

# September 17, 2017 "Passing Judgment"

(24th Sunday in Ordinary Time)

## **Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35**

Jesus' standard seems impossible but it will make miracles happen.

History is replete with examples of us trying it our way: revenge, escalation, retaliation, grudge-harboring, shunning, even killing. Imagine what the world would be like if war meant that we didn't stop until our enemies are wiped off of the map? What does it mean, for the world, to "win" against North Korea (whatever that means)? And how many imagined slights have we acted on only to find out that, as is ubiquitous and ordinary, we didn't know the whole story?

The Romans passage points to the fact that God is in charge of us all and that, if we answer to anyone, it's God alone. All of Matthew 18 points to a very clear and concise reality for us as followers of Christ. Our single most identifying trait as a community of faith must be forgiveness. And if God is really in charge then we must really forgive. It is the most profound and unmistakable act of love we can do. The reason we can know this is because God forgives us. And if we can be healed, the world around can be also.



## Romans 14:1-12

**1** Welcome the person who is weak in faith—but not in order to argue about differences of opinion. **2** One person believes in eating everything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. **3** Those who eat must not look down on the ones who don't, and the ones who don't eat must not judge the ones who do, because God has accepted them. **4** Who are you to judge someone else's servants? They stand or fall before their own Lord (and they will stand, because the Lord has the power to make them stand). **5** One person considers some days to be more sacred than others, while another person considers all days to be the same. Each person must have their own convictions. **6** Someone who thinks that a day is sacred, thinks that way for the Lord. Those who eat, eat for the Lord, because they thank God. And those who don't eat, don't eat for the Lord, and they thank the Lord too. **7** We don't live for ourselves and we don't die for ourselves. **8** If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we

belong to God. **9** This is why Christ died and lived: so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. **10** But why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you look down on your brother or sister? We all will stand in front of the judgment seat of God. **11** Because it is written,

*As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God.<sup>[a]</sup>*

**12** So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

*Footnotes:*

**Romans 14:11** Isa 45:23

- What do you think Paul means by "weak in faith"(v.1)? Could that be a measure of maturity? Resolve?
- Is Paul hearkening back to something Jesus said? (Matthew 15:16-20)
- So is Paul saying that all faith is relative (vv.5-6)? If faith is just a matter of opinion, how do we know if anyone is getting faith right?
- What is it that Paul is encouraging us not to judge?

## Matthew 18:21-35

**21** Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

**22** Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.<sup>[a]</sup>

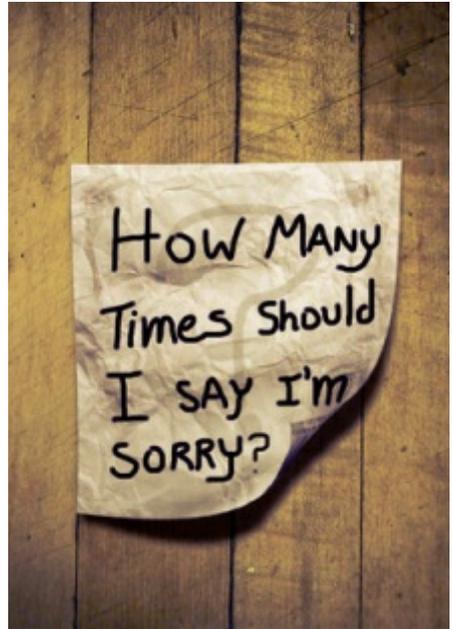
**23** Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. **24** When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold.<sup>[b]</sup>

**25** Because the servant didn't have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. **26** But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, 'Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.' **27** The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

**28** "When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins.<sup>[c]</sup> He grabbed

him around the throat and said, 'Pay me back what you owe me.'

**29** "Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.' **30** But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.



**31** "When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. **32** His master called the first servant and said, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me.' **33** Shouldn't

you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.

