

TEXT: Matthew 18:21-35
THEME: Acting like God
SUBJECT: Forgiveness
TITLE: The Little Ease

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Messiah Moravian
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No relationship, no family, no congregation, long survives a refusal to forgive. According to the parable, the one failure God refuses to forgive is our refusal to forgive. Unless we are merciful *as* God is merciful, we risk arousing God's anger. While the Psalmist assures us that God's anger doesn't last forever, it lasts long enough to land us in the hands of the torturer.

Before we conclude that God is like Vlad the Impaler (Dracula), let's remember that just as there are laws that govern the physical universe, so there are laws that govern the spiritual life. These laws are not externally or arbitrarily imposed on either matter or the soul.

We can no more nurse a grievance, seek retaliation, pursue revenge and live freely in the Big Easy, then we can leap from the top of the Eiffel Tower and land softly at Cafe Constant some four miles away to enjoy their famous Portuguese Soup and Crustaceans. The inherent consequences of defying the laws of the spiritual life are as torturous as defying the laws of nature.

In the Lord's Prayer we hear: "Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors." I am convinced of the need for a new reformation of the church. I am also convinced the word "as" is the key to this reformation. Until we realize our relationship with God is inextricably entwined with our relationships with our neighbors, hope for a civilized future drowns in our animus.

A will on file in the Surrogate's Court in Westchester County, NY, tells us what we need to know about refusing to forgive. In the summer of 1977, a five-million-dollar estate was willed in varying portions to a college library, a state museum, a long-time family chauffeur, and a Methodist church.

The daughter, an only child, was excluded from the will. This wasn't a surprise, at least not totally. Ten years before her mother's death, in the middle of an acerbic and protracted family argument, the daughter commiserated with her two aunts, the mother's sisters, who represented the opposing point of view in the family feud.

Both mother and daughter perceived the issues and the solutions differently, but while the daughter was able to live within the tension of the disagreement with her mother, the mother interpreted the daughter's independent vote as "defiance" and "betrayal." Deeply angered, the mother regarded the daughter's behavior as something she was unable to forgive, and she vowed that someday the daughter would pay for "taking sides" against her.

To effect her punishment, the mother wasted no time in alerting other members of the family of her displeasure. She burned the daughter's pictures, refused her telephone calls, and returned her letters unopened. In hurt and anger, she continued to widen the gulf between them - a chasm that the daughter and family members tried unsuccessfully to bridge. The final gesture, executed with elaborate attention to legal detail, involved excluding the daughter from the will.

There was no compromising the retaliation the mother had devoted herself to with such determination and passion. The thought that was particularly loathsome to the mother was bequeathing a life of comfort and luxury to someone who had inflicted on her such embarrassment and pain.

The mother spent the last ten years of her life, until she died at sixty-eight, vigorously campaigning against reconciliation. At the end, she was more adamantly resolved than ever not to forgive, so that she could wreak her final stroke of retaliation from the grave.

What happens when we refuse to forgive? This extreme example suggests some possibilities that apply to our lesser grievances to a lesser degree although with equally unpleasant and unhealthy consequences.

Refusing to forgive means being led by anger, pain, or hatred. It means being directed by negative memories. It means not acting freely. It means keeping a controlling grasp on situations and people. It results in pressured lives of tension and stress. It probably shortens one's life. It strains relationships with others not directly involved. Relationship with God is weakened. It means living with feelings of little self-worth, and with the feeling of unrelieved guilt.

When we refuse to forgive, we claim a triumph for failure - our's or another's. Someone's sin or mistake or error in judgment directs our lives. Forgiveness on the other hand, is an invitation to redeem failure.

In the oldest part of the tower of London, directly under the Chapel of St John, is a most terrible of dungeons. Its oak door blocks out all light and ventilation. The dungeon measures only four feet square and four feet high. There is no way to either stand upright in it or to lie down at full length. It is known as "The Little Ease." The Little Ease is an apt image of life bound by a refusal to forgive.

If I were a poet or short story writer, I would write the rest of the story of this parable. What happens when the man who refused to forgive his slave is placed in the cell next to him? Or more likely, in a common area where they stand face to face. The slave who owed a few months wages will be freed before too long.

The one who refused to forgive owes sixteen times the annual tax revenue of all of Judea. He will rot and die in debtors' prison. What do they say to each other? What happens to the unforgiving man's wife and children?

