

Proper 17 (22) - August 31, 2025

Obadiah 1:1–4, 10–15; Psalm 7:8–11, 17; James 4:5–11; Luke 17:1–4

“The Forgiveness Calculator”

1. There was a time when it felt like all of Chicago blamed one person for why the Cubs lost their chance to go to the World Series in 2003. And the person wasn't even a baseball player.
  - a. The Cubs had not won a World series since 1908, the longest drought for a Major League Team. They were looking good in 2003, though, and while at home in Wrigley Field, ahead on the National League series and ahead in game 6, the Cubs were 5 outs away from going to the World Series.
  - b. If you're a Cubs fan, you're probably grimacing because you know what happened next. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve\\_Bartman\\_incident](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Bartman_incident)
  - c. When a player from the visiting team, the Marlins, hit a long flyball to left field that kept driftin to foul territory, the Cubs outfielder had his eye on the ball and made a leaping attempt to catch the foul ball right at the wall.
  - d. But a couple of Cubs fans seated on the front row also had their eye on that foul ball.
  - e. Neither the fans nor the outfielder knew the others were going for the ball.
  - f. One of the two fans had the closest shot at it. The ball bounced off his bare hands and bounced into the seats, preventing the Cubs outfielder from making the out.
  - g. The Cubs tried to get the incident ruled as interference so it would count as an out, but the umps said the fans had not reached into the field of play.
  - h. That in of itself would have been just a tiny asterisk in Cubs history.
  - i. Except for the fact that the Cubs went on to completely fall apart defensively that inning, squandering their lead, and they lost game 6
  - j. People found it easy to blame that fan (not the collapsing Cubs) for trying to get the foul ball. The fan, 26-year-old Steve Bartman, had to leave the game escorted by security for his protection.
  - k. The Cubs issued a gracious press release and said that a fan wasn't to blame. Players asked for people to leave him alone (but Cubs fans wouldn't)
  - l. The Cubs kept falling apart and went on to lose game 7 so they didn't get to the World Series.
  - m. The fan, Steve Bartman, had to go into hiding. For years!! He had been just a devoted Cubs fan trying to catch a foul ball. He apologized, but many

frustrated Cubs fans blamed the loss on him, on the Billy Goat curse (don't ask) and they just wouldn't forgive him.

- n. The Cubs team invited him back to games. He wouldn't go. He was afraid. All this attention had made it impossible for him to be part of the community of Cubs fans, the very community which wanted to banish him
2. In our passage Jesus is talking about forgiveness as a way of restoring balance and supporting community
- a. Basically Jesus says: you're going to sin. No way around it. But don't be the one that makes OTHER people sin. That's not a good thing. Avoid it like you'd avoid getting thrown into the lake with a large stone around your neck.
  - b. But then, the thing is, as people will sin: what to do when they sin? Well set them straight, for one. Tell them that's not how things are done. Hopefully they won't bother you anymore. And they all lived happily ever after. The end.
  - c. Um, no, not the end. And this is where things could get messy. If they repent from their sin, you have to forgive them. And they all lived happily ever after. The end.
  - d. Um, still no, not the end. As per my earlier remarks, Jesus says, people are going to sin. And this one person may actually sin again. Against you! How dare they? Well, if they repent, you have to forgive them again. Yes, again. And just to cut to the chase, if they sin all day long (the number 7 can mean completeness, like 7 days of creation) and they repent all day long, then all day long you have to forgive them. And they all lived happily ever after. The end.
  - e. Well... I imagine you're thinking: how can I POSSIBLY forgive someone over and over again? Well, try it from the other perspective. Jesus is saying that, if you sin, and you will because see my earlier statement that we will all sin and probably often, Jesus is saying that if you really repent, the person you impacted HAS TO FORGIVE you. Even if you do it again (but repent).
  - f. But then again you might be thinking: wait, what about really terrible people who murder or who abuse their spouse or children, things you can't just take back by saying "I'm sorry"? There are scenarios like that which gave rise to the phrase in the Bible: An eye for an eye. Meaning, if you do this to me/my family, we'll do it to you and call it even. Even?
  - g. By the way, an eye for an eye was meant to hold the balance, not to allow revenge to get completely out of hand, for those who wanted to hurt the other well beyond the "eye for an eye" limit.
  - h. There is a quote often misattributed to Ghandi, which says: an eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind.

- i. Either way, we're left with those two neighbors each half blind.
  - j. So, instead of inflicting pain on those who caused us pain, Jesus is saying to invite God's grace for both (so they can repent, and we can forgive). We really can't do this on our own without God strengthening us. And they all lived happily ever after. The end.
  - k. Still no... This is not an easy teaching even if it fits in just a few verses
  - l. One thing we can say is that this teaching seems to assume a very public society, where in a way everyone knows each other's business, and one in which societal pressure could make someone do the right thing
  - m. But that gets really tricky when the person doing the sinning is in a position of power and authority: who's going to rebuke that person doing wrong?
  - n. And also: how will we know that their repentance is real? Because Jesus wasn't setting up a process with a loophole so someone could continue to harm us with no consequences.
  - o. But that's also when Jesus would remind us that even if people will sin, God sets the expectation of repentance and forgiveness as a way to live our lives as a community.
  - p. We are imperfect human beings, and God's reign is about grace and justice. And in that context there is the basic assumption that we are and will continue to remain in community. Then there is the willingness to admit wrongdoing and repent, and the willingness to forgive one who has repented. All so we remain as community.
3. We live in a time not dissimilar from times of crisis in history.
- a. There are laws which try to keep the community running smoothly and safe
  - b. There are people who, for a number of reasons, break the rules and the spirit of the rules, taking what's not theirs, hurting others or worse
  - c. Some of those people acting against the rules can easily be people in power, some will be everyday folks.
  - d. And so the question is: how do we hold each other accountable to what is right, so that we can then continue to be in community, safe and respectful of each other?
  - e. Well, we see that played out in a number of ways
    - i. Some may see ONLY OTHERS as law-breakers, and have no desire to keep them in community, even after they've served time, for example.
    - ii. A crime may be so horrific, it's hard to know where to begin to consider forgiveness
    - iii. A person who has sinned may now forevermore be seen as THE SIN ITSELF, dismissing they would ever truly repent, losing their identity.

- f. But Jesus in this passage calls us back, and reminds us we live not in our world but in God's reign, no matter how much we wish to be in control.
  - i. We live as forgiven people, because God forgives us. Often more than once a day.
  - ii. We live in community, because God has shaped us as a gathering of neighbors looking out for each other. Though we try hard to take control from God of who gets to be in the community.
  - iii. And I think most importantly: Jesus reminds us that repentance and forgiveness aren't our super powers, but they are gifts which can only come from God.
- 4. In 2016, the Chicago Cubs finally ended their drought and won the World Series. A few months after, the owners of the Chicago Cubs, who all along had been supportive, gave Steve Bartman a championship ring, to bring closure to the whole terrible incident, and to help make Steve feel welcomed back to the Cubs community.

#### Questions for Reflection

1. Think of a time when you were forgiven by someone for something you had done.
2. What do you make of the mandate by Jesus (Luke 17:1–4) to forgive someone, provided they repent?
3. How might it impact your perspective if forgiving means being a channel of God's forgiveness?