

“What’s the Score?”

*“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent’ forgive him.”
The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:3-4).*

A few years ago I spent my winter coaching basketball for a group of second grade girls. It was an experience every coach should have. I began the season with the high hopes of teaching the girls the fundamentals of the game, and then molding them into a solid team that really worked together. But by end of our first practice I knew that these hopes were quite naive. As the parents dropped off their daughters and quickly left for whatever errands they wanted to get done before our practice was over, I realized I was in way over my head. Suddenly, just keeping all these little girls in the gym became my measure for success.

During that season, I found myself frequently praying for patience, and I was amazed at the amount of energy that it took to shepherd these ten little girls. The girls would come to practice in pajamas, they brought stuffed animals to sit beside them on the bench during games, and quite often our halftime pep-talks would turn into a discussion on hairstyles or a strategy session for the cheers that they were going to use in the second-half. Yet, as capricious as these girls were, and as oblivious as they seemed, I was amazed at their awareness of the score.

At this level we were simply trying to emphasize basic skills and instill an enjoyment of the game, so we never kept score, and quite frankly, with all of the drama and emotion that accompanied our scrimmages the score was the last thing I was thinking about. But that wasn’t true for the girls. Even though the scoreboard was off, and I would tell them that the score didn’t matter, when we finished the game almost every one of those squirrely little girls knew the score.

My stint as a second grade girls’ basketball coach taught me many things, but perhaps one of the most profound lessons I learned is that we love to keep score. We all want to know how we measure up to others, and in many ways, this is a reality of life that drives much of what we do. Students get report cards; employees go through annual reviews; even churches track the attendance and giving of their members. It’s important for all of us to know the score, and this is especially true when it comes to sin.

Like the little girls on my basketball team, when it comes to sin, we always remember the score. In fact, it is our very nature to remember when we have been wronged or hurt, and so often the sins of others become grudges that we cling to and file away for future use. An ancient proverb says, “The man who seeks revenge should dig two graves” and yet so often, we hold onto sin even as it tears our relationships apart and eats away at us from the inside out.

We love to keep score, and that’s what makes Jesus’ words in today’s text so hard to take. Jesus says, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent’ forgive him” (Luke 17:3-4). Jesus’ instructions about forgiveness are shocking, and they are aimed directly at our sinful, scorekeeping hearts.

Every last one of us deals with issues of forgiveness, and every last one of us can pinpoint someone in our lives we have struggled to forgive. Jesus knew this, and He even acknowledges this truth in our reading, telling His disciples in verse one that “sin is bound come.” It is inevitable that we will hurt and be hurt in this life, and it is this reality that Jesus uses as a springboard to deal with us.

For the Christian, forgiveness is never optional and yet the process Jesus describes in this reading is one that we simply do not follow. Instead of rebuking our brother or sister with the goal of alerting them of their sin, we look the other way, or better yet, we talk to others about how we “can’t believe what so-and-so is doing.” When we do this our brother remains in his sin and we become the very people Jesus rebukes in verse two when He says, “It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin” (Luke 17:2).

But we are scorekeeping people, and the thought of forgiving someone who has sinned against us repeatedly is repulsive! How can Jesus possibly expect us to forgive people who hurt us over and over again? How can Jesus ask us to humiliate ourselves and allow ourselves to be taken advantage of without any thought of revenge? And how can Jesus honestly expect us to just forgive the sins of our brothers and sisters without any thought of scorekeeping or remuneration? How can Jesus make these demands?

Because that is exactly what He did for us!

On the Cross, Jesus Christ took our redundant sins, and He absorbed the injuries that we have repeatedly caused, and He experienced the humiliation of our abuses, and there – on the Cross, in His body – Jesus paid our debt. He took our punishment. He forgave our sins and there is now no longer any score to be kept! In this reading from Luke 17, Jesus teaches us to forgive, because through His death in our place we **can** forgive!

I love the response the apostles give to Jesus, because their response is honest. “Increase our faith!” You see from a scorekeeper’s perspective Jesus’ demands seem impossible, and even the apostles – the men who were closest to Jesus; the men to whom Jesus would charge with leading His church – even these men cannot fathom the kind of forgiveness that Jesus is describing, and they know that this type of forgiveness is simply not in them – and they are right!

The power to forgive never comes from inside of us. Forgiveness is always a result of faith, and faith is not measured, it is given! The apostles’ request for an increase of faith is not answered with a list of principles to learn, or an inventory to gauge the level of one’s faith, or a how-to prescription for gaining more faith. Instead Jesus says that “faith as small as a mustard seed” brings with it the power to do the impossible!

The truth is that the kind of faith described by Jesus **is** impossible for our scorekeeping hearts...but true faith never comes from inside our hearts. Faith is a gift from God. It is not measured, it is not earned, and it is not a product of our flawed will. Faith is given. Paul writes that “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ” (Romans 10:17), and the Word of Christ is the Word that proclaims forgiveness, that gives life, and that promises heaven!

The message of God’s love and forgiveness is a message that creates faith, and it is **this** faith that enables us to talk to our brothers and sisters about sin, not so that we can keep score, but so that they can be moved to repentance and receive God’s perfect forgiveness. And it is **this** faith that gives us the power to forgive in ways that our scorekeeping hearts could have never done before. And it is **this** faith that changes forgiveness from something **we** do, to something we share as the “unworthy servants” Jesus describes in verse 10 simply doing our duty.

Forgiveness is the job of the church. It is what defines us, it is what frees us to love others, it is what reconciles us to our brothers and sisters, it is what motivates us to reach outside of ourselves, and it is the power of God that enables to do the impossible. We are scorekeepers by nature, but in Christ, we have been forgiven and the score has been settled. By God’s grace, we have been given the faith to forgive, and no matter how small, this faith changes everything! Amen.

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