

# Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

## FORGIVING FOR GOOD

Matthew 18:21-35

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Analysis by Paige G. Evers

21Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25and, 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. 26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27Out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him. 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'

34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

*Note: The first lesson for this week is Genesis 50:15-21 near the end of the Joseph story. The following analysis uses Joseph and his brothers as a case study for interpreting the gospel text.*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Bearing a Grudge**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Weighing Your Grudge***

Matthew writes that Peter wants to know how often he is supposed to forgive “my brother” (Greek text of 18:21, translated in the NRSV as “another member of the church”) who sins against him. He gives what he thinks is a generous figure: seven times. Joseph might have asked the same question, but with a twist. If his brothers sinned against him multiple times in various ways in the past, does he have to forgive them all at once for the wrongs they did? Or can he forgive them of some of it and still bear a grudge for the parts that are harder to forgive? It’s reasonable for Joseph to want to calculate his forgiveness.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Holding Your Grudge***

Joseph’s brothers feared that he would choose the latter option. Once their father was dead, they expected retribution from their now-powerful brother. They were afraid that Joseph would demand they pay back in full for the wrongs they committed (Gen. 50:15). After all, Joseph’s grudge had a long time to simmer in his heart. The brothers probably wouldn’t have been surprised if Joseph’s grudge led him to act like the slave in Matthew’s

parable who came upon a fellow slave who owed him a debt. That slave grabbed the other slave by the throat and demanded that he pay what he owed (18:28). Even though the slave begged for patience so he could repay the debt, the other refused and threw him into prison (18:30). That's how the human economy of wrongdoers and the wronged works. There's no room for patience, mercy, or forgiveness. If you owe a debt, you have to pay it back. If you've wronged someone, you have to expect that they will do the same to you in return. Human relationships are boiled down to a settling of accounts (18:23).

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Crushed by the Grudge***

The problem is that nursing a grudge curves a person in on himself. Focusing on how one has been wronged or living in fear because one has wronged another makes a person forget how he stands before God. Not forgiving others is not just an interpersonal problem, it's a God problem. At the end of the parable when the king gives his slave over to be tortured, Jesus warns, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from the heart" (18:35). You can hold on tight to your grudge but it won't change your future with God. When God begins his reckoning (18:24), no matter which side of the debt you're on, your account with God will be found wanting.

## **PROGNOSIS: Forgiving**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Forgiven***

When the debt cannot be repaid, like the slave in this parable who owed the king ten thousand talents, or when the transgressions cannot be undone, as with Joseph's brothers, there is nothing left to do. Help must come from the outside. In both of these stories, it does come, in the form of compassion. The king released the slave and forgave him the entire debt

(18:27) even though it was an extravagant sum. Joseph wept when his brothers spoke to him (50:17) and told them not to be afraid (50:18). Joseph said, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good” (50:20). This side of Easter, one can be sure that the compassion highlighted in these stories is not a mere attitude or feeling. It has a name: Jesus. God accomplished the ultimate good for the slave, for Joseph’s brothers, and for all sinners through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The cross is where God shows his mercy toward debtors and wrongdoers. By taking on the debts of all, Jesus allows sinners to no longer be afraid. They can be certain that they are forgiven children of God.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Forgiving***

Once one realizes the extravagance of God’s forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Jesus, one has no more room in the heart for grudges. A heart that truly knows the joy of forgiveness desires to forgive others. Joseph’s brothers begged him for forgiveness (50:17) but there was no need for them to try and change his mind. Joseph’s reaction to them shows that his heart had already let go of any grudge. So it is with those who realize how God has forgiven them. They are able to forgive their brothers and sisters from their hearts (18:35).

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Fruitful***

Again, Joseph’s story shows how this forgiveness springs from the heart to the lips to merciful actions on behalf of others. Not only did he forgive his brothers and not pay them back for their wrongs. Joseph also promised, “I myself will provide for you and your little ones” (50:21). Unlike the slave who was forgiven of his debt by the king and failed to have mercy on his fellow slave (18:30), Joseph extended his forgiveness into concrete actions for his brothers and their families. Who knows how much fruit will spring up from mercy that is offered so generously?! A sevenfold harvest? Seventy-seven fold? What do

you think, Peter?