

In one of my favorite episodes of The Andy Griffith Show, there are two families who cannot stand each other: the Wakefields and the Carters. They hate each other so much that they are constantly shooting their rifles over the fence into each other’s property. As Old Mr. Wakefield says, “Us Wakefields been feudin’ them Carters for 87 years now.” 87 years of resentment, hatred, anger and bitterness. And as this feud begins to infect more and more generations, Sheriff Andy Taylor decides to do some investigating. He tries to discover the original offense that led to this long-standing feud. When he asks Mr. Wakefield why he’s shooting at Mr. Carter, Wakefield responds that he doesn’t rightly know, cause his daddy never told him...and his daddy never told him because his daddy never told him so either. In fact going as far back as the original parties, no one could remember the reason that the feud began. Andy responds, “You mean to tell me you’ve been carrying on a feud for four generations without knowing why?” In fact, as Andy discovers, in this 87 year-old feud, with guns being fired every day, neither a single Wakefield nor Carter has ever been so much as grazed by a bullet. Eventually, in his typical sly way, Andy manages to bring the two proud sides to their senses, and, in the end, reconciliation and forgiveness have the final word.¹

Four generations of resentment and hatred. Guns drawn and bullets flying for who knows what reason. Surely Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness would have something to say to the Wakefields and the Carters. Peter asks Jesus how many times we should forgive others. “Should we give folks second chances? How about three strikes then you’re out? God forbid, should we even forgive people as many as seven times?” Peter asks, knowing that such a way of life would be nearly impossible to live. And Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” WHAT?! Are you serious? I’ll never be able to forgive that much. I’ll never be able to reprimand those who offend me if I forgive that much. I’ll never be able to claim moral or legal superiority over others if I forgive that much. I’ll never be able to play the “I told you so” game and rub the mistakes of others in their face if I forgive that much. The Greek text is ambiguous here, and Jesus may have actually said something more like 70 times 7. You see, 7 and 70 were numbers that would have carried with them meanings of divine perfection or completeness. So, in instructing Peter to forgive 70 times 7, Jesus is saying, “There is *no limit* to the forgiveness you are called to practice. Let *God’s* infinite mercy, not some arbitrary number, be your guide to how to live a life of reconciliation.”

Could anyone really live like that? Maybe. Maybe in the case of the Wakefields and the Carters this kind of forgiveness is possible. Maybe in the case of long held resentment or hatred within someone’s own family. Maybe in cases of squabbles with neighbors over petty things like fences and trees and property lines. Maybe, in some few, rare, cases, would we actually try to live by these words of forgiveness. But Jesus isn’t willing to leave us here, making our own rules about when and how we would deem to practice forgiveness. No, he goes on to teach about this complete forgiveness by telling us a story, a parable. And not only that, he starts getting serious, real serious, by talking about money!

Jesus tells us the story of a King (let’s call him King Hank), and his two servants (Tom and Jim). Apparently Tom owes King Hank a lot of money--I mean tons of money. *Ten thousand talents*, to be precise, which is hundreds of times more than anyone (especially an ancient slave) could ever actually spend in a life time. Like the “70 times 7” that Jesus talked about before, this ridiculously high number is not to be taken literally (it is a parable after all), but to cause the audience to be blown away by this astronomical hyperbolic amount of debt, which no one could ever hope to repay. Rather than throwing Tom and his family in jail (as is his right to do), King Hank listens to Tom’s pleas and forgives him his debt, he doesn’t strike a deal, he doesn’t work out an installment plan, he forgives it—completely. King Hank must have been a lousy businessman, for with his debtor’s back against the wall, with the financial law backing him all the way, King Hank could have worked out whatever kind of settlement he wanted, to make as much profit as possible. In fact, that’s what Tom begs for. He says, “Have *patience* with me,

and *I will pay* you everything.” Tom pleads for time and a chance to repay, but King Hank is more gracious than Tom could ever imagine. He doesn’t grant him time or a low interest rate, he grants him freedom. Financial Independence! He forgives the debt—all of it. As great as the debt was, King Hank’s mercy was even greater.

Now, as fast as he can, Tom flees the halls of King Hank. Notice, Tom doesn’t say “thank you” to the king, he doesn’t jump for joy or rejoice with his family, he doesn’t shoot off fireworks to celebrate his newly-given freedom, he doesn’t do anything...anything appropriate, that is, to recognize this amazing gift of mercy he has received.

No, before the stage crew even has a chance to change the scene, Tom runs into Jim, a fellow servant. Now last week Jim had borrowed 50 bucks from Tom to help pay his light bill. Nothing big, Jim would pay him back once he found a job, pretty tough in this economy, you know. But Jim had hopes that something would come along sooner or later. Well, those hopes came crashing down immediately when he ran into Tom. As soon as Tom sees Jim he runs over, grabs him by the throat, choking the life out of him, and says, “Pay me what you owe.” Gasping for breath Jim mutters, “Have *patience* with me, and *I will pay* you.” Familiar words that must have registered in Tom’s mind. Disgusted with Jim’s groveling (which reminds him of his own weakness and inability to pay his debts), Tom throws Jim in prison until he can pay the 50 dollars he owes. Tom wants what is owed to him, to make sure that he is never again financially dependent on others. He exercises his power to keep himself from ever again having to beg and plead in weakness.

