

Luke 17:3-10

SI: For the next couple of months we’re going to look at a few stories in the Gospel of Luke and focus on a common theme.

The theme of generosity. Generosity is a quality of the heart.

It’s a spiritual virtue that comes from knowing the generous grace of God.

INTRO: One time I gossiped about someone.

I told some stories about him that may have been true, but I cast him in worst light.

He found out about it and asked me: Did you say this about me?

I told him I did. He said it was wrong. I shouldn’t have said those things.

I told him I agreed, that I was wrong. He said: Andrew, I forgive you.

And he did forgive me. He never brought it up again. He was kind to me.

Even though I know what I said hurt him for a long time.

Two weeks ago when we started this series I made the point that generosity is not just giving money. There are many currencies of generosity.

In fact, possible to be technically generous with money but not generous in spirit.

I’ll write check but don’t want to be emotionally involved with person, too draining.

I’ll write a check, but I don’t want to spend the time or give up my privacy.

Why? Because those things are more valuable to you than money.

There’s more than one currency of generosity.

We all know what currency is. Currency is a medium for exchanging value.

And sometimes the most valuable currency to us is not our money.

We would gladly give money if we don’t have to give other things.

True generosity that comes from the heart will be characterized by freely and liberally giving the currencies you hold most dear.

So what we’re doing in this series is looking at different stories in Luke that highlight different currencies and that challenge us to give them.

Some of these you might find harder to give than others. We’re all different.

The currency of generosity we’re looking at this morning is forgiveness.

Are you generous in your forgiveness of others? Do you forgive generously?

It’s one of the most important characteristics of Christians.

Look at it under three points: The danger of unforgiveness

The practice of forgiveness, The key to forgiveness

Credit where credit is due: Dr. Tim Keller’s sermons on this theme.

MP# 1 The danger of unforgiveness

Notice when Jesus talks about it the disciples say: Increase our faith.

Which is their way of saying: Are you kidding me? No way.

What did Jesus say that made them respond that way?

If your brother sins against you seven times in a day and comes back and says I repent, you must forgive him.

It's easy to get sidetracked if you think Jesus is describing a situation where someone actually wrongs you seven times in one day and asks forgiveness.

After about the third or fourth time you would think, this is ridiculous.

You're not sorry. And what if they did it to you eight times in a day?

Does that mean you don't have to forgive them then?

The key is the number seven.

Jesus didn't say twice a day or nine times a day, because not a literal number.

It's a symbolic number. Seven was a symbolic number of fullness for Hebrews.

So Jesus is not describing a situation where someone actually does the same wrong thing to you seven times on the same day and asks your forgiveness each time.

That would be hard. But what Jesus is actually saying is even harder.

If someone sins against you seven times in one day means:

If a person wrongs you as completely and fully as any person could wrong another human being, you must forgive him.

Imagine the worse thing someone could do to you.

It might be harming your children in some way.

It's something so bad, there's nothing worse.

Jesus says: If you are my disciple, you must forgive.

That's why his disciples said: Increase our faith.

They meant, That's impossible for an ordinary human being.

Jesus, you're demanding the impossible.

Some super spiritual person might be able to do it, but we can't.

But Jesus gives a warning in this passage that no matter how impossible forgiveness might seem for you, unforgiveness is not an option. Too dangerous.

The warning is in the three little words Jesus speaks as he begins this teaching:

Notice how verse three begins: So watch yourselves . . . If brother sins, forgive.

If someone hurts you or wrongs you, watch yourself very closely.

That's not what usually happens.

When someone wrongs us, we pay attention to that person.

Why did you do that to me? But Jesus says:

When someone wrongs you, you should immediately pay attention to yourself, and his words about forgiveness should be echoing in your mind. Because the danger of unforgiveness is too great.

Heb 12:15, See to it no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. That's what Jesus is warning about here when he says: So watch yourselves.

Watch out if somebody harms you.

Anger is a proper response to evil and injustice.

So being angry when you are wronged or betrayed is not wrong in itself.

But it is wrong when it becomes something you justify in order to keep it alive, it's wrong when it becomes settled, when it becomes bitterness or malice.

When that happens anger defiles you. It twists you.

A few years ago I read William Shirer's book *Love and Hatred*.

The Tormented Marriage of Leo and Sonja Tolstoy.

He wanted to keep no secrets from Sonja and begin their marriage with honesty.

So on the eve of their marriage he asked her to read his diaries which recorded his sexual dalliances as a young man and that he had a child serf woman on estate.

His timing was horrible, even if his motivations were good.

But what was really horrible was what Sonja let it do to her.

She married him and stayed married 48 years until his death, but never forgave.

She was also a writer in her 80s after he was dead she was still writing about what she had read and how bitter she was about it.

