

## **“Run Out of Patience? Run In Here”**

Matthew 18:21-35

*Series: New Year, New You Part 3. Live For Others Week 3. Patience and Forgiveness*

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Seven times.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21)

Seven times – seems like a pretty high number. That’s a lot of forgiveness.

Seven times your bank, phone and cable mess up your account.

Seven times they hang up while you’re straightening it out.

Seven times a friend doesn’t return a book.

Seven times kids insult you on facebook.

Seven times someone starts texting while you’re talking.

Seven times the family forgets to take the dog walking.

Seven times you discover no one replaced the roll.

Seven times he won’t give up the remote control.

Seven times you can’t sleep because of all the snoring.

Seven times she tells the story the first time was boring.

“Three strikes you’re out” works well in baseball.

Four, five and six mean I forgive more than all.

And if I am patient and finally reach seven,

Then no one can doubt I must deserve heaven.

But if you ask where I stash all my anger and hate,

You’ll see it come out if you try number eight.

By now, Peter has followed Jesus long enough to know He is all about forgiveness. He teaches them to pray “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). He tells them, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” (Luke 6:37). The first thing He says to a paralyzed man lying at His feet was, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” (Matthew 9:2). The last thing he says to a woman wiping His feet with her hair is, “Your sins are forgiven” and when the Pharisees questioned this He says, “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.” (Luke 7:47-48).

If you want healthier relationships, forgiveness and patience are essential. Yet we are fast becoming an impatient nation. An article on NPR sums it up like this:

We: Speed date. Eat fast food. Use the self-checkout lines in grocery stores. Try the "one weekend" diet. Pay extra for overnight shipping. Thrive or dive on quarterly earnings reports. Clamor for more safety in the skies, then complain

when security takes too long—and is inconvenient. Speak in half sentences. Start things but don't finish... We tweet stories in 140 characters or less, yet some tweets are too long. We cut corners, take shortcuts. We txt.<sup>1</sup>

Timex – the watch people – asked people how long they will wait before taking action:

- Honk at a car in front of you stopped at a green light – 13 seconds
- Shush people talking in a movie theater - 26 seconds
- Take the seat of someone who walked away – 26 seconds
- Ask someone talking too loud on a cell phone to "keep it down" – 45 seconds
- Wait for a table at a restaurant – 13 minutes
- Wait for a late blind date to show up - 20 minutes
- Wait to eat for the last person to arrive for a holiday dinner – 20 minutes<sup>2</sup>

The Apostle Peter was trying to be extra patient. The rabbis in Jesus' day adhered to the "three strikes" rule. You were only expected to forgive an offense three times. Most hold to that limit today. To please Jesus, Peter upped the ante by doubling the rule and adding one. "How about seven times Lord?" I imagine Peter expected an "atta-boy" from his Master. Instead, Jesus said, "Add more boy."

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:22)

Seventy-seven times? Impossible. Even if I can forgive half that much I will lose track long before I reach number 38.5. Exactly. Peter wants a limit. When can I stop forgiving someone? I'll go all the way to seven but watch out when we hit eight. Seventy-seven is not the new limit. It's Jesus' way of saying forgiveness is limitless. And so is patience.

He tells Peter a story about a king who does an audit of his books and discovers a whopping debt.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. (Matthew 18:23-25)

First a few observations. This king is a Gentile not a Jew because the Bible forbids selling wives and children into slavery to pay a debt. That's important because we don't want to make a direct analogy between the king and God. Some things apply and some don't. You'll see what I mean as we go on. The "servant" they drag in is not one of the household help. In this case "servant" describes a royal official who rules over a country for the king. The size of the debt tells us this. It is probably the taxes his area of the empire owes to the crown. And speaking of the debt: ten thousand talents is a huge sum of money. That's millions of dollars. It would take an average worker 273,972.6 years to

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<sup>1</sup> Linton Weeks, "Impatient Nation: I Can't Wait for You to Read This," NPR (12-6-10)

<sup>2</sup> Rick Lawrence, *Skin in the Game* (Kregel Publications, 2015), pp. 105-107

earn that much money. Clearly, this servant is no average worker. This is the Bernie Madoff of the Bible. Where did all that money go? You can sell and resell his family a thousand times and it will not wipe away the debt. Yet still he tries to strike a deal.

