

***Keeping Score***  
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A number of years ago when our kids were much younger, one of our daughters was playing soccer. It was a league in which there was no official score. That meant they did not count how many goals were scored or which team had the most wins -- which I was all in favor of at that age. During one particular game, our team was not playing that well. You know how it is -- some days your team plays well and some days it does not. This was one of those not-so-good games. And while no one kept score "officially" -- if someone had, we would be losing badly. About halfway through the game one of the girls on the other team, who just happened to be their best player and who had scored most of their goals, yelled over to her Mom after scoring yet another goal. She yelled loudly enough so that everyone couldn't help but hear, "Hey Mom, we're winning twelve to nothing!" And her Mom sort of laughed and yelled back, "Actually, it's thirteen to nothing, but who's counting?" Well, obviously the Mom was!

Now I came close to going over and saying something to the Mom. All sorts of things went through my mind -- most of which would *not* have been helpful or Christlike. I ended up holding my tongue -- but if she had made one more obnoxious comment, I was going to say something about being sensitive to the other kids on the field who were trying just as hard as her daughter.

In so many things in life it seems to be about keeping score, doesn't it? Vacation homes. Professional titles. SATs. Scholarships. But is that the way it is when it comes to *forgiveness*? How *do* we "keep score" when it comes to forgiveness? And who is it that's keeping score? That's what we want to look at today, and it is the very kind of question Peter asks Jesus in Matthew 18:21-35:

*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (NIV)*

Peter, whom we have learned recently was never shy about saying anything, comes to Jesus and asks, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?” And then Peter offers his own answer, “Up to seven times?” Now “seven times” was probably in response to the Jewish rabbinic teaching of the day that said you only had to forgive someone three times, but no more was required. Seven times seems pretty generous compared to three – two times three *plus one* – seven times. But Jesus says, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Some translations say “seventy times seven” – the Greek can be read either way.) Did Jesus simply increase the number, but still stay with the idea that when a person wrongs us the seventy-eighth time, then that’s it? I don’t think that’s what Jesus is saying here. It’s not really about keeping score in that way when it comes to forgiveness. That is not how God’s math of grace works. And to make this point, Jesus tells a rather challenging parable.

It is about a king whose servant owes him a large sum of money. Much in this parable would indicate to the mostly Jewish audience to whom Matthew is probably writing, that he is neither a Jewish king, nor a good king. Scholars also suggest that this is not just a poor servant, but more like someone who collected taxes or tribute from other nations, and now the king wants the money. But the amount of the money – ten thousand bags of gold – was absurd. It was much more than all of the nations in the area put together ever owed the king. It would be like saying this man owed the national debt. It is a huge number that Jesus uses to make a point. It is like when kids are young and they start saying thing like who loves Mommy more. One says, “I love her one thousand.” The other says, “I love her one million.” The first says, “I love her infinity.” The other says, “I love her infinity times infinity.” This number here was meant to represent *a number no one could ever pay back*.

The servant is threatened with being thrown in debtor’s prison, along with his family. Again, this would *not* happen *if* this were a Jewish king under Jewish law. The servant falls to his knees and begs for mercy -- saying he will find some way to pay back the king. (But what is he going to do – get a second job to pay back the equivalent of the national debt?) And amazingly the king has mercy on him, forgives his debt, and lets him go!

However, as soon as the servant leaves, he sees someone who owes him a rather modest amount of money in comparison. He grabs him by the neck and begins to choke him. The other man says almost word for word what the servant had just said when he begged for mercy, but the servant throws him in prison anyway. Others see this and tell the king who calls the servant back in, confronts him with what he has done, and throws him in prison. And the parable ends with some very harsh words that make us cringe about this being what God will do to us if we don’t forgive as we have been forgiven.

Now let me say I *don’t* think this parable is meant to focus only on that last threat. Like any parable, the focus is on the “surprise factor” -- which in this case took place first when the king cancels the servant’s debt. But the second surprise is when the servant failed to show the mercy most would think he would show. I don’t think God is the kind of God who is out to “get us” when we don’t get it right. God’s grace and love don’t ultimately seem to be about that.

What I do think is going on here is a depiction of what happens to us when we have been set free from the prison of our sin by God's grace, and we then choose *not* to live into that freedom. In this story, the servant had been forgiven his "infinite" debt and set free, rather than having to live in prison. Yet, when he is set free, he has a hard time living the way he should, so he goes back to his old ways of living. In the end, he ends up back in his own prison of unforgiveness and ungrace. But it affects not only him – it also affects others – and the way it does this makes God angry.

