



證道

Sermon

從心裡饒恕

Forgive from the Heart

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馬太福音 Matthew 18:21-35

Is Forgiveness Really Possible?

I will never forget an experience from elementary school when an elder at church “made me apologize.” [REDACTED] _____

I was playing with a church friend who was younger than I was, and we had a small conflict.

Is Forgiveness Really Possible?

An elder whom I deeply respected asked me to apologize to him.



He knew that it was unfair to me, but he still appealed to “the teachings of Jesus” and told me to just endure it, forgive him, and even say “I’m sorry” in front of his parents for something I knew I had not done wrong.

Is Forgiveness Really Possible?

By now, I have long forgotten what the conflict was even about, but that sense of “I didn’t even do anything wrong ~~that~~ stayed with me for more than twenty years.

Is Forgiveness Really Possible?

Forgiveness is a teaching that every Christian has certainly heard before.
We may even have taught others to forgive.

But can we really do it?

Is Forgiveness Really Possible?

Do the scars left by what others have done to us simply disappear because we forgive?



Can the resentment buried deep inside us really be healed simply by telling ourselves that we ought to forgive?

Is Forgiveness Really Possible?

Today, as we read Jesus' parable about forgiveness once again, I want us to think carefully about what forgiveness ~~really~~ actually means within our faith.

And from the perspective of practical theology, I want us to ask: in real life, what does it actually look like to forgive “from the heart”?

We Are All Keeping Accounts

Last week, Pastor Grace spoke about “listening.”

And immediately ~~after that passage, Peter—as the most earnest student—followed up with a question for Jesus:~~

if another member of the church sins against me, how many times should I forgive? Would seven times be enough?

We Are All Keeping Accounts

Peter deliberately uses the number “seven” to represent completeness. It already sounds like an exemplary answer. —

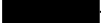
But Jesus tells him that seven times is not enough. Instead, he says, “seventy-seven times”—or, as it has traditionally been understood, “seventy times seven.”

We Are All Keeping Accounts

Jesus then tells a parable. A slave owed his master ten million dollars—an amount so enormous that even ~~if he sold everything in his life, he could never repay it.~~

After the slave pleaded desperately, the master had compassion on him and forgave the debt.

We Are All Keeping Accounts

But after this newly forgiven slave went out, he met another slave who owed him a hundred dollars.  _____

Instead of forgiving him, he had him thrown into prison. When the master heard what had happened, he became furious and sent the slave back to prison until he could repay the ten million dollars.

We Are All Keeping Accounts

When people hear this story, their usual reaction is something like, “Serves him right.”



In fact, Jesus’ parable perfectly exposes one of the most important and most difficult issues involved in forgiveness: fairness and justice.

We Are All Keeping Accounts

Injustice is like people owing money to one another, constantly calculating who owes whom and how much.  

And what makes forgiveness so difficult is precisely that “the other person has not yet paid back what they owe.”

As long as that debt remains unpaid, something inside us feels fundamentally unbalanced.

We Are All Keeping Accounts

In the parable, the unforgiving slave has just had an enormous debt forgiven.



From the perspective of most people, it is as though he has suddenly gained ten million dollars.

We Are All Keeping Accounts

So even if he technically has the right to collect the hundred dollars owed to him, his insistence on doing so, compared with the grace he has just received, exposes how distorted and greedy his values have become.

We Are All Keeping Accounts

His problem is not simply that he tries to recover that hundred dollars.

His problem is that ~~he has just experienced an entirely different world from the world of “if you owe something, you must pay it back,”~~ and yet the moment he turns around, he treats someone else according to the same old system of accounting. Grace came to him, but grace did not change him.

We Are All Keeping Accounts

But is this slave really so evil?

Or are we really all that different from him?

Whenever I see news stories online about court decisions or debates over the abolition of the death penalty, I often feel deeply saddened by the comments and reactions.

We Are All Keeping Accounts

Today, whenever a judge is perceived as giving a sentence that is not harsh enough—
whenever the defendant does not seem to have received the “punishment they deserve”—the
judge is easily attacked as an incompetent or out-of-touch judge.

