

Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered...forgive your brother from your heart."

OK, he has asked and I have forgiven him six times already. But I caught him, now, a seventh time and he has asked for forgiveness yet again. I mean, Why in all the world does he keep doing it?! It just doesn't seem to me like he's sorry for what he's been doing. But should I forgive him a seventh time? Is that enough?

Forgiveness isn't easy, is it? Particularly when the remorse / repentance / reaction to our hurt isn't what we'd like to see. And all of a sudden what was said or what wasn't done as promised has become etched in granite in our minds, as if we were going to post one of those historical markers so that the offense can be memorialized for all time. "On such-and-such a date, so-and-so offended my sensibilities. He wasn't as sorry as I thought he should be, so let this marker stand as a monument until he's as sorry as I think he should be. Then, just maybe, I'll forgive him."

You could call it an extended answer to Peter's question, or you could look upon it as an explanation of the request in the Lord's Prayer, "*Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*" But no matter what you call it or how you look at it, this simple story Jesus told in our text cuts to the heart of the matter and delivers a full-strength dose of what God demands: we are never to hold anything against anyone.

I have often heard it said, "Pastor, I can forgive but I just can't forget." Is it only the Lord who can truly forgive and forget? Is that why we find ourselves being so incredibly historical about the wrongs against us, why we keep those records of wrongs about things that happened not only weeks or months but maybe even years ago? Lord knows... I guess with Jesus telling this story we would better say, The Lord Jesus knows how badly we need to hear from him on this point. Whether it is continuing education or remedial coursework, listening to the last half of

So how *is* it going to happen that we don't hold anything against anyone, that instead of bearing grudges we don't allow them to form in the first place? To answer, let's start with the ending, where Jesus concluded the story, stepped outside the illustration and, referring to being thrown into an eternal debtors' prison, said, "***This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.***"

So, let me get this straight: It's the punishment of hell for me if I hold onto a grudge? That's a far cry different than what you'll hear from modern psychologists when it comes to forgiveness. The good news is that they at least still see value in forgiveness. The bad news is that they tend to see the whole concept of forgiveness as an evolutionary development for self-preservation.

It all started with a severe burn victim in Louisiana in 1978. The attending physician hypnotized the man. It wasn't the swinging watch kind of hypnotism, but closer to relaxation therapy, a medical hypnotism, what is now known as "induction." The man was hypnotized into thinking that his legs were cool and comfortable. And it worked. Instead of months of treatment, multiple skin grafts, or even amputation, the patient healed in eighteen days without a single graft.

As the doctor continued to use this approach to great success, he found that, as his patients recounted their tragedies, their words were laced with guilt, anger, or blame. In his opinion, these negative feelings were getting in the way of better, faster healing. Over the next thirty years, and to great success, he would help his patients to forgive others, or themselves, and free themselves to focus on healing.

And he wasn't the only one. Financier and philanthropist Franklin Templeton ran with the idea of forgiveness and healing. In 1997, he sought to bring forgiveness and science together through the Campaign for Forgiveness Research project. Since then, hundreds of studies have helped researchers to better understand the concept

of forgiveness, while encouraging anyone, religious or not, to recognize the positive impacts forgiveness has on the individual.

One participant in the Campaign for Forgiveness Research was a doctor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. A devout Christian and in the face of dismissive mockery from his colleagues, he had been using forgiveness as a part of rehabilitation therapy since the 1980's. Drug rehabilitation, victims of domestic abuse, cancer patients, and cardiac patients experienced faster recovery, fewer complications (like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress), even increased blood flow when forgiveness was part of recovery therapy, this compared to control groups receiving only standard medical treatment.

More recently, the Stanford Forgiveness Project, has been able to clearly quantify the impact forgiveness has on the body. Researchers measure emotional and psychological health during therapy. The therapy includes forgiveness training – a series of discussions and exercises. They are able to quantify the chemical impact forgiveness has on the body. They explain: “When you don't forgive you release all the chemicals of the stress response. Each time you react, adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine enter the body. When it's a chronic grudge, you could think about it twenty times a day, and those chemicals limit creativity, they limit problem-solving. Cortisol and norepinephrine cause your brain to enter what we call 'the no-thinking zone,' and over time, they lead you to feel helpless and like a victim. When you forgive, you wipe all of that clean.”

Now I'm sure that, for many of you, at this point you're probably wondering when I'm going to get back to Scripture. But I beg your indulgence to go even a little further: neuroscience. You see, since the turn of the millennium, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI's) have made it possible to monitor blood flow in the brain. Researchers have been using this technology to study the “functional anatomy” of forgiveness.

As it turns out (and I'm going to try and keep it simple so that I can understand it) forgiveness activates the parts of the brain associated with reason, problem-

solving, morality, cognitive control of emotions, and understanding of the mental states of others. Forgiveness, then, inhibits impulsive reactions fueled by rage and hatred for the wrongdoer. In other words, forgiveness reframes the event, allowing the person wronged to see what happened through the lenses of empathy, understanding, and depersonalization. You see the event through the other person's eyes and in the process, mediating the perception and suppressing your own feelings of being wronged. As one researcher explained, “Forgiveness could be viewed as a sort of pain-killer for moral distress.”

