

Learning To Forgive

Matthew 18:21-35

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I've heard the story of a man who, years ago, was bitten by a dog, and he went to the doctor. They found out that he had rabies; the dog was rabid. At that time, there was no treatment for rabies. The doctor told the man, "You need to put your affairs in order; you're going to die." This man was in shock, and didn't know what to do. Then he asked the doctor for a pencil and paper and began to write on the paper. The doctor left the room, and when he came back an hour later, the man was frantically writing on the paper. The doctor said, "I'm glad to see that you're working on your will and getting your affairs in order." Then the man said, "Doctor, this is not a will. This is a list of names of people I want to bite before I die." (Sorry; I couldn't resist telling that.)

I think we all live with a list like that. "I got a list of people I want to bite before I die to finish them off." C.S. Lewis said, "Forgiveness is a beautiful word until you have something to forgive."

It was painful for me to study this passage and it is painful for me to preach this passage, because I, like you, struggle with forgiveness. I've been hurt, I've been abused and I've had people say bad things about me. You have to learn to be forgiving. If God has forgiven us, we need to forgive others. This is a beautiful word until someone sins against you and you have to forgive them.

Last time we looked at the parable of The Two Debtors, and we realize that we are all sinners and we need to be forgiven. Today we learn that not only are we forgiven by God, but we need to be forgiving toward others. The parable we're studying today is called The Unmerciful Servant. Jesus is teaching in this parable that we have been forgiven, and we need to be forgiving. Jesus is going to say that an unforgiving spirit is the worst prison that you could ever be thrown into. He actually gives us the picture of being given over to tormentors if you are unforgiving towards others. So Jesus gives us the parable of The Unmerciful Servant.

This parable only appears in Matthew's Gospel. Most of the parables have been in the Gospel of Luke, but this one appears only in Matthew; you won't find it in Mark, Luke or John.

The parable starts in Matthew 18:21-22. I'm going to give you the outline. The first point is Peter's question. We have the problem of unforgiveness raised by Peter. Notice it in verses 21-22: "Then Peter came to Him and said, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?'" Now right off the bat I chuckle a little bit. Peter is the one who is speaking up. Not only that, but "If my brother sins against me, and I forgive him..."—well, did Peter ever think that he might sin against his brother, and Peter needs to be forgiven?

If you are unwilling to forgive others, you're burning a bridge that someday you're going to have to cross over. Sooner or later you'll be living on an island with walls around you, and you'll be all alone.

So Peter said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive Him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’” I’m sure Peter thought, Aiy yai yai! It’s in the white spaces. I can just hear Peter and the others.

Now the rabbis taught that you should forgive three times. That was the rabbinical teaching. They got it from some obscure passage in the Old Testament about God forgiving us once, then twice, then three times. But they were misinterpreting the spirit of the Lord; that God forgives us over and over and over. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

In 1 John 1:9—I call it the Christian’s “bar of soap”—it says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Over and over again, I have to come to the Lord throughout each day and say, “Lord, forgive me for that attitude or for that thought or for that word that I spoke or for that deed that I did.” So we have to come to God daily for forgiveness. More than three times God has forgiven us.

That was the rabbinical teaching, so no doubt Peter thought that he was really doing good by saying “seven times.” Peter was the one who said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus said, “Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven.” Peter thought he was really awesome; he was on a roll. So Peter asked, “How many times shall my brother sin and I forgive him?”

We all face this issue of forgiveness. A husband and wife will offend each other. If you’ve been married for any length of time, you know that you need to learn how to forgive. In relationships and family units, we need to learn to forgive one another, or we would never be able to get along.

Why does Peter ask this question? In the context, Matthew 18:1-3 starts with a lesson on humility. The disciples had asked Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Then Jesus called a little child to Him...and said...‘Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’” So Jesus taught a lesson on humility.

Then we have the well-known passage of dealing with someone who has erred against you or sinned against you. If someone has sinned against you, Jesus instructs you in Matthew 18 to go to them privately, personally and individually. You seek to win them back. If they repent, then you forgive them, and you’ve won a brother. If they don’t repent, Jesus said that the second thing you do is to take two others with you, and you go to them. You talk to them. If they repent, then you have won a brother, but if they don’t, there is a third stage in restitution, which is you take the church—you go to the church leadership. If they still don’t repent, you treat them like an unbeliever or like a heathen. They practice church discipline.

