

Children

Good morning, boys and girls. Look what I brought with me today. [Show them the dirty dishes.] Oh, no, dishes! Dirty Dishes! What do you think I didn't do? That's right, I forgot to wash the dishes. I didn't really forget, I just didn't do them. I hate to wash dishes. Why do I have to keep washing the same dishes over and over? How many of you feel as I do? How many of you hate dirty dishes? How many of you hate to wash the dishes? [Let them answer.]

I have a question for you. How many times do I have to wash the dishes? [Let them answer.] As often as they are dirty? Do you mean I must wash them every time they get dirty? Oh, me! If I want to eat off a clean dish, I must wash the dirty ones. That DOES make sense.

One of the disciples asked Jesus this question: "How often should I forgive a brother who sins against me?" Do you understand the question? If someone does something to me more than once or twice or three or four times, how many times must I forgive him? Do you know what Jesus answered? Do you think he said five times, or seven times, or 25 times?

I think you know the answer. It's the same one you told me about the dishes. Jesus said you must forgive those who sin against you as many times as they ask you to forgive them. That means that you must start over being that person's friend as often as he asks you to be his friend. There is no limit or certain number of times that you must forgive, for you must forgive as often as you must wash a dish. That's what Jesus said and I know that's what he meant.

The next time you see some dirty dishes think about what Jesus taught us about forgiveness. Will you do that? Good.

There is a story about an umpire in a softball league in Colorado. One day, during the off season, this unfortunate umpire got stopped by a police officer for speeding. He pleaded for mercy. He explained to the policeman that he was a good driver and told why this particular day he had to be in a hurry.

The officer didn't buy his argument. "Tell it to the judge," he said.

When softball season rolled around, the umpire was umpiring his first game. Guess who was the first batter to the plate? It was the same police officer who ticketed the umpire for speeding. They recognized each other. It was awkward for the officer.

"So, how did the thing with the ticket go?" the officer asked as he prepared to swing at the first pitch.

With a menacing look on his face the umpire replied, "You better swing at everything."

(1) The umpire was set to get his revenge.

Sometimes revenge can be deliciously sweet, yet most of us understand that vengeance is not a satisfactory response to being hurt, especially for those who follow Christ. But neither is carrying around a lifetime of hurt feelings. The answer as we all know is forgiveness. But how do we forgive someone who has hurt us? How do we

overcome our painful emotions and reconcile with someone who has done us wrong? That is what our lesson for the day is about. How do we go about forgiving?

Simon Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Simon Peter's question was a sincere one. He wanted to know exactly what the Master expected out of him. The prominent rabbis of the day were teaching that one should forgive someone who has done us wrong three times. Was that enough Simon Peter wondered? And so he asked Christ this important question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Some of us would like an answer to the same question. Forgiveness is a big problem in our lives. There have been persons who have wronged us and it is so, so difficult to let go of our feelings of anger, resentment and even hatred. How many times shall we forgive?

Jesus' answer was, of course, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

That is a demanding stance. Some of us may feel it is asking too much of mere mortals. And yet Jesus, believe it or not, was looking out for our best interest. Forgiveness is to our benefit as much as it is for the person who has injured us.

Our question for the day is, how do we forgive? Forgiveness is a redemptive act that is essential to our mental, emotional and spiritual well being. It is not enough to simply "act civil" toward a person who has wronged us--to let "by-gones be by-gones." We must move from our hurt to reconciliation or else we leave an open wound that is not allowed to heal. But how? How do we forgive?

Let's begin by asking, why do we find it so hard to forgive? Obviously, one answer is that the pain is simply too deep to forgive.

There is a man whose name has become synonymous with forgiveness. It is retired South African Bishop Desmond Tutu. After the final defeat of apartheid in South Africa, it was Bishop Tutu who set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by which black persons in that country publicly forgave those who had done them serious harm. It was one of the most stunning events in history . . . literally. People who had family members tortured and murdered by police confronted the officers who had committed these crimes and publicly forgave them.

Maybe the reason Desmond Tutu could be so effective in this role is that he himself had to deal with a very personal battle of forgiving someone who had harmed someone he loved.

In a book titled *The Book of Forgiving* Tutu tells how as a young boy, he had to watch helplessly as his father verbally and physically abused his mother. He says that he can still recall the smell of alcohol coming from his father's lips, he can still see the fear in his mother's eyes, he can still feel the hopeless despair that comes when we see people we love hurting each other in incomprehensible ways. He says he would not wish that experience on anyone, especially not a child.

