

June 10, 2018
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DON'T BE A CAT Matthew 18

Carl Ericsson was not the athlete he wished he could be when he was in high school in South Dakota. Too small, too uncoordinated to be a real athlete, he became the student manager of teams. Unfortunately he suffered the fate that guys like him too often experience, being mercilessly teased by bigger, stronger guys who were on the team. One particular day stood out for him. Norm Johnson, the star athlete of the school humiliated him, putting a jock strap on his head and teasing him cruelly. Ericsson would go on to grow up, get married and have a successful career in insurance. But one day in June, 2012, more than 50 years after that humiliating day in the locker room, the 73 year old retired insurance man went to Norm Johnson's house, knocked on his door, and when Johnson opened the door Carl shot and killed him. He admitted it was because of burning resentment that he had held inside for 50 years. His hurt and anger finally erupted in fatal violence.

That is an extreme example of the danger of resentment and bitterness. But could it be that resentment and bitterness actually are always fatal? The need to forgive is the topic we are going to consider today as we continue studying the book of Matthew and this morning look at Matthew 18.

BECOME A KID

In verse 1 the disciples ask Jesus, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Notice the word, "then." It obviously implies a connection to something that has gone on before. But to what? We don't see it in Matthew's account. If you were to guess, what do you think has preceded this question? You'd probably guess that the disciples were talking among themselves about that very question. Which of them was the greatest? You'd be right. Luke 9:46 says, "An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest." Jesus responded in verses 1-4 by bringing a small child to stand before them and telling them they had to become like that child.

This was a stubborn issue that we've seen the disciples wrangling about before. The disciples seemed obsessed with it. That's because they were all human beings, and humans are obsessed with who is the greatest. That is what competition is all about. Who is the best? Who is better than the others? Where do I rank in the

current order? We are constantly comparing ourselves to others, and that comparison is nothing more than a form of competition.

This is because all of us have a need to establish a sense of our worth, a need so demanding and deep that it is almost as powerful as our need to breathe. We think that by competing and winning we gain that worth. So compete we will.

Competition is not necessarily bad, and in fact, it is central to almost all human achievement. However, it tends to be terribly damaging. And yet, it is also unceasing in our hearts.

Laurie and I recently watched the comedy movie *Parental Guidance*, featuring Billy Crystal and Bette Midler. In it they play grandparents called upon to take care of their grandchildren for 5 days. They are thrown into a world very different from what they have known. Because their kids have very different ideas about child rearing than they did. At one point Crystal as Grandpa Artie is at his grandson's baseball game. His grandson is pitching and faces the school bully. He throws strike one, strike two, strike three. Artie is elated, seeing his grandson strike out the bully. But the umpire informs him the bully is not out. That's because no one makes outs. They kids all just bat until they get on base. Artie is appalled. This is not baseball. It gets worse. Next he is informed they don't keep score. He asks, "Then how do you know who wins?" He is told no one wins and no one loses. The problem with that is that in the real world kids won't play that game very long. It won't be fun. It's only fun if there's real competition

Competition is planted deeply in the human heart. I experience this at home a lot. Laurie and I are getting ready to go to bed. This particular evening I get distracted and it takes me a while to finish my preparations. Laurie gets in bed and proudly announces, "I got in bed first!" I didn't even know it was a race until I had lost. That competition is there because we humans are certain we can prove something about ourselves by winning.

Jesus brings a child to the disciples and says, "If you want to be great in God's kingdom, you have to become like this little kid. In fact, if you even want to get in to God's kingdom, you have to be like this kid." At this point people frequently wax eloquent about traits of little kids.

They are amazingly trusting. I watch Toby pick up his daughters and fling them high into the air. They go so high it makes me uneasy. But they laugh hysterically when he does it. To them it is fun. Toby will grow tired of it long before they will.

There is not a hint of concern that Daddy will drop them. They trust implicitly. So maybe Jesus was talking about having the faith of a child.

Kids are full of wonder. It is amazing to be outside with a 2 year old child. So much is new and marvelous in their eyes. A butterfly is magical. A bug crawling across the driveway is fascinating. Life is mysterious and wonderful to them. So maybe Jesus meant we need to have our eyes open to the mystery and beauty of his creation. Kids are innocent and often unselfconscious. These things are all true of kids. But none of them was what Jesus meant.

