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Forgive Your Enemies: A Hard Teaching

Sanha Kang

Matthew 18:28-34

Hello, everyone. Forgiveness. That's a word that I hear quite often in America, and it's not always limited to churches. Holding grudges and revenge are popular topics to explore in the realm of fiction. We want to see the hero get the bad guy who wronged him or her. We want to see justice play out in this dramatic and action-filled way. When the hero gets the bad guy, we cheer, we clap, we feel satisfied with that ending.

Of course, sometimes, there are films and books about the destructive nature of revenge. How far will the hero go to exact revenge? What if getting revenge destroys their relationships, harms innocent people, or consumes the hero themselves? In these stories, the moral of the story is that you shouldn't always get revenge. You shouldn't let your mind be clouded in anger or hatred. Of course, in these stories, the hero is presented with two options: the fast, dramatic, action-filled path where revenge consumes them and the slow, not-as-dramatic, and relatively quiet path where the justice system takes care of the bad guy. In both cases, the reader or watcher knows that justice will happen, but the hero is impatient. They want justice now because they want their revenge, so they choose the fast path.

But, that's not true in the real world, is it? Justice doesn't always happen. The people that hurt you won't always be punished for it. And vice versa. We hurt people. Not always intentionally, but we hurt people. And sometimes, we get away with it. In the real world, it can feel like there are two choices: you get revenge, or you let your enemy go.

Except, there is a third path. One day, Peter comes to Jesus with a question. How many times should we forgive his brothers and sisters? How many times should we forgive the other members in our community? Seven times, he asks. But Jesus responds with, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times." And if you remember from when I preached my children's message about forgiveness, it's not like Jesus is saying, "But if they sin against you 78 times, then you can hate them." No, if you were to ask Jesus, "How many times should we forgive? 77 times?" Jesus would reply, "Not 77 times, but 777 times."

Now, we're not entirely sure where Peter got this number of seven from, as it's not listed in Hebrew law. We have theories, but nothing concrete. Perhaps this is a reference to Cain where he begged God to spare him after being cursed, so God said to Cain that whoever would kill Cain would be punished sevenfold. Perhaps this was a personal idea in his spiritual life. I mean, seven times is a lot. Like, I love my younger brothers, but if they were to sin against me seven times, I would look at them suspiciously, thinking, "Something is going on here."

So, imagine how surprised Peter must have been when Jesus responded with 77 times. Why so many? Shouldn't there be a limit to forgiveness? I mean, there must be a point where someone could say, "No, you are a harmful person. I've forgiven you so many times, but you still try to hurt me. No more." Shouldn't there be a point like that? Why 77?

Jesus explains afterwards. After saying 77 times, Jesus tells the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant where one servant owed his king 10,000 talents and another servant owed 100 denarii. Jesus then ends this story with this: "My Heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." So, reason number 1 of why we should forgive: "Because God expects us to do so." God forgives

us so often. Every time we mess up, every time we sin, we can take comfort in the fact that because of what Jesus did, we can ask for forgiveness from God and get it. We don't need to be afraid. We don't need to think, "What if God is still angry with me?" No, God is always on our side. But we read that God doesn't give our forgiveness like candy on Halloween. In Halloween, we give candy out no matter who the child is, what they're dressed up as, or what they've done. We don't know all the children who come by for candy, but we give them candy. God, on the other hand, forgives but expects us to follow His example. When we don't, God reprimands us. Why should God forgive us if we refuse to forgive anyone?

But there are other reasons within this story. Reason number 2: it's for individual spiritual health. Think about this first servant. How ugly is his behavior? He was forgiven for 10,000 talents, but he would not forgive 100 denarii. A denarius was a day's wages, so if we were to translate this into modern terms, a denarius would be minimum wage, which in Illinois is \$9.25. A hundred denarii then is \$925. A lot of money, definitely. A talent is 6000 denarii, meaning one talent is \$55,500. 10,000 talents would be 555 million dollars. Yeah, there are millionaires that can't pay this debt back. After being forgiven 555 million dollars, you would expect that the servant would forgive 925 dollars. By not forgiving \$925, it tells us that this servant is greedy, impatient, intolerant of others, hypocritical. He borrows millions of dollars and doesn't have to pay it back, but he can't forgive less than a thousand?

