

Glue: Forgiveness
Delivered November 25, 2012

At our house, like at your house, we have various rules. Some of the rules are more well enforced than others, but all of them serve a purpose: to keep the household running smoothly. Among those rules at our house we have some basic relationship guidelines. They are not earth shattering revelations, so don't expect anything like that today. The first guideline is that when you do something to harm another person in our house – with words or actions – you apologize for what you've done. With three kids and two parents in our home, there is a fair amount of "I'm sorry" being said at different times. We do our best to admit when we were wrong and to take responsibility for our actions.

The second rule actually goes right along with the first one. When you are the one receiving the apology from another family member, we don't allow ourselves to say "that's ok", or "don't worry about it" or expressions like that. It might sound like an insignificant change, but instead of those phrases we make sure to say "I forgive you" to the one apologizing.

It might not seem like a big deal, but when we say "that's ok" we are passing off the offense like it didn't really matter, when the truth is that it really did matter. If it was enough for you to be upset about, and what I did was wrong, then it can't really be passed over just by saying "don't worry about it." When I have to apologize to my wife or my kids for something I have done to hurt them, I want to know that I am forgiven for what I've done in order for us to move forward. To pass it off like it didn't matter is to minimize the offense, and is also to be a passive participant in the relationship. But to say "I forgive you" is to take an action myself, to acknowledge that something was wrong, but that it has been set right because both of us are willing to make it so.

Forgiveness is probably a topic that makes all of us a little uncomfortable because, quite honestly, we're not very good at it. We're usually not good at asking for it, and we're usually even worse at offering it. We tend to look at our relationships like a balance sheet. When you are nice to me I credit your account with the good things that you have done for me. When you are not nice to me I debit your account for the bad things you have done to hurt me. The problem is that, if we're honest, we don't weigh the good things and the bad things the same way. We give greater weight to the things that people do to hurt us than we give to the things people do that are kind to us.

You know this is true because you have seen in your own relationships how weeks, months, and even years of good things in relationships can be undone in a relatively short period of time. Marriages that last for years fall apart because bad things happen over a relatively short period of time. Friendships disintegrate even after years of good things being invested by both parties because of a few poorly chosen words, or actions that seem to nullify all the good stuff in a matter of just a few bad choices. And at the root of all this disintegration is the issue of forgiveness. How can I forgive when someone has hurt me so deeply? How can I be expected to repair this relationship that just seems so broken and so far from what it once was or what it is supposed to be?

Maybe the biggest question of all, and the hardest one for us to wrestle with, is the question that opens our passage in ***Matthew 18:21-35***. Maybe it is reassuring for us to know that the people Jesus originally talked to were consumed with the same kinds of

questions we have about how we're supposed to live as followers of Christ. Maybe it's good for us to remember that they had spouses, children, friends, parents, and siblings and that not all of those relationships worked out exactly like they were supposed to. So it shouldn't be any surprise to read Peter's question in verse 21, because it's the same question that we want to ask any time we talk about forgiveness: how many times?

Peter's question to Jesus is incredibly relevant because every one of us has asked it at one point or another. If someone wrongs me, how many times am I supposed to forgive them for the way that they hurt me? He actually answers his own question to Jesus, with what he thinks is an appropriate number: 7 times. It's rather a generous suggestion by Peter, considering that the rabbis of Jesus' day would have offered 3 times as an answer to Peter. Let's pause just for a moment and acknowledge that if the number is 3, then most of us probably used that number up before the honeymoon was over, right? But as always, Jesus is not content with just a number, which would have been the surface level way to answer the question, but instead he pushes for a deeper understanding.

[V. 22] He uses a number (77) but you get the feeling that the number is not really the issue at all. Jesus is, as always, after the heart – the motive and the intent of the person who is doing the forgiving. He doesn't want us to forgive 77 times (or 490 times as some translations have it), instead he wants us to fundamentally shift how we view forgiveness in our relationships, and really how we view our relationships in their entirety, even with the people who hurt us. He wants to give us the perspective on what forgiveness is, and what it is NOT. It is not about keeping the balance sheet and the record of the number of times we have forgiven, but about throwing the balance sheet away and seeing the relationship through different eyes.