Pay attention to what Jesus said. In verse 4 he said it is only those who take “the lowly position” of a child who can become greatest in God’s kingdom. It is this lowly position that Jesus referred to. People loved their children as much in ancient times as we do today. But back then, and now, kids have a lowly status. Children can’t vote. They can’t serve in a political office. They can’t drive. Their opinions aren’t respected. As much as people value children, they don’t ask them to weigh in on the most important questions before us. In our church we don’t ask little Ella what she thinks we should do in regard to our youth ministry once Nate leaves.

Jesus settled an argument about who is greatest in the kingdom of God by saying it is the person who is so humble that he is not obsessed with proving something about how much more he knows than everyone else, or how talented, smart, beautiful or rich he is. The one who is great in the kingdom is the one who is not obsessed with himself, the one who is truly humble before God and other people.

THE KIDS ARE PRECIOUS

If we do as Jesus teaches and become humble like a little child, be willing to be of no account in the eyes of the world, it is likely that we will not become noteworthy, famous, powerful or influential in this world. In 1 Corinthians 1:26 Paul wrote, “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential, not many were of noble birth.” The Corinthians kind of had a pride issue. They wanted to be seen as wise. They kind of wanted to be somebody in this world. But Paul reminds them in the eyes of the world they didn’t count for much. They were “little ones” in Jesus’ words.

But Jesus said that though we might be nobodies in the world’s view, we are of enormous importance to God. He tells us that God loves the little nobodies who

love him. First he said that anyone who causes trouble for us, anyone who causes us to stumble in some way by their mistreatment of us, is in for an eternity of loss.

He went on to explain that what happens in eternity is of way more importance than what's going on in our lives right now. He says if your hand or your foot was somehow to trip you up and cause you to suffer in eternity you would be way ahead by cutting that limb off and throwing it away. He is not being literal, he is using an illustration.

How would your foot be able to cause you to stumble spiritually? It's pretty hard to figure out how that would happen. Jesus didn't intend us to figure that out. He is using hyperbole to illustrate a principle. The principle is that eternity is what we ought to be focused on, for it is infinitely more important than this world. This world feels all-encompassing to us. It feels like the only thing that matters.

Jesus insisted that we would be far better off going through life without a right hand, dealing with all the complications and hardships that would cause us, but reaping a reward in eternity, than we would be if we were focused only on this life and kept all our limbs somehow to the detriment of our eternity.

Let me illustrate Jesus' illustration. There was a point in my son, Toby's life when he bought his dream vehicle. It was a silver Toyota Tacoma truck with a double cab and a long bed. He loved that truck. He was thrilled with it. He owned it for a little less than 3 years. There came a time when he got married, and he and his wife, Anna, began the quest of him getting into and going through medical school. That truck contributed to making life more fun for him. But he and Anna realized it was rather expensive for them to keep and operate it. They determined that the wisest thing for their future was for him to sacrifice by selling that truck and buying a far more economical car. They saw that the future was more important than Toby having his favorite truck in the immediate present, so he made the smart choice. He sold his truck and bought a Mazda 3. Jesus was saying the eternal future is far more important than the present and we should live in light of that.

One implication of this is that being a "little one," a person who is of little or no account in the world's eyes, is a small price to pay for an eternity as a child of God in his Kingdom. In other words, yes, the world may think little to nothing of you, in fact it might hate you and make life hard for you, but that's a loss for them and a win for you.

Jesus then followed that up by telling a little story about a shepherd who loses one of his 100 sheep, and cares so much about that sheep that he goes looking for it. He's talking about how much the Father cares about those "little ones" that the world doesn't have any time for. They matter to him. It's easy to think that we don't matter much to God. After all, we don't matter much to the world. Millions of people didn't tune in to watch on TV when Laurie and I got married, or when our kids got married like they did when Meghan Markle married Prince Harry. The world doesn't wait with baited breath to hear us weigh in with our thoughts on the subject of the day. The world knows nothing of us, and doesn't care to know anything of us. So it is easy for us to think that God loves the world, but probably doesn't pay much attention to us individually. But Jesus insists that is not true. God knows you, loves you, and will go to great lengths to save you and keep you safe!

