

## THE COST OF FORGIVENESS

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Matthew 18:21-35

The apostle known as Simon Peter approached Jesus with a question about forgiveness. He said, *Lord, if a brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?* My question for you today is this, are there some things in this life that are too difficult to forgive even once, much less seven times.

A little over five years ago, on April 6, 2018, an 18-wheeler hauling 900 bales of peat moss ran a rural stop sign. The semi collided with a bus carrying a youth hockey team on their way to a playoff game. Fifteen players and one coach were killed in the accident. Thirteen others were badly injured.

This horrific accident took place in Canada. You may recall the story. It happened outside of the small town of Humboldt in the Saskatchewan province. Humboldt is pretty much in the center of Canada. It is north of Montana. The accident struck a deep nerve all across the country. Canadians love their hockey and they know what it's like to have a kid playing hockey and to send that kid on a bus to play in another town. It's part of life.

The driver of the truck was a man named Jaskirat Sidhu. He is a native of India. He had lived in Canada for only five years. He was newly married and had become a commercial truck driver to help his wife pay for her schooling to become a dental hygienist. Mr. Sidhu had only been on the job for three weeks. This was his first week driving a rig solo.

There is no question of fault. Mr. Sidhu was distracted by the tarps flapping behind him and he didn't notice in the clear afternoon daylight the five signs signaling the upcoming intersection including a 4-foot-wide stop sign with flashing lights. He plowed through the intersection.

Mr. Sidhu pled guilty to all charges. He accepted full responsibility. He could have plea-bargained but that would require a trial and he didn't want to harm the families any more than he already had. He was sentenced to eight years in prison—an unprecedented punishment for a collision that was not deliberate or involving impairment or distractions. It was simply an accident with tragic consequences.

Five years after the accident, Canada is at a crossroads about what to do with Mr. Sidhu. He is still in prison, but the Canadian Border Services Agency has initiated the process of having him deported, as stipulated by law, at the end of his sentence. Some are arguing for Mr. Sidhu to remain in Canada. Others want him gone. Is there room for forgiveness?

Our reading for today centers on a parable that Jesus tells in response to the question posed by Peter. The question has to do with forgiveness. Peter asks this question, *If a brother sins against me* (and by brother he means a follower of Christ) *how often should I forgive that person? As many as seven times?*

As a rule of thumb, the rabbis propose the number three as the number of times that a person should forgive. To be honest, I've never quite understood this. Am I supposed to forgive someone for three separate offenses? You offend me and I forgive you. You offend me and I forgive you. You offend me a third time. And I forgive you. Is it 'three strikes and you're out'?

I'm only kidding. Somewhat. What it means that if someone wrongs you once you should forgive them. And forgive them. And forgive them. Hopefully, by the third time you'll really mean it.

But Peter ups the ante and asks if not three, but seven times is sufficient. And Jesus tells him no, it's not. Jesus says that you should not forgive seven times, but 77 times. On a side note, scholars are not actually sure how to translate that number. It could be 77 or it could be 70 times 7. It doesn't matter. Either way, it's a lot. Essentially, Jesus is saying, don't stop forgiving.

And then, to make his point, Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wishes to settle accounts with his slaves. Now remember, this is a parable. It does little good to wonder why slaves owe a king money. I did read several complicated attempts to explain the economic system that would support this, but it doesn't really matter. It's a parable, not a case study.

So, this king calls in one slave who owes him 10,000 talents. Now, stop there. Those hearing Jesus tell this parable would be aghast. That is an unimaginable amount of money. A talent was the largest monetary unit of the time. And 10,000 was the highest numerical unit of the time. 10,000 talents is like saying "the most times the biggest." It's an incomprehensible number. Adjusting for inflation, today it would be about a bazillion.

So, this slave owes the king this astronomical sum of money, and he is unable to pay it back. Who could? Who has that kind of cash lying around? And since he could not pay, the king orders that this man, along with his wife and children and possessions, be sold to pay off the debt.

Hearing this, the man falls to his knees and begs saying, *Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything*. The king has pity on the man. He releases him and forgives the debt. (By the way, I tried this with my mortgage company and it doesn't work.)

It is hard to comprehend how fortunate this slave is. His unfathomable, unpayable debt has been relieved. Instead of being sold off, he's been given a new

life. Salvation is his. And if this were another parable, he would invite all his friends over and have a big party. But he doesn't.

Instead, as he leaves the presence of the king, he encounters a fellow slave who happens to owe him some money. It's just 100 denarii—about a couple thousand dollars—hardly anything compared to the previous debt. But the man grabs his fellow slave by the throat and demands, *Pay what you owe*. The second slave does the exact same thing as the first slave. He drops to his knees and begs for patience. But the first slave refuses any leniency and has the debtor thrown into prison until he can pay off his debt.

