

Title: Forgiving Those Who Tread on Me

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others who trespassed against us; help us work for reconciliation reflecting your love of us to the world, following your son Christ Jesus, through whom we pray. Amen.

The third Biblical patriarch, Jacob, also known as Israel, had twelve sons and one daughter. The twelve sons were the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. The second youngest, Joseph, was Jacob's favorite son. But Joseph was spoiled and conceited. His older brothers hated him.

This is what Joseph's older brothers did to him: they plotted to murder Joseph. While they debated Joseph's fate, they threw him into the bottom of a pit. They ended up deciding to sell Joseph into slavery. They took Joseph's favorite coat, the one given to Joseph by his father, smeared the coat with goat's blood and told Jacob that a lion killed Joseph.

To make a long story short, Joseph was a slave in Egypt, but rose to prominence to govern the empire. Joseph toyed with revenge against his brothers but instead forgave them and embraced them. The brothers assumed Joseph was kind for the sake of their father Israel. After Israel died, the brothers feared revenge and begged Joseph for forgiveness. They even volunteered to be slaves. In spite of the evil they gave Joseph, Joseph saw that the end result was for good and forgave his brothers.

Joseph could have chosen not to forgive, like this man I heard about. This man went to see his doctor because he was feeling absolutely terrible. The doctor gave him a careful examination, left the room to look at some tests, came back in with a very somber expression on his face, and said: "Sir, I don't know how to break the news to you, but you have rabies and you're going to die very soon."

The man very calmly got out a piece of paper and began furiously writing. The doctor said: "What are you doing, making out your will?" He said: "Oh no, I'm writing out a list of the people I'm going to bite."

Now I cannot imagine someone who hates so many people that he needs to make a list so no one is left out. That's a lot of hate. This must be a man who just does not get along with people. Did this man ever forgive? We don't know. What we do know is that forgiveness is not a one and done activity.

Let's assume your siblings did the following to you: plotted to kill you, thought better of that and instead sold you into slavery, then told your parents that you died in a horrible accident.

After you are reunited with your siblings, would you seek revenge? Would you write them off? Or would you forgive them?

Joseph, son of Jacob, decided on the latter choice. Joseph loved his brothers in spite of the evil they did to him. In this case, Jacob's family line was preserved through the actions of Joseph's brothers. God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob of many descendants was preserved. But mercy and forgiveness happen rarely.

Jesus' teachings about human relationships makes its apex in today's gospel reading. Jesus taught about conflict management in the church, but Peter misses the point of reconciliation being the goal of this conflict management. Peter wants to know how long he should hold a grudge against a church member.

Rabbinic teaching was that forgiving someone three times was all that was sufficient. To forgive someone four times was not favorable to God. This teaching was based on the prophet Amos. Seven was a number of perfection. Peter thought forgiving someone seven times must be sufficient. After all, wouldn't forgiving seven times make Peter perfect? Why put up with someone who is so callous that they need to be forgiven more than three times? Seven times should be more than enough. After that, it would be better to keep that person out of one's life.

Jesus replied that seven times is grossly insufficient. Instead, Jesus says to forgive 77 times or in some translations seven times 70 times. It is a big enough number to make keeping track of the actions of forgiveness meaningless. It is hyperbole that basically means infinite forgiveness. No matter how large the number is for forgiving, it is the story Jesus shares that is more important.

To make his point, Jesus relates the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. First, a point about slavery. Slavery in the ancient world was different than slavery practiced in the United States. In the ancient times, there were basically two paths to slavery, being a losing soldier to the Roman legions or defaulting on a debt. Slaves could earn outside income. Once the debt is paid, the term of slavery is over. For other slaves, they could earn enough to buy their freedom. Professional people in ancient times were typically slaves. A freed slave was of a low social class.

The parable begins about a king who wanted his slaves to pay off their debts. Jesus compares this parable to the kingdom of heaven. I guess the king was tired of having his slaves around. The first slave owed 10,000 talents. Talents were minted in gold. A talent would be worth about 1.25 million dollars. So, this slave owed the equivalent of 1.5 billion dollars. That's a lot of money. No slave would be able to earn that much money on the side. This guy was toast.

