

Matthew 18: 21-35: Forgive As We Have Been Forgiven

Forgiveness is at the heart of life with God, but I know it does not always come easily. In Matthew 18, Peter asks Jesus how many times he must forgive someone who keeps hurting him. Seven times? Is that enough? Peter wants forgiveness to have a limit. But Jesus answers, “not seven times, but seventy-seven times,” and then tells the story of a servant forgiven an impossible debt who refuses to forgive another person’s much smaller debt. Like the king in the story, who forgives a debt it would take billions of dollars to repay, God’s forgiveness has no limits. This is a sharp contrast to how the servant then treated the fellow servant. Jesus wants us to follow God’s example, not the example of the servant who was stingy in his forgiveness even after experiencing God’s generosity.

Jesus shows us that forgiveness cannot be reduced to a number we can count and complete. We forgive because we have first been forgiven. On the cross, Christ shows us the depth of that mercy, praying forgiveness even for those who mocked, tortured, and killed him. The mercy we receive from Christ is meant to move through us, not stop with us.

And still, forgiveness is hard. The good news of Christ assures us that forgiveness does not require us to feel emotion. It can begin as an act of will offered in obedience to God. It may never become an emotion – but that is ok. Sometimes all we can do is ask Christ to begin in us what we cannot begin on our own.

Forgiveness does not erase harm or remove the need for separation from those who have hurt us, but it does release our hurts into God’s hands. We also need to receive that mercy for ourselves. We are forgiven children of God, beloved children of God, and in Christ’s forgiveness we are joined to one another as brothers and sisters. Amen.