Of course, word spreads, as it always does, and King Hank comes to learn of the way that Tom has treated Jim. The king leaves his royal thrown room and rushes out to find Tom in the city square where he confronts him. “You wicked slave! Wicked!” he says. “It was all about business for you wasn’t it?! I forgave you all that debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on Jim, as I had mercy on you? But no, you were only looking out for yourself, looking to turn a profit however you could. You refuse to live by mercy and forgiveness. You demand to live by the game of debts and balances, rights and wrongs. Well then, let your own rules be your punishment. You *will* get what is owed to you.” And so, the King throws Tom in prison until he can repay his original insurmountable debt.

“How many times should we forgive?” Peter asks. “I tell you 70 times 7.”

“Our Father, who art in Heaven...forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.”

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Not only is forgiveness, real heart-felt forgiveness, hard to practice, but these biblical words about forgiveness are hard to hear: very hard to hear. It sure sounds like our forgiveness from God depends on whether or not we forgive others. It sure sounds like there are conditions placed on God’s grace.

Reformed theologian John Calvin, however, has some helpful words on the subject. Speaking about the phrase from the Lord’s Prayer, “as we forgive our debtors,” Calvin explains, “This condition is added, that no one may presume to approach God and ask forgiveness, who is not pure and free from all resentment. And yet the forgiveness, which we ask that God would give us, does not depend on the forgiveness which we grant to others: but the design of Christ was, to [teach] us, in this manner to forgive the offences which have been committed against us.” Calvin continues, “Christ did not intend to point out the cause, but only to remind us of the feelings which we ought to cherish towards brethren, when we desire to be reconciled to God.”ⁱⁱ

In other words, there is most certainly a cause and effect at play here, but it flows in the opposite direction. *God's grace* is the cause. God's grace is the catalyst for our lives of forgiveness. For as recipients of God's free grace, when we truly receive this mercy, we are in turn led to forgive others. Truly receiving God's gift of mercy, deep deep down appreciating and living by the gift of grace, means learning to change how we see ourselves, not as those who deserve rights and liberties based merely on the fact that we exist, but as those who have been given life abundant, lives of freedom that we do not deserve, but that we can merely receive with gratitude and joy. Our forgiveness of each other is, then, a reflection of this first forgiveness of God and our expression of thanksgiving to God.

Not only that, but our practice of forgiveness is a removal of those resentments, hatreds, and prejudices which would threaten to keep us from receiving God's grace, which harden our hearts to one another, and which stifle our responses of joy and gratitude to God.

Our opening hymn this morning, “Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive,” gives voice to this sentiment. “*How can your pardon reach and bless the unforgiving heart That broods on wrongs and will not let old bitterness depart?*” As the author of the hymn, Rosamond Herklots, explains, “The idea of writing the “Forgiveness” hymn came to me some years ago when I was digging up [weeds] in a long neglected garden. Realizing how these deeply-rooted weeds were choking the life out of the flowers in the garden, I came to feel that deeply-rooted resentments in our lives could destroy every Christian virtue and all joy and peace unless, by God's grace, we learned to forgive.”ⁱⁱⁱ Unless, *by God's grace, we learn to forgive.*

By the Mercy of the King, Tom should have *learned* to forgive Jim. By the grace of God, we *learn* to forgive and let go of those weeds that choke the life out of our gifts and those walls that divide families, neighbors, and nations from one another. By forgiving one another, we are slowly, overtime, molded into witnesses of God's infinitely merciful forgiveness.

Now, of course, our human attempts to practice of forgiveness is always, to some degree flawed and impure. Through sin, we are constantly pulled back into the world of debts and debtors, into hard-hearted lives of resentment. But though the practice of forgiveness in our own lives may never fully measure up to that which God calls to us practice, we can, none-the-less *hope* for the forgiveness of sins between sisters and brothers, and in the meantime *celebrate* with full joy the good gift of God's mercy for us all in Jesus Christ. And it is precisely with this *hope of mercy* and *joy in God's grace* that we gather this day around the table of our Lord, to celebrate this unmerited meal of grace. We remember that Jesus shared this meal with his disciples, one of whom had already betrayed him and the rest of whom would soon desert him, yet he forgave them and dined with them (70 times 7). And it is this same Lord, the Lord of abundant over-flowing mercy who invites us to share in this great banquet, saying. “Come! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price...[Let all people] return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”^{iv} Thanks be to the God of grace and mercy, to whom be all glory and honor. Amen.

ⁱ *The Andy Griffith Show*, Season 1, “A Feud Is a Feud.”

ⁱⁱ John Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists*, 327.

ⁱⁱⁱ LindaJo H. McKim, *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*, 245.

^{iv} Isaiah 55: 1-2, 7.