

Getting it Right: Session Seven

Forgive How Many Times?

Matthew 18:21-22; Mark 11:25

We all want to live right, be the right person, embody holy virtues and make a difference in the world. These hopes and goals are the reason for this series on living in the balance between right-living and right-belief. A mistake we make in the quest is to make it too much about us or make it an equation of effort. If being spiritually good is attainable by human effort Paul would have had much less to write about. This reality again became clear to me upon re-reading John Ortberg's book, "The Me I Want to Be." In the introduction he writes, "You are not *your* handiwork; your life is not your project. Your life is *God's* project. God thought you up, and He knows what you were intended to be."

We often go against the grain of who we were created to be. Why? Because we think we know ourselves better than anyone else, even God. Silly us. Ortberg continues: "If I am ever going to become the me I want to be, I have to start by being honest about the me I am." If this is sounding a bit Dr. Seuss-ish, hang on: "Each of us has a me that we think we *should* be, which is at odds with the me that God *made* us to be." We are definitely one *Horton* and a *Who* away from a Seuss story for sure, but this is good stuff. Even the person we think we should be, the best *us* we can imagine, isn't always the person God has plans for us to be. We have a limited scope for grasping our potential. We have the scope of a "self-help" manual, God owns the full library. So, let's allow God to lead us to the places we must go in order to become the people He needs us to be... and the people we really need to be.

Wait, I read the title and this lesson is about forgiveness. What does any of this have to do with forgiveness? Well, everything and possibly nothing. What? Yep, this is going to be one of those lessons. The "us" God needs us to be will require us to be freed from the grips of pride and fear and to embody the positive grace of humility. We will also have to learn to deal with the pernicious issue of

forgiveness, which might be the second biggest impediment to right-living for any/all of us. So, let's jump right in.

What is forgiveness? Definitions vary but these will help:

1. To let go of a wrong or a hurt.
2. To give something up.
3. To not demand a debt to be paid.
4. Letting go of resentment and the desire for revenge.
5. It is deciding to live with the consequences of someone else's sin.

The most common New Testament Greek definition of forgiveness (Aphesis) means to "send away." It's used 36 times in the New Testament and is always linked to the pardoning of sins. So, to forgive is to send away the penalty for a wrong committed; to pardon the wrong.

What forgiveness is not? The line between what forgiveness is, and isn't, is skinny and a bit blurry, but it is nevertheless important to our emotional and spiritual health.

1. Forgiveness is not a feeling or a thought, it is a verb, it is an act, an act of volition.
2. Forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation.
3. Forgiveness is a process, often a very long process that plays out over time. It is rarely accomplished in a single moment/event.
4. Forgiving is not forgetting. It's silly to believe that's even possible.
5. Forgiveness is not to condone any offense(s). That would undermine the forgiveness and the inherent value of grace.

Speaking of grace, shouldn't forgiveness for the Christian be based on the grace of Jesus and the provisions of God? If so, then a lesson on forgiveness should be, oh, I don't know, three sentences long. No pejoratives meant, it's just that we tend to overlook the *Amazing Grace* shown to us when we are wronged by someone. Remember the troubling verse: "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25).

Fear not (wait, that was last week, right?), our salvation is still intact. If we harbor ill will and refuse to forgive someone their trespasses (going a bit King James here) we won't be able to fully embrace our own forgiveness. We will be blocking the movement of God's Spirit in our own lives. Again, we can be our own worst enemy.

What did Jesus have to say about forgiveness? Jesus had just landed the plane on teaching a parable on how to treat a believer who sins when Peter asks a seemingly random question (Matthew 18:21-22). It wasn't random, it just didn't exactly fit the setting, but Jesus was a rabbi, and teachers teach, and questions tend to linger. And let's face it, Peter was one unique guy. He asks, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

What's up with the number seven? Peter was a Jew (as was Jesus) so he would have known that ancient Hebrew practice allowed for someone to be forgiven three times, but not four. C.E. Arnold writes:

If a man commits a transgression, the first, second and third time he is forgiven, the fourth time he is not.

