**New Math of the Gospel**

**By Jeff McDowell**

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Horseheads First UMC

**Sermon Theme:** Forgiveness. Jesus was asked how many times one should forgive another person, up to seven times? He responded, “no, seventy times seven.” It is impossible when you think about it. It’s the New Math of the Gospel! How can I forgive someone who has committed the very worst harm of all: the taking of a life? How can I keep forgiving someone who keeps hurting me the same way? A common feeling is that we have the right to withhold forgiveness as we determine. We often shout, “I will forgive but I will NEVER FORGET!” This means we are withholding true and full forgiveness in order to keep some power over the offender. We have the right to do this but it only hurts US in the long run. Unforgiveness in our hearts only makes us bitter, holding onto something we best let go of. Jesus taught us in the Lord’s prayer to ask forgiveness to the extent we are forgiving others! “Forgive us our trespasses AS WE FORGIVE those who trespass against us.” Today we will talk about all the things forgiveness is not, so we can fully understand what it really is.

Scriptures: Exodus 14:22-31 and Matthew 18:21-35

Exodus 14:22-31

***22****The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.****23****The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and chariot drivers.****24****At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic.****25****He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.’* ***26****Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.’****27****So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea.****28****The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained.****29****But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.* ***30****Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.****31****Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.*

Matthew 18:21-35

***21****Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’****22****Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.* ***23****‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.****24****When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;****25****and, 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.****26****So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.”****27****And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.****28****But 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.”****29****Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.”****30****But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt.****31****When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.****32****Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.****33****Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?”****34****And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.****35****So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’*

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Withholding forgiveness can give people a sense of power over others, he argues.

“If you are out to punish someone,” he said, “you make it really hard for them to ask for forgiveness.”

For Keller, one of the key aspects of forgiveness is what he calls “willing the good of the wrongdoer.” The idea is drawn from the command of Jesus that his followers love their enemies.

“A secret to overcoming evil is to see it as something distinct from the evildoer,” he writes. “Our true enemy is the evil in the person and we want it defeated in him or her.”

—Bob Smietana, “Too many Christians are afraid to admit they’re wrong, argues Tim Keller in ‘Forgive,’” Religion News Service, November 1, 2022.

The Greek word for forgiveness means release. When you forgive, you release yourself as well as the other person. You allow life to go on, to bypass your exaggerated sense of virtue and your worry about being offended. As long as you sit on your power to forgive, you suppress your joy in life. You also limit yourself: If you keep those you love within tight boundaries of behavior, you have to bind yourself as well lest you be a hypocrite.

It is interesting to note that in an obscure passage in Genesis (4:23-24), Lamech says to his wives “I have killed a man for wounding me … If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech [is avenged] seventy-sevenfold.” It is doubtful that Jesus had this early story in mind when he taught. Nevertheless, Jesus has replaced the infinite vengeance expressed in Genesis by infinite mercy and pardon.

The Greek word properly translated “forgive” in the New Testament means more precisely “to send off,” “to hurl,” “to release,” “to let go.” Therefore, to forgive is more than a passive sentiment. To forgive is an active process, almost a violent act of dismissal. Jesus says to do it endlessly. For most listeners in the first century as in ours, Christ’s admonition is absurd.

That the amount of the debt is so highly exaggerated indicates that God’s action far surpasses human comprehension, let alone human ability to do anything similar.

That a slave would be indebted to his master for any amount of money may not have been uncommon. However, that a slave would have been indebted to the amount of “ten thousand talents” is inconceivable. Ten thousand talents is an astronomical amount. It would be more than the richest citizens in the empire would ever hope to accrue. Professor Eduard Schweizer (The Good News According to Matthew [John Knox Press, 1975], 377) reminds us that, “the sum is made up of the highest number used in arithmetic and the largest monetary unit employed in the ancient Near East.” The servant, realizing the precariousness of his situation, throws himself upon the mercy of his master. All is hopeless. And yet, just as the amount of debt is inconceivable, so, too, is the master’s mercy. Only God can do the unimaginable.

Maybe it's something that should come naturally, an innate skill that shouldn't have to be taught. But the act of forgiving, it seems, takes a little work. Maybe even some training. That's the idea behind a $10 million grant earmarked for forgiveness research.  
  
The John Marks Templeton Foundation, which sponsors projects that apply scientific methods to religious issues, has launched the Campaign for Forgiveness Research. Psychologists, sociologists and neuroscientists are among those who have been given grants. Templeton made a significant contribution to the $10 million grant.  
  
Rarely has forgiveness been treated as these scientists approach it as human behavior that can be measured, taught or learned. Most Americans consider it an act of divine intervention. In a recent Gallup poll, more than 80 percent said it takes the help of God to show mercy... .  
  
"The essence of forgiveness is always the same," says Robert Enright, who founded the International Forgiveness Institute, a training center in Madison, Wisconsin, five years ago. "You've been hurt by someone. You choose to give up resentment to which you are entitled. You offer benevolence and mercy to someone who does not deserve it."  
  
Distress calls to his institute come from struggling married couples, school officials coping with violent crimes on campus, survivors of incest and other atrocities. He has received funding from Templeton in the past for research that has helped to create a growing field. When he began in 1985, he was one of a small group of scientists trying to reduce the act of  
forgiveness to a basic formula.  
  
-Molly Layton, a therapist in private practice in Wyndmoore, PA, "Apology Not Accepted: When the pain goes deep, the road to forgiveness is long," Family Therapy  
Networker (Nov-Dec 1998), Utne Reader  
Online, August 17, 1999, www.utne.com.Mercy does not require compromising your standards of justice, Enright says. "Forgiveness and reconciliation aren't necessarily the same thing. You don't have to cave in to the other person. But you can break the cycle of revenge if you are willing to forgive."As God has been merciful to the believer to an infinite degree, so, too, must believers be merciful to one another to any lesser degree. Again, unlimited mercy is shaped by the believer’s willingness to ask for it and to respond to divine mercy in kind.

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We are living, Lord God, in troubling and difficult times. Our lives seem to be confused, and we are full of fear. Help us in this time of worship to see clearly the life of Jesus and to know his ways. May we learn step-by-step how to follow this teaching. May we, as did Jesus, live lives filled with love. Remind us of the power of your love and set before us compassion, gentleness, forgiveness and peacemaking. May we, too, feel a sense of calling as we live and serve in a world of need and injustice. In the name of our Lord, who lived as a servant. Amen.