

“Forgive Us Our Debts”

Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be opened to the depth of your mercy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Before we get started in earnest today, there are a couple of things we need to clarify. If we were to read this passage too literally, we could be led astray or at least distracted by some of what we just read in Matthew. First of all, in the many centuries, or at least, the last couple since the Bible was written, the civilized world has decided that slavery is bad, in ways the gospel writers – embedded as they were in their cultures – could not bring themselves to come out and say. This is not to say that slavery has been effectively abolished, for we know that there are still those held in bondage, hidden in the dark corners of our global economy. Nor are we free of cruel systems that imprison, one way or another, people with certain kinds of debt. But for the most part, we have evolved to a point where we can say with confidence that Jesus is using a problematic metaphor here.

Secondly, we need to note that aspects of this portrayal of God do not align with most of what we know about God. If you read the text closely and literally, it seems that Jesus is holding us to a higher standard than God. The master in the story, to whom Jesus compares God, only gives the first slave one chance at being forgiven; but we're being asked to forgive seventy-seven times? Something seems off here.

And when the final line suggests God is going to torture us if we don't forgive everyone else ourselves, it's clear that some expert-level exaggeration is going on here. So, to be clear: Slavery, bad. God, more forgiving than we can ever hope to be.

While we're clearing things up, we should also note that in the passage we read from Romans, Paul is not knocking vegetarians. This was a culturally specific example, in which Paul is reflecting on the question of whether or not Christians should eat meat that had been sacrificed at pagan temples and then sold at the adjacent butcher shop. Many Christians considered it tainted, which Paul sees as the "weaker" position because it gives the pagan gods a weight of reality he feels they don't deserve. I'm pretty sure we no longer have any butcher shops that are connected to pagan temples, so this isn't really a salient contemporary example. But there are plenty of other examples.

The fact that these two passages are so embedded in their cultures is actually what offers us such a useful lesson today. So often, we think of the lessons we learn in church as nice and good in an abstract, idealistic sort of way. But when someone – say... the preacher, or our kids, suggests we're supposed to apply those lessons to the actual things that happen in our actual lives, we sometimes get a little testy. There is a reason Jesus and Paul were using examples that were actually happening around their listeners at the time: it's because they were trying to convince them that the gospel was supposed to connect with their real lives. As it is intended to connect with our real lives.

We know, in theory, that we're supposed to forgive and not judge people. But when opportunities arise to do either of those things, we're just as likely to think of rationales for why our grudges and judgements are entirely appropriate, as we are to remember the words of Jesus. Even if we do have a moment of pause, recalling the Christian imperative to forgive, we'll often tell ourselves, "But how could God expect me to forgive *this*? Surely this is unforgivable?" Or we'll go with the more faithful sounding, "May God forgive them, because I certainly can't!"

And maybe we can't. But we're supposed to try. That's part of what it means to follow Jesus. We're supposed to forgive, Jesus told Peter, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times – or even, as you've heard from other translations, seventy times seven times, which is 490 times, for those of you who are math-challenged. And here's how I know Jesus meant for us to apply this to all the real-life stuff we'd like to pretend is exempt from these high standards. Did you notice what that story is really about? It's not about slavery. You could pull all the stuff about slavery out, and the story would still be standing. It's about debt. It's about money – who has it, and who owes it, and whose debt is going to lock them into a situation where they're never going to be able to pay it off. It doesn't get anymore "real life" than this.

This story made me think of that prayer Jesus taught us. For most of my life, I thought it was weird that most of the Protestant churches I went to use the version of the Lord's Prayer that says "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". When I lived in the South, we said "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass

against us,” which was a weird shift. But I always thought it would have been more honest and direct to pray “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” That’s what we’re talking about, right? Sin? So why don’t we just say so? But in the last few years, I’ve been thinking about this more, and I think we need to assume that there is some significance to the fact that we use the words “debt” and “debtors”. I think Jesus keeps using this money language in his teachings about forgiveness precisely because he knows we’d prefer to spiritualize forgiveness, in order to avoid having to practice it in our “real lives”.

One could say the same thing about Paul’s examples about eating or not eating meat and observing or not observing holidays. Decisions about food and how we structure our time are some of the most fundamental influences on our lives. And those are apparently exactly the areas of life in which Paul thinks we should stop judging one another. He seems to agree with Jesus that these major principles of our faith should actually affect how we behave every day of the week.

I can feel my subconscious whining, “This is a hard teaching.” Do I really have to be forgiving and non-judgmental ALL the time? When I’m driving on the highway? A lot of those people really ARE bad drivers! When I’m on social media? Everyone knows some of those people are bots. When I’m listening to the news? Lord, help! I don’t know which part of your life makes this hardest for you, but I’m guessing we all have our areas where we struggle. We cannot expect this to be easy; the point is not to succeed, but to try.

While we're forgiving seventy-seven times, we can try to be gentle with our own failures at least seven times or so. I do think Jesus was exaggerating when he implied God would hand us over to be tortured for our failures to forgive. That is not what the heart of the gospel shows us. Paul's description is more helpful: "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." Whether we forgive or whether we fail to forgive, we are the Lord's. Whether we tame our hearts or whether we think judgmental thoughts, we are the Lord's. Whether we loan money or whether we owe money, we are the Lord's. Whether we eat healthy or whether we continually cheat on diets we knew wouldn't work anyway, we are the Lord's. Whether we let other drivers in during a merge or whether we honk when someone cuts us off, we are the Lord's. Whether we delete the snarky comment or whether we post it, we are the Lord's.

And if we can stay conscious enough of being the Lord's, in all of those moments, the forgiving and the not judging will become easier. Because we will grow in our awareness of just how much God is continually forgiving us and just how unconditional God's love for us really is. That is how we learn to dwell in the mercy of God. And when we dwell in the mercy of God, forgiveness doesn't just flow into us; it flows out from us as well. When we dwell in the mercy of God, acceptance and unconditional love don't just enter our hearts; they radiate from us to others too. We are the Lord's. Hallelujah and Amen.