

Debi and Jared both lost 30 pounds. Brooke shed 95 pounds and likes to tell people that, "The mirror is not my enemy anymore." These are only a few testimonials of thousands that could be used to cite the benefits of hiring a personal trainer. These people came to a point in their lives in which they felt their weight, and overall fitness, had spiraled out of control. And it took a personal trainer to bring their downward spiral to a halt.

But what does a personal trainer do? Well... I'm pretty sure we could probably come up with a list fairly easily. As we begin to brainstorm, we might say they have a varying degree of knowledge about exercise and instruction. Perhaps we might mention that personal trainers most likely motivate their clients by setting goals and providing feedback and accountability to them. And more than likely they can provide education about general health, diet, and nutrition.

As you think about the responsibilities and benefits of a personal trainer, I invite you to take a moment to consider the idea of engaging in some sort of spiritual training. And if we want to be spiritually fit, whom would we want as a fitness trainer? Of course, we might mention mentors, faith-filled family members, and trusted friends, and yet who could be a better personal trainer than Jesus, a trainer who specializes in forgiveness fitness.

Scarlett Lewis lost her 6-year-old son Jesse in a shooting that took place at Sandy Hook Elementary School. He was one of 20 children killed in that horrific attack back in 2012 -- an absolute nightmare come to life. Parents such as Scarlett were devastated. And at first, her anger drained her of all her energy and strength, her rage was directed at the shooter, and also at the mother who unwittingly armed him.

But then Scarlett made the choice to forgive. "Forgiveness felt like I was given a big pair of scissors," she declared to the staff at a UK Charity called *The Forgiveness Project*. These scissors helped her to cut her tie to the shooter and

regain her personal power. "It started with a choice," she said, "and then became a process." At her son's funeral, she urged mourners to change their angry thoughts into loving ones. She saw this shift as a way to change the world.

Forgiveness starts with a choice and then becomes a process. Jesus urges us to make this same choice for ourselves in our Gospel this morning when he responds to Peter's question about the number of times we should forgive. "Lord," asks Peter, "if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" Once ... twice ... three times ... "as many as seven times"? "Not seven times," says Jesus, "but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Other translations of this verse say "seventy times seven times" ... totaling 490 times.

However you count it, Jesus is saying that the forgiveness we offer others should be countless. Limitless. Numberless. He is like a personal trainer at the gym, urging us to increase our reps, and our intensity behind them, so we can get stronger every day. One, two, three, five, ten, twenty, 490. Jesus, the forgiveness trainer! "Forgive an infinite number of times," he says. Make the choice to do it, and then turn it into a process. But exactly why does Jesus say this?

Forgiving the people who hurt us can be a hard thing for us to do, much tougher than lifting a stack of weights at the gym. Still, Jesus recommends it because forgiveness is good for us. It isn't just for the person who needs to be forgiven, but it is for you as well. Forgiveness can enable you to regain your personal power, just as it did for Scarlett Lewis. Unfortunately, many people fail to, or are unable to forgive!

Today Jesus tells his followers the story of a servant -- let's call him Bruce -- who owes his boss several *million* dollars. Since Bruce cannot come up with the cash, the boss orders him to be sold, along with his wife and children, and possessions. Back in those days, it was legal for the boss to do something like that. Well, Bruce throws himself to the ground and begs to be given more time to pay.

Out of pity for him, the boss tells his henchmen to release him and he forgives his debt.

Que the Happy ending credits now, right? Not so fast! As Bruce leaves the boss's house, he sees another servant who owes him a couple of bucks. He grabs the man -- let's call him Jim-- by the throat and says, "Pay me what you owe." Jim falls to his knees and begs Bruce for more time to settle his debt. But Bruce refuses and throws Jim into prison until he can pay up.

Although Bruce has been forgiven a debt of several million dollars, he cannot find it in his heart to go easy on Jim over a few denarii. Clearly, he needs forgiveness training. And when Bruce's fellow servants see what's happening, they're completely horrified. After they report what they saw to Bruce's boss, the man summons Bruce and asks him, "Should you not have had mercy on Jim as I had mercy on you?" Gulp! Bruce knows that he is busted!

The boss then has little patience with him. And so God will do "to every one of you," promises Jesus, "if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart!" Wow, and we might think our fitness coach at the gym is tough, standing over us barking, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven?" Jesus is even tougher! Jesus demands that we forgive other people, based on the fact that we have all been forgiven. He insists that we make the choice to forgive, day after day, and turn it into a process that makes us stronger and stronger.

Modern research is discovering that Jesus was right about the benefits of forgiveness. Dr. Robert Enright is a developmental psychologist in the Midwest, and is also a Christian. Raised on the teachings of Jesus about grace, and reconciliation, he wondered if forgiveness could be proven to help patients in a hospital or therapy clinic. So he designed ways to include forgiveness in therapy sessions, and he studied its effects. And what did he find? The people participating in forgiveness therapy groups showed greater improvement in emotional and

psychological health, than people belonging to groups that failed to focus on forgiveness. As Scarlett Lewis discovered after the Sandy Hook attack, forgiveness helps people to regain their personal power.

Let's imagine for a moment that Bruce, from today's parable, is able to participate in a forgiveness therapy group. At one of the group sessions Enright as his therapist challenges Bruce to tell his "grievance story." He would let Bruce vent about Jim, who had caused problems for him by owing him money. Then Enright could say to him, "Bruce, why are you taking the debt of your fellow servant so personally? It's just a few dollars. Why are you seeing yourself as a victim? True there is nothing wrong with wanting Jim to be held accountable...but give him some time to make things right. Remember that plenty of people fall into debt -- didn't you owe your boss several million dollars?"

Unfortunately, Bruce is blind to this truth about himself. How differently the parable would have ended if he had realized that he was both a debtor, and a person who was owed money. If he had done so, perhaps he would not have seen himself as an isolated victim. Bruce would have realized that many people face similar offenses and disappointments. By seeing himself clearly, he could have let go of the pain and the blame, and found a way to forgive Jim who owed him just a few dollars. But he didn't!

Because he failed to forgive, Bruce remained stuck in his stress. He threw Jim into a debtor's prison and continued to feel miserable. Similarly, this is true for us as well. Our failure to forgive leaves us with a chemical reaction known as "the stress response." This is when adrenaline, and cortisol enter the body. According to Wikipedia, "Those chemicals limit creativity, they limit problem-solving, and over time, they lead us to feel helpless and like a victim."

So...what solution can be found in our story today? Well...Jesus advice, "Forgive your brother or sister from your heart," might possibly be the answer we

are looking for! In fact, it probably isn't too farfetched to imagine that Jesus wants us to get stronger and healthier by making the decision to forgive, and then turning that choice into a process. And if we are open to the Lord's leadership and guidance, he can act as our forgiveness trainer, challenging us to make that choice repeatedly until it becomes a part of who we are.

Yes, forgiveness is difficult. Seeing ourselves as sinners who have received forgiveness from our loving God is difficult! It is much easier to hold grudges than to feel compassion toward the people who have hurt us. But Jesus knows that forgiveness is good for us -- body, mind and spirit -- which is why he commands us to offer it to our brothers and sisters, to everyone we encounter.

Sometimes we need to be challenged to forgive, just as we need to be pushed by our trainers at the gym to complete rep after rep after rep. And thankfully we can wipe the slate clean by forgiving our brothers and sisters as we continue to remember the immense, innumerable, and sacrificial mercy that God continually offers us through Christ. That's a choice that will not only lower our stress, increases our personal power, and help us to grow spiritually, but it can also help others and perhaps even heal the world as well. And thanks be to God for that!  
Amen.