

“The Math of Forgiveness”
(No Fair: 2 of 3)

a sermon based on
Matthew 18:21-35

and delivered on-
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Today we're continuing the sermon series: *No Fair* in which we consider how to find peace – within ourselves and our relationships – in the midst of life that is not only unfair but can feel unjust. Last week, I began with a logic problem. This week, the sermon title (as you can see) is “The Math of Forgiveness.” So even if you don't remember that I said last week we'd be doing some math today, it should be pretty obvious, right now.

One of my high school math teachers, Mr. Barnett, worked out this math problem for us in class. I think it was trigonometry but let's face it, high school was a long time ago. Truth be told, I couldn't even remember how to get to the answer, so I looked it up on the internet.¹

If you'll bear with me for a few minutes on something that probably doesn't seem that relevant to the Gospel, and if you follow along, I think it can give us some insight.

So here it is:

We begin by defining our variables. Shall we?

First, $a = 1$. Next, $a = b$. Obviously if b equals a and a equals one, then both a and b must equal one. Right? But that's not the math problem. This is just our definitions.

Let's begin.

$b^2 = a \cdot b$ This works because b^2 equals b times b , and because b equals a we can substitute a for b . Right? Do you follow so far.

Next, $a^2 = a^2$, obviously. What we did here though is to change b^2 to a^2 because a and b are equal, and then a times b to a^2 , again because a and b are equal. Got it?

Remember in algebra, whatever you do to one side has to be done to the other.

Let's subtract b^2 from both sides. On the left, we'll write it as $a^2 - b^2$. On the right, we'll write it as $a^2 - ab$. (Remember b^2 is b times itself and because b is equal to a we can write it as ab .) So far, so good?

Now let's do some factoring:

On the left, $a^2 - b^2 = (a+b) \cdot (a-b)$. If you multiply a times a you get a^2 and then b times $-b$ you get $-b^2$.

On the right, $a^2 - ab$ factors out as a times $(a-b)$. Again, a times a equals a^2 and a times $-b$ equals $-ab$. We're just doing basic algebra, here.

Let's clean that up a bit. Which leaves us with:

$(a+b) \cdot (a-b) = a \cdot (a-b)$. Okay?

We know that because both sides are equal, that we can now divide both sides by $(a-b)$. Right? Let's do that.

This leaves us with: $a + b = a$.

Now if we subtract a from both sides that leaves us with $b = 0$.

If you remember from the beginning, however, that we said $b = 1$.

Substituting 1 for b , we get our final result: $1 = 0$.

Think of the implications. If one equals zero, then two equals one and three equals two, just by adding one or two to each side of the equation. Then if three equals two and we divide three from both sides we discover that one equals two thirds. The possibilities are endless.

¹ <https://medium.com/@Alikayaspor/one-plus-one-does-it-make-one-66cca346e2de>. Accessed September 7, 2020.

How did we get here? Let's go back to that equation. We'll wipe away everything except for the fifth and sixth lines, leaving us with $(a+b) \cdot (a-b) = a \cdot (a-b)$ and $a+b=a$. This is where the trouble lies.

Let's erase $a+b=a$, to consider how we got there. We need to divide both sides by $a-b$ to reduce the equation. But let's remember this, because a and b are equal, $a-b=0$. Which means that the next step would be to write our equation as this: $(a+b) \cdot (a-b) \div 0 = a \cdot (a-b) \div 0$. But that's impossible. Hence, the infinite failure of our equation.

The entire point of this is that in order for one to equal zero, we have to include a false *assumption... presumption*. (I don't exactly know.) Yet, it seemed so logical. Didn't it?

That's how it is with sin and forgiveness. In the Gospel lesson today, Peter, the guy who just blurts out what's on his mind and often everybody's mind, asks Jesus, "How many times must I forgive." He even offers a "generous" possibility. "As many as seven times," because, let's face it, there really should be a limit. Right? It wouldn't be fair otherwise.

