

Whose Rules? Matthew 18:21-35

Two 10-year-olds were locked in a tenacious match of one-on-one basketball. Dribble, dribble, shoot. Dip, dodge, juke, shoot. The match went on for hours. At one point, one of the young shooters was moving steadfastly toward the basket. As he grabbed the ball to dunk into the basket, he took two extra steps.

“Traveling,” shouted his opponent.

“Did not,” retorted the shooter.”

“Yes, you did, and that is against the rules. My ball.”

The two competitors stared each other down, each believing he was in the right — each of them believing he had kept the rules. The game ended in an impasse because they could not agree on who had kept the rules and who had broken them.

The issue is not irrelevant to the larger questions of life and community. What are the rules? What is right and what is wrong? And for those of us who seek to base our lives on the teachings of Jesus, matters of right and wrong are greatly complicated by the ideals of the Gospel.

This complicated effort to understand what the rules are is evident in Peter’s question to Jesus about forgiveness. Obviously, forgiveness was a key component to Jesus’ teaching. Undoubtedly, it was a feature in nearly every sermon that he preached and in every lesson that he taught.

And Peter was listening. He was paying attention. But there have to be limits, right? I mean, we can’t just forgive everything that happens between people. Sometimes there needs to be a reckoning, accountability, judgment — right?

So, Peter comes to Jesus seeking to understand the limits of forgiveness. How far does it go? What are the outer reaches of forgiveness? What are the rules?

Peter dips deep into his Hebrew roots in an effort to find the limits of forgiveness. In the theology and culture of the Hebrews, seven was the perfect number. God created the universe in six days and then rested on the seventh — the Sabbath. The number seven had come to represent completion, perfection. If something is done seven times, then it

has been done just right.

So, Peter assumes that the same is true for the act of forgiveness. If we forgive someone seven times, that ought to be enough. Seven is complete; it's the perfect number of times to forgive someone who offends us. After that, something else is called for. That is Peter's calculus of forgiveness.

But when he runs his idea past Jesus, he finds that his calculus is far too inadequate for the sort of math Jesus is using for calculating how forgiveness should work. Jesus takes the idea of perfection found in the number seven and puts it on rocket fuel, as it were. Not seven times, he tells Peter, but seventy-seven times.

If seven is the perfect number, then using the number seventy-seven would mean something like "infinity." In other words, Jesus was saying, if you are looking for the rules about how many times you should forgive, then the answer is — every time. Now the notion of forgiving every offense every time poses an immediate problem for many people. This is because of misunderstandings about the meaning of forgiveness. One of the main misunderstandings about forgiveness is that if we forgive someone for some offense, then we are saying that the offense is not offensive.

A young wife comes to her pastor and confesses that her husband has been abusing her. She has made arrangements to move out of the house and into a home for battered wives.

No one will know where she can be found, but she wants her pastor to know. She also wants to know what her spiritual responsibility is to her husband. She feels guilty about leaving him, wondering if she is violating some biblical ideal of marriage.

"What am I to do with all this," she asks her pastor.

The pastor replies, "Well, you must forgive him."

With huge tears in her eyes and a look of fear on her face she asks, "Does that mean I need to stay with him, that I should go home. Does forgiveness mean that I just pretend this didn't happen?"

"Absolutely not," the pastor replies. "Getting away from him and into a shelter is the best thing you can do right now. You need to protect yourself."

"But you said I had to forgive him," she says, with a note of confusion in her voice.

The pastor nods and looks at her with as much compassion as he can muster.

“Forgiveness is not something you do for him. Forgiveness is something you do for yourself. To let go of the anger and the hurt that you feel right now is the first step toward healing your own soul. Reconciliation is what happens when two people decide to heal a relationship.

And if your husband can ever get the help, he needs to not be abusive, then reconciliation may be a future hope. But until that happens, if it happens, forgiving him is what you do to keep from being consumed by anger and hurt.”

The other great misunderstanding connected with forgiveness is the notion of “forgive and forget.” In other words, if we truly forgive someone for some offense, we will no longer remember it.

The idea is rooted in the Old Testament, and in particular Jeremiah 31:34. “I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.” Unfortunately, to use the idea of “remembering” in the literal sense of not thinking about what has happened poses an almost impossible situation for anyone who has been hurt by another. Imposing a literal understanding of “remember” also distorts the biblical meaning of the word as well.

In Exodus 2, we read the story of the oppression of the Hebrew people by Pharaoh. Eventually their suffering becomes so great that they cry out for help.

“God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant” If we read the word “remembered” here literally, then God had forgotten his covenant with Israel, then suddenly recalled, “Hey, these are my people!” But we shouldn’t read it that way. In the Old Testament, the word “remember” means to follow through, to honor, to finish. So, when Jeremiah says that God will “remember their sin no more,” it simply means God chooses not to follow through on the consequences of our failures. God chooses not to punish us for our failures.

In personal relationships, when someone hurts us, the notion that we will literally not remember it is simply not possible. However, the notion that we can choose not to retaliate, that we can choose not to hold it against them, is something we are entirely capable of doing. And that is what it means to forgive and forget. Not that we pretend that we don’t know what happened really happened, but we control our response to what happened. Forgiveness is possible even as we remain fully cognizant of the offense. Forgiveness is not possible when our main concern is getting even.

The Lord’s Prayer contains a troubling statement about forgiveness: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not

forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

On the surface, this makes the forgiveness we receive from God seem conditioned upon whether or not we have forgiven others. But 20 centuries of Christian theology has rejected this notion. So how are we to understand these words?

What Jesus was trying to get across to us was not how we get God’s forgiveness but how forgiveness of others is possible. As we experience the unmerited grace and mercy of God, as we experience the reality that God “remembers our sins no more,” that becomes the basis for forgiving others.

If we find it difficult to forgive others, or if we are unwilling to forgive those who offend us, then it is possible that we have not fully experienced forgiveness for ourselves. Our unwillingness to “remember no more” the offenses against us may be an indication that we do not fully believe that God has fully forgiven us.

So that becomes the first step: to accept the fact that God fully accepts us, as we are. That God forgives our sins — seventy-seven times. That God remembers our sins no more. That God’s desire for us is to be free from guilt and shame and any sense of failure that comes with any failure in our life.

If we can fully experience that sense of acceptance, then it becomes possible to forgive others. That does not mean that we say that the wrong done to us is all right — it is not. Nor does it mean we are required to continue in a relationship with someone who hurt us — that is reconciliation, and an entirely different process from forgiveness.

And it does not mean we have to forget what happened. Not only is that unnecessary, but it is also impossible. To impose such an unreasonable expectation on the act of forgiveness is to make forgiveness impossible in any practical way.

Most importantly, we remember that forgiveness is something we do for ourselves more than for the one who has offended us. Forgiveness keeps us from being consumed by anger and the longing for revenge. These emotions will only consume us and ultimately take us away from the ideal of humanity and community revealed in Jesus.

Amen!