

Psalm 37

Don't get upset over evildoers;
don't be jealous of those who do wrong,
² because they will fade fast, like grass;
they will wither like green vegetables.
³ Trust the Lord and do good;
live in the land, and farm faithfulness.
⁴ Enjoy the Lord,
and he will give what your heart asks.
⁵ Commit your way to the Lord!
Trust him! He will act
⁶ and will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,
your justice like high noon.
⁷ Be still before the Lord,
and wait [\[b\]](#) for him.
Don't get upset when someone gets ahead—
someone who invents evil schemes.

⁸ Let go of anger and leave rage behind!
Don't get upset—it will only lead to evil.
⁹ Because evildoers will be eliminated,
but those who hope in the Lord—
they will possess the land.

Luke 17

Jesus said to his disciples, "Things that cause people to trip and fall into sin must happen, but how terrible it is for the person through whom they happen. ² It would be better for them to be thrown into a lake with a large stone hung around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to trip and fall into sin. ³ Watch yourselves! If your brother or sister sins, warn them to stop. If they change their hearts and lives, forgive them. ⁴ Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, 'I am changing my ways,' you must forgive that person."

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

⁶ The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

⁷ "Would any of you say to your servant, who had just come in from the field after plowing or tending sheep, 'Come! Sit down for dinner'? ⁸ Wouldn't you say instead, 'Fix my dinner. Put on the clothes of a table servant and wait on me while I eat and drink. After that, you can eat and drink'? ⁹ You won't thank the servant because the servant did what you asked, will you? ¹⁰ In the same way, when you have done everything required of you, you should say, 'We servants deserve no special praise. We have only done our duty.'

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, 'I am changing my ways,' you must forgive that person. A statement to which a sane person might respond, **NOPE**. No thanks, Jesus. That's ridiculous. That's absurd. It's actually the definition of insanity, to do the same thing over and again while expecting different results. You'd have to be out of your mind to forgive someone over and over and over again. Right?

One of my favorite quotes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer comes from his reflections on the Psalms, where he says that, "In Jesus's mouth, human words become God's Word." This might seem innocuous at first note, not to mention totally unrelated to the Gospel passage, that Jesus

takes the human words of the Psalms and makes them God's Word in his prayers. Yet, I think perhaps the Psalms are precisely the words that that we need to learn forgiveness, for as we pray them, the psalms are a vaccination for our vengeance. The Psalms are a vaccination for our vengeance. In today's recitation of Psalm 37, we together declared, "Let go of anger and leave rage behind! Don't get upset—it will only lead to evil." Isn't that the truth! Anger and rage and even our constant willingness to be upset only lead to evil. Maybe evil in our hearts. Maybe evil in our actions. Maybe engendering evil in the world around us. How often have you come across the person in your life who is a self-fulfilling prophecy of frustration, of dissatisfaction, of disappointment in their days? If we're honest with ourselves, how often have you been that person whose anger led only to evil? How often have I? Too many times, I'm afraid.

I've a friend named Dale, who's given me permission to share this story. Dale's mother faced numerous addictions, from cigarettes to alcohol, as well as depression and anxiety disorders, and she consistently refused to seek help for them. His mother's habits continually made life more difficult for Dale, his siblings, and his father. Because his mom insisted on smoking in the house, Dale couldn't leave home without smelling of smoke. Because she'd start drinking long before noon, Dale couldn't trust his mother to be sober at night. Since there was no clinical address of her mental issues, Dale couldn't express concern about his mother's wellbeing or the negative effects of her behavior on the family without the conversation devolving to personal attacks and tears.

Yet, in Dale's reflection with me, he shared that what truly ruined his life wasn't his mother's behavior, but his response: anger. It began as righteous anger, and it's important that you hear that clearly. He was right to be

disappointed with his mother's demons, the way that they plagued her family, and her unwillingness to face them. There surely was something to forgive, but he wasn't willing to forgive. So, that anger began to consume him. The frustration once directed at the loss of his mother – because he truly feels he's lost her – became the lens through which he looked at the entire world. The anger scuttled his love life, poisoned his friendships, and determined his future was full of disappointment. The lack of forgiveness was eventually a source of Dale's own depression.

Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, 'I am changing my ways,' you must forgive that person. Now, I'm not here to make a self-help book out of Scripture, but I think it's important to see the wisdom embedded within Jesus's words. Forgiveness changes you before it changes someone else. Your choice to forgive someone changes

you before it ever changes the person you forgive. Dale found his life transformed the day he was willing to forgive his mother. Why? Because he applied fault to the diseases and to her unwillingness to seek change. He vocalized the pain he felt. He named the sins. And then? As offered forgiveness, he found a weight lifted from his life. The burden of the anger fell away and he found he could have compassion on his mother's inability to change her life. Her sins continued, likely many more than seven times in the same day, and yet Dale continued to offer forgiveness because it helped him to be the kind of person he wanted to be.

But this is difficult. So incredibly challenging. That's exactly why the disciples' response to Jesus is, "increase our faith!" It takes faith to forgive when all signs point to the same sins returning, to the same mistakes coming back to your doorstep, to facing the same problems from the same

person. In some ways, in many ways, we need faith to believe that forgiveness is worth it. It seems easier to write off those who harm us, and continue to do so, rather than face them with the forgiveness that God calls us to offer. Faith tells us that forgiveness makes a difference for our life and theirs, and a difference for the better.

Here, a few side notes are necessary. Forgiveness does not necessarily equate to a return to the former kind of relationship. We don't get to go back to Eden. Things have been forever changed by sin. Forgiveness means healing for everyone, but not necessarily the same privileges we had before. For instance, victims of heinous crimes should not return to the same kind of relationship as they had before with aggressors. Their safety is of supreme importance, and so we should never expect forgiveness to force an abused spouse back into a dangerous marriage. Yet, this does

mean forgiveness is impossible, nor does it deplete the potency of forgiveness.

Dylann Roof murdered 9 people at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC. Dylann was radicalized on white power websites with Neo-Nazi propaganda and so he sought to kill these people, to snuff out not only their lives, but their blackness, their expression of God's image that offended him so greatly. Yet, his murderous racism was met in the courtroom by powerful words of forgiveness from Nadine Collier, whose mother was amongst those killed by Roof. In the courtroom, she told Roof of her forgiveness, and later commented to a reporter, "Forgiveness is power...It means you can fight everything and anything head on." This forgiveness doesn't mean Roof can be free from consequences of his actions. It's not just unwise, but unfaithful, to return him to a place where he can commit such vile, horrendous acts against African

Americans. But forgiveness means something for Nadine, and maybe for Dylann, too.

What it means for Nadine is that she, like the Psalmist, left vengeance in God's hands and taken forgiveness instead. She's chosen forgiveness as the avenue to face the sin of others, so that she might, as the Psalmist says, let go of anger and leave rage behind, that she might cling to God's promises in the face of the world's brokenness. You find similar stories amongst the Amish of Nickle Mines, PA, who actively forgave the shooter who murdered five young girls and injured five other children nearly a decade ago. You find the same from Raghvinder Singh, a Sikh faith leader whose father was murdered during the murder of Sikhs at worship in Oak Creek, WI. In Singh's words, "We will never have our mothers and fathers back. But we can draw upon their inspiration to fight for a more peaceful world with love and optimism."

Forgiveness in this way is choosing the path of peace on earth and goodwill toward all. It is living out God's will for peace while trusting God to bring true justice. The Psalms are a vaccine for our vengeance because they help us rely upon God for vindication rather than holding someone else's fate in our frail hands. As the Psalms help to clear out spaces where anger or rage might otherwise fester, forgiveness instead may grow.

Perhaps the question is this: Do you want forgiveness, and all that comes with it, more than you want to be right? It's nice being right, surely that's true. But there's a deep, unsettled anxiety that lives in the space where forgiveness might bring peace. We can be right and absolutely miserable all at the same time. The psalms are the vaccination for our vengeance because they place our desire to be right into God's hands instead. When we pray the psalms, we put our anger and tears, our demands for

justice, our hateful rage, and even our need to always be right, we place it all in God's hands. The power in the Psalms isn't that God will do everything that we ask, but that God's just enough to know what's right, God's gracious enough to receive our rage, and God's faithful enough to bring about both justice and mercy. We're none of that, and yet God forgives us in Christ.

And God's first move of forgiveness is precisely why God's the right person to handle our anger. Even when we're abounding in sin, God teaches us to forgive by forgiving us first, and when we're rid of the anger, God's forgiveness fills those spaces vacated by rage. Perhaps, then, **we should be out of our minds**, because all we should expect from God is punishment for our failure to forgive, and instead, in Jesus, we receive new life. We receive resurrection. We receive forgiveness. If we let ourselves be out of our minds, then God's mind takes over. That's the

road to forgiveness, and despite the insanity, it somehow seems quite wise. Amen.