The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. (Matthew 18:26-27)

His plea for patience is preposterous. There is no way he can pay back the debt. Then comes an amazing twist: the king not only accepts his plea, he goes beyond it, cancels the entire debt and lets him go a free man. Pause for a moment and try to capture the feeling. "Your mortgage? Paid in full. Car loan? Credit card debt? Completely wiped out. College tuition and student loans? Taken care of. Taxes? The IRS says you're good for life. How do you feel? Lighter? Freer? Now add to this the fact that you did nothing wrong to incur those debts but this man, through carelessness or corruption, certainly did. Yet with a snap of the fingers, the king makes all the debt and deceit disappear. That's forgiveness. That's patience. That's grace.

Having dodged such a bullet, you would imagine this servant strolling out into the sunlight in an extremely forgiving mood. And you would be wrong.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'" (Matthew 18:28-29)

A few minutes ago this man is strangled by the national debt. Yet the second his master frees him he goes out and chokes a fellow servant for a couple a hundred bucks. His colleague falls on his knees and begs for patience using the same words that just came out of the first servant's mouth. But this time there is no amnesty.

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. (Matthew 18:30)

He chokes him, then chucks him into prison. This is even crueller than it seems. How can he work off his debt if he is in prison? Well, you can imagine that gossip this juicy travels like lightning through government channels.

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. (Matthew 18:31-34)

When the king hears of this injustice his wrath explodes. The first servant is hauled in and thrown on the carpet. Because of his lack of patience and forgiveness, the king throws him into the prison where he will be tortured until he pays back the entire debt

which is the same thing as saying a life sentence. That sounds harsh. But remember this king is not following God's law which forbids torture. As I said before, not every element in this story applies to God. When Jesus ends the parable with,

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart (Matthew 18:35)

He does not mean God tortures you every time you fail to forgive. What does He mean?

Jesus wants to give us a new perspective on patience. I told someone I was preaching on patience and they replied, "I don't ask God to give me patience." "Why not?" "Because then He will give me more opportunities to practice patience." It's true. Patience takes practice. Take a moment and picture a situation which stirs up resentment, fills you with frustration, causes you to lose your patience. Picture it. Now let's walk it through these steps.

**Look at it Through God's Eyes.** Someone has hurt you. They injure your body, your soul, your psyche, your pride, your reputation. They damaged your past, they disturb your present, they destroy your future. You avoid them by day but you can't stop thinking about them at night. The truth is: humans always collide. Each of us tries to get the world to go our way. But when my plans clash with yours, often the result is a human fender bender. Sometimes it's worse. There is no denying the second servant owes a debt to the first. Yet just when we want to choke someone, Jesus reminds us what they did to us is not even close to what we've done to God. When you look at the situation through God's eyes, the forgiveness God gives you is infinitely greater than what He asks you to give others. It's like comparing the national debt to pocket change.

Why do we find it so hard to forgive? Often our eyes are fixed only on what they did. We go over it again and again. In our minds we repeatedly argue and win our case in court. Jesus tells us to change the scene in our psyches. Instead of looking at how much wrong they did, remember how much you've been forgiven by God.

During an early season of American Idol, Mandisa Hundley, one of the 12 finalists, was insulted by the notoriously cutting Simon Cowell. When he saw Mandisa, he made a sarcastic comment about her weight. "Do we have a bigger stage this year?" When she entered the room to learn the judges' verdict, Mandisa looked right at Simon and addressed him:

Simon, a lot of people want me to say a lot of things to you. But this is what I want to say...yes, you hurt me, and I cried, and it was painful. It really was, but I want you to know that I've forgiven you, and that you don't need someone to apologize in order to forgive somebody. And I figure that if Jesus could die so that all of my wrongs could be forgiven, I can certainly extend that same grace to you. I just wanted you to know that.

