

I. Introduction

A. You're in the express checkout line at the grocery store with a loaf of bread, a gallon of milk, a dozen eggs and a candy bar. And, as always, the guy who just cut in front of you has three times more items than he is supposed to and he's talking loudly on his phone and moving slowly and you're too polite (or he is too big) for you to tell him he's not allowed in that line.

B. So you settle in to wait and your eyes scan the magazine rack. And there, bigger than life, you see the headlines: *Mermaid baby born to Miami teen—claims dad is UFO Alien*. Details on page 4. It's the *National Enquirer*.

C. Now you don't believe this stuff. Not for a minute. But, there are pictures on page four and your curious what kind of pictures they could possibly have made up. And so you look around to be sure no one is watching and then you casually reach over and grab it, smirking as if to suggest to anyone who might see you that this stuff is beneath you. And you take in more headlines:

1. *Newborn baby sings like Adele*
2. *Jimmy Fallon and Vladimir Putin First Cousins.*
3. *Princess Di living with JFK and Elvis on South Pacific Island.*

D. Needless to say, you do not get any of this information in the *Wall Street Journal* or from your Google news feed. You can really be out of the loop.

E. All joking aside, there are serious issues at play. My fear is that when you read certain parts of this book you treat them the same way. You view them as equally outlandish.

A. I could pick a number of different passages, because there are many amazing claims. But the one I'm focused on today is the one that tells us that we should forgive those who wrong us – over and over and over again, which is the meaning of 70×7 .

1. Symbolically, seven is the number of completion, so 70×7 doesn't mean 490 it means you just keep forgiving. You would never say, "Watch it buddy. I've forgiven you 486 times, four more and I'm coming out swinging." No, what Jesus is saying is that we are to forgive without limit.
2. If we are a disciple of Jesus we are expected to forgive and forgive and forgive – contrary to the way we feel:

a) When we are wronged we want revenge. When we are hit we want to hit back. When we are hurt we want to hurt back.

b) And contrary to the advice we generally hear today – which encourages us to sue or get even.

2. *We are expected to sue or get even.*

F. I am trying to be unbelievably clear. If Jesus's advice doesn't sound as outlandish and crazy as anything you might read in *The National Enquirer*, then I'm not doing a good job of explaining it. What he is calling us to is radical and uncommon.

G. He doesn't say: Forgive them unless they are real jerks, of course if they are then it's OK to stick it to them and hate their guts; or forgive them unless what they did really hurt; or forgive them unless their actions cost you real money, or they did it on purpose, or they are not sorry.

H. Let me push on this to highlight how extreme a statement it is. What Jesus is saying is that:

1. Children abused by religious leaders should forgive the men who abused them.

2. Those who lost their retirement savings in my fraternity brother's 250 million dollar Ponzi scheme – during which time he bought 100 foot luxury boats, several hangars full of planes and jets and more than 300 cars; he built a 30,000 square foot house and had wild parties with wild women, and who is not repentant. What Jesus is saying is that those who were swindled by him should forgive him.

3. What Jesus is saying is that you should forgive the former business partner who stole your ideas and clients and left you with the bills.

4. What Jesus is suggesting is that you should forgive the drunk driver who crashed into your car, killing your child. Are you kidding me?

5. Here is a picture that haunts me. INSERT PICTURE Forgive? Really? Forgive the idiots – the cruel monsters – that did this? To this young girl? Impossible.

I. I suspect I got your attention. In fact, I expect that some of you are thinking, "Wait a minute Woodruff. Slow down. I was with you for a while. I believe in forgiveness. But there are limits. There are exceptions. Don't overstate your case. Not all of us live in the dream world you do. This whole forgiveness thing needs to be qualified a bit. I have no intention on becoming a doormat."

J. In short, I expect some of you to be thinking, "Mike, what you are suggesting is every bit as crazy as the idea that Princess Di, John F. Kennedy and a few space aliens are sharing a bungalow on a South Pacific Island."