He writes, "If I dwell in those memories, I can feel myself wanting to hurt my father back, in the same ways he hurt my mother and in ways of which I was incapable [of understanding] as a small boy. I see my mother's face and I see this gentle human being whom I loved so very much and who did nothing to deserve the pain inflicted upon her. When I recall this story, I realize how difficult the process of forgiving truly is. Intellectually, I know my father caused pain because he was in pain. Spiritually, I know

my faith tells me my father deserves to be forgiven as God forgives us all. But it is still difficult. The traumas we have witnessed or experienced live on in our memories. Even years later they can cause us fresh pain each time we recall them.” (2)

Some of you can relate to Tutu’s experience with an abusive parent. Or it may have been a teacher or a friend or a sibling or a spouse who abused us, but somewhere along the way someone has hurt us deeply and we can still feel the pain. For some the pain is so intense that it is simply easier to cut that person out of our lives than to forgive. That is one reason it is difficult to forgive--the pain is too deep.

Pride can also get in the way of forgiveness, as does a mistaken sense of principle. We think to ourselves, “This will teach him a lesson.” Then there are family members and friends who may encourage our estrangement: “You surely are not going to forgive him after what he’s done to you, are you?”

They probably mean well but they may not understand our own need for healing. Pain, pride, other people--these are usually the reasons why we do not forgive. And our inability to forgive can have devastating effects on us as well as on others. Holding on to resentful feelings can shorten our lives, poison our memories, weaken our relationship with God and even affect our own feelings of self-worth. This is in addition to the damage to the relationship with the person we cannot forgive.

Several years ago a book came out titled *To Forgive is Human--How to Put Your Past in the Past*. It was written by 3 doctors who evaluated the various benefits that come when you move past resentment to forgiveness. Here are three of those benefits:

First of all, when you let go of past hurts and learn to forgive, there is a physical benefit to you. Attitudes of bitterness, hostility, and resentment are like poisons and toxins to your body. Chronic anger and hostility can be more toxic to your health, say these doctors, than being a smoker or eating a high fat diet.

Secondly, there is a psychological benefit to forgiveness. People with angry, bitter thoughts become angry, bitter people held hostage by their own bitterness.

And finally there’s a relational benefit. Any time you move in forgiveness toward someone you consider an enemy you open the door to the potential of reconciliation. (3) These doctors say there is a high price to pay from holding on to resentment and hatred. But how do we let go and forgive? That is the question. Let me suggest three ways.

We let go, first of all, by recognizing that forgiveness is a gift from God. We have been forgiven, and so we are able to forgive others.

Jesus followed his answer to Simon Peter with a delightful parable of a man who owed his king ten thousand bags of gold. Gold today sells for about \$1,000 an ounce. Think how much 10,000 bags of gold would be worth today . . . maybe trillions. Amazingly, the king forgave the man this enormous debt. And here is the second amazing thing: This same man who had been forgiven this enormous debt had an acquaintance who owed him a hundred silver coins, perhaps worth a few hundred dollars. And this very man who had his enormous debt discharged by the king could not forgive the tiny debt owed him by this acquaintance. To make matters worse, he had this acquaintance thrown into jail. The contrast could not have been starker--a man had been forgiven a trillion dollars and he was unwilling to forgive a debt of a few hundred dollars.

Of course Jesus was not simply telling about one man in one particular place. He was talking about you and me. We have been forgiven by God. We are sinners saved by

grace. We have been forgiven an enormous debt. If we can see that, it can be a powerful antidote to our feelings of resentment over a wrongdoing someone has done to us. We remember just how much God has forgiven us and we are enabled to forgive. It's like a little boy who had done something very naughty. His mother was quite disturbed by his behavior. In the kitchen there was a chalkboard on the wall where they wrote down phone messages. When no one was around, this troubled little boy wrote on that chalkboard, "Dear mom, if you forgive me, please wipe this message out." He went to his room, and about an hour later returned, and, to his great joy, discovered that the chalkboard had been completely erased!

That is what God has done for us. Can we not do the same sort of thing for people who have hurt us? We forgive because God has first forgiven us.

In the second place, we need to recognize that forgiveness is the most powerful witness we have to the activity of grace in our own lives.

The great Christian scholar and writer C.S. Lewis struggled for many years to forgive a childhood teacher who made life miserable for him. Just before his death he wrote a letter to a close friend in which he said, "Do you know, only a few weeks ago I realized suddenly that I had at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my childhood. I'd been trying to do it for years; and . . . each time I thought I'd done it. I found, after a week or so it all had to be attempted over again. But this time I feel sure it is the real thing." (4)

Lewis was one of the most influential Christian writers of the twentieth century, yet he was a human being. He struggled to forgive this headmaster. But he knew that his witness for Christ would not be completely authentic until he somehow managed to forgive this one who had caused him so much pain. That he was finally victorious is testimony to the power of Christ's amazing grace, for there are some wrongs that can only be righted with Divine help.

