

Luke 23:26–34 (NRSV)

²⁶ As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷ A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸ But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ ³¹ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

³² Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[³⁴ Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”]] And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV)

²¹ 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.”

Forgiving can be hard, but if we want to be forgiven we must, in turn, forgive.

This week, our word in this series, *Words*, is “forgiveness.” In the Bible it is a profound concept expressed in many different words. Again this week, I’ve appended an abridged entry from the Lexham Theological Wordbook. There are many other related words – such a multi-dimensional idea, simple forgiveness.

Forgive them

You know how the story goes. After being condemned by Pontius Pilate, Jesus is led to the place of crucifixion. Bleeding, beaten, scourged, and humiliated Jesus is dressed in rags with a crown of thorns on his head. He must carry the crosspiece to which he will

be nailed.¹ But Jesus is too weak to bear the weight and still walk ahead to Golgotha. As he makes his way through the shouting crowd, a visitor from the countryside is pressed into service and made to carry the cross, following behind Jesus. This man, Simon of Cyrene, cannot really know the privilege that has been accorded to him. The church tradition is that this Simon did indeed come to understand just whose cross he carried.

As they make their way, Jesus turns to some women who mourn and wail for him. Somehow, Jesus finds the strength to speak to them. "Weep not for me, but for yourselves and your children," he tells them. Indeed, profound terror and sadness bitterness will soon be thrust upon them.²

Jesus arrives at the place called the Skull, Golgotha, sitting just outside the city wall atop a stone quarry. There, alongside two other men, he is nailed to the crosspiece, which is then lifted up and dropped onto the upright, to which Jesus' feet are then nailed. As all could see, Jesus is near death. He will not last more than a few hours more. Too much blood has been spilled. Too much pain endured.

Every moment in which we try to comprehend this scene and its meaning must flow from our conviction that this man, Jesus, nearly dead on the cross, was and is God himself, one with the Father and one with the Spirit. How could it be that the Creator and Lord of All, the Lord God Almighty, should take on human flesh, much less allow himself to be tortured and crucified? What sort of Father allows such a horror to proceed?

What must be the first words said in the face of such cruelty and depravity? What must God say to those who pour out their fears and hatreds on an innocent? . . . Words of judgment? Condemnation? Righteous Wrath? Vengeance?

No . . . simply this . . . *forgive them, forgive them, forgive them.*

Forgive *who* we ask? The soldiers. Yes! Pilate. Yes! Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders. Yes! The crowds. Yes! You and me . . . and we nervously glance away. The old gospel spiritual asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The only honest answer any of us can give is yes. As a holocaust survivor once said, "Some are guilty; all are responsible."

One of the worst dangers confronting western culture is that increasingly we are losing sight of human darkness, at least in ourselves, our friends, our families. We see so much wrong in this world and yet we are blind to our own participation in that wrong. Richard John Neuhaus wrote:

We would draw the line between ourselves and the really big-time sinners. For them the cross may be necessary. For us a forgiving wink from an understanding Deity will set things to right. But the "big time" of sinning is in every human heart. We make small ourselves when we make small our sins. Fearing the judgment of great evil, we shrink from the call to great good. Like Adam, we slink away to hide in a corner. Like the prodigal son, we hunker down behind the swine's trough of our shrunken lives. But then he came to his senses. He remembered who he was in his former life, in his real life. There is no way to have that dignity restored except through the confession of that dignity betrayed.

Still we hold back from confession, holding on to the tattered remnants of our former dignity. The more Adam hides from his shame, the more he proclaims his shame. What ludicrous figures we sinners cut. It is all so unnecessary; it only

¹ No man could carry an entire cross. The Romans typically left the upright post in place permanently. If nothing else, it served as an ever-present reminder of how Rome dealt with troublemakers. Still, even the crosspiece might have weighed nearly two hundred pounds. Little wonder that Jesus had to be helped.