FORGIVING IS IMPERATIVE

Beginning in verse 15 Jesus talks about an implication of being a truly humble "little one." There is something that we will certainly do if we are really a humble one, a member of God's kingdom. Verses 15-18 are often used to discuss church discipline. Unfortunately I don't think that's what they are about. Notice Peter's reaction to Jesus' teaching in verse 21. He asked, "How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" What did he understand Jesus' teaching there to be about?

He saw it as being about a situation where someone had sinned against him, not about some church discipline thing. He was the "little one" that someone had caused problems for by mistreating him. In fact, some ancient manuscripts actually have verse 15 read, "If your brother or sister sins against you." While there is debate about whether the words "against you" were in the text originally, it is entirely possible they were. But the fact that some manuscripts had them was because that is clearly the point of the passage. That's why Jesus goes on to give a parable that is all about forgiving.

This passage is not about church discipline or about how to resolve conflict. It is about personal offense. It is not a method of dealing with dispute where there are two sides of the story. It is about a situation where one person has clearly, no doubt, wronged another. It is about how the injured person should handle the hurt and offense.

Jesus says if someone sins against you, then go and talk to that person. Don't talk to other people about them. Talk directly to the person. Explain to them how they

have wounded you, sinned against you. This one principle could solve tons of problems between believers if we would just live by it. Talk to the person who has sinned against you. Don't just stuff it. Don't slam that person to everyone you know. Talk to the person face to face to pursue reconciliation.

Hopefully that person will admit their wrong and apologize for it. If they do then your appropriate response is to forgive them. What if they don't? Then you bring reinforcements, first one or two, then the entire church if necessary. Fine, but what if that person admits their wrong and asks forgiveness, you grant it, and then they wrong you again in the exact same way. What do you do then?

That's pretty much what Peter asked. In verse 21 he essentially said, "How far are we supposed to go with this? How many times do we let someone off the hook and forgive them?" Literally he said, "How many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

That's a pretty magnanimous offer if you ask me. Imagine that someone gossips about you, saying some really hurtful things. When you learn of this you confront the person. They admit it and say, "That was awful of me. There is no excuse for what I did. I am really sorry. Can you forgive me?" Wanting to obey Jesus you do. The next week they do it again and it's just as bad. What do you do? You go confront them again, and again they say, "I feel terrible about this. It was absolutely wrong of me to say those things. I can't believe I did it again. That is inexcusable, but please forgive me." What do you do? Hopefully being the magnanimous and big hearted person you are, you forgive them. But let's imagine that 2 days later they do it yet again! Now what do you do? The world would say you'd have to be an idiot to forgive that person yet again. You'd know they'll just go out and do it once more after you've confronted them.

It seems like it would be awfully hard to do that time and time again, day after day, year after year. Here's a quote from ancient rabbinic Judaism. "If a man commits a transgression, the first, second and third time he is forgiven. The fourth time he is not." Peter suggested bettering that teaching by a lot. But Jesus told him we are not to "merely" forgive 7 times, but 77 times. That's a way of saying you must be totally and utterly forgiving. There is no limit to how much we forgive. This is hard to fathom. It seems crazy, like we are opening ourselves up to being abused. Why would we ever forgive like that? Jesus told a story to explain it.

In his story a king has some issues to settle with some people. One of them is a man who owes him “10,000 bags of gold” according to our translation. Let’s call this debtor Jacob. Literally the text says he owed the king 10,000 talents. A talent wasn’t a coin, but a unit of measure usually of gold or silver. One talent was considered to be worth somewhere between 15 and 20 years wages for a common laborer. The minimum wage in California currently is \$11 per hour. Do that for 40 hours a week and you earn \$440. Do that for 50 weeks a year and you have \$22,000. So if that’s a year’s wage, then over 15 years that comes to \$330,000. That’s 1 talent! Multiply that by 10,000 and you get \$3.3 billion! Over 20 years it amounts to \$4.4 billion. So this guy owed the king the equivalent of somewhere around \$4 billion! That is a whopping sum of money.