Peter was being generous, even magnanimous with almost doubling the traditional rabbinic standard for forgiveness, but Jesus was about to go all crazy math on saying sorry. Jesus told him, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (A note here that some translations have *seventy times seven*)

To forgive an offender seven times as a new lifestyle would have been historic, but Jesus seemed to be intent on changing the world rather than setting precedent. While there is some confusion over seventy-seven times or seventy x seven times, the point is clear. The Interpreter's Bible Commentary on Matthew helps us:

Seventy times seven is 490; we can "do it in our heads." But this is celestial arithmetic: We must "do it in our hearts." Jesus meant "seventy times seven times seventy times seven times seventy times seven – to infinity. It is a problem of conduct rather than arithmetic.

Personally, I'm not good at math so I might ask, "Even at 490, how will I keep track? I'm not good at Excel either!" And that's precisely the point. If we count the number of times we forgive people have we really forgiven? Does keeping score nullify the act of forgiveness? Is it really grace if we say, *Well, this is the 85th time I've forgiven you for this! I don't know how many more I have in me. Maybe 405, but don't push it.* Jesus would say that's a hard no, but He would say it in a parable and we'd have to figure it out, so let's just go with a hard no.

So, what's the key to a life of forgiveness that allows for more right-living?

1. **First, we must learn to forgive ourselves.** We all cling to sins and mistakes long ago confessed and forgiven (at least by God). Alfred Korzybski helps us with this:

If our minds register we've done something wrong our nervous System signals a certain sadness. The sadness can intensify with the level of wrong committed.

Gerald Jampolsky adds:

Forgiveness means letting go of the past. It's hard to let go or release something that feels as deeply rooted as certain mistakes we've committed, but we must if we want to be healthy and whole.

All of this suggests it's an uphill battle, but we must "let go" of our past mistakes. God has forgiven us. If we don't release our mistakes we cannot embrace and fully live into our salvation.

2. **To forgive often benefits the person forgiving more than the person being forgiven.** What percentage of the time do people who wrong us ask for forgiveness? How often do we hear the words, "I was wrong, I am sorry?" Whether a slight, wrong or injury is perceived or real (perception defines reality) we can choose to carry it around or give it up. There's a slim chance the person who hurt us will eventually show up to apologize but do we really want to sacrifice days, weeks, months and years of life waiting? If we forgive the wrong in our own souls and minds, we will not be prey to the tentacles of unrequited grudges.

Holding a grudge is like drinking poison and then hoping the other person dies (Augustine).

3. **To Forgive & Forget only works in poetry and literature.** You can lose keys, phones, eyeglasses and remote-control devices but you will not forget a wrong committed against you. It isn't going to happen. It sounds good in Sunday School but it just ain't gonna happen in real life. When we get hurt it sticks. Remember the nervous system quote from Korzybski. Hurts, insults and slights become embedded. Can they be released? Yes. Absolutely. With extreme prejudice they can be sent away, but we are not capable of forgetting them.
4. **The High Road is lonely.** Harmony goes out of relationships like a Quartet I sing in! We exist in a world prone to mistakes. The key for *right*-living and being *good* for God's Kingdom is to work to make fewer mistakes and to ask forgiveness when we mess up. We will hurt other people, we will damage relationships, and there will be times it won't be by accident. We must strive to make these mistakes sparingly and to learn from each one. We must ask for forgiveness when we should. We must seek the High Road.
5. **Never, ever forget that God forgives us completely and forever.** If we have trouble forgiving ourselves or someone else, it's good to remember that God forgives our sins. To use Bible words He blots them out, He cleans the slate, He cancels the debt. The writer of Psalm 103 tells us, "He has removed our sins from us as far as the East is from the West." Think on that for a second. Exactly how far is the east from the west? As creation goes it's infinite. We continue to discover new areas of the universe. Our sins are so far removed from us we will never see them again. There's something we can learn from this knowledge.

Amen & Amen.

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