

The Storyteller / Week 4

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Matthew 18:23-35 NIV).

Have you ever seen America Ninja Warrior? If you haven’t seen it or don’t know what it is, it’s an obstacle course challenge where athletes compete to get through a variety of jumps, swings, ropes, bars, and challenges to hit a buzzer at the end. The top athletes fly through the course. One of the competitors is a guy named Joe Morovsky. He looks like a totally normal dude. He’s actually a weatherman in real life. But when he gets on a course, he crushes it!

It is easy to think, if a weatherman can do it, surely I can! I mean, he makes it look easy! When other competitors fail, it is easy to think and imagine: How could they possibly NOT complete that obstacle? I’m pretty sure I COULD HAVE DONE BETTER! And then enter reality, I can not do a pull-up at all! It’s in those moments that the realization that being an American Ninja Warrior is waaay harder than it looks, and a new appreciation for just how crazy strong those competitors really are sets in.

You know what else is way harder than it looks and sounds? **Forgiveness.** And that’s what we’re talking about tonight. And it sounds easy to say: *“I forgive you.”*

We all understand the idea of forgiveness. Most of us could go to small group today and have plenty to say. Many of you could predict exactly what we would say about it in church. We know that when someone hurts us, we should forgive them. We shouldn’t hold a grudge. It’s not a new concept, and it certainly isn’t something you’ve never heard before.

But *actually* forgiving someone in real life? It’s basically like trying to be a Ninja Warrior. **Because forgiveness is easy until you have to do it.**

Jesus knew that even if we understood the idea of forgiveness, we would still struggle to do it. The good news is, He hasn’t asked us to do anything He wasn’t willing to do Himself. Jesus knew what it was like to be hurt by people. He knew that forgiveness is easy to understand and difficult to carry out. Jesus had to choose forgiveness just like us.

Which brings us to another brilliant story by the great Storyteller.

But first, a little context leading up to the story.

Peter, one of Jesus’ 12 disciples who was particularly close to Jesus, asked Him a question about forgiveness:

“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21 NIV).

Peter was aware that forgiveness is difficult. Which is why he was asking just how much is required of him. It’s like when a P.E. teacher tells you that you have to run, and you’re like: “How far? Cause I don’t want to run more than I have to!” Running is difficult and painful. Forgiveness is kind of like that as well, and Peter wanted to know how far he had to run.

Peter asked, “Can I stop after seven times?” And when you understand the context of forgiveness within the Jewish law under which Peter lived, seven times actually went above and beyond. So, Peter likely felt like his question gave him brownie points with Jesus and made him appear spiritual and holy.

So, you can imagine Peter’s surprise when Jesus responded by saying, *“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22 NIV).*

Um. *What?*

Jesus didn’t actually mean that we forgive someone literally 77 times. He had something bigger in mind that He wanted to teach, which is why He then pivoted to tell a story . . .

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go” (Matthew 18:23-27 NIV).

Just so we’re clear, ten thousand bags of gold is like millions of dollars today. This wasn’t pocket change! The people listening to this story knew that, and they were probably shocked. Think about it. What if you owed somebody two million dollars? And you didn’t have the money to pay them back. And they wanted to have you arrested. You’re so stressed out about what’s going to happen. You beg for them to not put you in jail. Then, you get told your debt disappeared. You no longer owe anything! Imagine how great that would feel!

For someone to get a break on money they owed like this, we’d expect them to be incredibly impacted by this kind of life-changing event. But it’s not the end of the story. Jesus continued . . .

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins” (Matthew 18:28 NIV).

Immediately, you know what this guy’s *supposed* to do. Easy answer, right? Given the gigantic debt that was just taken off of his shoulders, *of course* he would forgive this tiny amount of coins!

Nope.

“He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt” (Matthew 18:28-30 NIV).

Obviously, we thought the story would go a different direction. But I’m telling you, **just because we understand what *should* happen with forgiveness, it doesn’t mean that it’s easy for us.** It’s so much easier said than done, even when we’ve experienced it ourselves!

But Jesus didn't let us off the hook just because it's difficult. Check out His point as He closes out the story . . .

*“When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. **Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?**’” (Matthew 18:31-33 NIV).*

DUH. We all knew that.

“In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed” (Matthew 18:34 NIV).

The owner is like: “Come on, man! What are you doing? I forgave you WAY more than you had to forgive!”

He missed an opportunity to show small forgiveness immediately after he was shown huge forgiveness. What was he thinking?

