referring to times when we continue to bear a grudge against someone for wronging us or slighting us. Such grudges truly are a burden, for they mire us in the past rather than dealing with the present and working towards the future. Sometimes we may think that revenge is the best way to get rid of such grudges, as if getting even will somehow get rid of the burden. But revenge has never solved anything. Revenge has never restored a broken or strained relationship. There is some profound truth in the statement, "Two wrongs don't make a right."

The only way to get rid of the burden of a grudge is to forgive. That is the message of Jesus' parable in our Gospel lesson. The message could be summarized, "Forgiveness takes a load off your mind."

Corrie Ten Boom bears witness to this truth in her book *Tramp for the Lord*. Corrie was one of hundreds of Dutch Christians who hid Jews from the Nazis during the Second World War. She and her sister were caught and sent to a prison camp in Ravensbruck along with the Jews they had been protecting. Corrie's sister died there, but Corrie survived and after the war went to Germany preaching the message that God forgives.

Her favorite illustration was to say that forgiven sins were thrown into the sea. She would say to her German audiences, "When we confess our sins, God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there in the ocean that says, NO FISHING ALLOWED."

Corrie was in Munich one day in 1947. She had just finished her sermon and the people were filing quietly out of the church when she looked up from her notes and saw him. He was an undistinguished middle-aged man wearing an overcoat and brown hat, but when she saw his face she could only see him wearing a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. He had been a guard – no, he had been the most cruel guard – at Ravensbruck. In her mind's eye she instantly relived being in the huge room with the overhead lights and the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor. She again felt the shame of being forced to walk naked before this man. Now, here she was face-to-face with him again.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there. But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well." He reached his hand out to her in a sign of reconciliation. "Fraulein, will you forgive me?"

Corrie stood there, fumbling in her purse so as to neither look at him nor have to take his hand. Contradictory ideas raced through her mind. She had just preached about forgiveness and knew that she had been forgiven again and again. But her sister had died a slow and terrible death in that camp, and he was one of the perpetrators. The words of Jesus came to her, "If you do not forgive others their sins, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your sins."

As hard as that saying is, she knew it to be true from her own experience. For the past two years she had been running a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

The penitent prison guard's outstretched hand was still before her. It had only been a few seconds, though it seemed like hours. The bitterness was still in her heart, and her hand was still in her purse. Then she remembered something she had learned years before – forgiveness is not an emotion. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the condition of one's heart.

Corrie silently prayed, "Help me, Jesus. I can lift my hand. I can do that much. But you have to supply the feeling." Slowly, almost mechanically, Corrie pulled her hand out of her purse and thrust it into the one reaching out to her. As she did, an incredible thing took place. She could feel something like an electric current shoot from her shoulder, through her arm, and into their joined hands. That healing warmth seemed to flood her whole being, and with tears in her eyes she was able to truthfully say, "I forgive you, brother, with all my heart."

For a long moment they grasped each other's hands, this former guard and former prisoner. Corrie recalls that she has never known God's love more intensely than she did at that moment. A load had been lifted from her mind. It did not change the past – her sister was still dead, the memories would never go away. But a burden had been lifted, a sense of peace restored, and God smiled.

Take a moment right now and try to identify one relationship you have that is strained or broken. There is a burden you are carrying that you need not carry. You can rid yourself of that burden by saying the words “I forgive.” You can do it in person, by phone, by letter, or in some instances, just privately to yourself. Forgiveness is a unilateral action. It does not require that the other person first ask for forgiveness or acknowledge the hurt they caused. That means it is possible to forgive someone who has moved away whom you haven’t seen in years. It’s even possible to forgive someone who has died and is no longer able to hear your words of forgiveness.

Forgiveness does not require that the other person ask for forgiveness. After all, we cannot control the other person. If we are waiting for the other to take the first step, then he or she has power over us. We can only control our own actions. When we take the initiative to forgive, the other no longer has power over us. In doing this, we might relieve the pain or anger the other person caused us, whether it was intentional or unintentional, known or unknown, but that is a necessary first step to forgiveness.

And then, let us remember Corrie Ten Boom’s great insight, that forgiveness is an act of the will. We can forgive and be freed of our burden, even if we don’t feel very forgiving. The alternative is to choose not to forgive and be like the elderly peasant woman who was content to continue carrying her potatoes on her back even when she didn’t have to.

I don’t mean to make this sound like forgiving someone is an easy task. Uttering the words “I forgive you” is one of the most difficult tasks known to humankind. One way to understand Jesus’ words to Peter – that we should not forgive another just once, or three times, or seven times, but seventy-seven times (which in effect means, “don’t bother counting”) – is that this is Jesus’ way of saying that forgiveness is an ongoing task that we must work at every day.

Forgiveness isn’t easy, but it’s always possible, because God makes forgiveness possible. In a few minutes we will pray again the prayer we know so well – “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” It is a truth that if we do not forgive, then we, by our own choice, cannot know God’s forgiveness. It’s not that God does not want to forgive us – it’s that we cannot receive forgiveness with a heart full of anger and resentment. There’s no room for anything else. It’s kind of like a hand made into a fist. What can you put into that hand? Nothing. But when the hand is opened, reaching out to give, you can see that it is also open to receive. It is the same with our hearts. If they are open to giving forgiveness, they are also open to receiving it.

Carrying a grudge is like carrying a bag of potatoes when riding in a cart. Both are burdens that we need not carry. Jesus invites us to put our burdens down and experience the freedom and peace that comes when we forgive. The choice is ours.