<sup>35</sup> "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

*Footnotes:*

**Matthew 18:22** Or "seventy times seven"

**Matthew 18:24** Or "ten thousand talanta", an amount equal to the wages for sixty million days

**Matthew 18:28** Or "one hundred denaria", an amount equal to the wages for one hundred days

- So this whole passage is a study in exaggerations. Why do you think Jesus uses this kind of language to make his point? Do you think he's being literal or is it that we need to not get stuck on the numbers?
- This passage comes right on the heels of how to deal with someone who sins against you. How does this passage inform your understanding of that?
- Why do you think God gives us so many chances?

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**"There is nothing about this passage that suggests the master forgives the debt and then offers the offensive servant unlimited access to his resources! There is nothing that suggests forgiveness is equal to allowing for perpetual cycles of abuse."**

**—Lisa Michaels**

## Commentary on Romans passage by Elizabeth Shively

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commentary\\_id=3426](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3426)

An English proverb says, "Faults are thick where love is thin"; but God demonstrates the opposite and to a greater

extent: “faults are thin where love is thick.”

In the first half of the letter to the Romans, Paul focuses on God’s love for believers: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

Now, in the second half of the letter Paul emphasizes the love that believers must show towards each other because of the love they have received. For example, “Owe no one anything except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8-10). The exhortations of chapter 14, however, suggest that in this community, love is thin because faults are thick.

Our passage belongs to a series of ethical exhortations in which Paul brings God’s gift of redemption in Christ to bear on the life of the Christian community in practical ways (Romans 12-15). Some believe that the section spanning from 12:1--15:13 addresses a series of hypothetical situations, because Paul does not give specific details about his

audience and because the text shares some content with 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. But this section of Romans differs from the Corinthian correspondence, for example, in Paul’s lack of attention to idolatry. It also contains content that points back to earlier parts of Romans, which suggests that Paul is not merely giving general exhortations but speaking to particular situations facing the community.

At the beginning of this section (Romans 12-15), Paul calls his audience to offer their bodies as a (collective) sacrifice and to be transformed by the renewal of their minds (12:1-2). The actions and attitudes about which Paul subsequently exhorts his audience provide examples of what it looks like for them enact this calling. With their Spirit-transformed minds, they are to think rightly about themselves and each other as members of the body of Christ and individually members of one another (12:3-8). Their actions are to be fueled by love and enacted in such a way that takes account of others.

In Romans 14 Paul addresses conflict in the body of Christ

about ceremonial practices that are peripheral to the gospel. Some -- whom Paul calls the "weak" -- believe that, according to Jewish tradition, certain foods are to be avoided and certain days are holy. Others -- normally called the "strong" by way of contrast -- believe that all foods and all days are equally fitting for believers to enjoy.

Paul is not addressing the issue of righteousness by works of the law or suggesting that the weak are somehow seeking a "works-righteousness." Rather, he sees the choice about practice as of a matter of conscience and an expression of faith (Romans 14:5-6). Paul largely directs his words to the "strong" because the issue with which he is concerned is the absence of love and unity in the body of Christ. While the practices regarding food and days are peripheral to the gospel, the way believers in the community treat one another is central to it.

Thus, Paul repeatedly warns these believers not to judge others in the community of faith, in Romans 14:3, 4, 5 (twice), 10. He reminds them

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**"I expect that we are not ready to accept either, a) That our debt that God has forgiven was really all that hefty to begin with; or b) that the debt we refuse to forgive someone else is really all that light."**

**—Mark Davis**

that when they pass judgment on others, they assume a role that belongs to God. He asks them why they take the role of judge over other peoples' servants (verse 4). By acting as judge, the "strong" fail to acknowledge that only the servant's master has the right to assume this role (verse 4). In

