

Genesis 50:15-21
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

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Every game has rules. Whether it is a sport or recreation, there are predetermined things players can and cannot do. In baseball, for instance, you cannot have a fourth strike. In football, you must play within the sidelines. In the game of Scrabble, you cannot make up words. In chess, you cannot move the pieces any way you want to, but only according to the rules of the game. These rules set the boundaries which keep the game from getting too chaotic. They are essential in governing how the game is played and in determining who wins or loses.

Of course, not all games are for entertainment. In the Gospel story today, Peter is trying to figure out one of the games of life, asking what is fair play in terms of forgiveness. He had been paying attention to Jesus' teaching and His actions. He also knew how you can't indulge people who take advantage of you in hurtful ways. Sometimes it is necessary to draw a line and say, "No More!" But where do we draw this line? Peter wants Jesus to explain the rules of the forgiveness game, to define its limits and boundaries. Peter thinks he knows. You've likely heard the Old Testament thinking: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." People sometimes think of this as a harsh law, but it did set limits. If you knock my tooth out, I'm not allowed to kill you. The only revenge I can take is to knock your tooth out. If you go further back into history, like the 4th chapter of Genesis, a man named Lamech recounted a much harsher retribution: "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." Lamech wanted unlimited revenge! The Old Testament law tried to control and put limits on retribution. In Jewish culture, if you want to do something perfectly, do it seven times. Most people call it quits much sooner: "three strikes and you're out." Peter wonders if he should be more generous with compassion, tolerating up to seven fouls

Jesus understood the number game as well as anyone, including the importance of symbolism, so he plays it with Peter. "Not seven times," Jesus says, "but seventy seven times." Peter is trumped by this answer. Seventy seven times means every time. Jesus' answer makes it clear how forgiveness is always in play. It has no limits. Every time someone offends or hurts us, we are to forgive them. So, Rule 1: Forgiveness is always in play.

This view seems to fly in the face of common sense. How can we continue to forgive people who will just keep taking advantage of us? Isn't this saying it is all right for the person to keep hurting and abusing us? We best define forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean we are saying a wrong act is right. And forgiveness does not mean we must stay in a harmful relationship. Forgiveness simply means we choose not to retaliate. It means we are not going to let the offense consume us with our own anger. Forgiveness is a choice we make not to return evil for evil, nor hurt for hurt.

Forgiveness, in a real sense, is something we do for ourselves. It saves us from developing destructive feelings of anger and resentment. It keeps us from becoming bitter and caustic. We might wonder what forgiveness does for the person we forgive. Hold on to this question as we continue to ponder Jesus' rules for forgiveness.

Rule 2: Forgiveness must be from the heart. On the heels of Peter's question, Jesus tells the story of two creditors and two debtors. The parable drives home the point how those who are forgiven must be forgiving. In order for forgiveness to be genuine and beneficial, it must be received fully with gratitude. The rich creditor forgives his debtor out of "pity." Instead of simply delaying the debt, the creditor cancels it. Wow!

However, when this newly debt-free man encounters someone who owes him money of far less value, he fails to act with forgiveness. He shows no mercy, revealing his lack of appreciating how he had been forgiven. This part of the parable provides insight into the question we left hanging before. God expects forgiveness to change hearts. Whether or not a person receives our forgiveness is not up to us. We can only forgive.

Accepting the forgiveness with gratitude is up to the one who has been forgiven. Rule #3 is how forgiveness should create forgiveness.

Jesus concludes the story with a harsh warning. The failure to forgive means you forfeit the game. Jesus says, "So My heavenly Father will also do to everyone if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Let me point out: Jesus is not saying we earn or keep our forgiveness by showing forgiveness to others. Instead, He is stating a fact from God's perspective. Forgiven people forgive. Unforgiven people don't, or can't. So, the failure to forgive those who are in debt to us reveals how we have not fully accepted our own forgiveness. God didn't withhold it from us. It simply means we have not accepted it. If we understand the full impact of our own release in being forgiven, our sense of gratitude and joy will compel us to be forgiving toward others.

Jesus knew any person who cannot forgive remains a prisoner. We are confronted to examine our relationships and our past. Is there a member of your family you have not forgiven, be it a sibling, parent, or spouse? Might the actions of a coworker or neighbor from long ago continue to smolder in your soul, allowing a consuming anger to claim permanent occupancy in your heart and mind. Perhaps the person you're mad at is long dead and gone, but your resentment still lives.

Many of you remember the name of Nelson Mandela, who was held a political prisoner in South Africa. His historic release was televised. Later, an interviewer asked Mandela: "As you marched from the cellblock across the yard to the gate of the prison, the camera focused in on your face. I have never seen such anger, and even hatred, in any man as was expressed on your face at that time. This is not the Nelson Mandela I know today. What was that about?"

Mandela answered, "I'm surprised you saw that, and I regret that the camera caught my anger. As I walked across the courtyard that day I thought to myself, 'They've taken everything from you that matters. Your cause is dead. Your family is gone. Your friends have been killed. Now they are releasing you, but there's nothing left for you out there.' And I hated them for what they had taken from me. Then, I sensed an inner voice saying to me, 'Nelson! For twenty-seven years you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man! Don't allow them to make you into a free man, only to turn you into their prisoner!'"

Most games end with a win or lose outcome. With forgiveness, however, Jesus promises a different sort of outcome. Christ offers us some guidelines in which nobody loses; everybody wins. With forgiveness, there are no boundary lines and it is always in play. If we receive forgiveness fully, it will change us in grateful way to practice forgiveness with others.

Forgiveness doesn't depend on what happens to you, but on the way you respond. When we choose to play by the rules of God's love, everybody can win.

Amen.