² In less than forty years, Jerusalem would be burned by the Romans and hundreds of thousands of Jews killed in the great revolt of the late 60's AD.

increases the complicity that we deny. We act as though there is not forgiveness enough. There is more than forgiveness enough.³

Oh yes, we are all at the foot of that cross. We don't admit or even comprehend our own guilt and, yet, we are forgiven . . . *Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.* To comprehend the deepest and truest nature of Him-Who-Made-Us, we look to the cross and these words of forgiveness. This is true love, God-love, for all to see and to hear.

In his faithfulness to the vocation given him by the Father, Jesus has gone to the very heart of darkness – and upon arriving he speaks words of forgiveness. He had told Peter that his disciples must forgive without limit (that's what is meant by “seventy times seven” Matt. 18:22). But Jesus goes further. Not only does he forgive – he forgives first. He doesn't ask if the people are sorry for what they have done, if they are going to straighten up and strive to do better. Jesus simply forgives first, right out of the gate. No equivocation or quid pro quo.⁴

The odd thing is that we often don't much like to be forgiven first. Ever had someone tell you “I forgive you” when you were darn sure you hadn't done anything that needed forgiving? Ever found yourself refusing to forgive someone because they hadn't shown any remorse for the terrible wrong they had committed against you? . . . See what I mean. *Forgive first* is challenging and even threatening. But it is God's way, thankfully.

Should it not be our own way? It must be. . . . Forgive first.

But how often? How might we forgive the worst and actually mean it?

Jesus tells a story of an unforgiving servant

Take a breath. A deep one . . . deeper. Now hold it. Keep holding it . . . longer. How long can you hold it? One minute? Two perhaps? Breathing, indeed living, requires us to breathe out as well as breathe in. I remember from my brief long-ago flirtation with circuit weight training that it was important to learn the proper way to breathe while struggling to lift the weight. Inhaling was easy, but remembering to exhale was very difficult. I'd just keep holding and holding my breath as I strained to move the weight smoothly and in rhythm.

Forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out. Sadly, this is a truth that one servant never learned.

*The unforgiving servant*⁵

Today's parable comes from Matthew 18, part of the fourth long block of Jesus' teaching in the gospel. Beginning in verse 15, Jesus tells his disciples how to handle situations where one has been sinned against by another. The offender is to be taken before two or three witnesses and, if needed, the large community of believers. If the offender refuses “to listen even to the church,” Jesus says, they are to be treated like a “Gentile or tax collector.” Neither is good, so far as Jesus' disciples are concerned.

³ Richard John Neuhaus. *Death On A Friday Afternoon Meditations On The Last Words Of Jesus From The Cross*. Basic Books. 2000.

⁴ This point that Jesus forgives first was driven home to me by William Willimon in his excellent book, *Thank God Its Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words of Christ*, Abingdon Press, 2006.

⁵ The parable is about a master and slaves, though modern translations often use the term “servant,” to help the reader understand that slavery in the ancient world was different in many respects from our own tragic experience with the horrors of African slavery. In the ancient world, slavery was common, often arising from indebtedness and even self-sale, in addition to the enslavement of conquered peoples. By some estimates, 35% of the Roman Empire's population were slaves. Household servants were usually slaves. In the Greco-Roman world of Jesus' day, even households of modest means could afford two or three slaves.

Then, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive a member of the church who has sinned against him. Perhaps seven times, Peter suggests. But instead of affirming Peter's notions of forgiveness, Jesus tells him that he is to forgive "seventy times seven." In other words, Peter is to forgive without limit. He is to forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive . . . Jesus then tells Peter a parable to help him grasp the full truth about forgiveness.

A king was settling up accounts with his slaves. There is one slave who owes the king a lot of money. So much money that it certainly would have conjured up visions of astounding wealth, for it would take the average laborer 15-20 years to earn a single talent and the slave owes the king 10,000 talents!⁶ To settle up as best he can, the king orders that the slave and his family be sold as well as all the man's possessions. But when the slave falls on his knees and begs for mercy, the king forgives all the debt – all 10,000 talents. All of it. One could hardly imagine a more gracious act.

