

Matthew 18:21-35; Romans 14:1-12
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Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat, for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on slaves of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it for the Lord. Also those who eat, eat for the Lord, since they give thanks to God, while those who abstain, abstain for the Lord and give thanks to God.

For we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God."

So then, each one of us will be held accountable.

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to [Jesus,] "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 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.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

I laughed when I read that Paul
 tells church people,
 “no quarreling over opinions!”!!!
 At least the quarrels he mentions
 are about questions of piety and not
 arrangement of furniture
 or styles of music!

Paul reminds the church
 that we’re all in this together.
 We’re a community —
 not just a bunch of separate individuals
 who happen to be doing ministry
 in close proximity to each other.
 And being in this together,
 we live and die together “to the Lord.”
 We live and die together
 for the love of Christ!

And yet we quarrel.
 We pass judgment.
 We despise.

There’s that one statement in the creed
 about Jesus coming again
 to judge the living and the dead.
 For several reasons
 we can talk about later,
 that part used to make me so uncomfortable
 that I wouldn’t say it.
 I guess I had a quarrel with it!

Then one day I heard it differently.
 I heard it with an emphasis on the word “he;”
 he will come to judge —
 which means not *me*, not *you*;
 we don’t get to judge.
 The only thing we get to do is forgive.

Ok, Jesus,
 so how *many times* should we forgive
 the ones who quarrel with us,
 who pass judgment,
 who despise?

Jesus answer is "as many times as it takes!"
There cannot be a limit to forgiveness.
It's isn't baseball;
there's no three-strikes-and-you're-out.
And there's no forgiveness *scale*
that weighs the *severity* of a wrongdoing.

The king in Jesus' parable forgives the slave of
a national-debt sized debt!
It's a ridiculous sum of money —
beyond imagination.

For that slave to repay it,
it would take every penny of wages
for 5 to 6 *thousand lifetimes!*
6 million working days!
2 hundred-thousand years!
It's a debt that can't be repaid!

There is no limit to the forgiveness of God.

And Jesus makes it very clear —
without subtlety —
that we are expected
to forgive without limit too.

But ugh!

It's hard!

And even worse news:

the alternative is torture!

It's torture to live without extending forgiveness.

It's torture to live without receiving forgiveness.

When I was on internship,
I got to know a man who,
many years before,
had been shot in a store robbery.
Since that time he was paralyzed
from the neck down.
He wouldn't receive communion.
He never would receive it
even when he was in worship.

When I visited him, I asked him "why?".

He told me that he could never forgive
the man who shot him,
and, in his reckoning,
he could never be forgiven
for not forgiving;
therefore, he couldn't receive
the cup of forgiveness.

This man lived the torture
of un-forgive-ness
for the rest of his life.

That doesn't mean he *wasn't* forgiven by God;
it's just that he couldn't receive it.

When we experience injury or trauma
at the hands of someone,
the ability to forgive doesn't come easily
and, at times,
necessarily needs to be done
at a distance.

Sometimes it's nearly impossible.
We might need help
from counseling or spiritual direction.

Forgiving is a long and difficult process,
that has to be repeated,
sometimes on a daily basis.

But Jesus does not offer a caveat;
we are to make the effort.
Period.

And he models it for us.

On the night when he needs them the most,
the disciples will betray, deny, and abandon him.
Yet he announces their forgiven-ness
ahead of time
when he hands them the cup
and says, "This is my blood of the covenant
poured out for the forgiveness of sin.
Drink from it, all of you."

Jesus commits an outrageous act of mercy,
even before the wrong has been done.

Even though he knows the wrong is imminent.
There is no justification for forgiveness like that!
The first slave,
 owing 200 hundred-thousand years
 of pay-back,
 did not deserve to be forgiven.

Joseph's brothers (in today's Genesis reading) —
 the ones who sold Joseph into slavery —
 did not deserve to be forgiven.

I don't deserve to be forgiven.
 None of us deserves to be forgiven.
 But we are.

And that's why it's so critical
 that we stop quarreling,
 stop passing judgment,
 stop despising.
For we don't live to ourselves,
 and we don't die to ourselves.
We live and die
 in a community of faith based on grace,
 on outrageous mercy,
 and held together with
 forgiveness.

And so every single Sunday we share the peace.
 We share the mercy.
 We share the grace.
Because sometime we quarrel.
 Sometimes we pass judgment.
 Sometimes we despise.

Because forgiveness
 is an everyday practice.
And we live and die in a community
 that exists for the love of Christ
 and for the sake of a world —
 including the ones so hard to forgive.
 Including even us.