

# Freedom Unheard Of

Dear Friend:

We live in a therapeutic society. What I mean is that in the Western culture, we give a lot of authority to our emotions. We believe we should pay close attention to how we feel. If something doesn't feel right, it's wrong and we should avoid it. If something feels right, then it's good and we should enjoy it. Pain and pleasure, what feels bad and what feels good, this is what life consists of. The problem with this therapeutic approach to life is that our feelings can change quite quickly. Emotions shift and change depending on what is going on inside and outside of us. Our desires shape and fuel how we feel.

When our desires aren't filled or met when we expect them to, that changes the way we feel. The reason it is important to understand our therapeutic society is because it shapes our ideas about forgiveness. Extending forgiveness is an essential part of experiencing life with others. If we think forgiveness can only be extended to others when we feel forgiving, our thinking is heavily shaped by our therapeutic society. The Bible has A LOT to say about forgiveness. What Scripture teaches is very contrary to what our Western culture would like us to believe. Today we are going to dig deep into this theme, looking at what and how Jesus taught about forgiveness.

One of the most important questions to ask regarding forgiveness is "Why should I forgive others?" What is it about forgiveness that makes it necessary in this situation? The Bible teaches that God is a holy and righteous Judge. He is the only one who has the authority to declare someone innocent or guilty. The Bible also teaches that God is the holy king. He is the One wronged by sin. Because God is both Judge and King, the fact that He forgives His children is incredibly freeing. These truths should shape how forgiveness is taught in the United States. Confusion about forgiveness is not new, Jesus' disciples were also confused.

In the gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, Jesus teaches his disciples about what the kingdom of heaven is like. He challenges his disciples' understanding of heaven, and how to enter into heaven. Jesus also instructs them on discipline within the church and how to forgive their brothers and sisters. In Matthew 18:21-22, Peter asks the question we all have. The Bible says, **“Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”**

The Jewish tradition was to forgive your brother for the same offense three times. After that, you didn't have to extend forgiveness to your brother and you could take legal action against them. Peter assumes he is being incredibly gracious by forgiving someone four more times than tradition requires. The number 7 is a very significant number in ancient Middle East cultures. It represents completeness, fullness or eternity. So when Jesus responds that Peter should forgive 77 times, he is not saying that the 78th time is the last straw. He means that his disciples should always be ready to forgive without keeping track of how often forgiveness is given. He follows this command with, in my opinion, one of the most convicting parables in the gospels.

Jesus continued teaching saying, **“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’” (Matt. 18:23-26)**

There is a Day of Judgment coming. We will all stand before the holy and righteous Judge and King. Our sin puts us into such incredible debt, that we could never pay it off. Jesus drives this point home using one of the largest measures of wealth at his time. One talent was worth about 6,000 denarii or 6,000 days worth of wages. Let's say that the average worker in the US makes \$15 an hour. That means they make roughly \$30,000 a year. 10,000 talents would be the equivalent to \$6 billion dollars!

Sin is at the very core of what it means to be human after Adam and Eve's disobedience. Because of sin, we owe God an unpayable debt. All that we have, our freedom, the freedom of our loved ones and all that we possess is demanded as payment. Sin is serious business. The servant reacts naturally, begging the king for time and mercy. In his desperation, we see our own plea apart from Christ.

If the parable ended there, the disciples would be left with nothing but desperation. Yet, Jesus continues, **“And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.” (Matt. 18:27)** The grace of God is summarized in this one simple sentence. The king, this righteous judge, frees the servant and clears his debt away! God's mercy frees this servant from bondage. This servant's debt would have enslaved him to the king for 1,000s of lifetimes and yet the king set him free! Not only is the servant free, but God's grace clears the servant from all debt. Imagine what Jesus is saying here, God is the one wronged by sin and yet He clears the immense debt of the sinner.

The servant must have been overwhelmed by relief and undone by the king's grace. He must have leapt for joy, running out of the courtroom ready to spread the news of this incredible grace. Unfortunately, that is not how the parable continues.

**Matthew 18:28-31** says, **“But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.”**

Clearly something has gone terribly wrong with the servant's heart. Using the same method of equivocation we used earlier, this fellow servant owed him about \$12,000 dollars. That's still a significant amount of money, but nowhere even close to the debt this servant owed the king. The heart of this servant is unchanged by the grace of the king. Jesus' point is all too clear and convicting: God's forgiveness in Christ should radically change the way we forgive the sins of others.

If we treat our brothers and sisters harshly like this wicked servant, we ruin our witness to God's grace in our lives. Other servants witnessed the injustice taking place and they reported what the servant had done. When Christians hold bitterness and resentment in their hearts toward people who have wronged them, they say that God's grace was enough for them but not enough for others.

