

FORGIVENESS FITNESS

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Text: Matthew 18:21-35

SCRIPTURE

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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.”

SERMON

The personal training industry is huge in the United States. Billions of dollars are spent by Americans every year in an attempt to stay in shape. In fact, it is about \$5 billion dollars in gym memberships. It is probably the number one New Year’s resolution. And I admit that I have made more than one New Year’s resolution to get in shape. But I am notorious for joining a gym and using it for about three months at which point my attendance dwindles and eventually I end up just donating to the \$5 billion. I hate exercising. I hate sweating. I wish I could burn calories simply by reading a book. So, over a year ago I decided I wanted to break my cycle and actually use my gym membership longer than three months. So I signed up for personal training. I asked my personal trainer, Lindsay, on Friday when I met with her last just exactly what her job is as a personal trainer. She said that personal trainers can have a variety of degrees but all have some knowledge of exercise and fitness in anatomy. But mostly she helps her clients to set goals and offers motivation and encouragement. And for me, it does work. Now, I am not getting any kickbacks or money to say this. But I do find it beneficial and I am not the only one.

¹According to the *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine*, it says that “working out with a personal trainer increases your fitness goal success rate by over 30 percent.”

Just like we need to stay physically fit, we also need to stay spiritually fit. Of course mentors, and pastors (Howard, Nancy and I) and trusted friends could help us stay spiritually fit. But who could be a better personal trainer than Jesus, who is always ready to give us aid, and who specializes in forgiveness fitness.

That is what our text and parable is about this morning...forgiveness. Now let me set the stage a bit for you...the disciples have been trying to figure out just how to be in relationship with one another under this new leadership. The rules were different and Jesus had a tendency to shake things up. So they asked Jesus questions like...who is the greatest, how do you deal with weaker members, how to confront those who have sinned against you. And it is no mistake that following up on how to handle and confront those who have hurt you that Pastor Howard talked about last week, you have Jesus talking about forgiveness.

Peter came up and asked Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?” Once...twice...three times...Peter says, “as many as seven times?” “Not seven times,” Jesus replied, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Other translations of this verse say “seventy times seven” totaling 490 times. Peter thought he was being generous here in his answer. In Jewish law you only have to forgive three times and after that the other person is just out of luck. So Peter doubles that and adds one more for good measure. But, once again Jesus shakes things up and basically says that forgiveness is “infinity times infinity”.

So we are going one step further from last week. Here, Jesus says that it’s not enough to just confront the one who has wronged you...you also need to forgive. Forgiveness is part of that “holy harmony.” And not just once or seven times but forgiveness should be countless...limitless...numberless.

Jesus is like a personal trainer at the gym, encouraging us to do one more rep. One...two...three...15...77...490 and beyond. Jesus is our forgiveness trainer.

Scarlett Lewis lost her 6-year-old son Jesse in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. He was one of the 20 children killed in that horrific attack in 2012. Parents such as Scarlett were devastated. At first, her anger sapped all of her energy and strength. Her rage was directed at the shooter and also at the mother who unwittingly armed him. But then she made a choice to forgive. ²“Forgiveness felt like I was a big pair of scissors,” she told *The Forgiveness Project*. These scissors helped her cut her tie to the shooter and regain her personal power. “It started with a choice,” she said, “and then became a process.” At her son’s funeral, she urged mourners to change their angry thoughts into loving ones. She saw this shift as a way to change the world. Forgiveness starts with a choice and then becomes a process. But it is easy to get caught up in the numbers, to keep track of how many times you’ve had to do the chore of forgiving. Because it is not an easy task. It is much tougher than lifting a stack of weights at the gym. But, like Scarlett, after a while the anger turns into bitterness and resentment and can sap all our energy.

¹ Homiletics. September 2017.

² The Forgiveness Project. <http://theforgivenessproject.com/>

Those feelings only keep us from moving forward and cut us off from our relationships. That is ultimately what this text is about...putting us in right relationship with one another. Peter here specifically asked about how often he should forgive a fellow member of the church. He is concerned with the whole life of the church not just for himself.

Forgiveness helps not only ourselves but also the community. Jesus wants us to get stronger and healthier by making the decision to forgive, and then turn that choice into a process. Now let me be clear.

Forgiveness is not saying that the offense is forgotten or never happened...it did.

Forgiveness is not saying that everything's okay...it isn't.

Forgiveness is not saying we don't remember or no longer feel the pain of the offense...we do. But...

Forgiveness, for Scarlett Lewis, was saying, "I still feel the pain, but I am no longer going let you have the power.

Forgiveness, for Scarlett, was transforming her anger into something good.

Forgiveness is saying "I'm okay. It is a practice, a discipline made possible by the grace of God, not some heroic act of the will. And Jesus acts as our forgiveness trainer, challenging us to make that choice again and again and again until it becomes a part of who we are.

Forgiveness is hard. I know. When we experience a great hurt, forgiving is the last thing we want to do. I find it timely that this topic of forgiveness and the difficulty of it comes as we have just passed the anniversary of 9/11. Every three years in our lectionary rotation this text falls around this anniversary. It was 16 years ago this past Monday that the tragic event took place all in the name of God. For many of us we can remember exactly where we were when we heard the news that a plane had struck the World Trade Center. I was in my senior year of college and was in my 8:00 psych. class when I first heard.

Another story from *The Forgiveness Project* is about a mother who lost her son that day.³ She wrote, "When Greg was killed I thought, I will never forgive the people who murdered my son, but I have come to see forgiveness as more than a word; it's a context, a process. Forgiveness is being able to accept another person for being human and fallible." A year after the attack, Phyllis befriended the mother of the man who had been charged with conspiracy in connection with the attack. She said, "In 2005, when Zacarias pleaded guilty to the conspiracy charges against him, I knew Aicha would be coming to America. I decided I wanted to give her as much support as I could beforehand. So we started speaking on the phone. I couldn't speak a word of French at that time but somehow we managed. A Moroccan Muslim woman living in France and a secular Jewish woman living in the US are no different when it comes to suffering. The day I met Aicha was the day that changed my life, because it changed my direction emotionally. It was the beginning of my learning that someone like Aicha, who has suffered so much, could still be emotionally generous. It brought out the generosity in me and I felt better for it. Since then I've learnt that one way to heal is to bridge the gap between ourselves and the 'other'."

³ The Forgiveness Project. <http://theforgivenessproject.com/>

With these stories and memories fresh in our minds, with the recent terrorist attack in London and riots in St. Louis, we can't help but ask ourselves, "How does one follow Jesus and practice forgiveness in such a time as this? I don't have an answer to that question. But it starts with a choice and then becomes a process. Jesus knew that forgiveness is good for us and for the community and for the church. That is why he became for us our own forgiveness trainer free of charge. And that is good news. May God's grace and forgiveness transform us into agents of grace and forgiveness. So may it be for you and me. Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.