

Ironically, Sarah worked for almost 20 years as a marriage and family counselor and a spiritual director. From the job, she apparently learned a few things about her own shortcomings, including her vanity, her quick-rising temper, her repressed anger at her own mother, and how she begrudged having to parent Serene. Such self-realizations led Sarah at one point to apologize for her meanness, but it didn't result in any real change of behavior. Sarah's bad conduct continued into her final years, and Serene confesses that even after her mother's death, she couldn't swallow the idea of forgiving her.

Let's return to our gospel reading for a moment. Remember that it begins with Peter asking Jesus if seven is enough times to forgive a person and Jesus calling for unlimited forgiveness. Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the unforgiving servant. This servant was forgiven the enormous debt he owed to the king, but then the servant refused to forgive a much smaller debt that a fellow servant owed him, and he had the debtor thrown into prison. When the king learned of this, he summoned the first servant 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?" (Matthew 18:32-33). The king then handed the servant to a guard for punishment until he paid his debt.

Jesus concluded the parable by saying, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (Matthew 18:35). Once again, Jesus is clear about the Christian obligation to forgive those who sin against us. But what do we do, if like Serene Jones, we are choking on the thought of forgiving years of abuse or some big betrayal?

Well, we need to note that there is a change of vocabulary partway through the gospel story. For most of the parable, the focus is on *forgiveness*, with repeated use of the words "forgive" and "forgave." But when the king challenges the unforgiving servant, he uses the word *mercy*. In the context of the parable, it may seem that forgiveness and mercy are synonyms, but they are not. There is an important distinction between forgiveness and mercy.

Serene Jones doesn't discuss this parable in her book, but she uses "mercy" as the title of the chapter in which she discusses her mother. There she says plainly, "When it came to my relationship with my mother, it was not forgiveness that I needed to summon. The only hope for repair was mercy." In delving theologically into the two terms, Serene notes that *forgiveness is transactional*: "A harm happens, the truth of the harm is recognized, and attempts are made to right the wrong, and when a perpetrator asks for it and the victim of the harm agrees, then forgiveness is granted, its healing balm embracing both parties."

Mercy is different, Serene says. After acknowledging that in secular use, mercy means releasing someone from deserved punishment, she says that theologically, mercy is that and more. "Divine mercy...is a one-way street," Serene writes. "God grants us mercy despite the absence of any human merit. But when knowledge of this mercy is reflected in human lives, it flows in all directions. It occurs whenever, against all odds, human beings choose compassion over punishment. Compassion is at the root of mercy."

To this, Serene adds one more step, noting that *justice* is the struggle to make sure the harms about which we grant mercy will stop. She says, "Divine Love...bids us to seek justice, because the compassion that mercy cultivates in our hearts requires us to make the world a better place, to heal wounds and fix oppressive realities." After decades of harm from her mother, Serene had no capacity for mercy toward her. What she ultimately realized was there needed to be some form of justice to allow mercy to flow. When her mother died, Serene, as the oldest of Sarah's children, gave the eulogy, saying the nice things one typically says in public when someone is laid to rest.

Later, it occurred to Serene that she needed to write a second eulogy. In this private piece, Serene poured out a more honest record and an evaluation of her mother's life which sought to understand it. Serene included that second eulogy in her book, where it helps us view her mother in a more balanced way. For Serene, that second eulogy served as the justice element that made not forgiveness, but mercy toward her mother possible. That mercy was healing for Serene. She said that as she wrote the final words of that second eulogy, "for the first time in my life with [my mother], I felt the grip of my own anger start to lessen its hold on me and my aspirations for a theological life. I felt mercy..."

Mercy does not mean "blessing" the offender or the offending behavior. Mercy does not necessarily mean reconciliation, and mercy may not mean a desire to continue the relationship with the offender. In the parable, Jesus used the words "forgiveness" and "mercy" to help us realize that mercy, coupled with justice in some form, can be the element that brings us healing when we simply cannot forgive. The King in the parable showed mercy prompted by compassion, forgiving a debt that obviously could never be repaid. By this, the king showed his people a new form of justice, one that healed and opened the future. The unforgiving servant had no compassion and showed no mercy, and for this he was condemned.