Not forgiving allows for negative traits to creep in. It reinforces the traits you already have. I mentioned before that I used to be very angry. If I don't forgive, it reinforces my anger, and it makes me feel like my anger is justified. I don't like who I am when I get that angry. And so, I had to learn how to forgive because by learning how to forgive, it taught me temperance and patience. It opened the path for good traits. This applies to greed, intolerance, hypocrisy, and jealousy.

There is one more reason. Reason number 3: it is for a spiritual community. Think about these characters in the story: the king, the first servant, and the second servant. At the beginning, they were all talking with each other. The fact that the servants were borrowing money tells us that they were in conversation with each other. There was a community here. But at the end of the story, both servants are in jail, and the king is not talking with either of them. The relationships they had with each other were broken.

Now, if you think about it, the second and third reason, spiritual health and community health, are themes we see in these movies that I was talking about. Revenge can destroy the hero and destroy their relationships. It seems like these secular movies are capturing what Jesus is talking about, right?

No. Actually, these secular movies do pretty well in capturing the nature of not forgiving, but they don't capture what Jesus is teaching. The reason is that there is a difference between forgiving and not getting revenge. Remember what I said in the beginning? These movies have two choices, one fast choice where the hero gets revenge and one slow choice where the justice system intervenes. The slow choice is not getting revenge; it allows the justice system to do what it is meant to do. But is that forgiveness? I said that there are three paths we can take. These three paths are revenge, not getting revenge, and forgiving.

What does it mean to forgive? When you forgive someone, what does it look like? Forgiveness is a letting go. It's the opposite of holding onto a grudge. But I see people all the time who say they forgive someone, but they really don't. They say they forgive, but they act cold towards someone, they don't talk with them, they don't include them in their social events, etc. Sure, they don't attack them, they aren't hostile, and they don't spread rumors. But the problem here is that people often confuse not getting revenge as forgiveness. They aren't letting go of their grudge, their hatred, their negative feelings for the other person. They're just not

acting on it. This is why Jesus adds “from your heart” when talking about forgiveness. It’s about what’s in your heart rather than what you do.

Now, I’ll say this. If you think that forgiving is easy, you either had a life without any enemies or you’ve tricked yourself. Forgiving is not easy. Oh, it’s easier when you’re forgiving those you have a strong connection with like your family and friends. It’s easier when the community matters to you like in the church. But what about those you don’t have a strong connection with? Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 that we must love our enemies. Have you forgiven the people you hate? Have you forgiven the people that get on your nerves? What about the people that disgust you? When you’re offended by someone, either on the internet or maybe even when you’re driving and someone cuts you off, how long does it take for you to forgive? Or do you even forgive them, or do you just forget about them once your anger goes away?

Look inside your heart. I guarantee that you’ll find something in there that still holds a grudge against someone, even if you don’t know that person well. Someone offended you, and you feel like they owe you something. Maybe not money, but at least an apology. One example of this is this classic dialogue. Someone messes up, so they apologize. After they apologize, the other person says, “Okay, I forgive you.” That’s not forgiveness. That’s accepting their apology. They offended you, so they paid you back with an apology. Maybe you don’t feel like an apology is enough, so when you say, “I forgive you,” you think you’re letting go of the negative feelings that weren’t calmed down by the apology. But that’s not true forgiveness because you only chose to forgive once they tried to pay you back. To truly forgive means to let go of your negative feelings against a person because you chose to do so out of love and empathy, not because they tried to appease you.

God always looks inside our hearts, and God judges by what He finds in there rather than our actions. So, I tell all of you, look inside your hearts. What do you find? Do you find a heart that has grown to be loving and caring, despite the evils of the world? Or do you find a heart that justifies its actions because it makes you feel better? God wants us to be better for our sake, our community’s sake, and the sake of our relationship with God. That’s a lot that is at stake, so we cannot take this lightly. We must take forgiveness seriously.