

“Spite House”

A Sermon by
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Text: Matthew 18:21-35 and Colossians 3:1-3

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.

‘For this reason, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So, the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So, my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’

Colossians 3:13

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Have you ever heard of the Spite House? “The story, as told by Alpern and Durst, is that around 1882, Patrick McQuade wanted to build an apartment building on 82nd Street at Lexington Avenue. The adjoining parcel of land, around the corner on Lexington, was owned by Joseph Richardson. If McQuade could acquire this parcel, he would be able to extend his building all the way to Lexington Avenue, and put windows on that side of the building. No problem: the parcel was a strip of land 102 feet long and five feet wide along Lexington Avenue. It was useless for any other purpose. Surely, thought McQuade, Richardson would sell. McQuade offered \$1,000, but Richardson demanded \$5,000.

“Unwilling to pay, McQuade started building his apartment building anyway, complete with windows looking out on Richardson's five-foot-wide strip, which was unbuildable.

“Or so he thought.

“Richardson built a building five feet wide and 102 feet long, blocking McQuade's Lexington Avenue windows.” What can you do with a five-foot-wide ribbon of land? Well, perhaps you could build a one-lane bowling alley, or a spaghetti storage warehouse, but beyond these offerings, not a lot of possibilities exist.

"The building soon became known as the "Spite House". The photograph above was taken around 1895. Lexington Avenue is torn up for maintenance in this picture."

This is what it would look like as a stand-alone building without the next-door apartment building.

"Richardson took advantage of a clause in the building codes that allowed him to build bay window extensions in his building. This allowed him to extend its maximum width 2'3" beyond the boundary of the lot. (Alpern and Durst say "In those days, such encroachments on the public sidewalks were not prohibited.") The rooms of the Spite House were in these bay window extensions, connected by extremely narrow hallways."ⁱ [

Richardson died there in 1897. The Spite House, as well as McQuade's apartment building, were bulldozed in 1915 to make way for a new apartment residence at 129 East 82nd Street, which still stands today.

I wonder how many people today live in a Spite House?

A couple in Switzerland certainly lived there. In a real life parallel to the movie "The War of the Roses," this couple waged a battle of mayhem against each other. It all began when the husband canceled one vacation too many for his wife. She expressed her disappointment by pouring bicarbonate of soda into his tropical fish tank, wiping out every one of his rare tropical fish.

A long argument followed. Finally, he grabbed a selection of his wife's diamond jewelry and threw it into the garbage disposal. She responded by flinging all his stereo equipment into the swimming pool. He then doused her \$200,000 wardrobe—fur coats, designer gowns and all—with liquid bleach. Then things really began to heat up. She poured a gallon of paint all over his new \$70,000.00 Ferrari. So, he kicked a hole in a \$180,000.00 original Picasso she loved. The wife had just opened the seacocks of the husband's 38-foot yacht causing it to sink at its dock when the couple's daughter came home. She saw what had been going on. She called the police. The police were powerless to do anything. It is not illegal for a couple to destroy their own property. Eventually the family lawyer managed to arrange a truce. Obviously, like many people, this couple had more money than sense.

But it is true. Unhappy marriages probably produce the largest number of houses of spite. Divorce doesn't help. A recent survey revealed that many divorced couples still feel rejected a decade after the breakup. Though they marry again, they stay angry and bitter. Forty-one percent of the remarried women were still furious at their first husbands a decade later. Thirty-one percent of the men felt the same way. How do we let it go? How do we keep our resentment and anger from destroying us?

Simon Peter asked Jesus, "*Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'*" Jesus' response to Peter's question goes way back to the first book in the Bible. In Genesis 4:23-24 we read of Cain's great-great-great grandson, Lamech. Cain was the first murderer, killing his brother, Abel. Lamech takes murder to the next level. We read, "*Lamech said to his wives; 'Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged seven-fold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.'*"

It is certainly a relevant question. Do I keep submitting myself to someone else's abuse in order to maintain a relationship? How long? Do I hold a grudge? Do I forgive? Is there anything that cannot be forgiven? These are important questions. But we want to deal with a slightly different question this morning. When someone has done me a grievous wrong, why is it necessary for me to forgive, and how do I do it?

FORGIVE FOR THE PEACE OF YOUR OWN SOUL

When we forgive someone, it is not for their sake, but for our own. Often when we harbor resentment, rage, bitterness and anger, it is not the person who caused these feelings who cannot eat, cannot sleep, and cannot function normally in life. It is we who suffer. Comedian Buddy Hackett once said about nurturing resentment that while you are home sulking, they are out dancing.

That's true. When we say, "I'll forgive, but I'll never forget," somehow, we think our resentment is hurting the other person when, generally speaking, it is only devouring us.

I know there's something appealing about nurturing resentment. Richard W. DeHaan tells the story of a little boy who had a fight with his brother. As the day passed, he refused to speak to his brother. At bedtime, their mother said, "Don't you think you should forgive your brother before you go to sleep? The Bible says that we should not let the sun go down on our anger." After some perplexed reflection, the boy replied, "But Mom, how am I ever going to keep the sun from going down?" We can appreciate what he is saying, but the truth is that nurtured resentment hurts most the one who nurtures it.

When the poet Edwin Markham reached the age of retirement, he discovered that his banker had defrauded him. Markham was ready to retire but was penniless. He was also bitter. He was so bitter that he could no longer write poetry. He was obsessed with the evil perpetrated against him by the man he thought was his friend.

