

# The God Who Doesn't Keep Score

Matthew 18:21-35

Proper 19-A, September 14, 2014

[Please note: Portions of this sermon are taken from a sermon entitled "Once More from the Heart," on Matthew 18:21-35, written by Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book: **SEEDS OF HEAVEN**; sermons on Matthew's Gospel; published in 2004, by Westminster John Knox Press, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, Kentucky 40202-1396]

Simon Peter came to Jesus: ***"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Seven times?"*** Jesus said to him, ***"Not seven times, but seventy times seven!"*** which actually comes out to be 490 times.

I, for one, have always found myself confronted with some very important unanswered questions with respect to this particular Gospel lesson (Matthew 18:21-35). When Simon Peter says "my brother" who is he talking about? Was Simon Peter talking about his own biological brother, Andrew, the first of Jesus' twelve disciples that our Lord called to follow him? St John tells us that immediately after this, Andrew goes and tells his brother Simon Peter, ***"We have found the Messiah!"*** so that Peter ends up becoming one of Jesus' disciples too. From everything you know about Simon Peter with all of his impetuosity and swollen pride, do you think it may have been difficult to have him as a brother? Was there some major sibling rivalry between them?

Or is Peter speaking here about a fellow disciple? One day when Jesus was sharing the good news about the kingdom of God in a synagogue, we learn in Mark chapter 3, that someone interrupted our Lord with what they thought was a very important message: ***"Jesus, your mother and your brothers are looking for you and are standing outside the synagogue!"*** Without missing a beat, Jesus says to those assembled in the synagogue: *"Who are my mother and brothers!"* Then looking at everyone in the room he continued, *"Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, these are my brothers and sisters and mother!"*

Or was Peter using the word "brother" here in a far more generic and general sense, simply to speak about another human being? Is it the same sin that this particular brother commits against Peter seven different times, or are they seven different sins? **Who is to say for sure?**

**BUT ONE THING WE KNOW, NO ONE LIKES TO BE TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF OR MADE A FOOL OF.** You might remember that day when President George W. Bush, our 43<sup>rd</sup> President, sometimes called "W" or 43, to distinguish him from his father President George Herbert Walker Bush, our 41<sup>st</sup> president got all tongue-tied when he tried to recite from memory an old proverb with respect to this whole matter: ***"Fool me once, shame on you! Fool me twice, shame on me!"***

Peter's question reminds me that we all tend to have those little calculators in our heads that are constantly keeping score of how much we are putting into our relationships, versus how much we are receiving from our relationships, and we usually don't continue to pursue those relationships with a negative balance! We prefer more cost-effective relationships in which the amount of ourselves that we invest into those relationships is much more even with the withdrawals that we also make.

Most of us tend to place limits on the amount of involvement we are willing to put into those relationships with a negative balance!

**WELL, IN RESPONSE TO PETER'S QUESTION, JESUS ANSWERS HIM BY TELLING A PARABLE, AS JESUS OFTEN DOES WHEN PRESENTED WITH A VERY IMPORTANT QUESTION.**

Jesus begins this rather prickly parable telling us about a king who was no doubt a very wealthy man who also had several Certified Public Accountants (CPA's) in his employ, who kept an accurate ledger running at all times on his net worth. He probably had hundreds of servants, and sometimes, some of those servants owed him large sums of money which they couldn't repay! Every so often, therefore, a day of reckoning would come in which the king sought to settle up his accounts with his debtors.

On this particular day, he must have started out with those whose names were at the top of the list, for there was this one particular servant, Jesus says, who owed the king TEN-THOUSAND TALENTS, which is an enormous amount of money! Commentators tell us today that this amount would be much more closely aligned with a billion dollars that it would be with a million dollars in our day.

When the servant is brought before the king, the king declares that he and his family members are to be sold, not because the price on their heads would in any way cover the cost of this man's indebtedness, but this king, **like any good business man knows that are times in the business world when you simply have to cut your losses and move on.**

When the sentence is pronounced, **the servant falls down on his knees before the king, pleading for mercy and even vowing that if the king would only be patient with him, that over time he would pay back the debt in its entirety, which is a complete absurdity** if ever there was one, because there is no way that this man with the kind of monies he was making could pay back the dead even if he lived out his whole life upon this earth fifty different consecutive times!

But for reasons of his own, **THE KING IS MOVED NOT ONLY BY THIS SERVANT'S PLIGHT BUT BY THIS SERVANT'S PLEA**, and certainly not because he was obligated to do so. Yet, he decided to have mercy upon this poor servant, totally relinquishing the debt that had been acquired against him.