Right after that, Jesus is teaching and Peter asked Him, in verse 21, “Lord, how often shall my

brother sin against me, and I forgive him?" And Peter thought, I'll just pick the number seven. It's a good Bible number; it's the number of completion. Peter was probably looking around at the other guys thinking They're really going to think I'm awesome! He probably thought that this would commend him.

But notice Jesus' solution to the problem in verse 22. He said, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." 490 times. You ask, "Well, is that the actual number of times that Jesus wants us to forgive?" Can you imagine if you are married and your wife says, "Honey, you're at 489. I know 'cause I have it in my book! You sneezed last night at dinner and it got on me because you didn't cover your mouth. So I wrote it down right here. Last week you forgot our anniversary. You didn't bring me flowers. We have this little rule."

Jesus isn't saying that we actually go by numbers. Then the minute they get to 491, they'd be out. No. Jesus is saying that our forgiveness should be indefinite, continuous and without limits. By the time you've forgiven 400 times, you're in a habit. Those of us who have been married for a long time—my wife and I have been married 40 years. It'll be 41 in just a few months—you kind of get in the groove. You say, "Sorry; I was wrong. Please forgive me." It's something you know how to say after 40 years of marriage. You learn how to forgive, or else you wouldn't survive in that relationship. There are so many people who just want to burn bridges. "I'll just get a divorce" or "I'll just find a new church."

Many times people say, "Someone offended me at church," so then you go to another church. What are you going to do when they offend you at the other church? Are you going to find another church and another church and another church? Or instead are you going to deal with forgiveness and learn to forgive others who have sinned against you?

So Peter's question is answered by Jesus' solution that we just keep on forgiving. Don't count the number of times you forgive.

Now Jesus decides it's time for a parable, in verse 23-34. This parable is commonly called The Unmerciful Servant. It has three parts. We first see the forgiving king in verses 23-27. Jesus said, "Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king." Now you don't want to give every aspect of the parable a meaning or significance, but I think this king clearly represents God, who was taking account of his servants. So the king "wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him..."—worshipping him—"...saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt."

I want you to note the characteristics of this forgiving king. He is making his creditors pay him what they owe. Then he finds out that this one servant owes 10,000 talents. This is not a denarius, a day's wage; this is a talent, which was a weight of either silver or gold. It's hard to

calculate the amount in today's money, because we didn't know if they were silver talents or gold talents. But most Bible scholars put it in the millions of dollars. I even read some who thought it was in the billions of dollars or a trillion dollars.

So I believe Jesus was speaking in kind of hyperbole, expanding it and saying that he just owed this huge amount of money. Can you imagine owing \$15 million? No way. I would just say, "Lock me up. I'm history." The guy evidently had this huge debt.

Now the Bible teaches that we, as sinners, have a debt to God that we are unable to pay. The Bible says that "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is no one righteous; no, not one." We all are debtors and we cannot pay. Verse 25 says, "He was not able to pay." So he had this huge debt, and he had no way to pay it. There is no way that we can atone for our sins. We sing:

"It's not the labor of my hands

That can fulfill the law's demands.

These for sin cannot atone.

Thou must save; and Thou alone."

How true that is. I owed a debt I couldn't pay; thank God Jesus paid a debt He didn't owe. Jesus died for my sins so that I could be debt free, so that I could be forgiven. So the picture painted here is that before God we owe this amazing debt, this huge debt that we could never pay.

Then notice his proud prayer in verse 26: "The servant therefore fell down before him..."—worshipping him—"...saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'" I'm thinking, Really? Are you serious, dude?! You 'will pay all'? How could you ever possibly pay off that great a debt?! Sometimes people think that they can earn, deserve or merit the favor of God or work their way to heaven. But there is nothing that you can do to earn, deserve or merit the forgiveness of God. It's undeserved, unmerited favor.

The Bible says, "By grace you have been saved, through faith, but not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast." The servant should have said, "Have mercy on me; I can never pay that debt."

But then notice the gracious and merciful act of this king, who is the picture of God, in verse 27: "Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt." Do you remember the day you were forgiven? I do. Do you remember that initial experience of trusting Jesus and having your heart cleansed and having a weight lifted off of you? The guilt and the same lifted off, and you are forgiven? You're free? What a glorious day that was! To realize that my sins are forgiven, that I am right with God! And knowing that you have eternal life, and if you died, you would go to heaven. It's so much to be thankful for!