William Shirer says:

"For half a century jealousy and unforgiveness blinded her and in the process destroyed all love for her husband."

Yes, that's an extreme, vivid example, but don't kid yourself that you're not being twisted by bitterness when you hold a grudge, stay resentful, and don't forgive deeply from the heart.

You'll become a less joyful person, afraid of trusting people, unwilling to give yourself freely and happily.

You'll become a hard person.

So watch yourself when someone wrongs you.

Be on high alert. Heed Jesus' warning.

So how do you forgive? That brings us to . . .

MP#2 The practice of forgiveness

Talking about the practice of forgiveness might seem strange to you.

Because a lot of people associate forgiveness with feelings.

They think, if I'm mad, I can't forgive, because I don't feel forgiveness and I can't do anything about that.

Yes you can. According to Bible, forgiveness granted before it's felt. It's practiced before it's felt. Here are some things you have to do.

First, you have to refuse to caricature the wrong-doer, instead you have to identify with him or with her.

When we get wronged, we tend to caricature the person.

She's just a liar! That's all she is, she's just a liar.

But if you get caught in a lie. Yes, I was wrong. But it's complicated.

I shouldn't have lied, no excuse. But . . .

You see yourself as a human being who did wrong.

That other person is a cartoon villain. He's just a jerk.

Tim Keller says forgiveness is impossible when you exclude your enemy from the community of humans and exclude yourself from the community of sinners.

You have to remind yourself there are two ways you are the same.

You're both sinners. It's impossible to stay angry unless you feel superior.

I would never do that. Maybe not, but you would do something like that.

In order to stay angry you have to think you're above that.

You also have to remind yourself you're both human beings.

Both made in the image of God. We don't even know what all that means.

A dignity and worth of every person.

And, referring specifically to this passage, sometimes there's another very important way you and the person who wronged you are alike.

Jesus says: If your brother wrongs you. Christians wronging Christians.

It happens in the church. It happens in Christian families.

But when you are wronged by a fellow Christian you especially have to identify with him or with her as someone saved by the grace of God, someone who Jesus died for on the cross.

You can't turn caricature a fellow Christian. He's just a liar.

No, he's son of God and he's your brother.

The second thing you have to do is inwardly surrender right to repayment and pay the debt yourself.

Forgiveness has the nuance of releasing person from a debt.

If person owes \$1000 and you forgive the debt, what happens to \$1000?

You eat the loss. You absorb it.

If a neighborhood kid breaks window, you can make the parents pay, you can say:

Forget about it. But the broken window doesn't go away. You pay for it.

You can only forgive if inwardly you forgo seeking repayment.

Most wrongs are not financial. Robbed of happiness or opportunity or joy. So what does it mean to make the person pay?

They made you unhappy, you want them to be unhappy.

They made you hurt, you want them to be hurt.

You might directly try to make their life worse. Tell them off. Make feel bad.

Or go to other people and gossip, criticize them.

But mostly you inwardly curse them. You root against them. Replay wrong.

Every time hear something has gone wrong, you cheer.

You feel good because debt being repaid. But you're being twisted.

Forgiveness is giving that up and praying for their blessing. Father forgive . . .

That hurts because it costs you. Currency of generosity. One man's description. Forgiveness is to deal with our emotions by denying ourselves the dark pleasures of venting them or fondling them in our minds. Once upon a time, I was engaged to a young woman who changed her mind. I forgave her, but in small sums over a year, done when I spoke to her and refrained from rehashing the past, done whenever I renounced jealousy and self-pity when seeing her with another man, done when I praised her to others when I wanted to slice away at her reputation. Those were the payments—but she never saw them. And her own payments were unseen by me, but I do know that she forgave me. Forgiveness is more than a matter of refusing to hate someone. It is also a matter of choosing to demonstrate love and acceptance to the offender. Pain is the consequence of sin; there is no easy way to deal with it. Wood, nails and pain are the currency of forgiveness, the love that heals.

Every time he refrained to get repayment, replaced with blessing, it hurt.

Because he was being generous.

Making payment with a valuable currency and he feel it.

So you never confront? Tell what did wrong? Of course you do.

If your brother sins, rebuke him.

Not loving just to let someone go on doing something wrong. Rebuke.

You may say, Good. I like that word! Rebuke.

But compare to Matthew 18—Rebuke him and if he listens, won brother back.

Now you know what purpose of rebuke is. His repentance.

If you haven't inwardly forgiven before you rebuke, why are rebuking him?

Is it to win them back—no, you're doing it to make feel bad, vengeance.

Person won't respond well and you'll have a battle on your hands.

MP#3 The power to forgive

Where do you get the power to forgive? I know some of you are note-takers.

