

**“Forgiven and Fulfilled”**  
*Series: Core Strengthening Forgiveness*  
Matthew 18:15-35

6/4/23

Martha Stringer

In February of her senior year of high school my daughter Audrey began to have a hard time getting up for school. She complained about being tired and mornings were becoming a battle ground. After a few days’ war over this my patience was stretched beyond thin. Finally, I snapped at her: “I don’t care if you’re tired. I’m tired too. Get up and have coffee like everybody else!” Not my finest parenting moment. Especially when, two days later, she was diagnosed with mono. She had an apology coming her way. Not just because she had mono, not because I was out of patience but because it was the right thing to do. I shouldn’t have spoken to her that way.

Anyone else here ever said or done something you regret? Maybe you mistreated someone or, you’ve lied or gossiped or betrayed. Or have you ever been wronged, been mistreated in a way that hurt you to the core, maybe physically or emotionally or both. Maybe you’ve been gossiped about or lied to or betrayed by a friend or loved one?

I think it’s inevitable. If you’re a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a friend, a child or ever once was a child – in short if you are a human in any kind of relationship with any other living being at any given time you either need to be forgiven or offer forgiveness to someone else. It’s unavoidable.

We are in the homestretch of our Core Strengthening series and we have come to the line of the Apostles Creed where we say: “I believe in the Forgiveness of Sins.”

Throughout this series we’ve learned the Apostles Creed starts in heaven with God the Father Almighty making heaven and earth. Then to the Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who walked beside us and then gave us the Holy Spirit who dwells in the Church and in the heart of every believer and that as believers or saints we act in communion or community with other saints to spread salt and light to others. And now, the Creed gets a little more up close and personal and maybe a little uncomfortable with “The forgiveness of sins.”

Uncomfortable because I think forgiveness is hard and is tied up in a lot of misunderstanding of what it means to forgive. It’s in our human nature when someone wrongs us to want to be made right. We have been hurt and we feel that the responsible person owes us something, some form of restitution or at the very least a remorseful apology. We only feel vindicated and willing to forgive because the wrong has been made right in some way. Yet often that doesn’t happen.

We can also mistakenly think forgiving someone releases the offender from punishment. Or that we are excusing or tolerating bad behavior. Perhaps we pick and choose the sins we want to forgive based on the degree of wrongness. Or maybe we have hung on the hurt for so long it’s taken root and now isn’t so easy to pull out. And how many times do we have to forgive? Is it once and done or many times over?

That’s what Peter wants to know. In the gospel of Matthew, we find Jesus with his disciples and Peter asks this question:

“Lord, how many times do I have to forgive my brother when he sins against me? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). Jewish law stipulated forgiveness be offered three times. Given this, suggesting to offer forgiveness seven times must have seemed generous to Peter. Until Jesus answers:

"Not seven times," he says, but seven times seventy," Wait, if you do the math on that it's 490 times? What does that mean? Tim Keller in his book: *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I* says,

“To focus on the number is to miss Jesus’ meaning entirely. This statement by Jesus is in the language of hyperbole not calculation. Those who are concerned with what the number is have missed the point. The message is clear: with God, there is no limit to forgiveness.”

To illustrate his answer to Peter’s question Jesus tells this parable of The Unmerciful Servant:

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>25</sup>

This servant has a serious problem. Ten thousand talents is a whole lot of money. Scholars say it was a deliberately unrealistic sum. It was humanly impossible for the servant to pay the King back.

Jesus continues:

“Since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the servant<sup>[c]</sup> fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup>

The servant realizes there is no way he can ever repay the King but perhaps if he pleads with him, it might buy him some time. So, imagine how the servant must feel when the King grants him a whole lot more than time. We read:

“And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> “

The servant doesn’t plead for mercy or grace but more time. Yet, the King made the decision to bear the brunt of the loss. The servant is set free with no retaliation, no payment plan. The King voluntarily absorbs the debt himself. So, what does the servant do with this newfound freedom from debt when he finds himself owed a debt by a fellow servant?

Jesus says:

“But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii,<sup>[d]</sup> and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>

Despite the great gift of mercy and the new lease on life the servant was given he could not extend that same forgiveness to his fellow man. As you can imagine the King is not pleased.

“Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.’<sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’<sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers,<sup>[e]</sup> until he should pay all his debt.<sup>35</sup>

Then Jesus brings it home with: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

(Matthew 18:23-35)

Jesus does not sugar coat the desire of God for us to show mercy to others the same way it was shown to us when Jesus voluntarily absorbed our sins on the cross. And not just with words or actions but from our hearts. The servant accepted the King’s forgiveness, but his heart was unchanged by the enormous gift he received, and it prevented him from offering forgiveness to others.

Has your heart been hardened by some wrong that was done to you? Are you hanging onto a grudge you need to let go of? Is there someone like the servant in your life you need to forgive? Do you know where to start?

