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The High Cost of Being Unforgiving  
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Matthew 18.21-35

When was the last time you were angry, upset, hurt, or disappointed by someone and something that was said or done, or not said or not done? Think of a specific person and a recent situation. It could even have happened earlier today. Can you picture the scene and remember what the situation was about? I want you to have it clearly in mind because I'm going to ask you a series of questions about it. Why did it bother you? It might take you more time than we have in this moment for you to reflect deeply and to get to the root of why it upset you, it might not be what you first think. How did the situation make you feel? What were some of the emotions that you felt and experienced and may even have expressed, if not to the person involved, but to someone else immediately after or later? Were you pleased with how you responded, or do you wish you had reacted differently? In your response to the situation, how long was it before you said to yourself or it occurred to you – *"I need to forgive that person?"* Was it a matter of seconds, minutes, hours, days, or did it not cross your mind until right now? What can happen when we get upset or feel hurt or wronged by someone is, we can carry around resentment and anger, or guilt and shame and it hurts our health, happiness, and our relationships. We give people rent free space in our head and in our emotions and it impacts our mood in a negative way and may even disrupt our sleep. Can anyone relate to what I'm saying?

Today I want to share with you about the high cost of being unforgiving. The first and most important thing to understand about forgiveness is **forgiveness is not for the other person. Forgiveness is a gift for yourself.** People who harbor anger and resentment are more likely to be miserable and irritable, to get sick, have high blood pressure, cardiac disease, and die early. So forgiveness is something you do for yourself. When you're in a state of resentment and anger, you won't be content, you won't feel the joy of the Lord or the peace of Christ you won't be fun to be around, you won't be a great family member or friend. Today's Gospel reading is about forgiveness. It begins with a question that Peter asks and includes a story Jesus tells about forgiveness.

21 Then Peter came and said to him, *“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”* 22 Jesus said to him, *“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”*

23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, *‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’* 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, *‘Pay what you owe.’* 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, *‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’* 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, *‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’* 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 **So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”**

**Failing to forgive as God forgives is very costly for us.** In many ways this parable is a vivid illustration of a point about forgiveness that Jesus made earlier in **Matthew 6:14-15**, *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”*

The Matthew 18 passage begins with a question from Peter about *“how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”* Peter’s offer to forgive even seven times sounds generous and gracious, especially since there isn’t any mention of repentance or remorse by the offending party. Jesus said in Luke 17:4, *“And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’*

*you must forgive.*” In Matthew there isn’t even any mention of repentance by the person who has caused the offense. Jesus’s response is far beyond Peter’s suggestion of the number of times and speaks more to the nature of forgiveness itself. Whoever is counting or keeping track of how many times he or she has forgiven someone hasn’t forgiven. Remember **1 Corinthians 13:4-5** (KJV), *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, **it keeps no record of wrongs.**”*

The kind of forgiveness Jesus calls us to demonstrate and to freely give is far beyond all calculation. Jesus’ response to Peter’s question takes forgiveness out of the “countable” category and places it into the realm of the incalculable. The forgiveness to which Jesus points is beyond one’s capacity to keep tabs, beyond one’s capacity to offer on our own strength or ability. It is God’s compassion and abundant mercy that make forgiveness possible, whether transgressions are large or small.

**Don’t make the first servant’s mistake of being Forgiven but Unforgiving.**

A servant of the king owes the monarch 10,000 talents. One talent is about 6,000 denarii (give or take), with each denarius worth a day’s wage for a laborer. So, the first servant owes about 60 million denarii, an amount so large that it exceeds the national debt of a small country. No person could repay it, even if they were to sell themselves and their family into servitude for several lifetimes. In an outrageous act of generosity and mercy, the king graciously forgives this unpayable debt.

The second servant owes 100 denarii. A decent amount of money, but like the number seven in Peter’s question, it is measurable—and miniscule by comparison to the debt that was forgiven by the king and it’s one that could have been paid back. When the forgiven servant refuses to extend compassion, it’s no wonder the king becomes angry. He granted his servant a level of forgiveness that exceeds imagination and yet, that servant is unwilling to offer even the smallest mercy to another person.

The parable doesn’t explain the servant’s refusal to forgive. It doesn’t matter. What matters is when we’ve been forgiven so much, we should extend forgiveness, grace, and mercy to others. A question we can ponder is, *“What keeps us from offering compassion and mercy to others when we have received so much?”*

### The “torture” of unforgiveness

When the first servant refuses to forgive the much smaller debt, the king withdraws the forgiveness that had been offered and locks him up to be tortured. Many of Matthew’s parables conclude with warnings of punishment for those who accept God’s gracious gifts but who refuse to walk in God’s ways. Still, this same Gospel is infused with the promise that God’s forgiveness, offered through Jesus the Messiah, extends to all, even to the most sinful of persons.

But the parable speaks a truth that is familiar to many who have experienced injury or trauma at the hands of another: one’s ability to forgive does not always come easily, nor is it necessarily a quick or simple process. At times it is necessary to forgive from a distance. Some wounds are so deep, some “debts” so large, that human forgiveness is next to impossible. There may be circumstances for which the most faithful response is to seek the assistance of a trained counselor or spiritual director to aid in the process of healing. Peter’s question, “How often should I forgive?” and Jesus’ answer suggest that forgiveness may well be a long and difficult process rather than a week-long project.