Randy said, "Amen." Simon apologized and hugged the singer.<sup>3</sup>

**Listen to What They Say.** The first servant refuses to hear the cries of the second. If he did, they would sound strangely familiar. Often the habits which annoy us in others turn out to be flaws we have but can't see. Very often, the requests we make of God are just like what others ask of us. Yet we are deaf to them. We can only hear the arguments in our heads. Before you go for someone's throat, listen to what's coming out of their mouths. Forgiveness is not denying what they did. It's dealing with it differently.

**Let Go of Your Rights.** The first servant has every right to demand payment. But if you demand your rights you just might get them. Jesus says His Heavenly Father will give you all of them – including what you rightfully deserve for what you've done. God doesn't give you your rights. He gives you something better: freedom and grace. He longs to let you off the hook. But if His forgiveness and patience flow into you, they can't stop with you or they will stink like a stagnant pond.

I heard a story about a couple who celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with their family. At the party they asked the wife how they managed to keep love alive for half a century. She smiled and replied, "On our wedding day I made up a list of ten mistakes. I promised the Lord if my husband did any of the mistakes on that list I would forgive him." "So what happened?" they asked. "Well," she said, "whenever he did anything that made me hopping mad I told the Lord, 'It's a good thing that's on the list.'"

**Let Yourself Out of Prison.** When we refuse to forgive, as the first servant did, we build a prison for that person. It might be a prison with bars of sarcasm or the silent treatment. We might avoid them for years or attack them at every opportunity. We might reject them or seek revenge. What we do not notice is our self-made cell. As long as we fail to forgive, we keep ourselves locked up. Like the servant at the end of the story, we are imprisoned and even tortured by the resentment we cannot release. God opens the cell door. Now it is time for you to stop punishing yourself. It's time to leave the prison behind and be free.

On the fourth of May, 1972 Richard Moore was running home from primary school. At this time of day, most children look forward to an afternoon of playing with friends or watching TV. But this day in Derry, Northern Ireland would be the last Richard Moore would ever see. For reasons unknown, a British soldier fired a rubber bullet at the ten year old boy. For the family, it was the second tragedy. Just months beforehand, Gerard McKinney, Richard's uncle was killed by British paratroopers on Bloody Sunday. Richard recalls

I was confused. It had been daytime on 4 May 1972 as I ran home from primary school but now it was suddenly dark. People were speaking, some shouting, with panic in their voices. I kept exclaiming, "I wasn't doing anything! I wasn't doing anything!"

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<sup>3</sup> American Idol, realitytvmagazine.com (2-15-06).

When the doctors told his father they could not save the boy's sight, his father asked, "Can I give him my eyes?" All through childhood his mother prayed for God to restore her son's sight. He even woke one night to hear his mother praying by his bedside.

Richard became a successful businessman but it wasn't enough. He decided to start a charity called Children in Crossfire to help little ones who face poverty and war. But another yearning stirred in his soul. Richard wanted to meet the soldier who shot him. His identity was kept secret. For three decades Richard tried to locate him. Finally Richard learned the soldier's name was Charles. He found his address, wrote to him and asked permission to visit. Then, on a cold January day in 2006 they met. It was awkward at first but then Richard forgave Charles. Here's what Richard later said:

After that, something peculiar and wonderful happened. Something inside me changed, something paradoxical. I began to realize that the gift of forgiveness I thought I was bestowing on the soldier who shot me was actually a gift from God to me.

I think one of the big things about forgiveness that can often be overlooked is that it's not about the person you're forgiving - it's about yourself. It didn't even matter whether the soldier wanted or needed forgiveness; the gift freed me, leaving me with a sense of serenity and blessedness.

When I met the soldier and forgave him, I believe my mother's prayers were answered. I was given a new vision, and my real wound, the one that needed healing more than my eyes, was healed."<sup>4</sup>

Ask God to open your eyes and give you His patience now.

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<sup>4</sup>Richard Moore, interview by Pat Coyle, [www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie).