

## THE TABLE OF FORGIVENESS

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

DeWitt Miller was a dyed-in-the-wool Presbyterian member and elder at the Mt. Zion Presbyterian Church in Rose Hill. By his own admission, his son, Greg, is also a dyed-in-the-wool Presbyterian. Greg spoke at his dad's memorial service in August 2012. When it was time for the congregation to say the Lord's Prayer, Greg asked the congregation to use the "Presbyterian" version and say "debts/debtors" instead of "trespasses." [Actually, in an e-mail exchange this week, Greg wrote, "I insisted on the right version of the Lord's Prayer at his service."] Nevertheless, I remember hearing several "trespasses" mumbled throughout the Mt. Zion sanctuary. I guess it's just deep in some people's bones and religious DNA.

I learned long ago, when leading worship in a community setting, to pause long enough to let the trespassers catch up with us Presbyterian debtors. Why the difference? The old joke is that the Episcopalians and Methodists, who had their roots in the Church of England and the land-owning nobility, would naturally be concerned about people trespassing on their property, while we Presbyterians of good, hardy Scottish stock and known for being thrifty and even tight-fisted would naturally be concerned about debts. The actual explanation is that translators render the Greek words in Matthew 6:12 and Luke 11:4 in different but totally appropriate ways.

Doesn't "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" sound a lot like the lesson of Jesus' parable about the unforgiving servant? Have you ever really stopped to think about what we're asking God to do? "Forgive us as we forgive others." Instead of simply letting the familiar words roll easily off our tongues, we can take the opportunity to think about what forgiveness in God's kingdom is really like.

If we're more concerned with the first part of that petition — "forgive us our debts" — than we are with the second part — "as we forgive our debtors," then we are like the unforgiving servant. He was more concerned with being forgiven his debts than he forgiving the debts he was owed. He begged the master, "Be patient with me, and I will repay everything." These are the same words his fellow servant used in his plea for mercy. The master, moved with compassion, released the servant and forgave him the debt. But when the servant heard his fellow servant's plea for mercy, he didn't want to forgive him, so he cast him into prison until he might repay what was owed.

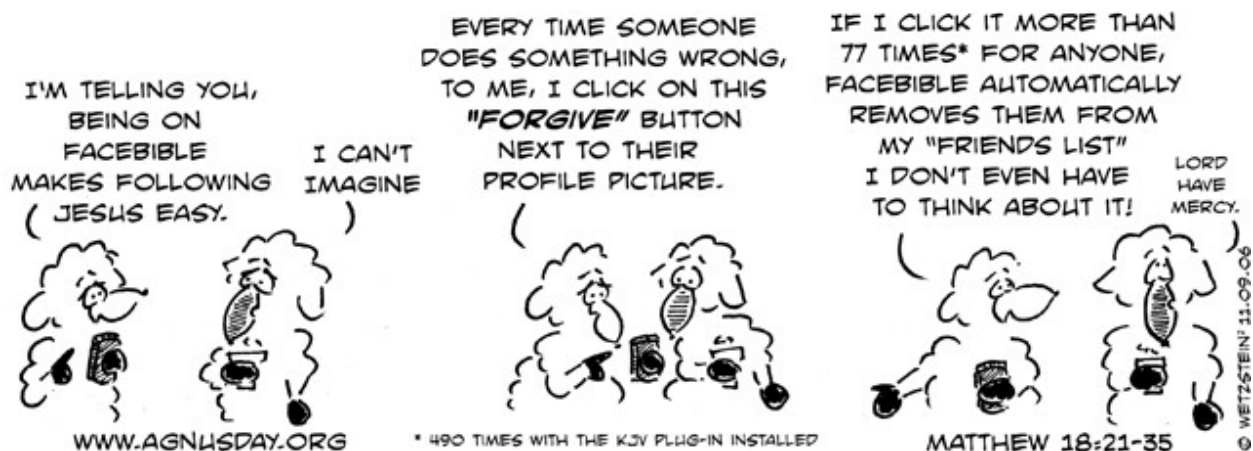
And what a debt the unforgiving servant owed his master! Actually, the way Jesus sets up the scene, it's really a criminal matter of embezzlement. When the master decides to settle accounts, he discovers the servant has been cooking books to the tune of "myriads of talents," which is kind of like saying the servant owed the master a "gazillion" dollars. He could never repay what he owed, especially if he were in prison. And

yet, after having the slate wiped clean, he wasn't willing to forgive his fellow servant a debt of 100 days of wages. That's not an amount to sneeze at, but he could have worked out some kind of payment plan . . . or maybe, just maybe, treated his fellow servant the same way his master had treated him. But the unforgiving servant seemed to have forgotten the second half of that petition in the Lord's Prayer . . . "as we forgive our debtors."

