

How do we forgive as Christians?

How forgiveness can create a more just legal system By Martha Minow

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I have said this a thousand times, but I have trouble understanding and interpreting art. A lot of ways people view, think about, and study are use many of the same principles as reading, interpreting, and studying the Bible.

Core Questions:

1. Do we want to see a world with more forgiveness?
2. What does Jesus say about forgiveness?
3. Since God has forgiven us, what does that do to inform how we forgive others?

We know forgiveness is an important Christian value, in fact forgiveness of sins is one of the central teachings of the Christian religion as a whole – we say Jesus Christ is Lord and part of that statement includes the fact that tied to Jesus’ Lordship is humanity being forgiven of sins. What kinds of forgiveness would we practice in our daily lives, why should we do it, and how should society practice forgiveness are all very complex questions. Jesus has some specific ideas however and we can read about them in Matthew 18:

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?’ 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, his 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 should 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 should 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.’ - Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew’s writing is strong and abrasive, and here is no different – being tortured until he can pay back a debt... and the analogous reference being God would come down on us with that same kind of anger, yikes. Of course Jesus is responding to Peter’s question about a member of the church sinning against

him. Maybe that means we should only practice forgiveness in the bounds of a church? Probably not, Jesus' story compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a king practicing political power in forgiving or settling debts.

Jesus's direct answer is of course – not seven times, but seventy-seven times. That is a pretty radical idea that we need to interpret. Do we forgive a wrong-doing seventy-seven times? A bunch of times? So much that it hurts us? The key in interpreting the 77 times is contained in the story Jesus tells. The grace offered by the king has seemingly no bounds. Ten Thousand talents some say would be equal to about \$4.5 million and the king just forgives the debt after the debtor asks for patience in repayment from the king. In the world of money, owing someone \$4.5 million is an amount that many of us will never even deal with. And all of it is erased with a plea for patience.

We then must practice grace in our daily lives, in those small things. The actions of that forgiven debtor to *not* forgive someone else with around 3 months wages of debt is a laughable comparison from what was forgiven the original debtor. Jesus is saying God sees it the same way – God's grace is boundless and we have to reflect that forgiveness in our daily lives. For something extreme we might need some help but thinking about grace taps into God's power and love for each of us.

Pray this week you can find ways to forgive in your daily life.