

September 17, Ordinary 24A (Matthew 18:21–35)

The failure to forgive disrupts, distorts, and degrades community.

by [Chris Dorsey](#) in the [August 30, 2017](#) issue

This week's passage from the Gospel of Matthew includes Jesus' best-known instructions on forgiveness. When Peter asks how many times "another member of the church" is to be forgiven, Jesus insists that forgiving someone seven times is not adequate. The offending member must be forgiven 77 times. The number seems staggering but communicates clearly that forgiveness is to be an essential part of Christian communal life.

To punctuate his point, Jesus invokes a "kingdom of heaven" analogy that shows how seriously we are to take the admonition to forgive. He tells the story of a king who is owed a debt by his slaves. At the moment when the king expects to be paid, one slave is not able to pay—and as a result is to be sold along with his wife and children. The man pleads with the king and asks to be given more time. The king has mercy on him and forgives the debt completely—but then the slave does not extend the same mercy to a fellow slave who owes him a debt. When the king finds out, he reinstates the original debt and has the slave tortured until he can repay it.

Is God the king in this story and we the slaves? Is the debt we owe a result of how we have sinned against God? That's a harsh analogy, and one that doesn't quite match Peter's original question about how many times church members are to be forgiven. It does, however, illustrate how seriously God takes forgiveness. In any case, what seems to be at the heart of the matter in the story, and within the paradigm of sin and forgiveness, is this: the failure to forgive disrupts, distorts, and ultimately degrades community.

We can certainly see the original transgression as having a disruptive effect on relationships. Over time the transgression can lead to hurt and increasingly negative feelings. What's at stake isn't just a matter of debt and repayment or transgression and recompense. Ultimately, this is about the balance and integrity of community.

While the king is owed a debt, he is moved by the slave's recognition that the debt is owed and by his seemingly heartfelt desire to make amends. It is important to the king that the slave and his family be allowed to continue as productive members of the community. Undoubtedly the king recognizes that extracting payment for the debt by selling off the slave would be disruptive to the cohesiveness of the community. Forgiving the debt may not enrich the king's coffers, but it maintains the integrity of the community and demonstrates that mercy is the thread that holds the kingdom together.

Sadly, the slave doesn't learn this lesson. We often fail to remember it, too. When we have experienced a transgression at the hands of our neighbor, the hurt we feel prevents us from seeing that our inability to forgive is just as disruptive to community as the original transgression. When the transgressor makes every possible effort to make amends and sincerely asks for forgiveness, our response must be merciful—and must take into consideration God's desire that we live in just and compassionate communities. The king in the story reacts angrily when the slave refuses to offer mercy to the fellow slave, because he knows that this inability to forgive will inevitably degrade the communal impetus he has set in motion with his original act of forgiveness.

So in telling this story, Jesus doesn't just punctuate his admonition to forgive with a formulaic illustration. He reveals a framework for forgiveness that is about mercy, compassion, and justice. It begins with the transgressor—the one who owes the debt—acknowledging and remembering the debt/transgression and endeavoring to make amends. It's easy to miss that part, but the paradigm of forgiveness, mercy, compassion, and justice works in multiple directions. The story illustrates this reality. Sometimes we are the ones who need to admit that we have transgressed, to seek forgiveness and declare our commitment to make amends. Other times, we are the ones who are owed a debt, and we must hear the apology of the transgressor and be ready to offer forgiveness when the offer to make amends is sincere.

This paradigm isn't only operative in our churches. The need to seek forgiveness and the need to forgive also work in multiple directions within a society and across the globe. We aren't always on the same side of social injustice. Sometimes we are located in a place where we need to recognize that our privilege is a result of transgressions in the past, and we have to seek ways to address this lasting debt. At other times, we find ourselves in a place where we are called to offer forgiveness to those who are seeking to right the wrongs of the past and work toward a more just

society. As for the global level, the paradigm illustrated in this passage points us to a more just and compassionate approach to the crippling debt with which many developing nations are now saddled.

The social animosity that comes from the legacy of unresolved transgression, and from debts that are continuously amassed without the ability to ever repay them, hinder our ability to live in the kind of community God desires for us. We know that the Lord requires us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Jesus' instructions to Peter and his subsequent story give us a clear sense that forgiveness is in line with what is required of us. It is a crucial part of participating in God's beloved community.