**But the real fly in the ointment comes next, when even as he was leaving the king's palace, a fellow servant approaches him, who owes him a debt too, with the same plea, "Have patience with me and I will pay you back the debt!"** And this is a debt that **could have been repaid, 100 denarii, or a mere \$3000** by comparison. But what does this ungrateful servant do? He grabs his fellow servant by the throat demanding that he be thrown into prison until every last cent of his debt would be paid!

**Here this man, within a matter of moments has a chance to return the favor by forgiving one of his own debtors, a paltry sum of money in comparison to the great debt that has just been forgiven against him, and apparently the thought or the idea never even crosses his mind!**

Those who were eyewitnesses to this whole event, went and told the king what had happened, and the king who earlier that day was **absolutely merciful and gracious, is not outraged and offended** that the great act of benevolence he had shown upon his servant did not make any difference upon him, it seems, in his approach to life and other people at all!

When the king summons the man to be brought into his presence, the king says to him: *“You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt, because you besought me! And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I have had mercy on you?”*

Because he didn’t “pass it on,” so to speak, or pay the king’s immense generosity forward, the king demands that the first sentence he pass on this man be revoked, and that he now be resentenced to prison until he could pay off every last cent, which no doubt meant that he would end up spending his whole life in jail.

**Friends how could anybody ever be that hardhearted? How could anyone who became such a profound benefactor or such immense mercy and compassion, remain completely unmoved and unchanged by what had just taken place in their life?** And perhaps there is a simple answer to this question: **The forgiven servant just didn’t get it, he never realized fully what had just happened to him in his life!** Rather than seeing the tremendous debt that had been relinquished against him 100% completely and fully by the king—as nothing less than a profound expression of the king’s mercy and grace being shown to him in his life, **he remained rather flippant about the whole ordeal instead!**

**Maybe instead of taking time to fully ponder and to meditate upon what had just happened, he chalks it all up to a mere stroke of good luck instead, a close call, a potential crisis in his life with extreme consequences, but that somehow was all miraculously avoided and diverted away from him by the luck of the draw, or the luck of the Irish, or simply because that’s not how fate would have had it, or by the fact that he was simply dealt a good hand of cards that day, but he never sees what just has happened to him in his life as nothing less than an act of pure mercy and grace as something that had flowed out of the king’s own benevolent heart towards him!**

You know someone once pointed out that you and I can never give to anyone else, something that we don’t first of all have for ourselves! You may see another person whose life is in financial ruins. Their car has been repossessed and their house is about to be foreclosed on and as much as you wish that there was something that you could do to help them, you are completely helpless to help them, because you only have \$500 in your checking account, with no other monies in a savings account, or any other kind of financial stocks and bonds in your portfolio that somehow you liquidate to help them. You can’t give to someone else, something that you don’t first of all have for yourself.

And isn’t this especially true for us also in the spiritual realm? The most forgiving people in this world are those who first have come to realize just how much they have previously been forgiven themselves? By nature we all have offended the God who has created us and given us the gift of life by our unholy living. And we do so not only by our open acts of rebellion against his laws that he has clearly given to us in his Ten Commandments, but Jesus teaches us also that we can sin against God by our thoughts and with our words, as well as in our acts of open rebellion against him (Matthew 5:21-48).

Jesus is teaching us what Joseph is reminding us of also in our Old Testament lesson today!

**HUMAN FORGIVENESS MUST ALWAYS BE ROOTED IN DIVINE FORGIVENESS!** If I am able to forgive at all, it is because I have been forgiven, because thanks to someone else, **I know how it feels to have my debts cancelled, my credit restored, my relationship renewed. When it has happened to me, it is like someone has taken a big pink eraser and scrubbed my record clean,** or better yet, has retired the ledger with my name on it and refused to keep score anymore. It is an incredible experience, but it is never one of my own doing. All I have

ever been able to do is ask for it—to ask for forgiveness—but when it has been granted it has come to me from outside myself, a free gift from someone whom I have hurt, whom I have owed, but who has decided that what is more important than getting even is to remain in relationship with me. **THIS IS WHAT REAL FORGIVENESS IS ALL ABOUT—PURE, UNADULTERATED GRACE. BUT ANYONE WHO HAS EXPERIENCED THE GENUINE ARTICLE KNOWS THAT THERE ARE ALSO A LOT OF IMPOSTERS** around will speak about forgiveness—and call it forgiveness—when it isn't the kind of forgiveness that God offers to us in the gift of his Son at all.

