

New math: Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew's story is terrible news. It is also the truth that will make us free.

by [Gracia Grindal](#) in the [August 28, 2002](#) issue

Matthew's Jesus has been teaching the disciples that the kingdom of heaven works not as the world works, but as a new way to live based on forgiveness. Now for the parable, which illustrates almost every point of the discourse that preceded it. What's surprising to me is how thoroughly the parable teaches the lesson: the Christian community reckons pardons differently than the world does. The brother wronged, instead of seeking revenge, should go to the one who wronged him and work out the issue in private so that the community will flourish and not be torn apart by bitterness and a desire for revenge. Children should be treated gently, and those who fail in this work deserve to have a millstone put around their necks. And by the way, the lost are of primary value to the Son of man who will do everything to save the straying one. As if to assure them that these things will be possible, Jesus promises that he will be there when they gather in his name and that he will grant them whatever they ask.

Peter always asks the first question, the one we would probably ask. Jesus has just called him "the rock," and then "the devil," so he might have learned to wait a bit, but then he starts again: How much do I have to forgive? Convention had it that three pardons were all you deserved—or in Peter's economy, all you needed to give. Peter approaches warily, even upping the ante from three to seven, asking Jesus whether it should be seven—a nice view into Peter's growing understanding that Jesus usually will not give the answer they might expect. How much of a surprise Jesus' view is, this parable illustrates, neatly summing up the fifth petition, the Golden Rule and the day's discourse.

In it he illustrates point for point what he was saying about the Christian community. The king, wrathful at the man who begs for time to pay him back, relents, is merciful and forgives the debt. The friends of the poorer servant go to the king on his behalf in an exquisite show of Christian concern for the brother. It is interesting to note that

they do not go to the scoundrel who did all this; perhaps they have sensibly noted that he will not listen. They go to where they can get what they need, from the Lord who has already shown mercy to the one. As Jesus said, he'll be wherever two or three are gathered, and wherever two agree about a request, the heavenly Father will give it to them.

But the conclusion of the parable, that we must forgive our brothers and sisters from the heart, is too much for me. What does it mean to do this? I know that Jesus is right to say that without forgiveness the Christian community cannot flourish. But with our psychologizing of guilt and shame this past century, we've gotten so messed up on what forgiveness is that I find it difficult to sort this story out. You say you forgive someone, but you keep in your heart a bill of particulars ready to be whipped out at the next infraction—this is not forgiveness from the heart. The church has quit talking about sin and forgiveness, and “plays” at community without getting to the depths of the heart where the forgiveness must start. The Lord's Supper has degenerated—it cannot be a rite of community without true forgiveness. We should not be taking the cup until we have made things right with our neighbors. Forgiveness is necessary for us to be one in Christ.

Dante taught me that sin is simply the father saying to the sinner, Thy will be done. The unforgiving heart is a proud heart that stands over and against the community, refusing to bow to community and instead casting itself out of the circle. Although this story is terrible news, it is also the truth that will finally make us free.

In my tradition of Lutheran pietism, people used to dread the Lord's Table when they knew that they harbored sinful thoughts and resentments against their brothers and sisters. They did not feel repentant enough to dare to drink to their own damnation. Something dangerous happened in communion, and they did not dare receive the cup without making amends with the neighbor. Luther even argued that one should not receive communion in a strange place because neither the community nor the pastor would know if there had been amendment of life.

This is strange language to us. We have mainlined grace so cheaply that we no longer understand the disconnect in our own spiritual lives. As Bonhoeffer argued, we have begun to justify sins instead of sinners. We insist on a superficial forgiveness and judge people who are judgmental and unforgiving. Here is where Jesus gets us again. It needs to be from the heart.

I have learned in my life that I do not always have it in my heart to do what is required here. For many of us, the only solution is to get a new heart. English poet Stevie Smith puts it well in her poem, "The Repentance of Lady T":

I look in the glass.
Whose face do I see?
It is the face
of Lady T.

I wish to change.
How can that be?
Oh Lamb of God
Change me, change me.