Being unable to come up with the 1.5 billion dollars, the king ordered him, his family, and everything he owned to be sold. That probably still wouldn't get close to 1.5 billion dollars. The slave begged the king to give him more time to pay off the debt. Jesus says that the king took pity on him and forgave the debt and released him from slavery. It may also be that the king realized that if this guy lived to be 500, he still wouldn't be able to pay off this huge sum.

If that were me, I would be thinking about how I would celebrate my freedom from debt and slavery. But not this guy. He encounters the next poor soul in line to pay up. This next slave owed the forgiven slave one hundred denarii. A denarius was cast in silver and weighed about .1 troy ounce or about \$3.62. So, one hundred denarii were worth \$362. Not quite \$1.5 billion. And the first slave wasn't exactly nice about as he grabbed the second one by the throat.

The second slave begged for mercy like the first slave did. Instead, the first slave threw the poor second fellow into prison in order to pay the debt. I never understood how putting someone in jail is the solution to paying a debt. It made no sense way back then and it makes no sense today. But that

is what judges in this country do with poor people who do not have the money to pay fines levied by the court.

Meanwhile, this action by the first slave caused great distress to the other slaves. So, they “reported” (tattled) this incident to the king. The king summoned the first slave and chewed him out. The king was so angry that the first slave was sentenced to torture until his \$1.5 billion debt was paid off. Of course, realistically, that debt will never be paid, especially while being tortured.

Jesus ends the parable with a somber note. If we do not forgive others from our hearts, our fate is like that of the first slave. The torture inflicted on us if we do not forgive is not from God. It is self-inflicted.

To hold a grudge and withhold forgiveness tortures our souls. Harboring resentment and withholding forgiveness has been compared to drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. The act of forgiving someone lightens our souls and removes the bile that sinks into our being.

At first blush, it seems to me that forgiveness should indeed come from the heart. If we forgive because we are facing some horrible punishment, then that cannot be from the heart. On the other hand, we know or know of someone who was so hard-hearted that they were willing to suffer torment than to forgive someone.

The forgiveness of an incredibly large debt, like that of the first slave, is akin to forgiving someone 77 times or even 490 times. To conceive of a limited amount of forgiveness, is meaningless. Forgiveness has no bounds.

The first slave did not internalize his master’s radical forgiveness. He did not conceptualize the size of the forgiveness. All he could think of was being off the hook of his debt and to add to his own wealth. He could not reflect his master’s grace. The first slave’s soul was dark and tormented.

We pray in the Lord’s Prayer to forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. A better translation is to forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. The expectation of the Lord’s Prayer is for us to reflect on the grace God gives us and to offer that grace to others. Forgiveness from God is not just an individual experience. It also makes

sense in a communal setting. We are to radiate God's radical forgiveness to all those around us.

If we are unable to forgive someone, how can we conceive God's forgiveness of us? When Jesus stated that the two greatest commandments were to love God and love our neighbor, Jesus didn't just pick them out as good ideas. They are linked together. One cannot exist without the other. Receiving God's love means extending that love to others.

God's mercy toward us has no bounds. The forgiveness God gives us pales in comparison to the forgiveness that we may give to others. After all, it's the least we can do.

Text: **Matthew 18:21–35** (NRSV)

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church<sup>g</sup> sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven<sup>h</sup> times.

<sup>23</sup> "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents<sup>i</sup> was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii;<sup>j</sup> and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister<sup>k</sup> from your heart."<sup>l</sup>

---

<sup>g</sup> Gk *if my brother*#

<sup>h</sup> Or *seventy times seven*

<sup>i</sup> A talent was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer

<sup>j</sup> The denarius was the usual day's wage for a laborer

<sup>k</sup> Gk *brother*

<sup>l</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version\*](#). (1989). (Mt 18:21–35). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.