Our friend Jacob had no hope of paying that off, so the king ordered that he and his entire family be sold as slaves. The amount they would bring on the slave market wouldn’t even pay off a tiny fraction of what he owed. This was a message to all who thought about stiffing the king. You and your entire family will become slaves for the rest of your lives. There is no way a king could lightly let someone get away with essentially ripping him off for that kind of money. Or so it seemed.

Jacob the debtor falls before the king and begs. “Be patient with me.” In other words, give me more time and I will come up with the money. What a joke. How much more time does he want? Let’s suppose he could pay the king off a \$1 million a year. That’s a lot of dough. It would take him close to 400 years to pay off the debt at that rate, although when you throw in compounding interest it will take eternity to pay off that debt at that rate. In other words, there is no way on Planet Earth that guy could ever pay off such a huge debt.

Amazingly the king did something that by human calculation was totally unwise. He took pity on Jacob, and on the spot forgave the debt, the entire \$4 billion! Everyone thinks that’s crazy. That’s going to encourage others to try the same thing. This king is too soft. Just appeal to him, beg of him, and he’ll cave and you can walk away debt free, even if it costs the king millions or billions!

Now Jesus brings the story to a dramatic ending. After being set free from a debt of billions of dollars, Jacob goes out and finds a guy who owes him money. Let’s call him Moishe. The text literally says Moishe owed Jacob 100 denarii. A denarius was considered a day’s wage. So, again, using \$11 an hour as minimum wage a days wage is \$88. So 100 denarii comes to \$8800. No big deal. If Moishe pays a reasonable \$175 each month he can pay it off with interest in 5 years. So he said

exactly the same thing to Jacob that Jacob pleaded with the king. Give me more time. I can pay this off in 5 years, maybe even less.

Jacob was having none of it. He wanted his cash. So he threw poor Moishe in prison until he could pay off his debt. It's hard to see how Moishe is going to pay off his debt when he's in jail. This suggests that Jacob knew that throwing him in prison would not get his money back. He was just merciless.

This is appalling. After being forgiven what was an insurmountable debt, he cruelly insists on Moishe paying him every red cent and doing it right now, and if he can't he goes to jail. He was unkind, cruel, demanding and selfish despite having been shown unbelievable kindness by the king. Jacob should have been humbled by what the king did for him, and filled with empathy for others in his situation. In other words he should have become merciful and at least as full of grace as the king. Instead he was cruel.

The king hears what Jacob has done and is enraged. So he had Jacob arrested. Verse 34 says he ordered that Jacob be tortured until he pay back every single dime that he owed. Of course, Jacob had no hope of paying all that money back, so this was essentially condemning Jacob to being tortured until he died.

The message is clear. We are Jacob in that story. We are the ones who have been forgiven a debt that is inconceivably large, a debt so huge that if we lived a thousand years we could never pay it off. Our King, the God of grace, has written "paid in full" across the loan papers. There is no more debt remaining. He has done it 100% by grace. We did not pay off some of the debt and he forgave the rest. He paid the entire thing off while we did nothing. And let's not forget that we were no more deserving of that forgiveness than Jacob was.

IMPLICATIONS

FORGIVENESS IS NOT DESERVED

In Jesus' story Jacob, our man in debt to the king, did not have a leg to stand on. He deserved the worst that the king could throw at him. Sell him as a slave, throw him in prison, all of it. He had taken an enormous sum of money from the king and he was not going to pay it back. What he deserved was punishment.

What he received was forgiveness. It was not something he earned. It was given purely out of the goodness of the king's heart. It was all grace and nothing but

grace. That is exactly how we receive forgiveness from God. Colossians 2:11-14 says, "When you were dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." What did we do to deserve that? Nothing! We were dead in our sins. Yet God has forgiven us all of our sins. There are some in there we haven't confessed because we aren't even aware of them. But he forgave all of them, every single bit. We didn't deserve any of that. We deserved condemnation.

