

7 Strikes and You're Out? Matthew 18:21-35

Joseph Stalin's biographer said this of his subject. 'Stalin never forgot nor forgave an injury done to him. He bided his time and in the end always hit back.' The death of countless millions can testify to the murderous intent of Stalin's unforgiveness. Much the same can be said about other tyrannical figures in history. They turned the energy of a grudge nursed into the fullness of evil.



In my first parish, one of my members, a GP, ran a workshop on the topic of forgiveness. She began the workshop by quoting this statistic from a Christian psychologist in the US, which shocked me. "Non-forgiveness, resentment or bitterness is the leading cause of death in the U.S.A." How could this possibly be so? She went on to explore the physical effects of not forgiving others: depression, an anger internalized. Anxiety, for which

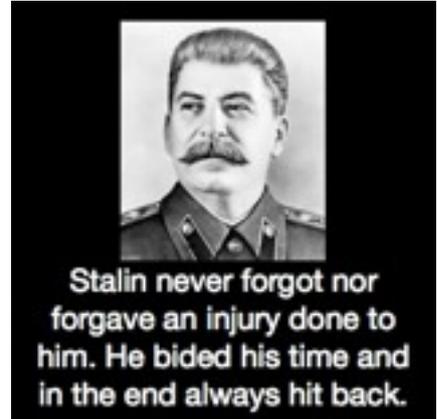
people may resort to drugs or alcohol in order to cope. It can cause other physical illness. Resentment requires energy, and this comes via the adrenal gland, which pumps out hormones. We know it as the fight or flight response, but when it's perpetually primed, it can suppress the white blood cells and the antibodies which fight illness.

I'm certain that each of us knows the heartache of an issue that remains unresolved. Perhaps it's estrangement between family members. Perhaps a simple dispute with a neighbour that has taken on the shape of a siege. Perhaps someone we trusted has passed on something we told them in trust, and now we refuse to have anything to do with them.

To suggest that the solution to all these issues is forgiveness is seen by many people to be the easy option, a way of featherbedding people who deserve to suffer for what they've done wrong. Witness the 'law and order' debate that comes around every election time. Some states have what is called

'mandatory detention' of defenders after a third offence, 'three strikes and you're in' legislation. The third conviction places a person in jail, no matter what the crime.

Perhaps this is the origin of Peter's proposal to Jesus. "Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Seven is more practical than three, give how much we offend against each other, but it still involves keeping tally of people's faults. It just requires better accounting and a more powerful memory. Then I wipe



them out of my life.

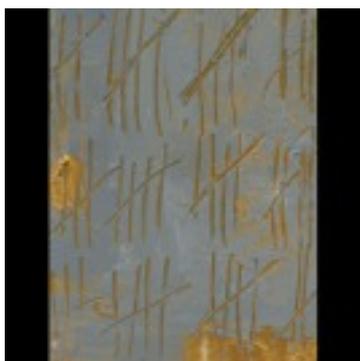
Jesus replies: "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Peter does the maths and rocks back on his heels, and we wonder whether Jesus is another one of these do-gooders, blind to the potential of human beings to hurt each other. That's when Jesus decides a tale of kingdom accounting is needed. The numbers in this parable are mind-blowing. A slave comes to the king owes the equivalent of a middle-size country's gross national product. His debt is infinite. A talent was the largest coinage known. And ten thousand was the largest number. The calculator doesn't have room for all the zeros.

Amazingly, unbelievably, the king is moved by his servant's plea for mercy. There's nothing in it for the king. The debt will never be repaid, but in his compassion, he forgives it. He throws the abacus out of the window. What to do now that life has opened up again. Aren't you shocked that the freed servant chooses the way he has just escaped from? How could he once again account for other people's wrongs against him, when he has been forgiven? Our anger begins to rise at his audacious behaviour. "Seizing his fellow slave by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe... he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.'" A big debt, no doubt, 100 day's wages, but minuscule in proportion to the one he had blithely walked away from.