Then, what does Jesus say? "Not seven times but seventy-seven times," at least in the translation that we just read. The way it's written in Greek is a bit confusing so it's hard to know if it's supposed to be seventy-seven or seven times seven (which would be forty-nine) or seventy times seven (which would be four hundred ninety). Then immediately he goes into this parable comparing the kingdom of heaven to a king settling accounts with his slaves and showing mercy on the one who had absolutely no hope of paying him back – not by reducing his debt or putting him on a payment plan but by wiping the slate clean.

Can you imagine the relief? Back then you could be thrown into prison for debt. The burden of worrying was removed and he and the king were square.

But... What does this slave do? As he's walking away – freed from his debt and therefore his need for additional income, he demands that a fellow slave pay him what he was owed. When the other slave asks for mercy even a payment plan, what does he say? Pay now or go to prison. It's only fair. You owe me.

"The only way for you and I to be square, is for us to even the score." "You've wronged me by not giving me back what is rightfully mine." "You've sinned against me." I get it.

When someone sins against us – when they hurt us, there's no way to remove that sin – there's no way to erase the pain we've already experienced. Because that hurt remains, the only way to be square to even up to get fairness is to inflict an equal hurt. Revenge is the only option. To be "fair" maybe we will follow the Scripture and only exact an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. (Ex. 21:24) To let it go... to forgive just isn't fair. It really isn't.

So when Peter asks Jesus how many times must I – must we – forgive, he's really asking, "How much unfairness to you expect me to endure." Before we take Jesus' answer too literally and look for a loophole somewhere between forty-nine and four hundred ninety, let's think about the math. He's really saying that there is no limit to forgiveness.

If the kingdom of heaven is like a king who forgives an insurmountable – might as well be infinite – debt for a slave, then God as the king of heaven must be infinitely forgiving. Right? And you are made in the image of God.

That math problem earlier actually points to this. We know that division by zero is impossible, but in calculus division by zero is said to equal infinity because it comes so close.

But think about what it does here. Your one hurt to me doesn't demand one hurt to you. I could do the math that way, but if I choose, I can make my one hurt fair with no hurt for you.

If my only means of fairness is to exact revenge or to hold a grudge, then your sin puts a perpetual burden on me until it's done. Right?

Forgiveness frees us from the burden of being hurt. Forgiveness is for us. Now, if the other person denies that they need forgiveness or refuses it, that's on them. It's like that for us. Even though Jesus offers us forgiveness and the promise of life from the cross, we still have a choice as to whether we will accept it or not. Part of that means being honest with ourselves and acknowledging that we need forgiveness because we have sinned.

That's why in last week's Gospel it was so important to go to the other who has sinned against you, hoping that they will acknowledge their sin. It's not so that you can exact an apology, but out of the hope that they will accept your unfair gift of forgiveness.

Likewise the math of forgiveness doesn't demand that we allow ourselves to be hurt. Especially when we yield to Jesus' command to forgive but the other refuses to repent, we don't have to stay in that situation. Remember last week, "If the offender refuses to listen ... let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."? (Mt 18:17b) Jesus doesn't expect you to be a doormat. For safety sake: physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual, it's okay to cut someone out of your life. What's not okay is to let your woundedness fester in unforgiveness. Why would you want to carry that pain with you through life or into heaven?

The math of forgiveness says that by demanding nothing for my pain, I'm freed up to find healing instead of picking at a scab forever.

Isn't it interesting that when we say the Lord's prayer that we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses... forgive us our sins... forgive us our debts... as we (in the same manner as we) forgive those who owe us."?

The king in that parable answered that prayer. He offered infinite forgiveness, but the slave through it away, because his math his faulty assumption said it wasn't fair.

God's not fair. He's willing to forgive as often as we are willing to accept forgiveness into our lives. That means not only receiving it but giving, and in so doing claiming the infinite time in his presence. Amen.