So we see this forgiving king. Then secondly, I want you to notice the unforgiving servant, in verses 28-30. This is the second part of the parable. It's the same servant. Take note of that in verse 28: It is the very same servant who was just forgiven the debt of 10,000 talents. "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii..."—this would be 100 day's wage, or in today's money, about \$150-\$200 that this man owed him—"... and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying..."—and notice that it's almost the same prayer that he himself had uttered in verse 26—"...'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt." Now, how you pay your debt when you're in prison, I don't know. In the Bible, they throw people in prison until the debt is paid; how can they pay their debt when they're in prison? So he was thrown into prison.

Now we see the unforgiving servant. This is where it really gets crazy. This servant was just forgiven this huge debt. You'd think that he'd be shaking hands, kissing babies, giving people money and buying for everybody. You'd think he would be the happiest guy. But no; he'd been forgiven, but he hadn't really experienced it, appreciated it or valued it.

Do you know that you can be forgiven by God but you haven't really appreciated it or experienced it? When you've been forgiven, it should keep you humble and broken and compassionate and loving and kind. Those are the characteristics of someone who has been forgiven. When you're mean or unforgiving or harsh or cruel, it's an indication that your heart is hardened; you're either not forgiven or you haven't really experienced forgiveness in the true sense.

So this unforgiving servant grabs his fellow servant by the throat. How graphic it is. He was probably choking the dude. He was walking down the street—I'm reading from the white spaces now, by the way—and he sees the guy on the other side of the road. You know how it is when you haven't forgiven somebody? All you have to do is see them, and you freak out. You're going to a party and you think, I hope they're not there, because I don't want to see their ugly face! Praise God. I hope they're not at church today! I don't want to see them! God have mercy on us.

So this servant grabs him by the throat and begins to choke the dude. "Pay me what you owe!" He himself was just forgiven a \$15 million debt. But he said, "You owe me \$200! Come on; pay me what you owe me!" The other servant said, "Have mercy, and I'll pay you all!" But he would not. He threw him into prison. How crazy is that!

Now I want to point out that when we are unforgiving toward others, it manifests in the way we treat them. Now you may not go up to someone in the foyer of the church and start choking them. But you may ostracize them or snub them or it may come out in your speech; their name is mentioned, and you say nasty things about them. Or it's the way you treat them, or the way you feel about them. All you need to do is hear their name, and all these feelings come back. And this anger comes back. This animosity comes back. Notice how this man treated his

fellow servant.

Now the key is in verse 29: The man prayed for mercy. "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all." But in verse 30, it says, "He would not." You need to mark that in your Bible: "He would not." It doesn't say, "He could not," but rather, "He would not."

I believe that forgiveness is a matter of the will. We can make a decision to forgive some. By the way, the word "forgive" means "to release" or "to set free." So we can release that—the anger, the hatred, the malice, the jealousy or the bitterness. We can forgive and let it go. It's a matter of the will. The problem was that the servant would not. He could have forgiven him, but he wouldn't forgive him.

Maybe you are hanging on to unforgiveness. "But, Pastor, you don't know what they did." It doesn't matter what they did. They put Jesus on the Cross, they were spitting on Him, they were crucifying Him, but He said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." How's that for an example of forgiveness?

"Yeah, but they said mean things. It really hurt me." Or, "They stole from me." God knows. You put it in God's hands. You don't have to hold that unforgiveness. We're not talking about reconciling with them; it may be that they are unrepentant, and they can't reconcile. But you still don't have to hold that in your heart. It's talking about being willing to release that unforgiveness and let that go. So we see this unforgiving servant. And if you're unforgiving, God wants you to release that.

The third part of the parable is in verses 31-34. We see the terrible results of unforgiveness. "So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him."

I want you to note the discovery in verse 31: "His fellow servants saw what had been done." So this guy, in broad daylight, out in the open, was choking his fellow servant, asking him to pay what he owed, and other servants saw this.