Even (and especially) when our own efforts fall short, God’s mercy is beyond imagining. This is a truth proclaimed by the parable as well as by the testimony of Jesus’ own life and ministry. On the night when Judas will betray him and Peter and the other disciples will abandon him, Jesus announces to all, “[T]his is the blood of the new covenant, **which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins**” (Matthew 26:28).

I want to close with a story of forgiveness that was widely reported in 2016. The following is from Eun Kyung Kim of the Today Show (Nov. 28, 2016.<sup>1</sup> “The last time Ian Manuel came face to face with Debbie Baigrie, he was 13 years old and he shot her in the mouth during a robbery gone awry. More than 26 years later, they met again in a Florida gas station parking lot, just hours after Manuel’s release from prison. *“Ian and I got out of the cars and we hugged for two minutes. It was like a long-lost reunion. It was so nice.”*

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<sup>1</sup>, 10:40 AM EST / Source: TODAY By Eun Kyung Kim

Free for the first time since he was 13, Manuel said the first person he wanted to see was the woman he nearly killed. He said, *"I got to do something that I had only dreamed about for so many years."* In 1990, Manuel was 13 and living in Tampa in one of the poorest, most violent housing projects in the state. One July evening, he was hanging with a group of older teens when they approached Baigrie, who was out with friends for the first time since having her second child. Manuel pulled a gun and told her to "give it up." Then he started shooting. One of his bullets went into Baigrie's mouth and out her jaw. Manuel was arrested days later in an unrelated case. While in custody, he confessed to being the gunman who'd wounded Baigrie. Although he was barely a teen, a judge noted his prior arrests and sentenced Manuel to life without parole. *"The judge said, 'Mr. Manuel, we're going to make an example of you,'"* Baigrie recalled. *"They sentenced him to an adult prison ... To me, that was heartbreaking."*

Manuel first reached out as he approached his second Christmas behind bars. He gathered his courage and placed a collect call. *"As soon as she accepted the call I said, 'Miss Baigrie, this is Ian. I'm just calling to tell you I'm sorry for shooting you, and I wish you and your family a merry Christmas. That's what I blurted out. What do you say to somebody you shot; you know?'"* To Baigrie, who would undergo 10 years of surgery to have her jaw rebuilt, the call came as a complete surprise. *"I was shaken by it because (the attack) was still so fresh at the time. But he called to apologize. I found it unusual and rare, especially from somebody that young."*

Shortly afterward came the letters, which Baigrie initially thought somebody else had written. *"His letters were so articulate, and he was so young. I don't even know if he had started high school yet,"* she said. He continued to write after getting transferred to another prison, sharing his experiences behind bars. *"I thought, wow, this kid is smart. **Let's not waste this life. Let's give him a chance. He was smart, he was remorseful.**"*

So she wrote him back. Because of laws preventing victims from visiting inmates, the two never met in person. But through their correspondence, Baigrie learned more about Manuel's case. She began attending his court hearings, where the two shared an occasional wave.

Many of Baigrie's friends and relatives didn't understand her empathy, mercy, or forgiveness. *"I figure if I didn't help and support him, it would be a life lost,"* she said. She was also upset by the time Manuel spent in solitary confinement which had a severe impact on his mental health. *"Once in solitary confinement, it's very hard to get released without achieving performance objectives that were impossible for a 15-year-old boy who had been told he would die in prison,"* said Bryan Stevenson, Equal Justice Initiative's founder and executive director and the author of *Just Mercy*. In 2010, the Supreme Court threw out life sentences for juveniles, and Baigrie began advocating for Manuel's early release, arguing he had served sufficient time. Manuel's life sentence was eventually thrown out. On November 10, 2016 based on time already served, Manuel, then 39, was freed from prison. He was headed to Alabama to join an Equal Justice Initiative program that helps former child inmates adapt to life outside prison. But before that, he met Baigrie at a gas station parking lot, where the two embraced like old friends



Baigrie and Manuel just hours after he was released from prison. "It was like a long-lost reunion," Baigrie said. Courtesy Debbie Baigrie

*"I didn't feel like I was hugging a stranger. Debbie's not only like a guardian angel, she's like a second mom,"* said Manuel, whose mother, along with other immediate relatives, died while he was in prison. They ended up at a pizza joint in downtown Tampa, just a few blocks from where the shooting occurred 26 years earlier.

The impact of Baigrie's support over the years is *"hard to quantify,"* said one of his EJI attorneys, Ben Schaefer. *"What does it mean to a traumatized kid, racked with guilt, and stuck in solitary confinement, to have the person he hurt recognize his humanity? Ian would not be where he is today without her."*

She said. *"My main wish and focus for him, as well as his legal team, is getting him acclimated and adjusted."* **She hopes her friendship with Manuel will inspire others to forgive.** *"We all make mistakes, we all try our best, and life is so short. And if anybody knows how your life can be gone in one minute, it's me. I understand that. We have to forgive because it helps us heal."*



Courtesy Debbie Baigrie

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. When you are angry, upset, hurt, or disappointed by someone and something that was said or done, or not said or not done, how long does it take you to think of your need to forgive the other person?
2. How have you experienced the high cost of being unforgiving either yourself or with someone else?
3. "Forgiveness is not for the other person. Forgiveness is a gift for yourself." How is this true? Have you experienced it?
4. Failing to forgive as God forgives is very costly for us. Jesus says in Matthew 6:14-15, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." What does this mean for you?
5. 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 (KJV) states, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." When it comes to love and forgiveness, why is it important not to "keep score?"
6. What is your response to the story of Ian Manuel and Debbie Baigrie? What do you think of her statement, "We have to forgive because it helps us heal."