Jesus ended his parable saying: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." The principle is clear. God has forgiven our great sin-debt and any debt owed to us is insignificant by comparison. And

yet, many sincere Christians withhold forgiveness saying, “God doesn’t forgive me without my repentance; therefore, I must withhold forgiveness from others who sin against me until they properly repent.” Such thinking is incorrect and ultimately dangerous because it presumes to take God’s place, deciding when and to whom we should offer forgiveness. In truth, God stands as the only *One who has never been forgiven and never needed forgiveness*; you and I stand as those forgiven and in need of continual forgiveness. Therefore, we should be *far quicker* to forgive than God is, without precondition of repentance, because we stand as forgiven sinners who must also forgive. We may have an even greater obligation to forgive than God does.

According to author Marianne Williamson, “The practice of forgiveness is our most important contribution to the healing of the world.” To that idea, Paul Lewis Boese adds, “Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.” Truly, forgiveness, compassion, mercy, and justice are the things that settle the past and open the future to wonders unknown. Since we have been forgiven so much, we have no right to withhold forgiveness from others. We are the debtor forgiven almost an infinite debt; will we hold on to the small debts others owe to us?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: “Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and freedom, locked out of the possibility of being at peace.” So, if we find we cannot find it in our hearts to forgive, perhaps we may find it within ourselves instead to offer mercy that heals and to seek justice that transforms.

Prayer: Merciful God, I come before You burdened by mistakes and hurt. I ask for Your forgiveness for the times I failed You. Remove unkindness and injustice from my heart, and help me to freely forgive those who have wronged me. Fill my heart with Your peace and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Source;

- Guzik, David. “Matthew 18.” *Enduring Word Commentary*. <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/matthew-18/>
- Jones, Serene. *Call It Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World* (Viking, 2019), pp. 265-289.

Choking on Forgiveness

Sunday, September 13, 2026

Matthew 18:21-35

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

“To err is human; to forgive, divine.” So wrote the English poet and satirist Alexander Pope; and to a certain extent, Pope is correct. Human beings are prone to make mistakes, to err, to mess up, to commit blunders, slip-ups, gaffes, missteps, bloopers, *faux pas*, indiscretions, miscalculations, and lapses in judgment. Some days we cannot put a foot right or we step right in “it” (if you know what I mean). And sometimes when we muddle things up, people get hurt.

If you’ve ever been so hurt so deeply by someone that forgiving them seems impossible, then the gospel reading for today is sure to increase your discomfort. Peter asks Jesus whether seven is enough times to forgive someone who sinned against him. Peter thinks he is being overly generous, because the rabbis taught that forgiving someone just three times would be sufficient. Jesus counters by telling Peter to forgive someone 77 times! Probably Jesus meant we are to forgive as many times as forgiveness is needed. By this, Jesus makes it clear that forgiving those who hurt is an important part of Christian life.

Important, no doubt, but not possible for every person who seeks to follow Jesus. Consider the case of Serene Jones. Serene is a Christian theologian, an ordained minister in two Protestant denominations, a professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, and most recently the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City. With that kind of training and experience, we might expect Serene would be big on forgiveness, a prime Christian virtue.

But there was one relationship in Serene’s life where forgiveness seemed too far to go: it was the relationship with her mother. Serene wrote extensively about this in her book, *Call It Grace*, which combines her personal memoir with spiritual teaching that mines the works of great theologians from the past. As Serene details with multiple examples in the book, her mother, Sarah, was neither a nice person nor a good parent.

Sarah seemed hateful toward and resentful of her daughter, even while Serene was a child. When Serene was 5, her mother beat her with a brush for coming home from kindergarten happy. When Serene was 10, Sarah ripped up her daughter’s A+ essay because, as Sarah said, it was too smart for someone of Serene’s age. There were instances of physical abuse as well, which continued throughout Serene’s teenage years. Even after Serene was an adult with a successful career and a daughter of her own, Sarah continued to belittle her.