I think it is that unwillingness to show grace and forgive when God has forgiven us that makes God angry -- and ultimately, God will not let that stand. When our lack of forgiveness affects others in the way the unmerciful servant unfairly treated the man who owes him money, then in the end, God will address the injustice. And remember that in the Bible, "justice" always means setting things right.

But also remember that God does forgive. God's *final* word is grace. At some point, God will set things straight. Those who oppress and abuse others will one day have to stand before God and give an answer. Those who hurt others will not get away with it forever.

What God wants is for us to model the way God, who is the good king, treats us – with forgiveness and grace. We are freed from the power of sin in order to help free others through forgiveness and grace. Forgiveness sets us free – but it is not just about *us*. It is also about how we treat *others*. And it is also about *God* – and how we serve the God who created, loves, and forgives all of us.

Lewis Smedes says in his classic book, *The Art of Forgiving*, which is the best book on the topic and one I recommend to you – Smedes says that we forgive as often as it is needed. In other words, it is *not* about "keeping score." He adds, "Use the gift [of forgiveness] as often as it takes to set you free from a miserable past you cannot shake." Forgiveness is not a number – it is a process that lasts our whole life long.

When it comes to what forgiveness looks like, I am reminded of the story of Corrie ten Boom, which I have shared with some of you before. She tells her life story in the book, *The Hiding Place*. In 1939, she was 47 and lived with her widowed sister and her father in the Netherlands. When World War II came to her country, it fell to the Nazis in just five days. Soon the Jews in her city began to be attacked and were shipped off on trains to who knows where, never to be seen again. Her family began helping the Jews in her town to escape by making a "hiding place" in their home. But in 1944, they were discovered and her family ended up in a concentration camp in Ravensbruck. Her father died within ten days of their arrest.

When Corrie and her sister entered the concentration camp, they were told to strip naked and place their clothes in a pile. They passed by dozens of guards as they went to the shower room. Somehow Corrie managed to get her sister in the shower room before undressing, and she also managed to smuggle through a Bible, a bottle of vitamin pills, and a sweater for her sister to wear. That Bible became her only comfort as she read it to herself and shared it with the other women. In that awful place, as hard as it may seem, her faith actually grew stronger. But,

Corrie's sister became sick and eventually died. Then in 1945, for some unknown reason, Corrie was released.

She began a new chapter in life travelling around and talking about God's forgiveness. But one night, she was speaking at a church service in Munich, when she saw one of her former SS guards who had stood at the shower room door in the prison camp. He was the first man she had seen from the camp. And all of the jeering and mocking from the shower room came back to her. The man came up to her and said, "How grateful I am for your message . . . To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!" And he put out his hand to shake hers. Corrie, who had preached about forgiveness, kept her hands at her side. She said she felt her anger and vengeful thoughts, but she also knew that Christ had died for this man. She prayed to God to forgive her and help her forgive this man. She tried to smile and struggled to raise her hand, but she could not. She felt no feelings of kindness toward this man. But, then she prayed, "Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness." And as she took his hand, she said that an amazing thing happened – she almost felt a current that seemed to pass from her to this man, while in her heart she felt a love for this stranger that was nearly overwhelming. She said she discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on God's forgiveness. She said, "When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself." (Adapted from *Corrie ten Boom and Forgiveness* by Inge Danaher, copyright 2007).

Friends, I believe that particularly during this time of pandemic, when our anxiety is high and our tolerance is often low, we are more prone to treat one another in ways that are less than Christlike. So, when we find ourselves sinning against one another or being sinned against, how will we respond? Will we show grace and forgiveness in the same way that God has shown grace and forgiveness to each one of us? In Jesus the Christ, God has cancelled the unrepayable debt of our sin. Like the servant in the parable who owed the equivalent of the national debt, we have a sin debt that we could never work off. But *the good news is that we don't have to!* Because Jesus gave his life on a cross, we have been forgiven by God. That infinite debt has been paid. And when we truly grasp the magnitude of God's grace, it should inspire us to show the same kind of grace and forgiveness where it is needed .

So, the next time we are wronged and sinned against, I want to invite us to take a moment to remember first that we, too, have sinned, been forgiven, and shown grace by God. Remember also that the person who has wronged and sinned against us is also someone made in the image of God and loved by God. And then try to offer forgiveness in whatever is the most appropriate way for that particular situation -- trusting that God will give us the capacity to forgive, even when it seems beyond our capability. But remember that with God, "all things are possible" -- *even forgiveness*. In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.