You know, it grieves my heart—as well as the Holy Spirit—that Christians can't get along in the body of Christ. We are brothers and sisters in the Lord. God is our Father in heaven. We are going to be in heaven for all eternity, and some of you are hoping that certain people won't be living by you in heaven. You're hoping heaven is big enough that you aren't going to run into them. We need to learn to get along right now. Someone said:

"To dwell above with the saints in love—

That will be glory.

But to live below with the saints I know—

That's another story."

I don't know why we can't just get along and learn to forgive! God has forgiven us. We're going to be in heaven together.

So the discovery is in verse 31, and then in verses 32-33 is the rebuke. The master, or Lord, said, "You wicked servant!" I believe that unforgiveness is sin. I believe that if you are unwilling to forgive someone, you need to ask God to forgive you because of your unforgiveness. You need to say, "God, forgive me for my bitterness. Forgive me for my anger. Forgive me for my hatred. Forgive me for holding on to this spirit of unforgiveness." The master called him a "wicked servant."

Then the master said, "I forgave you all that debt because you begged me." Another problem in unforgiveness is that we forget what God has done for us. I like what Charles Haddon Spurgeon said. He said, "We come to the Cross to be forgiven; we linger at the Cross to be forgiving." We come for that initial salvation, but we stay there for that sanctification or for the attitude of forgiving other people. So he said, "Have you forgotten that I forgave you all your debt?" That's also our problem. We so easily forget the great debt or our great sin of which God has forgiven us.

Then notice in verse 33 we see that true Christians should show compassion. "Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" Shouldn't you? In other words, it's only rational; it only makes sense to do that. I believe that it's inconsistent to claim to be a follower of Jesus Christ and have unforgiveness toward anyone. You can't do that. You can't say, "I'm a Christian, but I have a 'bitch list.' There are people I won't forgive or that I won't let go. I'm hanging on to my unforgiveness until the day that I die!" God help us! Christians show compassion and forgiveness.

Notice then the punishment in the parable in verse 34: "And his master was angry." It grieved him. Paul says in Ephesians 4 that our anger and bitterness and evil speaking grieves the Holy Spirit, "by Whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." So he "delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him."

So we have the forgiving king, we have the unforgiving servant and now we have the terrible results. God wants us to learn how to forgive others by remembering our own sin.

Notice that this unforgiving servant was turned over to the "torturers." Unforgiveness is the worst prison you could ever be put in. It's far worse than Sing Sing or San Quentin. It's far worse than any prison on earth that you might be locked in.

Lastly, I want you to notice verse 35. This is the parable applied. We have the problem of unforgiveness, the parable of unforgiveness and now we have the parable applied. It says, "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his

brother his trespasses.” Wow! Jesus really holds up the mirror.

Remember that the parables are windows for us to see God through. We see a God of love and a God of mercy and a God of compassion, that even in our great sin, God freely forgives us. But the parables also have mirrors in them. This is one mirror we don’t want to look at. I’m sensing it right now. Some of you are looking at me as though you’re thinking, I wish I hadn’t come to church today. Who does this preacher think he is?! He doesn’t know the hurt! He doesn’t know the pain of what I’m dealing with! It doesn’t matter if I know or not; God does. And God still wants you to release it. God wants you to forgive, no matter how deeply you’ve been hurt.

Do you know that there’s no pit so deep, that God’s love is deeper still. There is no sin so great that God’s grace is greater still. There is nothing we could do that would keep God from loving us and forgiving us, because His Son died for us on the Cross.

Now I want to lay down some principles that are important in interpreting this parable. Jesus is not talking about salvation. He’s talking about forgiving a fellow Christian, a brother in Christ. So I see here the motive. Notice that he mentions “brother” in verse 35. Why should I forgive? Because you’re my brother and my sister. We’re part of the same family of God.

Secondly, He’s not saying that if you don’t forgive someone, God’s going to throw you in hell. He’s not saying that you’re going to lose your salvation; that’s not what Jesus is teaching. The judgment is here and now and not in the future. It’s the prison of an unforgiving spirit. It’s not saying that someday you’ll have to go to hell, because you didn’t forgive that person. He’s talking about a prison that you’re entrapped in right now.

Well, what is Jesus saying? He’s saying that the nature of our forgiveness—notice verse 35—must be thorough and sincere. He uses the phrase “from his heart.” From our hearts. And it is a matter of the will. The problem is that we don’t want to; we’re so deeply hurt or offended.