For some of us the nursing of a grudge has become a deep spiritual problem. It weakens our witness to Christ's presence in our lives. Besides the damage it does to us personally, it prevents us from being effective in our ministry to others. We need to recognize that forgiveness is a gift from God to be passed on to others, and that it is the most powerful witness we have to the reality of God's grace in our own lives.

We need to recognize, finally, that forgiveness is a positive activity necessary to the healing and wholeness of our own hearts.

Reader's Digest once asked its readers to complete this sentence: "I Never Regret . . ." Think about that for a moment: "I never regret . . ." Here is how some of their readers responded:

"I never regret . . . the day I quit smoking." Sandy Biss, Elbow Lake, MN.

"I never regret . . . taking naps and leaving large tips." Rhiannon Rae, Hershey, PA.

"I never regret . . . serving my country." Sharon Parsons, Oak Hill, OH.

"I never regret . . . eating the last cookie." Christina Hicks, Clarksville, TN.

And listen to this last response: "I never regret . . . forgiving the person who caused me pain, which gave me relief I never thought I could have." Erika Jones, New York, NY.

Erika Jones is a very smart person who learned about the power of forgiveness. "I never regret forgiving the person who caused me pain, which gave me relief I never thought I could have."

The Jewish philosopher, Hannah Arendt, once had these wise words to say, "Forgiveness is the only power which can stop the stream of painful memories." Now please understand. Forgiveness is not passive resignation to a bad situation. We do not shrug our shoulders and say, "Well, there's nothing else to do. I might as well forgive." There is little healing in that kind of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a positive, joyful activity in which we change from seeing ourselves as victims to seeing ourselves as victors. Forgiveness allows us to move from weakness to strength, from inadequacy to self-affirmation. Forgiveness allows us to experience within our own lives the power and the presence of the indwelling Christ.

Is there someone you need to forgive? An unfaithful spouse--an overbearing parent--a friend who has stabbed you in the back--an employer who has taken advantage of you? I know there is pain. There may also be pride, principle, and other people to consider. The most powerful witness we have to the action of the grace of God at work in our own lives, however, is the ability to forgive others. As we forgive, we heal not only the wounds of a broken relationship, we find healing for wounds inflicted in our own hearts by anger, hurt and resentment.

God has forgiven each of us for every soiled thought, act, and deed of which we are capable. Can we not forgive one another? Three times? Seven times? Yes, even seventy-seven times? Forgive and find the emotional, mental and spiritual freedom that only Christ can give.

"Karma!" we say, when we feel a certain "punishment" exactly meets the "crime." A bad guy in a movie ends up falling into the trap he set for someone else. A thief ends up losing everything. A murderer who prepares a poison ends up drinking it himself. While these make for great plots in fiction, they seldom apply to real life. Or do they?

How about the overprotective mother who in her smothering loses the very daughter she seeks to shield?

Or what about the wealthy woman who values accumulating money over building relationships, and who later is surrounded only by her jewels as she battles cancer alone.

Or the successful businessman who devotes all his time and energy to his career in order to make a good life for his family only to lose them all in the process as they go on with their lives without him.

Remember the famous song by Harry Chapin, "Cat's in the Cradle?" In the lyrics, a man is too busy to spend time with his son. When his son grows up, he becomes too busy to spend time with his dad.

"Karma."

In the Jewish tradition, this kind of "poetic justice" is called "midah k'negged midah," which means, measure for measure.

“Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.” “You reap what you sow.” “Choice and consequences.” “Tit for tat.” You can probably think of a few others. These are popular phrases that have their core root in scripture.

The scriptures are filled with stories that demonstrate “measure for measure.”

Jacob substitutes himself for his brother Esau to cheat him from his birthright. Later, Leah is substituted as a wife for her sister Rachel by Jacob’s uncle.

Pharaoh decrees that all Israelite boys be drowned in the river Nile. Later Pharaoh’s army drowns in the Red Sea.

Haman constructs a gallows to kill the Jew Mordechai. In the end he is hanged on his own gallows due to Queen Esther’s ingenuity in revealing his plot.[\[1\]](#)

However, here’s the catch. Often, we take the idea of “measure for measure,” which yields the natural consequences of our deeds, which often reflect back upon us, or are reflected back upon us by God, for another idea: revenge.