One would think that being the recipient of such forgiveness would forever change a person. Yet, this same slave refuses even to be patient with a fellow slave who owes him a small sum, no more than a few weeks' wages. Seemingly forgetting, though probably just not caring, about the grace shown himself, the forgiven but unforgiving slave has the debtor thrown into prison. When the king learns what has happened, the slave's original debts are reinstated and he is tossed into prison where he will stay until he can repay the 10,000 talents – which he will never be able to do.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity was highly valued in the ancient near-eastern cultures. If someone does something for me, I then am obligated to do something similar for them. The forgiven servant naturally then assumes that the reciprocity he owes his master is to be extended only to his master.

But the parable makes clear that the generosity the slave received should have been passed on to others. As John Carroll writes, "The kindness from which I have benefitted should reach to touch others who had no part in that original act of kindness. Since, in the parable, the king in some way embodies the graciousness of God, the point is that I should be so transformed by the experience of divine grace that I am able to bring that same grace and mercy into all my relationships with others."⁷

As with all the parables, we have to be careful about pushing them too far, e.g., seeing the character of the king as telling us more about God than the parable intends. This is a parable about forgiveness told in response to a question about forgiveness not about the nature of God.

Craig Blomberg suggests that we focus on the three episodes of this parable if we are to grasp Jesus' point about forgiveness:

- The first episode illustrates the boundless grace of God.
- The second episode shows the absurdity of refusing to extend grace to others when we have been given so much.
- The third episode (the punishment of the first servant) starkly shows the consequences of spurning God and God's grace.

Eduard Schweizer put it this way: 'God's forgiveness is not for decoration but for use.' Living, truly God-shaped living, requires that forgiveness be breathed out, not just breathed in. A genuinely grateful heart is also a forgiving heart.

⁶This is a good time to remind ourselves that Jesus' parables are not meant to be utterly realistic depictions of life. They are teaching tools. We aren't to worry about how a slave could assemble wealth that would rival Bill Gates'.

⁷from *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* by James and John Carroll, Hendrickson Publishing, 1996. The later quote from Schweizer is also from the Carrolls' book.

Forgiveness

(from the Lexham Theological Wordbook, entry by David Stark)

Forgiveness is the release, on the part of the creditor or offended party, of any expectation that a debt will be repaid or that an offender will receive punishment for an offense. When describing the removal of an inappropriate offense in this way, the removal does not condone the behavior or suggest approval for the offense.

Concept Summary

In the OT, the most direct words for forgiveness are סָלַח (*sālah*, “forgive”) and סְלִיחָה (*sēliḥā*, “forgiveness”). Forgiveness can also be expressed by stating that one will not “remember” (זָכַר, *zākar*) the offense or “count” (חָשַׁב, *ḥāšab*) the offense against someone. Where such mental acts are negated for a debt or offense, the result is a kind of forgetfulness concerning the debt or offense. Forgiveness may be motivated by or result in the demonstration of compassion (רַחֲמִים, *rahāmîm*). More metaphorically, forgiveness may be compared with physical removal (נָשָׂא, *nāsā*, “lift up”; עָבַר, *ābar*, “pass over”), covering (כָּסָה, *kāsā*, “cover”; כָּפַר, *kāpar*, “atone”), and cleaning or repairing (רָפָא, *rāpā*, “cure”; מָחָה, *māḥā*, “wipe”; טָהַר, *ṭāhēr*, “be clean”).

In the NT, although the terms may also have other forces in particular contexts, forgiveness is generally indicated with the words ἀφίημι (*aphiēmi*, “forgive”), ἀφεσις (*aphesis*, “release”), χαρίζομαι (*charizomai*, “forgive”), and ἀπολύω (*apolyō*, “give leave”). As with the Hebrew חָשַׁב (*ḥāšab*) or זָכַר (*zākar*), not reckoning (λογίζομαι, *logizomai*) an offense against someone may indicate forgiveness. Terms like ἰλάσκομαι (*hilaskomai*, “atone”) and αἶρω (*airō*, “take away”) also mirror Hebrew counterparts in how they communicate release from an obligation or removal of a burden.