II. Let's dig in. For starters let me place today's passage in context.

A. As was noted in the beginning of the service, the prevailing theme in the parables Jesus gives in Luke 16 and 17 is generosity. We looked first at generosity with our money. And there I argued that money is the first example because it's a bit of a test case – perhaps because everyone interacts with money, perhaps it's because financial generosity is objective and easily measured. For whatever reason, Jesus frequently talks about money and the call for us to be radically, pervasively – outrageously – generous starts with our money. But it doesn't stop there. There are other forms of generosity. Today we look at relational generosity.

B. I'm reading now. Luke 17:1

III. **Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come,**

A. It is a broken world. We do not have to go looking for trouble. It will find us. Sin has unraveled things. And we have contributed to the mess. We are guilty of violating God's will, of actively breaking His laws (sins of commission) and of passively avoiding them – (sins of omission). These are among the things that cause hardship in life.

B. Tragically, we hurt people and we are hurt in a variety of ways. There is plenty out there to trip over.

IV. **V:1. Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come." 2 It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.**

A. A millstone was an enormous stone that was used to grind food. The visual that Jesus paints here is that if you're someone who misleads others – who leads others astray, you would actually do better to tie yourself to a large rock and jump off the boat than to face God. Jesus isn't going to hand you a lifejacket. That's a pretty strong statement coming from Jesus. But He really doesn't like people who hurt people – especially people who hurt "little ones."

1. By the way, some scholars think this is a reference to those who tempt children. Others think it refers to those who mislead those who are young in the faith. I'm not sure which it is and I'm not sure it matters because the thrust of his statement is clear. Help people. Protect people. Build them up don't tear them down or hold them back. And, as always, be especially attentive to the needs and struggles of those who are weak or oppressed.

B. So, so far we've been told two things: first, when it comes to sin, fight it, resist it, flee; and number two: do not pass it on. Do not be an agent of evil.

V. V:3: So watch yourselves. “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them.”

A. This is interesting. What we are being told is to pay attention to your own heart. The advice we generally receive is, “If someone hurts you, watch them – i.e., be on guard; protect yourself; get away; don’t trust them again.” But what Jesus is saying here is, “If someone hurts you, watch your own heart or it will start to grow hard.”

VI. 3 So watch yourselves. “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. 4 Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”

V5: The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

A. This is code for, “You’ve got to be kidding. Do you realize what you are saying? Do you have any idea how this would actually play out in life?”

VII. There is a lot there. A lot. This week and next I want to try to answer three big questions.

A. What does it mean to forgive?

B. Why should I forgive those who wrong me?

C. And what does that look like, especially given the fact that I can’t do it. I just can’t. I may want to, but my heart will not let me.

VIII. Question one: What exactly does it mean to forgive? What is forgiveness?

A. Let me start by saying that forgiving is not the same as forgetting. The first is an act of the will. The second can’t be.

1. I can’t decide to forget something. That’s a self-defeating effort. If I remember to forget it, I’ve remembered it.

2. Yes I know that in Isaiah 43:25 that God says that “He will remember our sin no more.” But that is a bit different. For one thing, it is discussing what God is able to do. Secondly, it does not actually mean that he no memory of what has happened, it means that he will be able to remember it and yet treat us as if it didn’t happen.

1. Now, as a practical matter, what you forgive you might forget. The incident will lose its power—lose its hold over you. It will likely drop off your emotional radar. But that will not always be the case. Some hurts can be forgiven but not forgotten. Some incidents can lose their emotional hold but never fall from our memory. The picture of the girl without her hands is an example. There are many others. We may be able to forgive but for very obvious reasons not be able to forget. To forgive does not necessarily mean to forget.

B. Number two: forgiveness is not the same thing as condoning wrong behavior.

1. It is not excusing bad behavior by saying something like, “It’s OK. You couldn’t help yourself,” or, “you didn’t mean to do it.”

C. Number Three: Forgiveness is not passing off the offense as insignificant, saying, “Oh, that didn’t matter.” Or, “It wasn’t that important.” If it’s not important then we hardly need to talk about forgiveness.