Then Jesus adds an exclamation mark after His story:

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart” (Matthew 18:35 NIV).

So, what exactly does Jesus mean by this? Well, remember that it was a parable. It doesn't mean that you're *literally* going to be put in jail and tortured if you don't forgive! But think about it: the last time you held on to a grudge, who hurt the most? You? Or the person you refused to forgive? You, of course! **Because refusing to forgive is its own kind of punishment and torture.** The person who hurt you just went on about their life while you were thinking about what they did. When you hold on to an offense and a grudge, you hurt and imprison yourself.

So back to Peter's question: “Jesus, how many times should I forgive? Is forgiving seven times enough?” Nope. If you're keeping track, it means you still haven't let it go. You've forgiven enough when you're no longer being tortured by the offense that was done to you. **You've forgiven enough when you are free.**

But that's not all. The point of the story is also to shift the attention away from what was done to us, and toward all the things we've done—things that God has generously forgiven. It's a lot easier to hold on to a grudge when we see ourselves as “the good one.” **But when our eyes are opened to all the ways we aren't perfect either, giving other people a break becomes a lot easier.**

And let's be clear, Jesus has forgiven us of A LOT. If He can offer us forgiveness for every single sin that we've committed against Him, then we can pass that forgiveness on to others.

Simply put:

FORGIVE LIKE YOU'VE BEEN FORGIVEN.

As long as we think we're better than someone else and what they've done to us, forgiveness will be a tough thing to demonstrate. But as Jesus' story points out, it's all connected. Our ability to forgive others is directly tied to our willingness to receive forgiveness. And we can't expect forgiveness from others if we aren't willing to give it as well.

For many of us in church, we have to remind ourselves that we're not as perfect as we sometimes think we are.

- Our pride is an ugly obstacle to loving and forgiving others.
- Our judgmental attitude cuts others to the core.
- Our secret sins are bigger and could hurt more people than we care to admit.
- Our words toward our parents would surprise a lot of people.
- Our envy and jealousy may not show itself on the outside, but we know it's brewing on the inside.

We have a pile of sin that Jesus willingly forgives over and over again. I don't tell you that to bring you down, but instead to empower you to pass it along. Jesus has led the way in demonstrating the power of forgiveness. We get to follow His lead.

Imagine if you had two cards in front of you. One says, **"What I did to someone."** The other says, **"What someone did to me."**

Imagine if you filled out that first card with one or two things you've done recently to wrong someone else. It may take a minute for you to think through. But even if you hurt someone unintentionally, it counts as an offense that you've committed against them.

Now imagine filling out the second card. This will probably come to you much quicker and easier. What is something that somebody has done to you that you're still holding on to. It doesn't matter if it happened yesterday or five years ago. If you don't feel freedom from it, then imagine writing it down.

In light of that, think about your two cards. **What you need to receive forgiveness for, and what you need to give forgiveness for, are connected. Freedom is found when you can give forgiveness and when you can receive it.**

And here's what you need to know: you have already been forgiven by God! A LOT. Now it's your turn to pass it along.

Forgiveness is easy—until you have to do it. A lot of times, it's also not a one-time thing. Sometimes, we have to do it over and over again. Sometimes, a person offends us so bad that we have to forgive them for it again and again. Sometimes, we have to forgive someone for their repeated offenses again and again. Get it?

The point is this: The story about bags of gold isn't just about us. As with all of Jesus' stories, it tells us something about the Storyteller—about Jesus Himself. He forgave us so we could be *free* from the power of sin, but when we don't forgive others, we're not free anymore. We're missing out on the free life He wants for us. And that's why He tells this story, to remind us that because of what He has done, we have more power than we can imagine to forgive others . . . again and again . . .

Text/Email Katrina: If you could have any super powers, what would you choose and why?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What's the difference between forgiving and forgetting? How can forgiveness be possible even when forgetting is not?
2. What was a time when you wished someone would forgive you?
3. When it comes to forgiveness, why can it be helpful to be aware of the things you've been forgiven for?
4. Don't miss this: What are the reasons it's difficult to forgive when someone hurts us?
5. For upperclassmen: What are some signals that we haven't forgiven someone? What are some signs that we have forgiven someone?
6. How does what Jesus did on the Cross make forgiveness possible regardless of how we feel?
7. The point of the parable Jesus told was for us to realize how important forgiveness is, but forgiveness doesn't always happen all at once. How have you seen forgiveness be a process rather than a one-time decision?