

Did we just catch Jesus in a lie? I know that's a startling question and especially disconcerting when coming from a pastor—and here's your 'spoiler alert', I don't actually think we caught Jesus in a lie, but hear me out as to why that thought crossed my mind....

Jesus begins by telling Peter that we need to forgive over and over again. Not three times, which is what the Jewish custom was to do and not seven times, which Peter has offered, but seven times seventy.

To Matthew's Jewish audience, seven was a significant number. In the book of Deuteronomy, the Israelites were to cancel all debts (and free their slaves) every seven years. Dolores Smyth points out that (t)he "numbers seven and seventy-seven may have their roots in Genesis 4 (where) God pronounces sevenfold vengeance on anyone who kills Cain (v. 15)...and...expands it to seventy-seven-fold for anyone who might kill Lamech (v. 24)." <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/bible/what-is-the-biblical-significance-of-the-number-7.html> We know that Jesus took conventional wisdom and turned it upside down many times. It could well be that he took these numbers that originally referred to vengeance and applied them instead, to forgiveness.

So Jesus has said, forgive seven times seventy or seventy-seven times. Then he tells a story of what the kingdom of heaven is like. There's a king in the kingdom, so we can assume that the king is God. Someone owes the king a great deal of money and the king shows a great deal of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. The person whose debt has been forgiven then goes and calls in a debt, not showing any grace, mercy, or forgiveness he's just been shown. People rat him out to the king and the king throws him in jail.

This is what the kingdom of heaven is like (?!?) One strike and you're out?!? Yikes!

The God I believe in will forgive you if you ask for forgiveness if you're truly contrite. You've often heard me say at Communion time, "There is nothing that can separate you from the love of God." But what if there is something that can separate us from the love of God...**and that something-- is us?** (Gulp!)

I propose this as the 'divine karma' interpretation: In the Sermon on the Mount, earlier in this gospel, Jesus teaches the people to pray saying the same words we used earlier today, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". What if we don't forgive others and then we pray to God to 'forgive us our debts, or trespasses, or sins, or as we forgive our debtors, those who trespass against us or those who commit sins against us? (How's that going to work out for us, given the passage that Pastor Dan just read for us?!)

I also suggest that it's not just way down the road (in Heaven) that we get 'jailed' for our unforgiving behavior. I think it's right here and now (on earth). When we don't forgive, it's like getting Monopoly card, "Go directly to jail". We suffer. And we continue to suffer by withholding forgiveness. Verse 18 says 'whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

We bind ourselves up like Jacob Marley with links and chains that we forge in our lives through out behavior. When we hold on to anger and frustration because someone 'done us wrong', then we bind ourselves to that person with our resentment and pain.

We have each had someone hurt us, either inadvertently or on purpose. We have each suffered because of another. We each have a choice about what to do about it, whether or not we know who or where that person is...or whether they're even still alive. We have a choice.

My Aunt Clara and I were very close. I used to take her out for lunch often and inevitably, she would fall back on what I call her 'greatest hits' stories...many of which involved a relative who didn't treat her very well. The thing is that even years after that relative had passed away, she was telling those same stories and reexperiencing the trauma of the past as though it was in the present, even though the perpetrator of the action wasn't even alive. So who was keeping the pain alive and current? Aunt Clara-the victim. The blame game is one that many of us play, but no one ever wins.

I had an incident 5 years ago with a would-be landlord. She changed the terms of our rental agreement the night before I was to move in. The day of the move, as the movers were loading the truck, I spoke with her on the

phone and we decided that though it would put me in a bind since I had no other place to move to, I would not move in to her apartment. I would send back the keys (which I did) and she would send back the \$2400 I had given her the night before. (Do you have any idea where this is going...?) “She would send back the \$2400 I had given her the night before (which she did not). That’s a lot of money to lose. After a few more interactions with this person, I consulted an attorney who said it was a tough case because it was ‘she said/she said’...and so I lost \$2400. It still bothers me from time to time, but every time that I get angry and worked up about it, I realize that I’m putting myself in that jail.