But midah k'negged midah is not revenge.

Think of it this way. When a child reaches into the cookie jar too many times, “measure for measure” might be that the child becomes ill from eating the very cookies that taste so delicious. Gluttony’s own consequences are a sick tummy.

However, if someone plots to “create” a consequence by for instance lacing the cookies in the jar with an illness-inducing substance, so that if the child eats them when not supposed to, that child will become ill, that is NOT measure for measure. That is revenge. And that is sinful in God’s sight.

Remember Jesus’ encounter with the woman accused of adultery? He challenges those persecuting her, “he who is without sin can throw the first stone.”

Remember Jesus’ message today to his disciples in Matthew 18 when asked how often Peter should forgive? Jesus says, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Or in current lingo, an infinite amount of times!

Jesus is trying to “correct” the disciples’ understanding of midah k'negged midah. In fact, Jesus says in Luke, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you (Luke 6:37-38).

Jesus does not negate the Jewish idea of midah k'negged midah. But like many of his teachings, he re-interprets their understanding of it. Jesus explains that only God can judge. Their job in the sense of measure for measure is not to dole out punishments, retributions, judgments, and revenge, but to dole out love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace.

Treat others as you would have them treat you.

Seek and you will find.

Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but fail to notice the beam in your own eye?

Forgive and you will be forgiven.

This concept was so important to Jesus that he placed it into the very prayer he taught his disciples.

Say it with me now (silently or out loud):

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And **forgive us our sins, to the degree that we forgive others.**

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Every time you pray that prayer, you are asking God to treat you the way you treat others, to judge you based on your judgments of others, to bestow upon you the mercy that you are willing to bestow upon others.

You are asking God to impose upon you the just consequences for your thoughts and actions.

If you don't think that's a tough vow and commitment, you haven't paid enough attention to the prayer you've been praying!

Jesus' parable today about forgiving sins and debts is a powerful one. If we expect and yearn to be forgiven, we must first be willing to forgive.

All of us love the idea of "fairness," "justice," "equality," and "come uppance." But think about it. We love it a lot more when someone else receives it. When it comes our turn to kneel before God and confess our sins, will you want God to bestow upon you in fair share what you have done? Will you say, "God give me exactly what I deserve?" Or will you plead for God's mercy and forgiveness and grace?

Jesus knew how hard it is for us to carry out God's command of mercy and forgiveness, measure for measure. So Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice. He gave his own life, so that we could receive freely God's forgiveness and mercy, despite our failings.

It is we who ask God to aid us in our attempts to live the way we should, when we pray together, "Forgive us our sins, to the degree that we forgive others."

May this phrase wake you up and chill your bones, and make you everlastingly grateful for Jesus' sacrificial gift of salvation grace.

Amen.

[1] These examples are taken from “Jesus’ Jewish Logic: Measure for Measure” by Lois Twerberg, article in Our Rabbi Jesus, July 28, 2013, <https://ourrabbijesus.com/articles/jesus-jewish-logic-measure-for-measure>. ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., , by Lori Wagner

“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

A Gospel passage like the one we have today, this long story about forgiveness, gives us insight into this often-recited phrase. It shows us just how close our refusal to forgive comes to idolatry. Idolatry, after all, isn’t just some statue that represents one or another false God; idolatry is also substituting something in our lives for the place that God should have. And one idol, one of the things we substitute most often for God, is the vengeance and anger we harbor inside of us.

Why, after all, are the servants of the Master so shocked at the behavior of the first man who was forgiven? Because this first figure, having received forgiveness, should have known what it was all about. He should have seen that forgiveness is at the heart of who God is. His refusal to extend that forgiveness means that he has also chosen to refuse to see that God’s very nature is love and mercy. Instead of discovering the truth of God, he sits with the idolatry of his resentment.

This is why we are urged to forgive. Forgiveness not only touches the relationships we have between each other. The experience of forgiving establishes our very ability to see and to know God. Our anger, which is only a distortion of the pride we have, means we put ourselves and our hurts in the place that God should have in our lives.

Because none of us can pay anything back, because none of us can erase the past, the only way we can move forward in our lives is through mercy. The only way we can move forward is through God’s love.

“Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord,” St. Paul says. This means that we are living to incorporate into our lives the qualities of mercy and forgiveness that Jesus shows us are at the center of who God is. When we live this way, it forms the basis of our eternal life. Our anger not only traps us inside ourselves; it also blinds us to others and removes the God we say we love from the central place God should have in our lives.