1. If someone is a few minutes late to an appointment because they went to the wrong room they might say, “I’m sorry. Forgive me. But this sure seems to fall into the no harm no foul category. It doesn’t matter. They do not need my forgiveness. We are talking about things that do matter. About wrongs you have suffered that hurt – that set you back.

2. If the women who was butchered in Rwanda were to face her tormentors and hear them say, “I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?” She can not say, “Oh, this was no big deal. It doesn’t matter. Nor would it be honest to say something like, “Well, you didn’t mean to do it.” Or, “You’re not to blame because you were having a bad day or your father beat you or anything else.” Men and women, remember, we matter. And because we matter, what happens to us matters. And God didn’t suggest that the wrongs we have done could be quickly dismissed, they had to be paid for by the death of his Son. Our actions matter. And so, forgiveness is not forgetting nor is it dismissing or condoning someone else’s wrong behavior.

D. Number four: forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation.

1. Reconciliation may follow forgiveness – they are often related – but reconciliation takes two people.

a) A party that is wronged may forgive those who wronged them but have that offer of grace rebuffed.

b) There may be no restoration of the relationship because the offending party is not ready to be forgiven or even ready to acknowledge that what they did needs forgiving.

c) Last week I mentioned that I was reading *The Flames of Rome*, an historical novel about Nero written by Paul Maier, an ancient history professor. Towards the end of the book, there is a scene where Nero is having Christians killed – it's all very horrific. They are being attacked by ravenous dogs, lit on fire and worse. It's bad. Well, in the book, Peter, who is being crucified – please note, this is conjecture. Tradition holds that Peter was crucified upside down at Nero's hand but we do not know that. In any event, in the book, he has Peter say to Nero that he forgives him and Nero says, "you can't do that. I don't accept that."

2. All that to say, reconciliation may not be possible. In Romans 12:18 Paul says, "to the extent possible be at peace with all people." It's not always possible. Reconciliation may not be possible. But that doesn't mean that forgiveness can be held at bay. We can forgive even if people do not accept it.

E. So, forgiveness is not the same as forgetting or dismissing something as not important. It is not reconciliation. What is forgiveness? Three Greek words are usually translated as forgive in the New Testament.

1. One speaks about having an attitude of love and mercy. This is the one used in Eph. 4:32: We are to be "tender hearted, forgiving one another."

2. A second describes the cancellation of an obligation. As in Luke 6:37: "Forgive and you will be forgiven."

3. But the main word – the word that gets the most play in the New Testament literally means: to release; to hurl away; to free yourself from something.

4. Jesus used this same word to describe our obligation when someone has wronged us. We are obligated to release them. To willingly throw away our resentment at being wronged. This doesn't just mean containing or restraining our resentment, but letting go entirely so that we can be truly free of its influence.

F. This doesn't mean that we don't have any emotions.

1. When we are wronged our natural response is to become angry. Our anger may or may not be the appropriate response. Anger is not, in and of itself, a sinful emotion. Jesus got angry when he saw the temple changers. It can be a very justifiable response to what is going on. The question is, what are we going to do with that anger? How are we going to act on it? How should we act on it? An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? You did this to me so I'll do that to you. Your soldiers killed ten of my people so our suicide bombers will kill ten of yours. Or are we going to step back from our knee-jerk response and think about what should be done in light of what Jesus said about forgiving and loving our enemies.

G. I'm not suggesting that any of this easy or natural; nor am I suggesting that we become a dishrag while all kinds of rottenness is thrown our way; I am not suggesting that we put on a fake smile while people wish us ill. I am not suggesting that we are expected to trust someone who has proven untrustworthy in the past, especially if it puts other people at risk.

H. I am not suggesting that we let people off the hook for the wrong they have done. That is a pardon, not forgiveness. That is a legal matter. And its only concerned with the legal status of the offense not the relationship between the offender and the victim.

I. Please hear me, this is complicated and it's just one of the reasons we need really good friends and good small groups, so in some of the really tense situations we find ourselves in – where we may not be able to trust our own heart – we can receive good counsel.