[V. 23-24] To give a fuller understanding of what's involved, Jesus tells a story. He tells stories to pull us in emotionally, and especially when we talk about forgiveness and relationships, we are talking about emotionally touchy areas. He wants to shift what we think, and how we behave, but he knows that we will not change our minds or our actions until we care enough about the change he's calling us to, so he tells this incredibly emotionally charged story about a servant who owes a massive debt to his master. In fact, when you dig a little you find that the debt is so great in Jesus' story that it really is a fantasy number. Basically it's as if Jesus says, "Once upon a time there was a servant who owed his master a zillion dollars."

[V. 25-27] His debt was more than his wages would be for several lifetimes, so when the king calls him in to account for the debt, he has already decided that at the very least the man and his family need to be sold to at least recoup some money towards the debt. But when the servant hears this decision he does what any one of us would have done – he starts begging. He begs for his life, the life of his family, and in the process makes promises that there is no way he could possibly keep. He asks for an extension of time so that he would be able to pay everything he owes eventually. He knows that he can't pay it. The master knows he can't pay it. Everyone in the story knows that he can't possibly pay this debt. And while we expect the master to laugh him out of the room, the master actually goes beyond what the man has suggested. Instead of just giving him time to work off his debt, he completely clears the debt – total forgiveness and freedom.

[V. 28-30] We want the story to end there, but now that he has us hooked, Jesus continues. It's the part we don't want to read, and the part that, if you're not yet following

Jesus, you can feel free to skip over this morning. The forgiven servant walks out with the debt lifted off his shoulders and he immediately runs into a man who owes him 3-4 months of wages. To put it in perspective it is 1/600,000 of the debt he was just forgiven. It doesn't even register on the scale of debt that he has racked up.

I'll give the guy some credit and say maybe he was feeling like since he had been forgiven so much he at least owed it to the master to try to work off some of his debt, but even if that's the case, what he does doesn't add up. He goes after the man for the 3-4 months of wages and threatens him with debtors prison unless he pays up. The fellow servant begs for mercy in the **same terms** he just used to beg for mercy from the master, but he is unmoved by the man's pleas. He has him thrown into prison, and every single one of us gasps and says that's not right, don't we?

[V. 31-34] The other servants in the story vocalize exactly what we're thinking when we read it. This guy is a total hypocrite, an absolute jerk, a waste of space. They go to the master and report this behavior, and when the master sends down his sentence we are so emotionally invested in it that we are saying "YES!! He got what he deserved!" We feel like his lack of forgiveness has earned him the punishment of the master.

But then we start to understand who we are supposed to identify with in the story. We're supposed to identify with the forgiven servant. We're supposed to recognize ourselves in his actions, and then we immediately go back to Peter's question about how many times to forgive, how big does the debt have to be before we can write them off and throw them in debtor's prison for the rest of our lives? And all of a sudden we realize that we are still stuck in the balance sheet approach to our relationships. We are still finding excuses to hold things against those in our relationships who have hurt us, and while we talk about how great God's forgiveness is, we fail to extend that same forgiveness to our spouses, our children, our friends, our parents and our siblings.

[V. 35] And in that we reveal something ugly about our hearts. We don't really understand forgiveness – not God's to us, and not ours to someone else. And the way Jesus insists on this, we reveal that we have not really been forgiven if we're still holding on to the balance sheet and checking off the numbers of times we've forgiven. To be unforgiving is to reveal our hearts as unforgiven.

Forgiveness changes the nature of the relationship. It changes our relationship with God when we understand that we could never earn his forgiveness. But when we truly receive and enjoy that forgiveness, it begins to settle in our hearts and flow out to our other relationships and that changes the nature of your relationships. No longer is it a balance sheet where you check the person's value to you based on what they've done for good or bad – now the value lies in the relationship itself. When you forgive, you reset the counter on the debts and then the relationship progresses forward even stronger as a result because you don't live with the weight of all those offenses. The end result is a stronger, more valuable bond together than what you had in the first place.

So here's the question, and it's very simple: who do you need to forgive? Is it a spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling, a pastor, a friend? Whose small debt are you still holding onto despite the way Christ allowed you to walk free from yours? Do you want to change the nature of those relationships? Then learn to forgive quickly and see the value of the relationship build over time.