That was Peter's problem. "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter took the three times of forgiving required in Jewish law, doubled it, and added one for good measure. Surely that was more than enough! But, as is so typical, Jesus turns things upside down. "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times." Maybe you learned that story with Jesus saying "70 x 7 times." Either way, that's a lot of times to forgive someone. It's akin to "thousands of talents" in the parable Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples.

No matter whether it's 7 times, 77 times, or 490 times, there's always the 8th time, the 78th time, or, if you can hold out that long, the 491st time. Then watch out, all bets are off! Even if you somehow manage to forgive someone 7 times, 77 times, or 490 times, if you're keeping track and waiting for your opportunity for revenge, you miss the point. Remember when Peter made "the confession" of faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, only to turn around and rebuke Jesus when he talked about suffering and dying? Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Matthew 16:23) Well, Peter's doing the same thing here. As someone has said, Peter is thinking quantitatively, but Jesus is talking qualitatively. Life in God's kingdom is different . . .

This cartoon showed up in my emails this week. It's a good illustration of the shortcomings of thinking "quantitatively" rather than "qualitatively" when it comes to forgiving someone who has wronged us.



Once you click the "Forgive" button the 78th time (or the 491st time), the person who sinned against you is automatically removed from your list and you don't even

have to think about it. (I love the other sheep's reaction — “Lord, have mercy.”) Once again, that's not the kind of forgiveness Jesus is teaching in the parable. The point is not to forget about the other person. Rather, the challenge is, what are we going to do with the unbelievable forgiveness we have received from God through Jesus Christ? Today's epistle lesson reminds us, “if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” (Colossians 3:13)

There's also the danger of hearing this parable as if Jesus is telling us, “Just forgive and forget.” In other words, the burden is on you as the wronged party to do the heavy lifting. But that interpretation doesn't take seriously the complicated and harmful effects of some situations. That's probably why this story about forgiving your fellow church member is preceded by some early rules of church discipline. Forgiveness requires working it out, holding people accountable, and moving toward reconciliation.

It's hard work. It will cost us something. It has to be done. But, it can be done. And when that forgiveness and reconciliation happen, it's remarkable enough to make the news (sort of like being forgiven a debt of a gazillion dollars!).

When Nelson Mandela walked out of prison in South Africa after twenty-seven years of captivity, he had a choice to make. He later said, “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.” But he also said this in a 1995 speech, “Reconciliation does not mean forgetting or trying to bury the pain of conflict, but that reconciliation means working together to correct the legacy of past injustice.”

During the first week of October 2006, Charlie Roberts' parents held a private funeral for him. A few days earlier, he had barricaded himself in a one-room Amish schoolhouse, wounded 5 children, killed 5 others, then turned the gun on himself. At the graveside, his parents were amazed when about forty members of the Amish community — including some parents of the child victims — surrounded them and hugged them and their widowed daughter-in-law and her three children. The Amish community also donated money to help the young mother with her children. Did their actions erase their pain or treat the tragedy lightly? Not at all. But, as a community counselor observed, the community's forgiving behavior helped them with their own healing.<sup>1</sup>

Forty-eight hours after Dylann Roof shot and killed nine members of the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston as they studied God's Word, some family members appeared in court for his bail hearing and publicly forgave him. Did their actions that day ignore the tragedy and the pain they were feeling, or exonerate Dylann Roof of his actions? Not at all. One of the family members who spoke that day was Chris Singleton, whose mother was murdered. He said, “The narrative of forgiveness is submitting and it means that you're weak, or people would think that. But I've realized that forgiving is so much tougher than holding a grudge. It takes a lot more courage to forgive than it does to say ‘I'm going to be upset about whatever forever.’”<sup>2</sup>

Today's sermon title — “The Table of Forgiveness” — comes from our closing hymn, “Help Us Accept Each Other” — “to practice your acceptance until we know by heart the table of forgiveness.” That might sound like a reference to the Lord's Table,

but it actually refers to a multiplication table, as when Jesus says, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven (or 70x 7) times.” We sing a lot of hymns asking for God’s forgiveness. This hymn is a prayer asking God to help us live as people who can forgive, even as we have been forgiven. To live that way will cost us a lot. But how much more will it cost if we don’t accept each other as Christ accepted us?

***Let us pray: Our Father who art in heaven, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Joe Shapiro, “Amish Forgive School Shooter, Struggle with Grief,” October 2, 2007 at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org).

<sup>2</sup>Rasha Ali, “Five years after Charleston church massacre: How ‘Emanuel’ reveals the power of forgiveness,” June 17, 2019, at [www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com).