

Forget About It! – May 8, 2016
By Wayne J. Schneider – Gratias agimus tibi

Forget About it!
St. Matthew 18:21-35

There is a Jewish story that tells of God's people liberated from slavery in Egypt, and their desire to express their joy to God. But God rebuked them to silence, and reminded them that some of God's children have died. God said that their freedom made him happy but they need to know that this freedom is costly.

I believe the same holds true regarding forgiveness because it always comes with a price tag. The cost of not forgiving however, is sometimes far greater.

We are the forgiven people called to forgive ourselves and others. One of the roadblocks to forgiving is the plethora of trite sayings that sound easy but are not, such as "*Forgive and forget.*" Statements like this make us uneasy because we know that forgiving someone is difficult at the best of times, and forgetting it is nearly impossible. Yet, Jesus calls us to forgive.

Jesus knew Jewish law, and we can assume some of the disciples were acquainted with the tradition of forgiving anyone three times, that is, forgiveness for three wrongs. The prophet Amos makes reference to this practice in his writing, where God declares "for thee crimes, and for four," indicating that God forgives them for three wrongs against God, but the fourth brings God's wrath.

St. Peter has been hanging with Jesus long enough to understand that Jesus often amplifies God's law, so St. Peter attempts to show Jesus that he is really 'getting' this compassion thing, and he volunteers that we should forgive someone seven times!

Jesus replies, "Nope." The correct answer is not seven but seventy-seven. The point is not after the 491st forgiveness then you may 'sock-it-to-them!' No, again. Jesus proposes a radically new approach that will smash the cycle of wrongful unforgiving.

Sometimes, when we hear the Biblical command to forgive we want to take a defensive position, saying forgiveness applies to the criminal element. Forgiveness is for, let's say, the mass murderer, or the serial rapist. Sometimes, it does appear difficult to apply Biblical law to current culture. Perhaps the answer is found in the parable of Jesus.

A man was in debt up to his eyebrows, he owed an amount so vast it is difficult to conceive it. Jesus says, "A slave owed his master 500 trillion dollars!" Really? No one owes that kind of money! Yet, the slave tries everything he knows to convince his master that he will try to repay the debt. The master sympathizes and forgives the debt. This is a lovely story but it isn't over yet.

The debt-free slave is walking in the village and sees a man who owes him a nickel, and he flies into a rage. Even as the debtor begs for mercy the first, forgiven slave will not hear, and throws the debtor in jail until he can pay the nickel owed

When the master who freed the slave hears about this he is livid. He cannot believe that the man shown compassion would not also share compassion. "And that," Jesus says, "is how God will deal with us if we do not forgive." Strong stuff.

When Dennis, our second son, wanted to buy his first car he did the required research. He found what he wanted, and could afford, and he and I went to the car dealership on a Saturday morning. The truck Dennis choose was on special and we made the deal, the truck to be picked up Monday morning.

When we returned the salesman told Dennis that the sale was over Sunday evening, and now the truck's price is \$2000 more. Dennis was devastated and I was furious. (My father was a salesman and his word was his bond). I began ranting and raving at a volume that could be heard across the street from the showroom! I used no expletives but I told the salesman how poorly he had done, what a lowly character he was to treat my son this way, and that as a pastor I would tell all of my congregation of 300 attendees never to purchase anything from this dealership, and then we left. Later that day, I wrote a letter to the owner of the dealership.

On the way home Dennis and I dialoged regarding what had happened. I apologized for the dealership, and for my actions, realizing I had failed badly at being a father and a Christian.

Three days later the dealership's general manager called to say the truck was Dennis' at the weekend 'Special' price. We returned and purchased the truck. I spoke to the salesman and apologized for the unkind words I had spoken.

One of the most revolutionary statements Jesus ever made is, "*Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.*" I believe what Jesus means is not just that God feels as we do, or that God simply forgives our sin, but if we are children of our Heavenly Father, then we are to be compassionate as he is, we are to become like our Father.

If we look, we can find ways to move through patterns of our lives and see our mistakes and our unforgiving spirit. We can break the proverbial cycles. It is often hard to let our grudges go, or our feelings of not wanting to forgive. But we can also find the courage to stop these patterns and discover ways to live like Jesus.

One way to do this is that each night as you enter your bed, ask yourself, "*What were the mistakes I made today? Are there any amends I need to make? Was any wrong done to me today? Is there some forgiveness that needs to happen either way? Then offer forgiveness. And, if need be, you can offer forgiveness to the person you offended the next time you encounter them.*"

In St. John 20:23 Jesus says, "If you forgive someone's sins they are forgiven, and if you do not, they are not." "The Message" paraphrase renders this verse: "If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"

That's really the choice, isn't it? The sins can rot and harass us, or we can move forward in our relationships. Forget? Perhaps not, but we can forgive. Alleluia. Amen.