We Are All Keeping Accounts

At that point, public judgment about injustice begins to measure justice primarily through anger and retaliation. 

I am not saying that people should not feel angry in the face of injustice.

We Are All Keeping Accounts

The problem is that once anger and retaliation become the measuring stick, the debt that supposedly “must be repaid” can expand without limit, until we end up with the absurd mentality that every crime deserves the harshest possible punishment.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

Precisely because retaliatory justice cannot lead us toward forgiveness, Jesus offers another way of thinking in ~~the~~ parable: the cancellation of debt.

In fact, Jesus has already taught us this in the Lord's Prayer: "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (6:12).

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

The master, who has the right to collect the debt, chooses to let that debt stop with him. But the indebted slave does ~~not~~ change the way he understands debt at all.

He continues to collect according to the old retaliatory logic that says, “If you owe money, you must pay it back.”

His own debt has been forgiven, yet he refuses to forgive another's debt.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

If injustice is like a heavy account that must be settled, then forgiving the debt means saying, “The harm stops with me.”

Anger tells us that if someone owes us something, they must repay it.

Retaliatory justice tells us to keep collecting the debt. But Jesus teaches us to “forgive our debtors.”

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

Whether we are a wealthy master or a poor servant anxious about our next meal, we are invited to let the debt stop with us—to stop pulling out the ledger and calculating.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

When we hear this teaching, it is natural to feel that something is unfair.

After all, injustice ~~when~~ comes with real harm.

When a debt remains unpaid, we are the ones left without the money.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

If I simply keep forgiving debts, who will care about what I feel?

Who will make sure I have enough for my next meal?

If Christian forgiveness simply means swallowing pain, then ethically, such forgiveness is nearly worthless.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

I believe we can learn from the framework of transitional justice as we ask: if we refuse retaliation, how do we then practice justice?

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

Transitional justice does not make the perpetrator the center of the story and asks only what kind of punishment ~~it would be severe enough to achieve justice.~~

Instead, it begins from the perspective of those who have been harmed and asks more comprehensively: what do we do with the harm that has already been done?

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

And if we begin from the perspective of those who have been harmed, then the first step is to establish the truth. 

What actually happened?

Who did what?

Who was harmed as a result?

Whose voices were ignored in the past?

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

The first step of transitional justice is not to rush into either forgiveness or punishment, but to tell the truth clearly. 

Because if the harm itself is never acknowledged, genuine forgiveness is impossible.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

Telling the truth does not by itself resolve everything, so the next step is accountability.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

Accountability is not simply asking what punishment would be severe enough.

It means identifying who should take responsibility for what happened, and asking how we can make sure that those who were harmed will not have to endure the same harm again.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

From there, we also need to speak about reparation, healing, and institutional reform.

Where restitution is possible, we should seek it. Where it is impossible, we should at least acknowledge that the harm truly happened.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

Transitional justice is concerned with more than whether “bad people got what they deserved” or whether the account has been settled. It asks instead:

Have the wounded been seen?

Has their suffering been addressed?

And can we keep this from happening again?

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

If we bring this framework from the realm of public justice back into our own lives, it can become several very concrete practices.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

The first is to acknowledge the harm. Forgiveness absolutely does not mean pretending that nothing happened, ~~nor~~ does it mean telling ourselves, “It’s fine. It wasn’t that serious.” We need the courage to admit this really hurt me.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

The next step is to name the pain. We do not need to keep repeatedly calculating how much the other person owes us, but neither do we need to bury our discomfort inside. When there is an opportunity, we can try to speak honestly and clearly about the harm and about responsibility.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

The third practice is to establish boundaries. Forgiving someone does not mean tolerating further harm, and ~~it does not mean that a relationship must always return to what it was before.~~ Responsible forgiveness should include clear boundaries that prevent the harm from continuing.

If We Do Not Retaliate, How Is Justice Done?

And finally, we stop passing the harm on. Emotionally, this may be the hardest step. Because we have been hurt, it is easy to feel that we now have the right to make someone else experience the same pain. It is like the indebted slave: because he knows what it feels like to owe a debt, he assumes that making someone else bear that pain is perfectly justified.

