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## How Important is Forgiveness to God? Matthew 18:21-22

Then 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, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."  
Matthew 18:21-22

How important is forgiveness to God? It's fair to say that forgiveness and grace have become the corner stone of Christian theology. God is so gracious that God offers forgiveness even when it is undeserved. All we have to show is remorse for our wrongdoings. That's a VERY radical concept of forgiveness.

But how important is it to our faith that we forgive those who wronged us? It must be pretty important to God or else the Christian bible were not so full of references to that effect. But it's not just the number of references to forgiving our neighbors it's also what it says about forgiveness, namely that God expects us to show the same kind of radical forgiveness, than God does.

Forgiving other is a hard concept for all of us. We, like Peter, feel that there have to be limits to our forgiveness. We can't just keep on forgiving people because if we did, they would walk all over us. Some things that people do to us or say to us, we feel, are hard to forgive, because the offense hurt so much it left a scar.

Perhaps, we prefer to be like Peter who in our gospel lesson this morning comes to Jesus with a mathematical solution to forgiving others. There must be some limit, Peter reasons, beyond which forgiveness is no longer required. Beyond which we no longer need to pray, "forgive those who trespass against us."

What does it mean when Jesus taught us to pray: "Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sinned against us?" Rest assured that whatever Jesus included in the Lord's prayer was elementary and very important.

According to our gospel lesson too, it becomes clear that forgiving others is not optional; it is expected. In fact, if we don't show the same kind of forgiveness to others that God has shown us, we're in trouble. The way it goes in Jesus' parable, the unforgiving servant who was forgiven his debt, was thrown back in

jail when he refused to forgive a person who was indebted to him. Not only was did he find himself back in jail, this time he was also tortured. And Jesus concludes his parable with these words: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Mt. 18:35)

Jesus' message sounds very radical to our ears, especially since he mentions torture. I want to be clear to give a disclaimer here and make it 100 per cent clear that we as a church, that I personally, do NOT believe that torture is legit. When we deal with ancient texts from about 2000 ago, we have to consider the historic and cultural context. Torture and slavery were widely deemed acceptable and legitimate.

So, sometimes we have to give a disclaimer and put the parable into the right context. Though we obviously believe that slavery and use of torture is morally wrong in God's view, this was obviously not clear to people back then. Having given this disclaimer, I want to also be clear that this parable can still teach an important point, viz. That it is extremely important to God that we show the same kind of grace and mercy we have received to others. If we don't, there will be grave consequences.

Why on earth is it so important to God that we forgive others anyhow? Maybe some of them don't deserve forgiveness. Why should we be punished for their sin; after all, we are the victims. The sin was committed against us.

Here is my theory. I believe that God gave us commandments and requirements for our own good. To follow God's rules and suggestions is good for us. God wants us to prosper and to grow spiritually and not get hurt.

There are many reasons why it makes sense for us to forgive others, I will mention two of them this morning, and as you will see, they both show how we benefit from forgiving others. Forgiving others is FOR OUR OWN SAKE.

Now before I get into these 2 points, I need to give you another disclaimer: When I preached on forgiving others before, a woman came up to me after the service and said: "Pastor Frank, what about my abusive husband; am I supposed to keep forgiving him for what he does to me.

Please know that forgiveness has nothing to do with this problem. If you are in an abusive relationship, you are the victim of a crime and you need to remove yourself out of that situation. You can and still should work on forgiving that person eventually, but you should also get out in order to be safe!

1. The first point I want to highlight on how forgiving others can benefit us has to do with freedom: the act of forgiving can set us free from the chains that bind us to the offense and the offender. Only after we gain this freedom can we receive healing from the hurt a person has inflicted on us.

Joan Borysenko knows what happens to us if we can't find a way to forgive-- instead of vanishing with time, the memory of the offense weighs on us and grows heavier. She says, "My mother was always telling about our aunt whom she couldn't stand, and that poor woman had been dead for thirty years. I thought, who is suffering from this? So my mother continues to live with the chains of an unforgiving attitude."

An example of how to free ourselves from the bondage of an unforgiving attitude is Philip Yancey. He tells of a conversation that he once had with an immigrant rabbi. "Before coming to America," the rabbi said, "I had to forgive Adolf Hitler. "Why?" Yancey asked. "I did not want to bring Hitler with me, you know, to my new country."

2. The second reason to forgive has to do with emotional health: You pay an emotional tax for an unforgiving attitude. Someone has said that an unforgiving attitude is like carrying a red-hot brick around in your mind with the intention of someday throwing it back at the one who has hurt you. But in the meantime, you get burned by the red-hot brick yourself.

An unforgiving attitude tires us, burns us. Harry Emerson Fosdick used to tell his Riverside congregation that harboring an unforgiving attitude is like burning down your own house to get rid of a rat. An unforgiving attitude is self-destructive emotionally. And furthermore, since now we also know about the connection between the emotional and physical aspects of a person, an unforgiving attitude may even affect you physically. It can even make you physically ill.

Again, when God asks us to forgive others, God does so only after we have received grace and mercy ourselves. And then, God expects us to forgive for our own sake, so that we can free ourselves and heal from whatever wrongdoing, hurt, or loss was put on us. And considering that, forgiving others is another way in which God is showing God's great care for us. That's the good news from today's lesson. Amen!