Remember that bumper sticker a few years ago that said, “You touch my truck, I break your face”? Welcome to California. What kind of a bumper sticker is that? Or the Dirty Harry kind of thing: “Make my day!” We want to get even. We want to pay people back. We want to see them hurt. We want to see bad things happen to them. Jesus said, “Pray for those who persecute you and despitefully use you. Bless them that curse you.”

It’s so hard. How can I do that from my heart? Because the Holy Spirit is your strength. The only way you can do it is not in your natural self, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can give you the strength and the ability.

Lastly, Jesus is saying that God is the standard of our forgiveness. Notice He says that when you forgive, it is “my heavenly Father.” I believe that the inference there is that God our Father is our example. Do you know that you are most like God when you forgive? You are most unlike God when you refuse to forgive. When you forgive someone, you are godlike. That’s what we mean when we say “godly.” What do we mean when we say he is a “godly” person?

We mean that they are like God; they're compassionate and kind and giving and merciful. But if you're unwilling to forgive, then you are the most unlike God.

In looking in the mirror of this parable, I want to ask three closing questions. Number one, have you received forgiveness? We've all sinned. We've all fallen short. We all have this great debt. If you think you're a good person, you're deceived; all of us have sinned. God looks at our thoughts and our hearts. He knows the motive of our hearts. None of us are righteous before God. But we can come to Him to be forgiven.

Secondly, not only have you been forgiven, but have you been humbled and broken by God's forgiving grace? This is what's important. Not only do you get forgiven, but it's important that you walk in humility, that you walk in love, that you walk in grace; that the forgiveness you've experienced keeps you humble, compassionate, tender, kind and merciful toward other people. The most forgiving people on planet earth should be Christians, because they've been forgiven by God's grace.

Then my third and last question is, are you forgiving toward others who have sinned against you? Are there some people on your list that you don't want to forgive? Has the Holy Spirit brought to mind some people about whom you're unwilling to say, "God, I'm sorry for the bitterness and hatred in my heart, and I ask You to please take it right now. I've forgiven them. You've forgiven me. I was undeserving. I was a wretch, and I needed forgiveness. So God, help me to show the same compassion to others."

I've already mentioned that when Jesus gave us what we call The Lord's Prayer or the disciple's prayer, remember that He said, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." So if God is forgiving us, we also need to be forgiving others.

I think of Joseph in the Old Testament. If you want a story of forgiveness, that's the one. He was so wronged by his own brothers. He was sold as a slave. When he got to Egypt, he was lied about by Potiphar's wife, and thrown into prison and forgotten. That's cause for bitterness.

Can you imagine Joseph in a group-therapy session? "Hey, Joe, what's your problem?"

"Well, my brothers sold me. I became a slave. Worked for a guy whose wife lied about me, so I was thrown in prison. Everyone forgot about me. So I'm real bitter right now."

But every time Joseph opens his mouth in the pages of Scripture, he mentions God. He is one of the most Christ-like, God-like characters in all the Bible. He had such a focus on God. We need to keep our eyes on God. The day came when finally all of his brothers were there before Joseph, bowing and kneeling, just as God had given him the dreams so many years earlier. He had within his power retribution and revenge.

Can you imagine how we would have gone, "Oh, I love that!" When I'm watching a cowboy movie and the good guy has the bad guy, I always want him to beat him up before they throw him in jail. Just punch him out! Hit him! Hit him! (Pray for me; okay?) He's a real rotten bad

guy, so I just want the good guy to punch him. (I need prayer.)

Can you imagine Joseph? I'm reading the story and thinking, Okay, Joseph. Now's your chance to get back! But through his tears, Joseph said, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." I can even imagine how hard that must have been for Joseph to say, "I'm Joseph, your brother! God had His hand on this whole thing! I forgive you." He brought them all to the land of Egypt and took care of them.

When God forgives us, God forgets our sins. It doesn't mean that God doesn't know about our sins, but God treats us as though it never happened. And God wants us, from our hearts, to forgive others.

In Ephesians 4:31 to 5:1, Paul says, "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice..."—or "hatred." "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore, be imitators of God as dear children." In other words, be mimicking God. Be imitating God. Put away your wrath and your anger and your evil speaking and your malice and hatred. And be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven you. Go out and live like God your Father.