J. Please hear me, we are not free to act like nothing happened. That is not what Jesus advocates in this passage. Read V:3: "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them.

1. We may need to confront the people who have wronged us and let them know. The term Jesus uses here is "rebuke."

2. Some of you are thinking, "I like the sound of that." Not so fast. I think we have to link this to Mt. 18, where we are coached about confronting people who have wronged us and how that is done.

3. And for the record, if you have not inwardly forgiven them before you go to confront them – if you have not thrown this off, if your goal is to help them see their sin – then let's be honest, you are going to try to hurt them and this is very unlikely to go well. We need to get to a place where our goal is the good for the other person.

K. What exactly is forgiveness? Forgiveness is the heartfelt, loving response towards another person who hurt you. It means surrendering your right to get even – to inflict at least as much pain on them as they have inflicted on us. It means leaving those matters to the Lord. And it goes beyond that – over time – to the point where we wish them well.

L. Some of you are saying, “that is just not possible.” I may or may not want to do that, but it’s just not possible. Hang in there. I am going right after that in question three – which is next week. Sorry, but this is just not a topic that can be handled in one week. Please hear me though, if you are carrying this stuff around inside you. If you are spending any of your energy hating or trying to get even, it is killing you and blocking joy and hindering your relationship with God and you need to be here next week.

M. Right now, let me move to question two. Question one was: what is forgiveness.

IX. Question Two is: Why should we forgive? Here there are five reasons:

A. First: We should forgive because we are commanded to forgive.

1. In Matthew 6:15 we read: But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

B. Second: We should forgive because we have been forgiven – by God and others.

1. This is part of the fabric of the Gospel. We all sinners – Romans 3. We deserve eternal separation from God. But we are offered forgiveness instead.

2. This is an old truth for most of you –and so it’s well trafficked – but hear me clearly now, because it is foundational for all that follows. The only way we can be commanded to forgive – the only way we can broach the radical idea of forgiving those who have wronged us—is if we start with an understanding of our own need for forgiveness. We must recognize our own guilt – our own badness.

(1) Most of us are painfully—usually secretly and shamefully—aware of our shortcomings. The repetition of our sin, our inability—despite our best intentions—to be good on a day in and day out basis. But not all.

a) Some are aware but do not admit it. That takes some energy. Confession is a wonderful, freeing thing. Realizing that God – and our close friends – know the worst about us and still love us is a wonderful thing. So some of us know how bad we are. Some do not. Some act as though they are good. Some claim to be good.

b) Look, I maintain that if the person sitting next to you knew every thought that passed through your mind – my mind! – that they'd get up and move.

3. Most people are aware of their fallen state. And are aware that they depend on being forgiven as well. And what goes around comes around. I want to treat people the way I want to be treated. And I know that I need to be forgiven so I want to forgive.

C. Third, we should forgive others because to some extent our own forgiveness before God is linked to this.

1. We see this in the Matthew passage I read and also in The Lord's Prayer.

- a) Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
- b) Thy kingdom come.
- c) Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven
- d) Give us this day our daily bread
- e) And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

D. Four, to not forgive is not only an act of disobedience, and not only in contrast to our own experience, but it's also personally destructive.

1. As I suspect you have heard before – but let me remind you – holding a grudge against someone is like drinking poison and hoping that they get sick.

2. Holding anger in your heart like that is toxic. By the way, anger will always tell you that it's not anger. It will say, "I just want justice, or the truth." But if you hold to anger it will defile you.

- a) Heb. 12:15: see to it that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many have been defiled.

E. Finally, number five: we forgive because it's the only way to break the cycle of blame – and pain – in a relationship.

1. In a culture that embraces the dictum, “an eye for an eye” everyone is blind.

2. We see the wisdom in God’s Word when we contrast it with its alternatives.

F. Men and women, the kind of forgiveness that Jesus calls us to is a radical, counter-intuitive, uncommon piece of advice. But it is a way forward.

G. Learning to let go. Deciding to not hate or seek revenge is life-giving.

X. There is more to unpack here, but I am out of time. You will need to come back. Do not miss next week.