Unexpected Truths 5) Grudges Kill; Mercy Thrills

Matthew 18:21-35 ● 2026-09-13 ● Listen to audio

I recall a story of the Hundred-Acre wood which I shared or read to my children years ago. Winnie the Pooh and all his friends were helping Rabbit plant his garden. Sometime later Piglet was at the house of Kanga, and her little Roo was sick. Roo said that whenever he was sick in the past his mother always made him a vegetable stew to feel better. But they were all out of vegetables for the stew for poor little Roo. Piglet, being small but so very clever knew where to go for help. He darted off to Rabbits to fetch some carrots for the stew to help little sick Roo. When he arrived, Rabbit was not home. But Piglet thought that Rabbit wouldn't mind if he took just a few carrots to help his sick friend. When Rabbit returned, he was shocked to see his carrots missing. He set about an investigation into the crime. Eventually all the evidence pointed to Piglet as the prime carrot culprit. At first, Rabbit was naturally upset and had it in mind to give Piglet a piece of his mind. But then Rabbit found out why Piglet took the carrots. He forgave him. Piglet then made Rabbit some muffins and all was well.

We could probably learn much from the adventures of Winnie the Pooh. But is that how it most often plays out in real life when we are hurt by others? Is usually only a mere misunderstanding? Does a meager offering of muffins make all well? If only that were the case when things upset us or when we discover someone has ruined our day. We don't live in a children's storybook. When we are wronged, we investigate to find the culprit. It often turns up that the culprit was malicious, selfish, or inconsiderate. They weren't ruining our day to help some sick child. And it often hurts. You can't just leave it as "It was all just a big misunderstanding." You can't just take a muffin and call it good. When someone hurts you by their actions you need to confront the sin in all its ugliness.

That's exactly what we looked at last week. We read in Matthew 18 how Jesus instructs us to deal with sin. If our brother or sister sins, we are to point out their fault and hold them to it until they listen and repent. Jesus wants his disciples to deal with sin and call our brother and sister to repentance. We learned last week how to properly deal with sin and to work towards peace and forgiveness. Sin can get ugly, but God has us deal with it and forgive.

But that still left one question unanswered. What about when that sin hurt us and it keeps happening? Today we continue reading in Matthew 18 and find our answer. Peter ruminated over this idea that we are to call our brother to repentance and forgive them. But knowing how to bring someone to repentance and forgiveness is only part of the picture. Peter was left wondering, "to what extent?"

Jesus had addressed that on another occasion. Apparently, the teachers in ancient Israel at the time were telling people they should forgive someone three times for a sin, but don't have to forgive after the third time. Yet Jesus had told his disciples, "*If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him*." (Luke 17:3-4)

Peter evidently must had been a good listener that day. He asked Jesus, "*Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?"* That seems like a generous number. Imagine if Piglet kept taking Rabbit's carrots without telling him. I think that by the seventh time Piglet asked for forgiveness Rabbit would probably have a new opinion of Piglet. Their friendship would be over and Rabbit would be saying, "No, forget it! I've had enough of your muffins!"

You know how it is. When someone sins against you there's a debt. And eventually we start to notice the lack of interest payments. Soon it doesn't matter how many muffins or how many times they person says, "please forgive me." Enough is enough and forgiveness can become just too much.

Not only is forgiveness too much. The opposite takes hold. That's what the world expects. The world is over-the-top with grudges. Step outside the Hundred Acre Wood and you realize that's that way the world has always seemed to work. Last week we considered the catchphrase of Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Allow me to take you back to that scene and what followed. After the Lord pointed out Cain's guilt for his brother's murder, he laid out the consequence. Cain, a gardener, was cursed and would not be allowed to work the ground anymore since he spilled his brothers blood into it. Cain became afraid and begged for God to protect him from people seeking vengeance. "Anyone who finds me will kill me." The Lord in mercy protected him. He put a mark on Cain and said that anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over. He put a stop to the cycle of vengeance. Vengeance, and grudges kill.

That was supposed to put an end to the family feuding over the death of Abel. And it was a display of God's mercy even for the first murderer. But sadly, one of Cain's descendants, Lamech, took this grace of God and twisted it. He boasted in a song that he had killed a man for wounding him. Lamech's son had been one of the first recorded to make tools of iron and bronze. You can almost picture Lamech with a sword, a powerful technology and him waving it as he threatened all who might dare to cross him and get revenge for the man he killed. Lamech warned those who might try to harm him, "If Cain is avenged seven times, Lamech is avenged seventy-seven times." Grudges kill.