Theological Overview

In both the OT and the NT, economic debt and wrongdoing have a close relationship. Not all wrongdoing may result in economic debt (Psa 73:3), but economic debt is a frequent (if sometimes implicit) metaphor for wrongdoing or for the state that results from wrongdoing (Matt 6:12). Consequently, expressions for forgiveness of economic debt and forgiveness of wrongdoing are often tightly bound together. Over time (at least in some strands of interpretation), Israel’s sabbatical debt cancellation became a metaphor for forgiveness of sins (11Q13 2.2–6; compare Isa 61:1–3).

Within this context, several common ways of describing forgiveness cluster together. First, forgiveness may be portrayed as release from an obligation. Frequent language in this connection includes סָלַח (*sālah*, “forgive”), סְלִיחָה (*sēliḥā*, “forgiveness”), ἀφίημι (*aphiēmi*, “give leave”), ἀφεσις (*aphesis*, “release”), ἀπολύω (*apolyō*, “give leave”), and ἰλάσκομαι (*hilaskomai*, “atone”). For instance, if a man annuls or cancels a vow made by his wife or daughter, Yahweh will not hold the women responsible for performing that vow (Num 30:5, 8, 12); they are released (*sālah*) from the obligation. In the NT, χαρίζομαι (*charizomai*, “forgive”) may also fall under this category, although the term seems to focus on the kindness displayed by the forger in releasing another from a particular obligation (Col 3:13; Eph 4:32).

Forgiveness may be described as a decision not to consider a debt or offense in connection with the debtor or offender’s relationship to the creditor or offended. Often, this portrayal is made by negating a verb of mental operation like חָשַׁב (*ḥāšab*, “reckon”), זָכַר (*zākar*, “remember”), or λογίζομαι (*logizomai*, “reckon”). For example, Shimei begs David to forgive him, saying “do not count me guilty” (אִלֵּי־יְהוָה בִּי לֹא־חָשַׁבְתָּ לִי עֲוֹן, *al-yahāšāb-lī ‘āwōn*; 2 Sam 19:19). In Ezekiel 33:14–16, God says that when a wicked person repents, his sins will not be remembered (*zākar*). In the NT, Paul says a person is blessed if God does not count (*logizomai*) his sin against him (Rom 4:8). Such forgetfulness does effect a release from an obligation, but it focuses more on the

magnanimous action of the creditor or offended person rather than on the effects of forgiveness on the debtor or offender (2 Tim 4:16).

Forgiveness as not taking account of a wrong is metaphorical in the sense that it treats an offense as a debt that will no longer be counted against someone's account. Sin can also be conceptualized metaphorically as an object that must be carried away (נָשָׂא, *nāśā*; עָבַר, *ābar*), a blemish that must be covered (כָּסָה, *kāsā*; כָּפַר, *kāpar*), a stain that must be cleansed (טָהַר, *tāhēr*; מָחָה, *māḥā*), or a disease or fracture that must be healed (רָפָא, *rāpā*). In these metaphorical contexts, forgiveness can be expressed as any of these actions that somehow deal with the iniquity. Psalm 32 demonstrates how these various metaphors for sin and forgiveness can be brought together. In Psalm 32:1–2, forgiveness is described as sin (עֲשָׂה, *peša*) being carried away (*nāśā*), as sin (הִטָּה, *hāṭā*) being covered (*kāsā*), and as guilt (*āwōn*) that Yahweh does not count (*hāšab*).

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Gospel of Mark*

This class will not meet again until July 31.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Samuel*

This class will not meet again until August 1.

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Current series: *Ten Bible Passages I wish Christians Knew . . . Well*

This week – John 1

Rev. Lauren Gerlach will be teaching this class on July 16 & 23.

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.