That is the nature of real forgiving. If someone has to earn our forgiveness it is not real forgiveness. Forgiveness is grace and it is freely given just as God freely gave to us. In Pakistan Christians make up a mere 2.5% of the population. They are a severely persecuted minority. The laws of the nation are intended to rid the land of any Christians. Munawar Rana is a Christian leader in Peshawar. He has seen many examples of Christians being economically persecuted, beaten, jailed, he's seen churches destroyed by mobs who also urinated on Bibles. Despite this, he is not bitter toward his countrymen. He views persecution as an opportunity to display Christ's love to them, even to militant Islamists. He says the Christians there respond to the terrible mistreatment of them is, "We clean the wounds of those who hate us and those who would kill us." Their persecutors do not deserve that. But forgiveness is never deserved.

FORGIVING ALWAYS COSTS SOMETHING

Think about the story Jesus told. The man who owed the money at first got off totally free. It didn't cost him a dime. But that forgiveness came at a price. When there is forgiveness, the person forgiving pays. When there is bitterness and desire for revenge, the goal is for the guilty party to pay. Forgiving that indebted man cost the king billions of dollars that he would never get back. It meant it would encourage others to try the same thing, get away without paying the king. It not only cost him money it exposed him to risk.

Sometimes I hear people complaining about cheap grace. That means they think it wrong to say someone just believes and because they believe they claim forgiveness. Let's be real clear that there is no such thing as cheap grace. Grace is costly to a degree that is beyond calculation. It costs us nothing to be forgiven by God. It cost God the life of his Son in the most horrible way imaginable.

When someone has hurt us we need to see that there are only 2 avenues we can travel down. One is to make them pay, either through our attitude toward them or

even through taking actions that in our minds will even the score. The other avenue is to choose to pay ourselves, by bearing the hurt that has been inflicted on us and deciding to forgive and love despite all the pain.

FORGIVING IS A CHOICE

One of the hard things about real forgiveness is it is most needed when we've been really hurt. Sometimes, maybe often, the party who has hurt us is either not repentant at all or their admission of fault is much less than we would hope for. This leaves us with a continued sense of hurt. We might decide to forgive. But there is a natural progression in human emotion that we need to be aware of. The natural and usually immediate response to hurt is anger. If someone painfully smacks me in the head, even if it is accidental, there is naturally a brief flare of anger over what they've done. I may realize it is accidental, and as a result let go of that anger seeing that it is inappropriate. But that usually is accompanied by a kind of impatient, "Well, try to be more careful."

So when someone hurts us that anger is there, and if the hurt continues so does the anger. This can feel like we are not forgiving someone. But forgiveness is an action, not an emotion. We can feel the hurt, feel the anger, and still choose to forgive a person. That means we choose to not hold it against them. That means we choose to relate to them with love, regardless of the feelings we might have.

One of the really hard things is that often this is not a one time only choice. We may have to continually choose to forgive a person. That may be something that we choose many times.

Let's be clear that have a forgiving attitude is different than reconciliation. God is a forgiving God. But we are not reconciled to him until we admit our wrong, our sin, and ask for his forgiveness. Just as God has a forgiving, graceful attitude toward everyone, but only those who admit their need for forgiveness are reconciled to him, so we can have a forgiving attitude toward someone who has harmed us, but there won't be true reconciliation until there is admission of wrong.

FORGIVING IS AN INEVITABLE PRODUCT OF GRACE

This is a principle that is perhaps the main point of Jesus' story. Jacob had been forgiven billions of dollars he could never repay. Everyone in the story except for him could see that the natural response to that kind of grace should have been to give that same grace to someone who owed him. His insistence on punishing him was abhorrent to all.

Ephesians 4:32 says, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” We also had a debt, and it was one we could never make go away. Our debt before God was nearly infinite and we deserved nothing but judgment and the consequences of our wrong. Yet Romans 5:8 says while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. He did it freely. He freely gives grace.

Yes, other people will wrong us. But they will never be as guilty before us as we were before God. The fact that God has forgiven all our sin means we should do the same for other people who have wronged us.