Perhaps that multiplied desire for vengeance and the twisted mindset of this world is what Jesus wanted to contrast

with in his answer to Peter. In response to a world that desires to limit forgiveness and lash out in vengeance 77 times over Jesus said, "*I tell you, (forgive) not as many as seven," Jesus replied, "but seventy-seven times."* This was not to set a limit, but to teach us that in exact opposite of the world's grudges and vengeance we are to be abundantly forgiving and merciful. Don't count your measure of forgiveness. Let it stand in the exact opposite of what the world expects.

To teach us about grudges and grace Jesus shares a story. A king had a servant who owed him a ridiculous amount of money. Ten thousand talents can rightly be translated 10,000 bags of gold. We don't have too much to compare this wealth in the ancient world because a talent was so much wealth it was used to measure tribute by entire nations. According to ancient records, just 600 talents was the annual revenue collected by Rome from ancient Judea in an entire year. 10,000 talents is unheard of, its 60 million denarii or 60 million day's wages! It's the kind of wealth even ancient Roman Emperors could hardly aspire to attain.

The man fell before the king, "Be patient with me and I will repay you everything." No, he wouldn't. His debt was so terrible it would be impossible to ever repay. So, the master had pity on him. He didn't refinance his debt. He didn't reduce it. He did the only thing that could be done to help that servant. He cancelled all his debt.

This is a fitting picture of what our God has done for us. We didn't just commit some misunderstanding and take a few needed carrots from God's garden to help a friend. We have incurred a lifetime of debt of sin. We have ruined his world with our deeds and have done it day after day. We were helpless in that sin. But God, who is rich in mercy cancelled all our debt. He didn't refinance it. He didn't say we have more time to pay it off. He forgave it all.

He did this when he sent his Son to make the payment for such a debt. His Son purchased and won us from our debt of sin. On the cross he cried out, "It is finished." And our debt was covered. He became poor so that through his poverty, his humble suffering and death, we might be pardoned and become rich. And when Jesus rose from the grave the payment cleared. Our account is covered. And on top of that he credited to us his righteousness and poured out the riches of his grace and his gifts. This type of mercy ought to thrill every sinner! Pardon. Debt gone! Peace!

Jesus' story goes on as the man who had his debt cancelled found a fellow servant who owed him what might amount to a few hundred dollars. It's not small amount, but nothing compared to what he was forgiven. Right away he dealt harshly with his fellow servant and began to choke him and demand his money. The fellow servant begged for mercy. But he found none. The man who had been pardoned tossed that fellow servant in jail.

The master found out. *After he had summoned him, his master said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'* When judgment day comes, will your grudge against your fellow servant, your brother and sister in Christ matter anymore? Will you still be upset and refuse to forgive that person who harmed you and caused you pain? Will you still hold a grudge when your brother or sister in Christ wants nothing but to be reconciled and at peace? The grudges we hold onto will one day be held against us. The Lord will turn our mercilessness griping on our own heads. None of us is guaranteed another day. What if tomorrow the grudge you held onto is called to account? All of us will stand before our King. And he who cancelled our debt will see every petty debt we refused to let go.

You might say, "But what they did to me was not petty or small. It hurt me." Did it? Tell it to the one who was face down in the garden anticipating the great hurt of sin, including yours and mine. Was it petty or small to him when they beat him and crucified him? Was it petty or small when he took on himself the just price that you deserved? But he let it all go. He bore the pain. He didn't die for a mere misunderstanding. He died for a world filled with sin, including the sin of holding grudges and refusing to forgive those who repent. Despite the pain it cost him, he freely forgives all who come to him: you, me, and the person who wants you to forgive them from the heart.

The king threw the wicked unmerciful servant into the prison -a life sentence of torture. This too is something the world doesn't expect. Grudges kill. They bring the just wrath of God for his people when the refuse to share his mercy. Our bitter grudges grieve our God and can only lead to death and hell in the end.

But the mercy of God thrills us with a new and unexpected truth. Pardoning sin is thrilling and leads to life! It started with Christ getting rid of our sin and bringing us life. It continues as we live in the thrill of forgiveness. "*Don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption.* ***31*** *Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice.* ***32*** *And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ. Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children,* ***2*** *and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God."* (Eph 4:30-5:2) It is this great love of Christ that dissolves our desire to hold a grudge and thrills us with his mercy. We are thrilled to receive it and then become thrilled to share it.

The world expects forgiveness for misunderstandings. It expects us to forgive a few times. But it expects a grudge and hard heart which refuses to pardon those who hurt us. But this is an unexpected truth we know as the people of God. We now forgive without limit, even those who have hurt us. For we know that grudges kill; but mercy thrills.