I was born in 1956, one year before the Russians launched the Sputnik satellite and sent the United States into a competitive Cold War frenzy. America panicked that the Soviets were ahead in the space race because they were more advanced in teaching math. So, in response, we developed the so-called New Math.

Now, in the old math, you did a lot of memorizing. Multiplication tables. You just knew that, oh, let’s pick a number out of the air, 70x7, say, is 490. Ok, so maybe we didn’t memorize the table of 70s, but we knew our 7s and our 10s and it was easy enough to multiply 7x7 and get 49 and then add a zero for the 10. But now there you have it, I am already spilling over into The New Math. The basic idea was that you understand the values and symbols of numbers—how they work and what they mean—more than just computing them.

New Math is long since discredited, roundly thought to be too complicated. Better just to have kids know how to get to the answer as quickly as possible than to have them understand the logic. In fact, the phrase The New Math is used now for anything someone claims to be true but just doesn’t add up.

Today we begin a three-part sermon series I am calling Accounting Standards. In the next few weeks, we will look at three passages from Matthew's Gospel that all have some connection to how we reconcile our relationships with God and one another. Today’s story lays out whether forgiveness-and-mercy or sin-and-punishment will be the standard by which we balance our accounts.

Our text comes right after Jesus has told us that when relationships are broken in the church, we should seek to restore them. The process he lays out is designed to bring us back into right relationships. Peter poses the question to Jesus then about how often we should forgive. In those times, some believed you might forgive three times, but the fourth time you shouldn’t forgive, lest a chronic sinner lose all motivation to change.

This is religion’s version of the old math. You keep score. And Peter plays into this by doubling down and doubling the tradition and adding one to get to the spiritual
number seven. He’s probably proud of himself, sensing that Jesus is more merciful than the prophet Amos, who laid out the three times rule. But Peter’s still doing bookkeeping.

Jesus employs new math. He says we should forgive 70 times seven. Some scholars think the number should be 70+7 times, or 77 times—which is possible in the translation. Either way, the point is the same: stop counting! If you’re counting the number of times you will forgive someone, you aren’t really counting forgiveness; you are biding your time until you can get to your real aim of judgment.

Christianity always lives within the tension of forgiveness and judgment. The question is which is the true standard by which God reckons with us. Is judgment the ruling standard and forgiveness a possibility for those who are truly repentant or is forgiveness the standard and judgment the outcome for those who fail to live by the standard of forgiveness?

You can see how these two approaches show up in the way churches operate. Do our membership policies begin with exclusion and end with inclusion of only those who qualify? Or do they begin with inclusion and only exclude those who refuse to live according to the terms of always open to all? (Hmm, there’s a cool motto for a church.)

Jesus tells a parable to clarify. A servant is caught red-handed owing a sum of 10,000 talents. We don’t know how that can be. Maybe he was the head of the king’s treasury department because the amount is astronomical. It would have exceeded the combined taxes of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea and Samaria. It’s a ridiculous sum. Zillions. The point is that it’s unfathomable and unpayable.

The servant falls on his face and begs the king to give him time to pay up. No amount of time would be enough, though. The king knows this and surprisingly responds with compassion. He forgives the debt entirely. No strings attached.

This is the gospel. God does not reckon our sins against us. Forgiveness is the rule, not the exception to the rule. Mercy is the nature of a God whose character is defined by the law of love not the love of law.

Which is to say, if you are despairing about the state of your soul today, if you are worried that your sins are so grievous that you can never atone for them in your
lifetime, listen to Jesus. Grace is greater than all your sin. The marvelous, matchless grace of our loving Lord, as the hymn puts it, is the basis of your relationship to God. As Frederick Buechner beautifully says it: \emph{Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.}¹

This is why the whole idea of Christians engaging in culture wars that exclude or marginalize or cancel people because they don’t conform to certain standards of conduct or belief or opinion—or worse, identity, is so unseemly. The grace of God doesn't figure. By its nature, it’s extravagant and incalculable. It doesn’t say “do this” or “be that” before you are accepted and loved and welcome in the arms of God. And to show how true that is, Jesus continues ...

After being shown inexplicable mercy by the king, the first servant who has been forgiven much comes immediately upon one of his own servants who owes him a sum that amounts to 100 days’ wages. The second debtor falls on his face and begs patience in exactly the same way the first debtor did with the king who forgave him. But instead of doing the same as had been done for him, the forgiven servant refuses to forgive the lesser debt owed to him. He has him thrown into prison—which is always ironic to me in that if you’re in debtor’s prison, you can never earn anything to pay back anything. Punishment never ends in restoration.

When fellow servants hear what has happened, they report the incident to the king. The king summons the man he has forgiven and hands the man over to be tortured until he can pay the original debt that had been forgiven.

The fellow servants get the king’s intent that mercy rules his kingdom. They know that if this ungrateful servant gets away with his unmerciful behavior, it will ruin the whole calculus of the community. See, the problem in the church is not, as some charge, that there’s no accountability or, as others charge, that there’s too much accountability; it’s that the church’s accountability is based on wrong accounting standards.

Here we see a key teaching of the

¹ \url{https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/9/9/grace}
church. We are not judged by God on the basis of our sin; we are judged on the basis of our forgiveness. What rules our relationships? If we always worry about doing something wrong, we are perpetually insecure. If we realize that sin doesn’t determine our relationships, we are secure.

It’s not that doing things God’s way makes you unaccountable; it’s that it makes you accountable for living God’s way. God’s way is the way of the new math, the way of counting the big forgiveness first and then applying it to all the smaller offenses we have with one another.

My grandkids are learning to add differently than I did. They compute left to right, from the larger numbers to the smaller, whereas I learned the other way around that involved lots of carry-overs to the tens column.

We do too much carrying over of our smaller debts with one another. We note them and nurse them, enjoying the righteous indignation of feeling superior as the one who is offended. It gives us a false sense of power.

I have felt that powerful feeling of unforgiveness before. True confessions, there are some people I still feel that way toward today.

And to tell you the truth, I’m pretty annoyed I have to preach this passage to you because unless I am content to be a hypocrite, I have to let go. Which is exactly what the word forgive means, don’t you know?! To let go.

True power is the power to forgive, not the power to punish. This is what we learn from the king in Jesus’ parable.

The problem with holding onto your anger and bitterness against someone else is that it’s like a leash—there are two ends to the tether. You may think you are holding someone accountable, but you are being held by it as much as the other. True freedom comes from letting go of whatever it is that has come between you. Even if the other person hasn’t begged your forgiveness.

The problem with the unforgiving servant is that he was still adding right to left. He quickly forgot the enormous debt forgiven him and therefore failed to see himself in the man indebted to him. When you see yourself in the other person you are holding accountable, and you realize how much you have been in that position before God yourself and have been forgiven, then you can’t do anything but forgive ... or ... or you yourself will suffer the
consequences of your unforgiveness.

The eloquent preaching professor, Tom Long, puts his finger on it pitch perfectly: *When one gets a sense of proportion, then, a sense of the size of our sinful debt and the immensity of God’s mercy, no one would dare attempt to ration forgiveness. We know too well that the little boat in which we are sailing is floating on a deep sea of grace and that forgiveness is not to be dispensed with an eyedropper, but a fire hose.*

Fire away, church. Let’s let grace loose on each other. Let’s let forgiveness be our accounting standard, since apparently that is God’s way of reckoning with us. Amen.

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