We start with God and Jesus and understanding forgiveness is both a process and a promise and requires a change of perspective.

The process begins with understanding we are not God and in our humanity, we are going to need to call on God’s power to give us the strength to forgive. Because truly forgiving means we let go of the desire to seek retribution or worse vengeance. I think vengeance is at the heart of hanging on to the hurt. We think we will be made whole by inflicting hurt on the one who hurt us. The truth is nothing can undo the hurt. The scars may remain, and no amount of retribution will ever take away the sting. But by hanging onto it you put yourself in a kind of jail like the servant was thrown into. And hanging onto it will eat you up inside. Someone once said hanging on to anger is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to get sick. You must get that anger out so you can deal with it. Maybe you must tell the person just how much they have hurt you. If you can’t, then talk to someone else you trust about it. Certainly, take it to God in prayer and ask him to take it from you. And know you may have to do that repeatedly. But until you do you will never be able to move toward forgiveness.

At the age of 30, my sister Kim was killed in a car accident in 1989. She was a passenger and the man driving the car was intoxicated. He lost control on a stretch of 2 lane highway in south Florida hitting a car in the oncoming lane broad side. She was ejected from the car and died on the side of the road. The driver walked away. We discovered later his blood alcohol was 3x the legal limit while hers was negligible. I was filled with grief and rage for a long time. I walked around in a kind of daze struggling with so many unanswered questions about what led up to the accident. Questions continued to plague me for years after he was charged and convicted of vehicular homicide.

I wasn't a Christian when she died so I didn't understand God's forgiveness. When my family came to Woodside in 1995 my journey of understanding began. I realized there was nothing about the driver going to jail that brought me any peace. Nothing was going to change the fact that she was gone. Over time my grief and rage morphed into a kind of numbness, but it was still there, nonetheless. I realized it was only going away if I gave it to God. I never got my answers and the driver never apologized. But I came to understand there are things that happen in this lifetime, and we may never know why or get the answers we are seeking. Yet slowly, over time, as I began to process and understand how God chose to forgive me, I understood I could choose to forgive and find peace.

Deciding to forgive also involves a promise. Because when we truly forgive, we make a promise to release the right to revisit the wrong. That is different forgetting. No where in scripture is the phrase Forgive and Forget. I don't think there is any such thing as forgiving and forgetting. It's not possible to forget feelings of hurt, anger, pain, or betrayal any more than you can forget the feelings of joy and happiness and love you have experienced. But you can refuse the desire to dredge it up again and throw it back in someone's face.

We don't hold a grudge or seek revenge. Yes, that's hard. It takes restraint and reminding ourselves of the enormity of Jesus' promise that his sacrifice makes us right with God forever. If we believe he keeps this promise, God asks we be compelled to keep ours.

And finally, forgiveness requires a change of perspective. Not one of us is any better than any other. Paul writes in the book of Romans, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (3:23) Yet we tend to view sin through a worldly lens. We like to label sins as big or small and believe some sins are worse than others. We are tempted to judge the sins of others. Remember God is the judge. What if we change our perspective and see sin through God's eyes? Can we look at the person we need to forgive through God's eyes? He wants salvation for everyone. We see that in the cross and Jesus Christ. On the cross Jesus fulfilled the justice of God, and yet at the same time, granted our mercy and grace and salvation and forgiveness. Forgiveness for everyone who believes. We are forgiven through Christ's sacrifice. Keeping that perspective in our heads and hearts helps us to forgive others.

This Thursday June 8<sup>th</sup> is the 51<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the day in 1972, when a napalm bomb was dropped on small village in Vietnam by the South Vietnam Air Force. This photo, "The Terror of War" shows 9-year-old Kim Phuc Phan Thi whose clothes were burned off her body. She spent 14 months in the hospital enduring 17 operations. She became referred to as the Napalm girl.

She says: "It was a very difficult time for me when I went home from the hospital. Our house was destroyed; we lost everything, and we just survived day by day.

"The anger inside me was like hatred as high as a mountain. I hated my life. I hated all people who were normal because I was not normal. I really wanted to die many times."

After years of operations and therapy, Kim still suffers adverse effects from the burns sustained that day.

“Those bombs have brought me immeasurable pain. I am still receiving treatment for burns that cover my arms, back, and neck. The emotional and spiritual pain was even harder to endure.”

But on Christmas Eve in 1982, in a small church mere miles from the street where her journey had begun amid the chaos of war—she invited Jesus into her heart.

“I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior. It was an amazing turning point in my life. God helped me to learn to forgive — the most difficult of all lessons. It didn't happen in a day, and it wasn't easy. But I finally got it.”

“Forgiveness made me free from hatred. I still have many scars on my body and severe pain most days, but my heart is cleansed. Napalm is very powerful, but faith, forgiveness, and love are much more powerful. My faith is what has enabled me to forgive those who had wronged me, no matter how severe those wrongs were. If that little girl in the picture can do it, ask yourself:

Can you?”