This is just a normal thing really. Laurie and I went to a great ice cream store one night while we were on vacation. We have discovered that when you are on vacation calories don't affect you, so dessert is a must. This store has terrific ice cream. It's pretty expensive compared to some others, but hey, we were on vacation. When we were arriving at the store there was a large family that was getting there just ahead of us. I wanted to get in ahead of them because I figured they would take a long time to choose and buy their ice cream, but they beat us. Oh well. We both selected our desired ice cream. They dished it up then I went to the cash register to pay. The girl rang up our purchases and as I was pulling out my wallet to pay she said, “You don't need to pay anything. It's all paid for.” I couldn't understand that. I hadn't paid anything. I had seen no signs for free ice cream. So I very eloquently said, “What?” She said the man who was the dad in the family that bought their ice cream before us told her he was having so much fun and enjoying his vacation there so much that he wanted to help other people have as much fun as he was. So he gave her \$60 and said, “Use this to pay for the ice cream of the next few groups.” So our ice cream was paid for. Do you know what I immediately thought? “I should have gotten two scoops instead of one.” But I immediately after that felt great gratitude. I was really glad that family got there before we did. Even more, I was thankful for that man and his generosity. That guy didn't owe me anything. I did not deserve that. I wanted to go thank him, but they had already left. But it left me thinking that I would like to bless other people the way he blessed me. That's what grace should do in our lives.

When we hold grudges, when we let the hurt fester, when we refuse to extend forgiveness to others, it is a sure sign that we do not really believe that we have been given grace by God. If we grasp the grace that we have received, we will never hold anything against anyone.

An article in *New Yorker* magazine a few years back reported on a study of various species of animals. They were looking for conciliatory behavior in various species, and had observed it in all but one. In other words, there are signs of forgiveness among every species except for this one. The one that does not forgive is cats. So the lesson here is, don't be a cat. As you have received grace, so you should give it.

LACK OF FORGIVING IS DEADLY

But grab hold of one more idea from this great story. Look what happened to the man who had been forgiven but refused to forgive. He ended up being punished, probably until death. Jesus was telling us that if we do not forgive it can only be because we have not experienced the reality of the grace of God. It will cause us to forgive. God hates our vengeance, our bitterness, and it will only destroy us.

A study at Erasmus University divided subjects into three groups. The first group was to think about some conflict they had which hurt them and they had never forgiven. The second group was to think about some conflict where they did forgive the person who hurt them. The third group were just to think about something neutral. They were to write their thoughts, and when done they were asked to jump 5 times without bending their knees. Groups 1 and 3 averaged jumping up 8.5 inches. Group 2, the ones who recalled how they had forgiven averaged 11.8 inches. Forgiving made them stronger, able to achieve more! Studies have shown that when we are reminded of a grudge we have or some injustice done to us our heart rate and blood pressure immediately increase. It's bad for our health.

Revenge is a common theme in movies. Recent films like *The Revenant* focus on it as did a recent movie title simply *Revenge*, but there are many others like *Ocean's 11*, *The Other Woman*, and countless others. That's because it feels to us like revenge is essential to helping us feel better, but it's not true.

When I was in college I had to read *Moby Dick*. It is a classic, one of the great American novels. Boy did I hate it. It was boring. It has a chapter 70 pages long just discussing different types of whales. Yawn. But it tells us a crucial truth. You know the story. Captain Ahab, the commander of the whaling ship *Pequod*, had a fateful encounter with a white whale known as Moby Dick that ended up costing him one of his legs. On the journey that is featured in the book Ahab has become obsessed with catching and killing the whale that so terribly injured him. His bitterness drives him to the point where he loses all judgment and common sense.

Everything is secondary to killing Moby Dick. He puts his ship and crew in increasingly insanely hazardous situations in the effort. Finally he finds the whale and a 3 day chase ensues. One officer finally speaks up, trying to bring the captain to his senses. He says, "Moby Dick seeks you not. It is you, you that madly seek him." The story teller says that Ahab is moody, desperately moody and savage sometimes. But Ahab ignores every danger. The climax comes and in it the ship itself is destroyed, and every member except for one, Ishmael, who tells the story, is killed. The story tells us this is what resentment and bitterness do for us. They only destroy us, a truth that Jesus told us 2000 years ago. The story of Carl Ericsson that I told to begin, reminds us, it is as true today as it was when Jesus first said it. Don't be a cat. Forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

