

Seeking: Questions People Asked Jesus sermon series
How Many Times Should I Forgive? – Matthew 18:21-35
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I mentioned last week that there are 613 laws in the Hebrew scriptures, which Jesus handily Cliff-notes into two: love God and love your neighbor. I'm glad he did that because 613 is a lot of laws to have to follow. But there's one law in the book of Genesis that isn't a part of the laws God gave to Moses. It's called the Law of Lamech.

Right after Cain kills his brother Abel, Cain is sent packing, but with God's protection. God says, "Whoever kills Cain will suffer sevenfold vengeance." Why seven? In the Bible, seven is the number of perfection, like the seven days of creation. So sevenfold vengeance means complete and utter vengeance. In other words, don't mess with Cain.

Right after his story is a riveting and spine-tingling genealogy, in which we meet Cain's descendant Lamech. The author pauses the genealogy to share this statement from Lamech: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." So, if you think messing with Cain was a bad idea, stay away from Lamech! This is the Law of Lamech: If someone hurts me, I must make them pay many times over. That's why you need a law like "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," to limit the amount of revenge that can be exacted.

It seems sad that we need a law to tell us not to go overboard in our vengeance. That's a weird word, right? Vengeance. Sounds like it only belongs in Liam Neeson movies or shows about gladiators. "I will exact vengeance!" And yet, if we're willing to dig deep enough into the dark corners of our heart, we'll find our own little dust bunnies of vengeance, our desire for retribution, or primitive need to for a wrong to be corrected and punishment to be doled out.

That may be why you all wanted to hear a sermon on today's question. As we move through our "Seeking" sermon series, we're looking at questions people asked Jesus. I let you all vote on which questions you wanted to address, and Peter's question today – "How often should I forgive?" – was one of the top ones. What do we do with Jesus' call to forgive when we'd rather follow the Law of Lamech?

Notice how Jesus reverses that law when Peter asks about forgiveness. Peter tries to show Jesus just how merciful he is by suggesting a number of times to forgive someone that only a saint would consider. The teachings in ancient Judaism said that forgiving three times was the sign of a compassionate spirit, so Peter more than doubles that. But Jesus has something better in mind. Some translations of this passage have Jesus responding, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven times." That's 490 times, if you're keeping score, which you shouldn't be doing! That's kind of the whole point of this scripture. Jesus isn't giving us permission to get to our 491st moment of forgiveness and go, "Aha! Not THIS time!" Jesus is telling Peter that any number he thinks of is too low. Forgiveness is not a one-time or seven-time event; it's a way of life that must be practiced.

Forget about the 491st time, or the seventh time. For some of us, it's hard to forgive the first time. True forgiveness is very, very difficult to offer because it's not a part of faith we can practice until we're ready to use it. We can't say to someone, "Pretend to insult me so I can practice forgiving you." We can only practice forgiveness by actually forgiving someone, and most of us have a little bit too much Lamech in us. It's a lot easier to know that forgiveness is the

right response than it is to actually forgive. “I know I should forgive them, but that really hurt.” When Jesus tells us forgiving is important, we solemnly nod our heads. “Yes, Lord.” But to live it out in real life? Someone said forgiveness is like trying to untie an old knot.

Why is forgiveness so hard? Maybe because we think it’s something different than what Jesus means. Forgiveness isn’t condoning the offending behavior, nor is it tolerating the continuance of that behavior. Forgiveness is also not necessarily forgetting, because sometimes we need to protect ourselves from being hurt by remembering how we were treated. But we can remember the pain we were caused and choose forgiveness instead of vengeance.

At its core, that’s what forgiveness is: a choice, choosing to let go of vengeance, even when we clothe it as justice, “an eye for an eye.” I’ve told you before about how I experienced this first-hand. In college, I worked for the school newspaper and once wrote an editorial questioning the need for our small school to have a baseball team when that funding could be used elsewhere, like for the school newspaper. The week that article came out, I was playing in an intramural basketball game, and the referee was one of the baseball players. The first time I tried to block a shot, I got called for a foul. The second time I tried to block a shot, I got called for a foul. The third time, I just stood there and let the other person shoot, and got called for a foul. When I protested, I got a technical foul. Finally, I said to the guy, “OK, you’re obviously going to call a foul on me no matter what I say. In that case, is it OK if I just think something?” He said, “Sure.” I said, “Good, because I think you stink!” I got a second technical foul, but at least I earned that one. At some point in that game, the referee moved from seeking justice to vengeance.

But – can I say this? – vengeance feels good, doesn’t it? There’s something uniquely satisfying about seeing someone who has wronged us get what’s coming to them. They deserve that, right? And if we’re really honest, forgiving someone means we have to give up something. It’s scary to lay down your grudges, to trade in your pride and your power. Sometimes losing an enemy is as hard as losing a friend. After all, one of the great benefits of having an enemy is that you get to look good by comparison. Mary Gordon wrote, “To forgive is to give up the exhilaration of one’s own assailable rightness.” In other words, to forgive is to admit that not all the mistakes that were made were by the other person. It means seeing the other person as more than their errors. Sure, they make mistakes, at times they are weak, insensitive, and lash out from their in pain. They’re faulty, fragile, lonely, needy, and emotionally imperfect. In other words, it means admitting they’re just like us.

That assailable rightness can feel exhilarating, right? One writer said, “Of all the deadly sins, resentment is the most fun.” But the consequences of not forgiving can be self-inflicted wounds. Writer Anne Lamott said, “I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of the Christians who is heavily into forgiveness – that I’m one of the other kind. But even though it was funny, and actually true, it started to be too painful to stay that way.”

Jesus knows that about us. He knows that one of the major problems with us humans is that we can’t stop at justice. If left to our own devices, we’ll go all Lamech on our enemies, blowing right past “an eye for an eye.” Once your mind is focused on payback, you will never reach the point when you can say, “Now I’ve inflicted enough pain on you, I’m peaceful and content.” Once the desire for revenge takes hold of our hearts, it won’t stop, even when we’ve given our enemy two technical fouls. The desire for vengeance will destroy us and it is destroying our world.

That’s why Jesus goes to such extremes with Peter. With his astronomical number, Jesus is saying we should never stop forgiving. There is only so much room in the human heart. If we

don't actively work on forgiving those who have wronged us, before we know it, our hearts are cluttered with piles of unprocessed hurts and pain and anger, and then there's no room for forgiveness. Those dust bunnies of vengeance grow fast and the only way to keep our heart clean is to actively work toward forgiveness.

Forgiveness is hard, so I'm glad Jesus gives us the parable to expand upon what he's asking us to do. In the story, a king forgives a servant an unpayable debt of billions of dollars, and then the servant fails to offer the same mercy to someone who owes him a couple hundred bucks. The message is clear and simple: we forgive because we have been forgiven.

That's the choice we have every day. We are people who have received an unmeasurable amount of mercy, and each day we are presented with opportunities to share that mercy. And when we withhold it, we are taking a gift we have been given – God's unmerited, unlimited grace – and rationing it out only to those who deserve it, which means we sometimes withhold forgiveness from ourselves. We are forgetting the message we receive each week at this table that we are more than our mistakes, more than our bad decisions, more than our lapses in judgment. We can be so hard on ourselves, can't we?

Several years back, I was having a conversation with someone and a close friend of mine who was nearby kept interrupting with little jokes and asides, making me lose my train of thought. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I lost my temper and snapped, "You're not helping!" The guilt of treating my friend that way stayed with me for months, eating away at me. Every time we were together, I just knew he was thinking about that incident and my guilt and anger at myself grew. Finally, it got the best of me, and I emotionally recalled the event to my friend and offered the sincerest of apologies. His response? "Of course I forgive you, but here's the thing. I don't even remember that happening." Sometimes we need to forgive ourselves because we've done the best we can. Other times we need to forgive ourselves because we haven't done the best we can. And all the time, we need to remember that we serve a forgiving God, who even forgives our failure to forgive.

So, what will you choose? Will you choose to be Lamech, doling our vengeance through your words or thoughts or actions, withholding mercy from those in our life who've wronged you, who deserve the consequences of their actions? I mean, they do, don't they? Yeah, so do we. And yet God offered us, not an eternal technical foul, but Jesus, who died so that we may know the depth of God's desire to be in relationship with us. One writer said, "Every time you forgive someone, you pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful that God has already given you." May the cleansing waters of God's forgiveness wash away our dust bunnies of vengeance until we overflow with mercy. Sure, we can continue to seek vengeance and withhold forgiveness. It sure does make us feel powerful in our unassailable rightness. But doesn't this life have so much more to offer us than that?