Can you hear the cogs turning over in his mind? Let God be God, but I've got to get on with life. Forgiveness might be good for God, and the do-gooders around the place, but it doesn't work in the real world. You can't let people take advantage of you. You've got to show them who's boss.

But the king, the one who has just pardoned him, gets to hear about what he's done, and is shocked and angered: If you're not into managing with mercy, then nor am I. Pay me what you owe. Two can play this game. "In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed."



Are you and I stuck in accounting mode? Even though we know that we have been forgiven by God, have we translated this grace across to the way we treat those who have wronged us? This is where Peter starts this conversation: he asks Jesus for a number. He wants to know just how much will be expected of him, how much is reasonable, how much is required. And so he suggests what by all accounts is a more-than-sufficient amount of forgiveness?

In turning forgiveness into a transaction, we dismiss grace. And we leave people locked in the prison of our hate. Who have you imprisoned? Over whom are you still seeking revenge? Who do you

still want to punish because they hurt you? What can't you let go of because it seems unfair that your hurt will be forgotten and therefore not validated?

All of us get stuck in a place like this, and these thoughts and emotions become a prison which entraps us. Perhaps that's what Jesus means when he talks about "being handed over to torture." An unforgiving and unrepentant attitude causes harm to ourselves as much as it does to others. It's corrosive to faith and it sets us on a collision course with God



who has treated us so graciously in the forgiving way he has embraced us through our baptism and blessed us with a living relationship with him.

“The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go.” This word “pity” is used by Matthew to refer only to God’s love. God was wiped the slate clean. In the words of Psalm 103, “as far as the east is from the west; so far he removes our transgressions from us.” But in choosing to remember and account for each wrong, we are rewriting our history. We are throwing back in God’s face the fact that he has rescued us from spiritual bankruptcy. And if that’s what we want from God, then sadly that’s what he will give us. “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive a brother or sister from your heart.” If you and I want to keep count, so will God. And he has a far better memory than us.



But this is no way to live, and not the way of full life that Jesus promises those who trust in his love and grace. God is ready and waiting for us to return to him to seek his forgiveness, and to pray to him for strength to forgive those who have hurt us. And this can be immensely difficult, for forgiveness is not the easy way out. It is much easier to ignore other people’s hurts, our underestimate the pain they’ve caused us. But when we do that, we file the hurt away, and we brood on it. It grows and develops a life of its own, and we can’t resist the desire for revenge. But this isn’t love in the name of Christ. Remember what Paul says in the famous chapter, I Corinthians 13. “Love keeps no record of wrongs.”

Forgiveness is powerful. It’s not a cop out, nor an acceptance of what happened to us. In his book, *The Art of Forgiving*, Lewis Smedes outlines the process of forgiveness. It has four steps, if you’re counting.

Acknowledge the hurt

Blame the person who has hurt you; something has happened that makes it impossible to carry on relationship as if nothing has happened. “Forgiveness is not saying, ‘What you did I understand and it’s all right with me... Forgiving is going to a person and saying, ‘I don’t understand. I’ll never understand. And it wasn’t OK and it isn’t OK. But I forgive.’”

Decide you are going to live with the scales of justice unbalanced. It means not engaging in the cycle of revenge. It means that you choose to live the prayer that you daily pray: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” And to live in obedience to God’s word through Paul: “Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

Begin to revise your feelings toward the person who has wronged you. The person who hurt you gradually rejoins the human race.

Forgiveness is not just a good idea when it comes to the maintenance of relationships and communities. Forgiveness is a theological necessity. Forgiveness is the heart of the good news. “In Jesus we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.” And in our forgiving, “we set a prisoner free. We discover that the prisoner you set free is ourselves.” Free as God intended us to be in Christ. Amen.

Father, give us the power to do what you have done for us, so that we might live in harmony with one another, and at peace with you and ourselves. Amen.