By holding on to the justification that I was wronged, all I’m doing is inflicting further damage upon myself. Just like my aunt did in revisiting old wounds. *The kicker in this is that by forgiving the other person, you reap the benefits.*

By refusing to hold on to the rope that keeps me connected to that would-be landlord, I’m the one who benefits. I’m free of the pain, anger, and frustration. It doesn’t mean that I’ve forgotten what happened, but that I’m no longer maintaining the emotional connection between myself and the person who took my money. In the song, Already Gone, the band The Eagles sing, “So often times we live our lives in chains. And we never even know we have the key.” That key is forgiveness.

This can be summed up as 5 C’s and they work for both sides of the issue. Here they are: Conversation. Contrition. Compassion. Control. Cut the Cord. You have a conversation about the issue. If you’re the offender, humble yourself and be contrite. Confess that you have let the other down. If you’re the person being offended, make decisions coming from a place of compassion. You are in control of how you will act and react. If you’re the offended, you can forgive, cutting the cord that keeps you connected to the offender. *I suggest that forgiveness is a gift you can give yourself.*

Some of us have ongoing issues with family members, employers, co-workers, and friends. In those cases, there’s not one issue that needs to be forgiven, but many. How do we deal with these things? I don’t think you have to be a door mat and let people walk all over you, but sometimes you have to love the person who lets you down time and again--love them and let your heart break. Forgive seven times seventy.

I dare say that all of us have done things that have hurt others. Some of those things have been doozys...others much smaller. As we saw in the example where the first man owed the king about a million dollars and the other man owed him \$400, the punishment was the same. All transgressions count.

Let me give you an example: Two young men just out of grad school were hoping to settle down and start families. They each knew that they had done things they shouldn’t have so they sought the advice of a wise family friend. This friend was significantly older. He’d seen it all and he welcomed the men to his home. The first man said that he’d committed a great sin for which he was sure God would never forgive him; the other was less worried, because he had never been guilty of anything so grave, but only of the normal collection of lesser sins.

The friend, more like a great-uncle really, told them to go out into the field behind his barn to pick up stones corresponding to the size and number of their sins. They were to take them home and consider them and later to go back to the field again and scatter the stones. A week later, both men were again at the friend’s home and the wise man said, “Now go back to my field again and get the stones you scattered, and bring them here.”

The man with the terrible burden of that one big sin immediately knew where his stone was and he brought it in. The other had scattered so many little stones that he couldn’t be certain of which ones he’d dropped or where they were. Finally, he had a knapsack full and went back to the man’s porch. The wise man said, "Your deeds are like your stones. You who brought one large stone, committed a grave sin. But you were conscious of what you had done, and with a determined effort at repentance you could be forgiven by God. But you, whose sins were many and small, like those of most human beings, have found how hard it is to catch up with one's minor lapses. And no repentance of yours can possibly be effective until you realize that small things matter."

(Adapted from *Apple, Rabbi Raymond (1970). "Penitence, Prayer & Charity: An anthology for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur". Publications Committee of the United Synagogue. London, UK.*)

If you identify as Christian, your behavior is ultimately a reflection upon God. One bad apple may not spoil the whole bunch, but one bad blackberry or one bad grape tomato WILL. It's a reflection on the group. We're a reflection of Christ as Christians. How can we *not* be merciful when asked to be? If we don't, it reflects on us. If your child is carrying a tray at McDonald's and they drop the tray on the way to the table, the manager has a choice about whether to replace the food and 'forgive that debt'—or not. If he chooses not to replace the food at no charge, does it reflect poorly on him or on the entire chain?

Here's something I never expected to say in the context of worship: Be like a heat pump. A heat pump is the newest way to heat and cool and there was an article about heat pumps in the York Weekly a few weeks ago. They're good for the environment. A heat pump doesn't make heat, but it redistributes it to different areas. Take that past grace (p-a-s-t grace) that God has already given you and make it passed grace (p-a-s-s-e-d grace). Redistribute it where it's needed. The king in Jesus example showed grace, mercy and forgiveness. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. And that's the truth! Blessed be and amen.