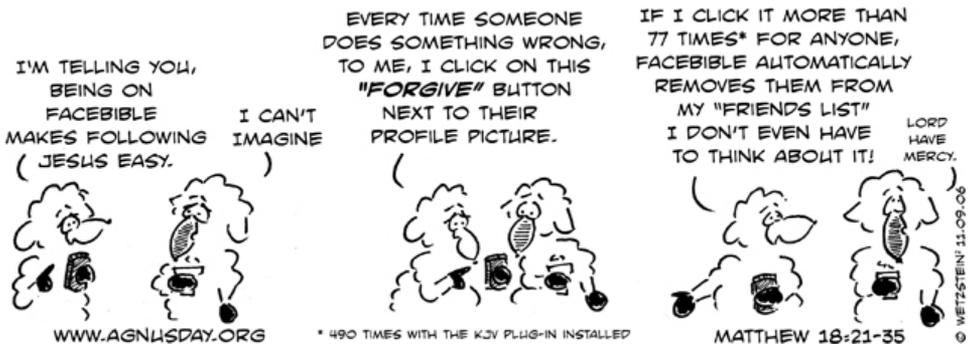
fact, God, the master of all believers (see Romans 6:20-23) "is able to make them [the weak] stand" at the judgment (14:4b). Paul then asks his audience why they stand in judgment over their brother or sister (verse 10). He reminds them that no one has the right to this role because "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God" (14:10).

We ought to read these words in light of 5:2, where Paul writes that, "through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." On the basis of Jesus's death and resurrection, God welcomed all believers as those who were weak and sinful (Romans 5:6-10). From this perspective, no one approaches God in the "strong" category. The point in chapter 14 is that all believers

are together the weak-made-strong who stand in God's grace now, and who will be made to stand confidently at the judgment because of God's gift of redemption in Christ. Since this is the case, who are we to sit in judgment over one another?

So Paul exhorts his audience to take on the role or calling that does belong to them as members of one body in Christ (see Romans 12:5). In this role, their task is to manifest love and unity as Christ's servants (see Romans 12:9-10; 13:8-10). Like Christ, Paul writes, "we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves" (14:7). Rather, we live and die to the Lord and so belong to him (verses 8-9).

Paul's exhortations in chapter 14, to build unity rather than pass judgment, contribute



towards his larger vision of the goal of the gospel. He envisions Jews and Gentiles transformed into the image of Christ, together worshiping and giving glory to God: "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together with one mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:6; see also verses 7-8). In order to realize this vision fully, the church has a unique role to play in a world rife with disunity, criticism, and blame. We may reflect the love of God in Christ by living among our brothers and sisters as those who are thick with love and thin with faults.

## **Commentary on Matthew passage by Stanley Saunders**

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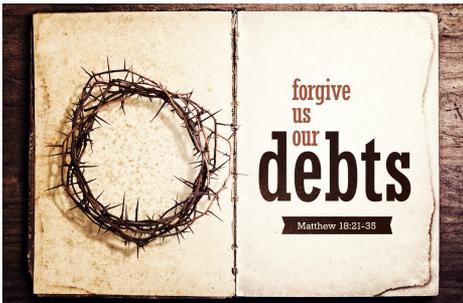
What might the practice of limitless forgiveness look like in a modern capitalist economy? Is it even possible?

The economy of forgiveness Jesus announces is congruent neither with the values and assumptions that govern human economies nor the relentless pursuit of power and privilege that drives our daily social relationships. The pursuit of unlimited forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-22) requires a definitive break from the tacit arrangements that govern everyday life, whether ancient or modern.

When Peter asks Jesus how many times he has to forgive a brother who sins repeatedly against him -- as many as seven times? -- Jesus explodes Peter's magnanimous offer: not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Jesus' number is not drawn from the air. It mirrors the boast of Cain's descendant, Lamech, in Genesis 4:23-24, who brags that the mortal vengeance he has extracted against a young man who hurt him far exceeds God's promise of seven-fold punishment against anyone who might kill Cain. Jesus is calling his community of disciples to participate in undoing the curse of Cain and Lamech that has kept their offspring trapped in spasms of

envy, hatred, violence, and retribution across the generations to this day.

The parable of the unforgiving servant serves as a sobering counterpoint -- a sharp warning -- to those who might think forgiveness is possible on limited terms. The parable illustrates with painful clarity the



difficulty of practicing forgiveness in a social system built for different purposes. It may also illustrate the power of "binding and loosing" (Matthew 18:18): even heaven has a hard time undoing the damage wrought by human choices and the intractable systems we build to sustain our places in the world of Cain and Lamech.