One day he was sitting at his desk doodling—not writing poetry, but only thinking of the man who had wronged him. Markham later testified that the Holy Spirit spoke to him. "Markham, if you do not deal with this thing, it is going to ruin you. You cannot afford the price of your anger. You must forgive that man." The poet prayed, "Lord, I will, and I do freely forgive." A miracle occurred. The resentment was gone. The poetry now flowed. He then penned the poem for which he is best remembered:

"He drew a circle to shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout;
But love and I had the wit to win;
We drew a circle and took him in!"

We forgive, in the first place, because it is in our own best interest to do so. Our resentment is poisoning our own hearts. In some cases, it may be poisoning our relationships with others.

FORGIVE BECAUSE THE PAST IS PAST

Nothing is more pitiful than the person who is continually living in the past. The past is gone. Why allow it to ruin the present and future? You cannot change the past. You can only forgive the past. However, if you forgive the past, you can change the future.

A recent newspaper story described how a fatal stabbing took place. Two men had been shooting pool and had a \$1 bet going. An argument developed over the bet, and the two continued it outside. As the disagreement escalated, six people were eventually involved. One of the two pool players apparently held a nightstick while the other had a knife. The man with the knife won. It is highly unlikely that either man would tell you that he would be willing to kill—or die—for the sake of \$1. But that is exactly what happened.

You and I are unlikely to kill anyone. Nevertheless, unresolved anger will sometimes erupt into ugly and destructive actions. People say and do strange things under the influence of anger and rage that they might never say and do otherwise. This is why Jesus taught, [SLIDE] *'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool", you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.'*

Why allow the possibility of something that is over and done with, something over which we can exert no control or influence, bring us heartache and pain in a future we haven't even entered yet? Forgiveness offers the opportunity for a new beginning!

A dentist moved into a new house. He soon found neighborhood teenagers littering his yard and riding their bicycles over his lawn.

One night the leader of the teenage group had a bad toothache. The boy's mother sent the young fellow to the dentist to be examined. The dentist found the tooth in need of expensive repair and offered to take care of it. The boy refused. He said his family could not afford it. The dentist persuaded the boy to let him do the repairs.

The dentist didn't send the boy or his family a bill. Soon he forgot the incident. That summer the dentist left town for an extended vacation. When he returned, he found that his lawn had been well cared for during all that time by the teenager whose tooth he had repaired. The lad just smiled and said, "A tooth for a tooth."

When the dentist first had trouble with the neighborhood kids, he could have harbored real resentment. What good would it have done? Instead the dentist was kind and forgiving and reaped the benefits. Resentment cannot change the past, but forgiveness can transform the future!

We forgive for our own peace of soul. We forgive because the past is past. Only today and tomorrow count. We want to sow all the good that we can.

FORGIVE BECAUSE YOU HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN

In order to fully answer Simon Peter's question, Jesus told a parable about a servant who owed his master 10,000 talents. This debt amounted to more than fifteen years of a laborer's wages. The servant could not repay it. His master forgave the debt. This servant was greatly relieved.

This servant, in turn, had a man who owed him a hundred denarii. This amounted to about one day's wages. The servant refused to let this man out of the debt. When he heard it, the master was furious. This wicked servant had been forgiven for fifteen years' worth of wages, but he would not forgive someone else a day's worth of wages. Jesus' point was clear. The master is God and we are the servants. We are to forgive because we have been forgiven.

Dwight L. Moody once said that Peter did not seem to think that he was in danger of falling into sin. His question was, "How often should I forgive my brother?" But very soon we hear that Peter has fallen. "I can imagine that when he did fall," said Moody, "the sweet thought came to him of what the Master had said." Peter was forgiven for denying the Master. Could he not forgive those who sinned against him?

Jesus recommended that we become like little children. Young children can really be quite forgiving. Often, more forgiving than adults. A nine-year old was on his way out the door to get his younger brother a Christmas present when he discovered that this same brother had just broken one of his favorite toys. He flew into a rage. He vowed that his brother could never play with his toys again and that furthermore, he should not expect a Christmas present from him this year.

A moment later the boy returned to the kitchen and slipped on his coat. "I'm going, Mom." he said with no hint of his anger the moment before.

"Going where?" his mother asked.

"To buy the present," the young man answered.

His mother couldn't hide the look of surprise upon her face. "I thought you were angry with your brother. I thought you were never going to let him play with your toys again and that you were not going to get him a Christmas present this year."

"Well, he is my brother, isn't he?" said the boy.

Yes. Yes, he is...out of the mouths of babes. It is necessary for us to forgive in order to have peace in our own souls. It is necessary for us to forgive in order that the past might be past, and we can experience only the best in the present and future. It is also necessary for us to forgive, because we have been forgiven, and, after all, he or she is our brother or our sister, right?

What about it? Are you still living in spite house? It's much nicer out here in the fresh air of forgiveness. Why don't we ask God to help us let go of those feelings of anger and resentment that we may be carrying today? If you are bearing resentment or anger towards someone in the church, someone in your circle of friends, someone who has slighted you, hurt your feelings, or made you angry, let it go . . . let it go . . . Thank God that God has forgiven you. Name the person God has placed on your heart and forgive them now. Then ask for God's grace and mercy to let this go . . . forever!

Let us go home forgiven, resolved to live as God's pardoned and pardoning people.

Let us pray . . .

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory.

ⁱ <https://blog.plover.com/tech/spite-house.html>