

# Radical forgiveness is a sign of the kingdom

written by Catherine Upchurch |

## Turnabout

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do.” (Colossians 3:12-13)

## Questions for reflection or discussion:

1. In your experience, why is forgiving another person sometimes so difficult? And is receiving forgiveness also difficult at times?
2. In the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21-35), refusing to forgive a debt has dire consequences. What emotional and spiritual scars build up in us, or in any person, who is unforgiving?
3. The passage in Colossians 3:12-13 includes forgiveness as a necessary piece of clothing for every Christian. If this is so, why do you think forgiveness is sometimes seen as a weakness?
4. Who models for you the mercy of God?

“We believe in a God of second chances” is a common way of speaking about God’s ability to allow us make mistakes, to let us sin and repent. But there is another saying that also comes to mind: “Fool (or offend) me once, shame on you. Fool (or offend) me twice, shame on me.” Surely twice is not as far as we can go. The Bible tells us that God is not nearly so miserly.

When Jesus was instructing his followers about the need to be forgiving, Peter must have begun to understand that he was being called to be generous. We can almost imagine his excitement when he approached his teacher and said, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21).

The number seven was associated with the notion of completeness or perfection, so Peter was basically saying, “See, I get it. I need to offer forgiveness completely! Right?” But Jesus has a more radical idea altogether (verse 22): “I say to you, not seven times but 77 times.” (Some translations read, “70 times seven times”). The point is that Jesus is saying forgiveness is to be offered without any limits.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus illustrates his meaning in the parable of the unforgiving servant (18:23-35). Here we have a servant in danger of being sold into slavery to settle a large debt he owes to his master. This servant pleads for mercy and receives it, along with a complete forgiveness of his debt. One would think the mercy shown to him would be passed along, but

the opposite occurs. The forgiven servant seeks out a man who owes him money that cannot be paid, and instead of passing on the forgiveness, he has the man jailed.

Jesus offers another parable to illustrate that the kingdom of God is characterized by forgiveness. Most of us might know this as the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32), a name not assigned by the Bible's writers but by book editors centuries later. Both the common title and the story have become so familiar to us that we might miss something very special here.

The word "prodigal" means wasteful, yes, and that surely applies to the younger son who wastes his inheritance. He is brazen enough to ask for it before the death of his father, foolish enough to spend it recklessly and desperate enough to imagine he could come back home and simply be a servant. The older son is also prodigal to a degree. He does not ask for his inheritance or lead a scandalous lifestyle, but when the younger son returns, the older son is resentful and jealous. He wastes the opportunity to be welcoming, to celebrate with his family, and to experience the joy that comes with offering forgiveness.

To be prodigal, however, is also to be extravagant or to be lavish. The father in the parable is surely lavish in the party he throws upon his son's return. More importantly, the father is extravagant (prodigal) with his forgiveness of one son and his encouragement of the other. One son has shamed him by a life of depravity, and the other son has shamed him by refusing to attend the party. But the father is not nearly as concerned about what the neighbors think as he is about his children.

The rather obvious lesson is that God is continually and lavishly forgiving of us. In the kingdom of God that has begun in our midst, we are being shaped by these experiences of divine mercy. If we are going to be at home in God's kingdom, we are being invited to become radical in our desire and ability to forgive, and humble in our recognition of the mercy we receive.

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