Let the Account End with Me

When I think about forgiveness, I also think about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One of the places in the world ~~that seems most difficult to reconcile is also the very land where Jesus~~ taught about forgiveness.

Let the Account End with Me

When I was in seminary, our school invited a Jewish rabbi to speak on the subject of “love.” One of the students ~~among us was from the Middle East, and she courageously asked him,~~ “Judaism has such profound teachings about love. Then how do you understand the war between Israel and Palestine?”

Let the Account End with Me

Faced with such a difficult question, I deeply respected the fact that the rabbi did not avoid it. Instead, he answered candidly and thoughtfully: “Both sides must acknowledge the harm they have caused the other, rather than continually proclaiming only the harm they themselves have suffered.”

Let the Account End with Me

Of course, the actual situation also involves enormous differences in power, responsibility, and the scale of harm ~~caused~~ by the different parties. Transitional justice, in fact, requires us to face those differences honestly.

Let the Account End with Me

Yet in his answer, I hear something that resonates with Jesus' parable.



When the indebted slave grabs the other slave by the throat, he certainly remembers the hundred dollars that the other person owes him. But he has forgotten that he himself is also a debtor.

Let the Account End with Me

He remembers with absolute clarity the hundred dollars owed to him, but forgets the ten million dollars that have just been forgiven.

He knows exactly what injustice he has suffered, but he cannot see the harm that someone else is now suffering because of him.

Let the Account End with Me

When every person remembers only the harm done to them, harm continues to be entered into the ledger one line ~~at a time~~, and there will never be a day when the account is finally closed.

Let the Account End with Me

Even more ironically, at the end of Jesus' parable, the slave who insists on keeping accounts with someone else ~~becomes the one whose own account is opened again.~~

Let the Account End with Me

Jesus even uses extremely severe language of judgment to warn us: if we receive grace but refuse to let that ~~grace~~ change us, then in the end, we place ourselves back into the world of endless accounting.

Let the Account End with Me

To forgive “from the heart” is to choose to stop that cycle. I do not deny my wounds, and I do not abandon accountability. But I refuse to let my own wounds become the justification for creating the next wound.

Let the harm stop with me.
Let the account end with me.

Let the Account End with Me

Forgiveness has never meant forgetting, nor does it require wounded people to pretend that everything is fine. 

Forgiveness means that after the truth has been seen, responsibility acknowledged, and boundaries established, we choose not to let the harm determine how we treat others from here.

Let the Account End with Me

We remember what happened without living forever inside that ledger. We can seek justice without needing ~~someone else's suffering to become our comfort, because we too are people~~ who have received grace, people whose debts have been forgiven.

Let the Account End with Me

May the grace we have received not stop with us, but truly transform the way we face harm and the way we face one another, so that hatred will not continue, and so that the harm may stop with us.

Prayer

God of ~~justice~~ and mercy, we
thank you that through Jesus,
you have wiped away every
debt we owed under your
justice. When we had no ability
to repay, you had already
allowed us to receive this
immeasurable grace.

Prayer

Yet, Lord, ~~our~~ weakness and sin —————
cause us to cling tightly to our
own ledgers. With our narrow
vision, we use justice as an
excuse and calculate every
debt that others owe us.

Prayer

Perhaps ~~we~~ forgive outwardly while inwardly holding tightly to the memory of how we were hurt. We say, “It’s fine,” while secretly longing for the other person to receive the punishment we believe they deserve.

Prayer

Help us ~~remember~~ that
whenever we pray in the Lord's
Prayer, "Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our
debtors," we are also
proclaiming a form of justice
that does not depend on
retaliation, and a model of

Prayer

Keep us ~~from~~ living inside our
own ledgers, so that we
ourselves may not be judged
according to the standard of
the ledger. Teach us to let the
harm stop with us.

Prayer

And through your mercy and
grace, give us wisdom to
discover new ways of seeking
justice, so that we may truly
live out your gospel.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.