Perhaps some of you have written this down. Steps to forgiveness. One, two. But some of you are saying: I'm still back in verse 5. Increase our faith.

I feel like the disciples.

I know important it is, but with a particular person in my life, I can't do it.

The wrong is too raw, the hurt is too great.

Fortunately Jesus has given a full answer. It's in the verses that follow.

This is his response to disciples saying: We can't do this.

He answers with a parable. It's a parable about an imaginary conversation between a master and a servant.

Put yourself in the position of a master.

Your servant comes in from working hard in the field or with the flocks.

Would you say: You've been working hard, just take off, come eat something?

Or would you thank him for taking care of the sheep?

Jesus says: Of course you wouldn't.

You would tell him to prepare your meal and serve you, then you can eat.

Now, as Americans, this parable strikes us as wrong for a couple of reasons.

First, we imagine an unreasonable, demanding, ungrateful boss, that bothers.

Second, we have the history of slavery in America and that bothers us—

the thought of people owning other human beings, buying, selling, horrible.

But the cultural setting of Jesus' parable was different.

Jewish servants under Jewish masters were not paid employees,

but they weren't owned slaves either.

They were in a relationship that was unique to the Jewish people.

In the pagan world of that day, if you fell into debt, there were no bankruptcy

courts, you were thrown into prison rot or sold into slavery.

It was almost impossible to get out of debt. Generations could be enslaved by debt.

But in the Law of Moses there was a merciful provision for the Hebrew people.

A Jewish person in debt could become a servant to his fellow Jewish creditor.

He would be bound to him and work for him, and earn his room and board,

and he would work off his debt and eventually be free.

It might take a few years, but the Law of Moses was even merciful about that.

The Year of Jubilee. Every seven years all Jewish servants were released from all obligations debt free. So absolute longest a servant, seven years. Usually less.

So a master wouldn't say to a servant: Knock off, take it easy.

No, because he's never going to come close to paying off actual amount of the debt. He's getting pennies on the dollar.

And would he thank him for doing his work? No, he's doing the servant a favor. He's keeping him out of prison and life-long servitude, It would be horribly ungrateful for the servant to demand time off or expect to be served or praised.

So Jesus ends the parable by pointing to our hearts.

He says: You're the servant. Don't forget who you are.

And your attitude should be:

I've been granted mercy and I've been given the opportunity to show my gratitude for a great debt lifted by serving my creditor for a short time.

When I've done everything required, I'm still an unworthy servant.

What's Jesus talking about?

He's talking about your relationship with God through the cross.

He's talking about the generous forgiveness you've received from God.

You had a debt that would have killed you to pay, but God made you his servant instead and said: Now serve me.

Show me your gratitude through your work for the great debt I've forgiven through the death of my son Jesus in your place.

And one of the things God wants from us, his servants, is to mimic him in forgiveness. To be like him in extending generous forgiveness to other people.

Think about this: When you get to heaven, you won't have any opportunities to forgive people, because everybody there will be perfectly holy.

There will be no conflicts and wrongs committed, no need for forgiveness.

It's only for a short time in this life that you have the opportunity, the privilege, to forgive other people as an expression of your obedience and gratitude to God.

So when you say, I can't forgive, it's too hard, I refuse to forgive—

You're not remembering who you are. You're a servant acting like a master.

You deserve to die and go to hell.

But God he forgave you, he redeemed you—you owe him everything.

And he expects you to serve him until the Year of Jubilee.

Jesus says one more thing to encourage you.

The disciples say: Increase our faith. This is too hard. You have to be a super spiritual person to do this. You have to be a super Christian.

But Jesus says: If you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can do it.

Not faith in general, but faith in him.

If you have a smidgeon of understanding of what I did for you.

If you have a tiny understanding you are a sinner forgiven by grace.

If you understand the Gospel at all, you are able to forgive.

If you have any idea what I have done, you will be able to forgive.

You will be long-suffering when you see Jesus suffering for you.

You will be able to forgive people the little debts they owe when you see

Jesus dying on the cross to pay your great debt.

You will stop being a judge of other people when you see the Judge of the world,
coming to earth and submitting to unjust human judgment and the cross.

Jesus says: If you just have mustard seed understanding of the Gospel—
you will have the power to forgive.

When you know you've been generously forgiven through Jesus,
then he becomes the source of your life and confidence and love.

People can wrong you in many ways, but in the end, they can't touch you.

You'll be free to serve your gracious Master by forgiving others.

So if you, this morning, are struggling with bitterness.

If there is someone who has wronged you who you have refused to forgive.

It doesn't have to be that way. You can be free.

It starts with you coming to Jesus in faith and asking him to forgive your sins.

Do that this morning. Don't delay. Don't die with a bitter, forgiving heart.

Make this the day you become a servant of Jesus and truly free.