Despite the suggestion at the end of the parable that God will act as the king in the parable

does (Matthew 18:35), we should resist the inclination to read the parable as a simple allegory, in which the power figure, in this case a king, represents God, and the servant who is forgiven much but refuses to forgive another stands for Israel or some other too easily vilified social group. Parables work best when they are read primarily as simple, integral stories, rather than as ciphers to be decoded in terms favorable to Christians. In any case, parables do not usually convey a simple moral point so much as they are meant to induce critical reflection and to pull the blinders from our eyes.

Although the figures in this parable are exaggerated, as so often in parables, the king and his slave represent and follow scripts that would have been familiar to ancient Mediterranean audiences. Kings used agents like the "unmerciful servant" to organize lower levels of agents, from tax-farmers to torturers (Matthew 18:34), who together made up a system that ensured the continuous flow of wealth, power, and honor to the top of the pyramid.

The unforgiving servant is apparently a manager of the highest level, effectively a CFO, with control over the movement of vast wealth. The astronomical "debt" or "loan" he owes may represent the income he is responsible for producing from those lower on the pyramid of patronage. In the Mediterranean economy, the goal was to pass a steady, acceptable flow of wealth further up the pyramid, while retaining as much as one could get away with for oneself, to be used to grease one's own way further up the pyramid.

This slave, who works near or at the very top of the pyramid, may have taken too large a share for himself. The reckoning described early in the parable is meant to correct any wrongdoing on the part of the slave, but also to send a message to the whole system to limit such "honest graft." In such a case, the only recourse on the servant's part would be to beg for mercy, as this one does to good effect.

Disciplining and then restoring such a slave might be a better move on the king's part than finding a replacement. Although the king forgives the slave's enormous "loan," the slave's obligation to the king is actually intensified. He is likely to be more loyal going forward than less.

The king's stupendous act of mercy is, however, neither a private matter nor an act with consequences for this slave alone. Wiping this debt off the books has implications for everyone down the pyramid, a fact certainly noted by all the clients of this servant. The king effectively inaugurates a regime of financial amnesty, a jubilee, not only for one slave, but for everyone in his debt.

*"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong."*

*Mahatma Gandhi*

The economic revolution, however, makes it not much further than the door. The slave's immediate encounter with one of his client-slaves, someone with a much smaller obligation, demonstrates that the forgiven slave intends to revert to business as usual. He gives no heed to the second slave's appeal, although it is nearly identical to the one he had just given the king. His failure to carry on the forgiveness the king granted him not only halts the spread of financial amnesty in its tracks, it also mocks and dishonors the king himself. The king cannot ignore such an affront. The unforgiving slave binds himself not to the king's mercy, but to the old system of wealth extraction and violence. He thus binds the king in turn to deal

with him once again within the confines of this system.

Matthew's Jesus seems to tell us that God's forgiveness has necessary limits, but perhaps these are the limits we set. The unforgiving slave brings judgment on himself by treating his own forgiveness as a license to execute judgment on others. He thus transforms a merciful king into a vengeful judge. The problem lies not with the king, or even by analogy with God, but with the world the slave insists on constructing for himself, under which terms his fate is now set. With whom, and to what systems, do we bind ourselves each day?



## Additional Thoughts

- What is the defining characteristic of your personality? What is the defining characteristic of your life of faith?
- Without forgiveness no relationship could function: not ours with God nor with each other.
- *(from last week)* Why does God want us giving so many “chances” to someone? What’s motivating God to do this with us? (Hint: same thing that should be motivating us)
- “This is not simply a command to forgive more. It is an indictment of ANY system that sets God up as the one who keeps score.” –Richard Swanson

- “‘How often should I forgive, Jesus?’ Of course, Jesus’ response to Peter’s question doesn’t really provide an answer but rather points out the misdirection of the question itself. How many times should we forgive? The issue is not how much or how often we are asked to forgive or should forgive. The act of forgiveness is already a limitless, measureless act. Forgiveness is never not present in our lives and in our relationships. That’s the issue. Forgiveness is part and parcel of the Kingdom of Heaven. It’s a constant. It’s not optional. It’s not a choice. We want it to be -- and that’s at the heart of Peter’s question.” –Karoline Lewis



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