

Tortured By Books **[Deeper Sheet 6.21.09]**

Read Matthew 18v21-35

Forgiveness is more than something we ought to do. Forgiveness is part of the program of becoming a disciple. You don't simply "apply" forgiveness when it is needed. Instead, Jesus' teachings call us to become forgiving people. The practice of forgiveness is rooted in who we are. It isn't a magical or spiritual ability that one finds himself or herself suddenly capable of. Rather, forgiveness is learned. It's a skill that is cultivated, nurtured and grown. Becoming a forgiving person is incredibly challenging and requires that we wrestle with what forgiveness is and what it isn't. Forgiveness is not condoning. It's not a passive acceptance of a wrong that was done. Nor is forgiveness simply forgetting something horrible that was done. In fact, sometimes to forgive is to remember. Forgiveness is not necessarily reconciliation. It's very possible that what was said or what took place was so damaging that the relationship can never again be as it was. Perhaps most importantly, forgiveness is not the elimination of justice and consequences.

But forgiveness is always personal. Anger can't be directed toward a nameless or faceless institution. Institutions consist of people, and it was a person in that particular institution who hurt you or hurt another. Part of becoming a forgiving person is learning to name the hurt that occurred and locate the face that caused that hurt, because forgiveness is always personal. If we don't locate the source of our anger, there's no way to address it and it becomes like a spiritual cancer eating away at you. This is why the bad things that happen *to* us so often become the bad things that happen *in* us. Very often, forgiveness is the process of going back through life and discerning how a hurt shaped our identity and influenced our choices. Forgiveness is a process.

In Matthew 18, Jesus teaches that we should forgive "not seven times, but seventy-seven times," which is a Jewish way of saying we should forgive endlessly. To help clarify what he means, Jesus tells a story or a parable about a king who keeps very good books. When the king balanced the books, he discovered a servant who owed ten thousand talents—the equivalent of 60 million days of work, a debt the servant could never possibly repay. So in an act of mercy, the king scrapped his meticulous bookkeeping system and canceled the debt. One would expect the servant to be full of gratitude. Instead, he responds by hunting down one of his own debtors. Instead of extending the same kind of mercy he was shown, he "throws the book" at his debtor by having him thrown in jail.

The parable is about bookkeeping: forgiveness has a cost. It always costs somebody. We call revenge *payback*. But in this case, the king recognized that according to the bookkeeping system, this servant could never pay back what he owed. So he got rid of the bookkeeping system so the servant could have new life. But the servant doesn't get it. He insists on keeping the books and exacting payment from those around him. The only trouble is when you live by the books, you have to pay back what you owe, and we all owe more than we can ever pay back. Bookkeeping is the constant tallying of scores, balancing the positives and the negatives and demanding the appropriate payment. And like the king, God has tossed the books. Unlike the unmerciful servant clinging to his books, when the gospel gets hold of you, you've got to toss the books.

When have you seen a powerful act of forgiveness, whether in your own life or in the life of someone you know?

If forgiveness is always personal, then we have to name why we're angry and who we're angry with. What are you angry about? Or what have you been angry about in the past?

Who are you angry with?

You probably don't throw people in jail, but what other kinds of things do you do to keep the books?

Why do you think it is so hard to stop bookkeeping?