Other slaves witnessed this interaction, and they are not happy. They had seen the king forgive the first slave and they hoped that the king's goodwill might trickle down to them. But when the first slave refuses to pay it forward, they rat him out and tell the king.

The king calls the man in and says, *You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?* And then in his anger, the king hands the slave over to be tortured until he can pay off his entire debt. But we know that he can't do that. The debt is too great. He will be tortured for eternity.

Jesus concludes this parable saying, *So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*

As I said, this is a parable. It is not meant to be taken literally. Its purpose is to help us understand what it is like to live within the parameters of God's realm. How is life different in God's realm? In the parable, the king is not God. But like God, the king has great power to forgive. This is a parable and within it we encounter extremes. We have a king who has ultimate control over everything. And then there are his slaves who have no power at all. And one slave is in debt for an unimaginable sum and the king forgives him. The lesson is clear. Because of our sins, we are in debt to God. It is not a debt that we can pay off on our own. The only hope for salvation is God's forgiveness. If we seek this forgiveness, it will be granted. However, there is the expectation that the forgiven will practice forgiveness on others. In God's realm, all people adopt the ongoing attitude of forgiveness.

But God, like the king, is not a forgiveness vending machine. There is also a measure of judgment. The forgiven are expected to practice forgiveness themselves. If they don't, there will be a price.

In the parable, the first slave did not forgive another slave for a much smaller debt, and so the king handed him over to be tortured. This raises a theological

dilemma. Is Jesus telling us that God will torture those who don't forgive? I hardly think so. I believe that what we find is that those who refuse to forgive are only torturing themselves. Their torture is of their own making.

I started off telling about a horrific accident in Canada which rocked that nation. This year, five years after the tragedy, a reporter for the Christian Science Monitor revisited this story from the angle of forgiveness.<sup>1</sup> The reporter, a woman named Sara Miller Llana, attempted to interview those affected by the Humbolt wreck. She wanted to learn about their personal journeys of forgiveness. Many people refused to speak with her. Their hurt was still raw.

The Canadians are going to have to decide what to do with Mr. Sidhu, the driver responsible for these deaths. The story is not unlike the parable. We have the Canadian government with all the power of a king, and we have an immigrant, essentially a slave at the bottom of the power ladder. He sinned and incurred a great debt against the nation. He accepted full responsibility and in the proceedings, he literally dropped to his knees before family members asking for their forgiveness. Some families have expressed forgiveness. Others refused to speak to him. In the parable, the king threatens to sell the slave and his family. In the story, the government threatens to deport this man.

Some of the families refuse to forgive. And that is certainly understandable. They are angry and hurt. They suffered a horrific loss. But others have taken the view that Mr. Sidhu is also a victim. The wreck was not intentional or malicious. He was not drunk or impaired or doing anything he shouldn't be doing. Some point to the lax trucking regulations in that province that allowed a man with little training or experience behind the wheel of a big rig. The accident has destroyed his life, and now he is facing deportation. He'll serve his time in prison; he'll pay his debt. Should he be punished more and deported?

One of the victims is a woman named Christina Haugan. Her husband Darcy was coach of the hockey team, and he died in the crash. Mrs. Haugan has chosen to take the route of forgiveness. At first, she says she was angry—extremely angry. She had lost her husband, and her two boys, ages 9 and 12, had lost a father. But she says that but guided by her faith and the values that she and her husband sought to instill in their home, she has committed to forgiveness. She says that when she decided to forgive, “It was like this huge weight was lifted off me, like I didn't have to find a reason, I didn't have to find someone to blame.”

At first, she says, forgiveness was a daily choice. She says, “For a while, I had to kind of think about it consciously. And I had to say it every day: ‘I'm not going to be angry. I'm not going to go down that road.’”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2023/0207/What-does-forgiveness-mean-A-Canadian-bus-crash-five-years-later>

Eventually she understood that she needed to distinguish between the commitment to forgive and the need to put it into action. That's why she has reached out and offered help in whatever way she can to Mr. Sidhu and his wife so that they may find a happy future – in Canada.

Mrs. Haugan says, "It's easy to say that you forgive him. But it's maybe a little bit harder to actually, genuinely want good for him."

Whether she realizes it or not, Mrs. Haugan is acting out the words of Jesus who said that we must continually practice forgiving. It's not something we do once and walk away; it is something that we practice intentionally and continually.

Forgiveness is not easy. It means working around feelings of anger and hurt. The reporter spoke to some who have not yet forgiven Mr. Sidhu for what he did. And one can't help but be saddened by their stories. Their hurt is real. Their pain is like torture.

But as you read about those who have chosen the challenging route of forgiveness, in their words you can sense healing and hope; you can sense God's kingdom.

According to Jesus, we should be forgiving because God is forgiving to us. We are forgiven our sins and in return we should be forgiving to others. It is not just good for them, it is good for us. It eases the torture.

Ephesians 4:32

<sup>31</sup>Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, <sup>32</sup>and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.