

“To Err is Human (ya think?)”
Sermon – September 13, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

To quote former 1960s Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey “To err is human. To blame someone else is politics.”

Or to put it more poignantly, as Robert H. Goddard, the inventor of the first liquid fuel rocket in 1926, said, “To err is human; to blame it on the other guy is even more human.”

Of course, these are riffs off a quote from 18th century English poet Alexander Pope. The original quote was “to err is human” and goes back the Latin poet Horace in 20 BCE.

But Pope in his poem, “The Essay of Criticism” published in 1711, added the phrase “to forgive, divine.” (As a sidenote, in the same poem he gave us the aphorisms, “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing”, and “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread”.)

And, frankly, that pretty much sums up today’s gospel and epistle lessons.

Today’s passage from Matthew 18:21-35 falls on the heels of last week’s passage of Jesus commanding his disciples to reconcile with those who sin against them. That is, those who have personally wronged, offended, or harmed them.

So Peter follows up with the question, “How many times should I forgive?”

In response you might be thinking of the adage from the 17th century, “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice shame on me.”

And even in Jesus’ time the rabbis thought forgiving someone three times was extremely magnanimous.

So when Peter says, “How about seven times?”, he is earnestly trying get his head wrapped around this idea and he may even be wondering, “What about Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, or Deuteronomy 19:21 that say, ‘an eye for eye, tooth for tooth’?”

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Jesus’ response is essentially, “Not a countable but rather uncountable number of times you shall forgive.”

As a sidebar, a critical implication of the response, and many others of Jesus, is that interpreting the good news of Jesus Christ cannot be reduced to a simple list that you can just check off as if you were Santa Claus with his naughty or nice list. That was Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees in his time and applies to many Christian sects in our time. Jesus is a “spirit of the law” kind of guy.

Jesus then introduces a parable saying, “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.”

To underscore that uncountable point, Jesus says the slave owes his lord 10,000 talents! That was literally 60 tons of silver. That amount was 10 times greater than the entire annual tax revenue of all of Judea. In ancient Greece and Rome, 10,000 was the absolute highest named numeral and in the New Testament Greek the word is “myriad.” We use that same word today in English to mean a very large or uncountable amount.

Thus, we are not to take this parable literally, but to recognize the absurdity.

Then the slave has the temerity to say, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ Really? Like, how? How could he pay back even 1% of it?

Then our translation says, “And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.”

The Greek word for “out of pity” is *splanchnistheis* [splahnkh-nees-THAY-ees). That literally means, “bowels turned over”, gut wrenching feeling;

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Jesus uses that a couple of other times in the gospels. That is the level of pity or compassion the lord has. And, mind you, for no obvious reason. Nowhere does it say the lord knew the slave well or had a close relationship with him or that he somehow earned it or deserved it.

Indeed, the slave has barely gotten out of the room when he encounters a fellow slave who owed him 100 denarii, which is about 100 days’ worth of wages—a third of your annual salary. While that’s not a “myriad”, neither is it a trivial amount. It’s enough to want it paid back. And that is the key.

All of us have had someone “sin against us” and times where it was significant. Maybe it was insulting you in public. Maybe it was real loan that they weren’t paying back as in the parable. It’s not something you can just shrug off and say, “No big deal.” It’s going to be some kind of a deal.

In the parable the newly forgiven slave has no mercy for his fellow slave and immediately throws him in debtors’ prison until he can pay.

The other slaves see the injustice, tell their lord, who summons the slave and essentially says, “Sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander. You want to show no mercy after you received a ridiculous amount of mercy? Well, then, let’s show you no mercy after all.”

Jesus concludes saying essentially, “The same thing will happen to you if you do not forgive in your heart the person indebted to you.”

In Matthew 6:12, as the Presbyterians properly use for the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus tells us to petition God to “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Jesus’s rhetoric reflects a financial metaphor that became common in Second Temple Judaism: Sins were understood as debts that the sinner accumulated before God.

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Our debts (or “sins” as Luke calls them in his version of the Lord’s Prayer) are a myriad. We pray for God’s unfathomable forgiveness. But as the parable tells us, in response we should humbly forgive others whose debts to us cannot be anywhere near what ours are to God.

And so, this is a primary advocacy of forgiveness, of having mercy, of experiencing this pity, this compassion for our fellow human beings.

With this parable Jesus advocates a different way of life.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of our faith in God and our love of one another.

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus teaches that, as well as being relational, forgiveness—both the giving and the receiving of it—is reciprocal; you cannot **have** it without **doing** it.

In the parable the slave doesn’t realize that his experience of radical generosity obligates him toward not the **master** but in relation to **others**. What is now asked of him? To extend grace outward to others.

He is to pay it forward, not back! And so are we to do.

Yet, how do we avoid being a doormat, being taken advantage all time?

And what about abusers, murders, and even terrorists? Well, they should be held accountable and dealt with through civil justice.

But we cannot let the extremes inflame our fears and hatred and give us an excuse not to forgive at all.

For forgiveness is not a minimization of evil, but a profound release of vengeance, rooted in the belief that ultimate justice belongs to God.

Forgiveness is internal: it is a unilateral decision to release bitterness, hatred, and the desire for personal revenge.

To err may indeed be human but for us to forgive is divine.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.

Amen.