Some people imagine that forgiveness, is simply to sweep another person's transgressions under the rug; we simply avoid a willingness to work through issues and call it forgiveness. We can say things that sound forgiving and call it forgiveness, while our actions bear no resemblance to our words at all! There is a lot that seeks to pass for forgiveness these days that is little more than mere indifference, which really isn't forgiveness at all. We dismiss people from our lives by "forgiving" them, we say, and then have less and less to do with them until finally there is nothing left between us at all. **When this happens, Jesus teaches us that it is because we have forgotten what it is like to be forgiven ourselves, genuinely forgiven from the heart, especially what it means to be forgiven by the King himself, the LORD God almighty, who sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him!**

**If we have truly become recipients of God's help and another person's help in a time of great peril and need, and actually came to recognize that help for what it was—not a mere accident, or coincidence, or a stroke of good luck, but a true gift from God and true gifts to us from other people—how can we be so unwilling at times to return the favor, to pay it forward, to help others experience the same joy and peace in their lives that we have first experienced for ourselves?**

How could we deprive anyone else of the same experience? It would be like refusing to share food, or water, like breathing in and refusing to breathe out. Once we have experienced the exhilaration, how could we fail to pass it on?

That is what the king wants to know. ***"I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Matthew 18:32)***

**Somehow, when the king released him and forgave him his debt, he did not get it. He thought he had gotten away with something. He thought he had pulled a fast one. He thought the king was soft in the head to buy such an obvious lie. "Lord, have patience with me and I will pay you everything."**

He could never repay what he owed. He knew it and the king knew it, but if making the king feel sorry for him meant he did not have to pay, what did he care?

**He missed the experience of forgiveness altogether! It never occurred to he was being forgiven from the heart by someone who understood the enormity of his debt—indeed, by someone who had financed it—but who was willing to let it all go, to stop keeping score, to erase the debt that had become a substitute for the relationship so that they could get to know one another again.**

**That is what real forgiveness is all about! The reason to forgive each other is so that we might have the relationship back again, which is hard to do when you are keeping score.** As long as you are focused on what someone owes you, you tend to spend your time figuring out how to get paid back, or proven right, or protected from further harm.

**But once you have forgiven your brother or sister from your heart, then it is time to put the calculator way and go for a walk, time to compare notes on what you have learned, time to get to know one another again.**

That is what the wicked servant missed. When the king forgave him, he just figured that he had **outsmarted the old guy, and that the best way to cut his own losses was to see that the same thing did not**

By the end of the parable, **Peter thinks he has gotten the message: “Do unto others or the king will do unto you!”** Only this is not the message of the parable at all. The message of the parable is: **“DO UNTO OTHERS AS THE KING HAS ALREADY DONE UNTO YOU. IT IS NOT A MATTER OF EARNING YOUR FORGIVENESS,** or letting others off the hook so that you will be let off the hook yourself.

It is a matter of understanding that you have **ALREADY BEEN FORGIVEN, THAT SOMEONE TO WHOM YOU OWE EVERYTHING--ALL THE LOVES OF YOUR LIFE—SOMEONE WHO HAS GIVEN AND GIVEN AND GIVEN TO YOU AND WHO HAS GOTTEN PRECIOUS LITTLE IN RETURN HAS EXAMINED YOUR ENORMOUS DEBT IN GREAT DETAIL AND KNOWS FROM YOUR CREDIT RATING THAT THE CHANGES OF REPAYMENT ARE NIL.** Someone who knows all of that has taken the stack of your IOUs and torn them in two, balancing your books in one fell swoop for one reason and one reason alone—because that someone wants to remain in relationship with you, and want you to be free to respond!

And this ONE is none other than the Triune God himself, who has created, redeemed and is sanctifying you that you might come to know the joy and peace afforded in living in fellowship with him now and the joy and the peace afforded in living in the hope of an eternal fellowship, completely free from sin, death, and anything harmful or hurtful again!

**When someone like that has stopped keeping score on you, you feel sort of foolish keeping score on the people in your own life. You feel sort of petty, wanting to write them off after seven times, or even after seventy times seven, for that matter, when you consider how many times you have been forgiven yourself, forgiven from the heart over and over and over again,** through no merit of your own but simply because someone loves you very, very much and wants to love you some more. Once you have let that sink in, once you have really taken that in to your own heart, how can you—how can any of us—pass up a single chance to do the same?

**Yet isn't it also true—sometimes we falsely imagine we have already forgiven someone else 490 times, when in actuality, it probably is perhaps only seven times at best? Amen**