All quite fascinating, at least to me. As I look through my own faith-colored glasses, I see this all as scientific explanation of the chemical mechanics, emotional effects, and physical impacts of what is a spiritual fruit of faith - forgiveness. Beautiful.

But the science is also all a little sad at the same time. You see, instead of seeing the hand of God and the power of the Spirit at work, many researchers see forgiveness simply as self-preservation. Forgiveness becomes the way the body limits the negative impacts guilt, rage, and blame. One researcher wrote, “A great deal of evidence converges suggesting that forgiveness is a positive, healthy strategy for the individual to overcome a situation that otherwise would be a major source of stress from a psychological and neurobiological point of view. The fact that forgiving is a healthy resolution of the problems caused by injuries suggests that this process may have evolved as a favorable response that promotes human survival.” In other words, through some kind of evolutionary process, humans came up with “forgiveness” in order to heal better and live longer.¹

In some ways, it's almost shocking. But to be fair, he was dancing around the truth. You see, in the greater context of findings, he admitted, that even though forgiveness requires the rational part of the brain to function, it also requires a counterintuitive, irrational choice, “You wronged me, but I forgive you anyway.” He had no explanation for how this happens.

But we do as Jesus pictures all of these scientific explanations in the parable:

the king empathizing and forgiving, the joy (one can easily imagine) of the servant at being forgiven, but then the anger and rage as he failed to forgive his fellow servant. The researcher saw only evolutionary processes. We see sin and grace.

And that's why Jesus seizes the moment with Peter to help him and all of us better understand why it is so important to forgive as we have been forgiven. An unwillingness to forgive displaces faith, cancels it out, renders it null and void. To be forgiven by Christ and not to be forgiving as Christ...those are two things that can't coexist in a Christian.

Certainly, the Lord knows about the part of us that wants to remember what another person has said or done and make them pay for it rather than forgive and move on. That inclination inside us is a poison in need of extraction. Consider our friend in the story: Huge debt cancelled but then he turns around and threatens punishment on someone else for a little debt?

Seems, maybe, a little far-fetched, until you realize the point Jesus is making. You see, Jesus is referring to our debt of sin and the sins committed against us. There's the sum total of our sinfulness and, bad as it may be, the sin or two or three that someone has committed against us. Go ahead and set both on the pans of a scale – first the sin committed against us on one side, then the sum total of our sinfulness on the other. Yeah, the weight of the sum total of our sinfulness launches the sin committed against us up through the atmosphere.

That's the comparison Jesus uses to teach unlimited forgiveness. Because of that ratio, there ought never be a time that we *don't* forgive from the heart, never a time that we *won't* forgive from the heart. I mean, let's get real. How often do we actually forgive, even up to seven times? Honestly, we have a hard time even making it to once! We've been forgiven an ocean of sin, and then one tiny drop of water of someone else's sin falls on us, and there rises up this screaming monster inside us that's yelling at the top of its lungs, "Yeah, but... He said this or she said that or they did this or they

did that, and I know God's forgiven me a ton, but I just can't..."

And so Jesus told the story, the true highlight of which is not how unmerciful the servant was but how merciful his master had been. If he's teaching Forgiveness 101, Jesus puts his fingers on your temples and gently turns your head to see what the master said in the first place. "Your unpayable debt has been erased."

You see, when God's Word calls on us to forgive from the heart, when we're struggling to find the motivation to forgive, remember not what was done *against* you. Remember what was done *for* you. The sum total of all my sinfulness – I could never have paid it all off, so Jesus did.

When Jesus was turned into a sinner on that tree trunk that was converted into his cross, God the Father looked straight at his Son and said, "***You wicked, unforgiving, grudge-bearing servant!*** Off to the tormenters till you pay the debt to the last penny!" That was our debt he paid. We should have heard those words, those threats. But now we never will. God the Father spoke those horrifying words to his own holy Son to bring complete forgiveness to you, to me, to the world.

And it makes all the difference. Not only do we get to feel the weight of our sin removed from our hearts and lives, but when we forgive as we have been forgiven, we get to enjoy forgiveness from God's perspective. As he forgave us to rejoicing by the angels in heaven, we too can forgive from the heart to the rejoicing of angels in heaven. Yes, we too can do what Joseph modeled, what Paul echoed, and what Jesus proclaimed: ***Forgive from the heart...just as in Christ God forgave you.*** When you look to him, when you look to his cross, it there that you see the *matchless mercy, forgiveness and grace* we sang about a few moments ago, poured out on you and freely flow to others, no matter what has happened. No historical markers, no long-term grudges, just forgiveness, full and free. ***Seven times? No, Seventy-seven times*** and beyond. Amen.

ⁱ The previous paragraphs and quotations are taken from: https://www.salon.com/2015/08/24/the_science

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