Here lies the essential problem we face in our therapeutic culture. When we place so much focus on our individual feelings, we make our sins small but other people's sins large. We can also go the opposite direction and focus so much on how bad we are that we make God's grace ineffective. Most people in our society assume they are good people who occasionally do bad things. We compare ourselves to a wet hand on a beach that collects dry sand, our hand underneath all the sand is good, but we occasionally sin. In fact, we go so far as to claim that others make us sin! It's the external influences: family life, genetics, sin of others or society, that make us sin.

The Bible describes us more like freshly fallen snow. When we were first created, we were pure, white and fresh. After Adam and Eve's disobedience, we became utterly bent toward sin. Exactly like when cars splash mud into the snow. The snow is not pure anymore. Nothing you can do can separate it from the mud. Jesus tells this parable to explain the effects of sin in our lives, the power of God's forgiveness in Christ and what will happen if we don't display God's forgiveness to others.

So the servant has his brother thrown into jail for failing to pay him \$12,000. Other servants witness this lack of grace and report to the king. Jesus finishes the parable by saying, **“Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”** (Matthew 18:32-35)

The king exposes the servant's clear heart sickness. This servant's lack of grace toward his brother proves that his heart is unrepentant and wicked. The king is angry at his lack of forgiveness and delivers him to prison for all eternity. Again, the debt this servant owed to the king was so much greater than what his brother owed to him. Jesus drives the nail straight into his audience's heart by proclaiming that God will punish every wicked servant who refuses to extend forgiveness to their brother or sister.

So what does this parable have to do with our original question? Why should we forgive others? In this parable, we see the great grace and forgiveness of God. Our own sin is cause for our condemnation and guilt. We are bent toward sin from birth and God is the one we really sin against. That's why the message of the cross is so powerful! You and I are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone!

We don't have to strive to do the impossible. We are free to be God's children, because the price for our sin has been paid once and for all. Here's the thing though, if we fail to extend the same grace we receive toward others, we prove we haven't really been changed by God's grace. If we hang tightly to our lists of wrongs others accumulate throughout life, if we allow bitterness or anger to sit in our hearts, if we abuse and accuse our brothers and sisters, then we first, ruin our ability to express the God's grace to us before others and second, we prove our hearts haven't been changed by God's grace. We must forgive others, because God has forgiven us in Christ Jesus.

The power of the gospel is this: we are saved from sin and death through Christ's death and resurrection on the cross. The servant in the parable is set free from his unpayable debt because of Christ's sacrifice. When God looks at us now, He sees the righteousness of Jesus in us.

This truth changes us at the heart level. When this heart change really does take place, we begin to look more like Jesus. Paul says it this way in **Ephesians 4:31-32** "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

How do we forgive others as we should? We dwell on God's forgiveness extended toward us in Christ Jesus. When we hold this truth in our minds and hearts, we can be kind and tenderhearted even when others abuse us. Maturity in the Christian faith is marked by readiness to forgive and love others well.

The Biblical understanding of forgiveness offers something the therapeutic culture can't. Scripture offers a foundation, an authority to appeal to, that our feelings can't offer. Christians can extend forgiveness not because they feel ready to release resentment or anger towards someone.

Christians can extend forgiveness regardless of any emotion, because they are forgiven in Christ. This freedom is unheard of in our modern minds. It breaks all the emotional chains we drag around with us, because biblical forgiveness has nothing to do with our emotional makeup and everything to do with God's grace through Jesus Christ. Our responsibility is to respond to God's grace by forgiving others when they sin against us.

Forgiveness is hard to practice sometimes. If you don't know Jesus as your personal Savior, I invite you to commit your life to him. Jesus is the only one who earns forgiveness before God. He submitted himself to death on a cross for you. God's grace is for you if you submit to His will and follow Him.

Forgiveness is not about feelings. Forgiveness is about God's grace setting you free from sin and death. When you experience this freedom unheard of, you want to practice extending forgiveness to others. May the Lord bless you and keep you and your family safe today.

Yours In Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chris A. Rice". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Chris A. Rice

## **Personal Study Questions**

After reading through the whole sermon, answer these questions.

How many times did Peter suggest we forgive our brothers for the same offense?  
What was Jesus' command?

How much debt did the servant owe the king in today's money?

What do you think of the sandy beach and snow analogy? Have you thought this way before?

How quick are you to forgive your brother or sister for the same offense? How does this scripture challenge you?

What is forgiveness about? What is forgiveness not about?