

The Freedom Of Forgiveness

Matthew 18

I know something about you, and you know the same thing about me. What we know is that we're both in need of forgiveness. The Bible says we have all sinned, and that means we all need forgiveness. We need forgiveness from God and perhaps from others, but forgiveness can be elusive. Sometimes, we're too ashamed to ask for it, so we live with our guilt.

Here's what I also know, last year, or maybe yesterday, or maybe this morning, somebody hurt you. And you felt it. Your first response was to retaliate, because you felt like you had a right to. You made up your mind whether you were going to retaliate or not. Maybe you decided not to, but you stuffed it down, and it's on the inside. The other thing we do is hold on to the hurt and become bitter. One of the most dangerous things a person can do is stuff down resentment, anger, hostility, all of these things, which really adds up to unforgiveness.

Simon Peter was trying to define forgiveness as a mathematical equation. He probably had one person in mind, and he had already forgiven them six times. He was ready to write somebody off and be done with them. We have learned how to keep count when people hurt us. You may not be good at math, but when people hurt you, you can keep up with that stuff in an amazing way. The people who hurt you the most in life are the people you love the most, trusted the most, and helped the most.

Peter thought there were boundaries of forgiveness, that at some point you finally get to say, "Get out of my life! Deleted—you're gone! Goodbye!"

"Then Peter came to Him and said, Lord, how often shall someone sin against me, and I have to forgive him? Up to seven times? And He said to him, I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."
Matthew 18:21

The rabbis had taught that you had to forgive three times, so Peter said, "Maybe seven?" Peter thought Jesus would applaud his graciousness to forgive seven times. Peter was seeing forgiveness like the world sees it. Jesus responded, *"Actually, Peter, not seven, 490. And let Me tell you a story about why forgiveness is so important."* Matthew 18:22

1. Forgiveness Is Not About Keeping Score. It Is About Losing Count.

Peter was trying to get to the boundaries of forgiveness. Are there boundaries to forgiving somebody? Is it some place where you just finally get to say, "That's enough. That's it. I'm done." Jesus blew their minds when He said, "No, not seven times, but seventy times seven," which, I'm not good at math, but that's 490 times, the same thing in one day from the same person.

Jesus is not suggesting a number. He's giving us a new math formula. He was saying, "You can never stop forgiving others, regardless of how deeply and how often they've hurt us." Peter thought that he was proposing a generous standard... seven times. But instead, Jesus ups it exponentially and says, "No, not seven times; seventy times seven."

You cannot start keeping score if you're going to be a forgiving person.

In 1985 Microsoft Excel spreadsheets changed the accounting world, and they do it in columns. It allowed you to keep up with dates and columns of information like groups or individuals as accounts. You have a client or a person, and then you have the date on one side and you have the name and then you have the column and you have the amount that they owe you. We also keep an Excel spreadsheet on people in our minds. We make so many examples. In 2003, mom and dad didn't go to my ball game, so they got themselves a column. We've got

a column for our friends. It goes back to high school days. Maybe they stole your girlfriend. In your column for your friends, they didn't invite you to the Super Bowl. You noticed on Facebook they had a party, but we didn't get invited, so they just got themselves a column, and we keep score. A column named coworkers. They lied, took credit for my project, didn't give me the credit. Our spouse gets a column. Something is said and done. They treated me ugly. Turned me down.

Every time somebody does something wrong, I have a choice. I can put them in a column, or I can let it go. Our problem in life is we start adding and adding, but when you come to church you're offended and angry, and you try to worship and you try to get something out of it, but you can't—because you've got columns on people.

Jesus gives us the right math in Matthew 6 on forgiveness. *“If you forgive those who sinned against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But, if you refuse others, your Father will not forgive your sins.”* Matthew 6:15

Every time the Father has forgiven us, we have to forgive that other person. Think about every time He has forgiven you, and take that formula and use it with somebody else.

You ever heard people say, “Time heals all things”? That's not true. Unforgiveness is not going to get better if you leave it alone. It festers. It grows. It takes root and grows. You will either fester unforgiveness or foster healing, but you have to do one or the other.

The most courageous thing you will ever do as an adult is to choose to forgive those who have done things to hurt you. Forgiveness is not for weak people. Weak people don't forgive. Weak people get even. They hold a grudge.

Forgiveness is for people who have gained a perspective that gives them the strength to believe that God is with them regardless of their circumstances. Forgiving is hard work. If it were up to us, we would not forgive. It's way too hard and uncomfortable.

Forgiving people who have hurt us deeply is not easy. Our lives have been deeply scarred by someone we trusted, by someone we loved, someone we expected to receive love from, not injury.

You are thinking about forgiving, and you might say to me, “Can you give me one good reason why I should forgive?” And before I could finish my answer, you would say, “Can I tell you what they've done to me?”

Some of us haven't known how to handle the horrible memories of a loved one who has abused you. The very ones in whom you trusted for safety and peace have taken advantage of you in the most horrible kinds of ways, and God calls you to forgive. Some of us have been abandoned, betrayed by loved ones, by a spouse. Some of us struggle with the fact that our parents never showed up at our basketball games. Dad was busy and never seemed to really care. God asks us to forgive. Some of us have been ignored by people we wanted to pay attention to us. Some of us have been victimized by slander and gossip. God says, “It's time to forgive.”

You may be saying, “How can I forgive?” You can say that several ways. “Teach me how to forgive.”

2. Forgiveness Is Not A Suggestion. It Is A Requirement Of The Redeemed.

What I'm fascinated about in the story that Jesus tells us is not about how many times we must forgive. I would have expected Him to tell a story about the 490 times. The story is about why we must forgive. Jesus wants Peter to understand why we forgive so the numbers become totally unimportant.

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold, brought to him. Since he was not able to pay,

the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Matthew 18:23-35

You may say, "Give me one good reason why I should forgive them." Jesus gives us five:

- Forgiveness Is At The Very Heart Of Who God Is.

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like... (this story about forgiveness)." Matthew 18:23

Why is the Kingdom of Heaven like forgiveness? Jesus was telling us how you get into the Kingdom of Heaven. You don't get in without forgiveness! All of us who are in the Kingdom have come to the Cross. How was such a huge price paid to open a door into the Kingdom of God for you? It was paid at the Cross because you desperately needed to be forgiven. I think if the Kingdom of God has a national anthem, it has to be about forgiveness. The Kingdom of God is all about forgiveness.

"Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go." Matthew 18:22-27

The gospels are filled with Instances of Jesus Forgiving Sin:

The Paralyzed Man (Mark 2:1–12, Matthew 9:1–8): Jesus forgives the man's sins before healing him physically, proving he has authority on earth to forgive sins. In Matthew 9:5-6 Jesus said *"Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins."* So he said to the paralyzed man, *"Get up, take your mat and go home."* Then the man got up and went home."

The Sinful Woman (Luke 7:36–50): A woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears is forgiven because of her faith and love. Jesus said to the Pharisees, *"I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."* Then Jesus said to her, *"Your sins are forgiven."*

The Woman Caught In Adultery (John 7:53-8:11) The religious leaders presented the woman to Jesus, noting that Mosaic Law commanded stoning for her offense. Jesus stooped to write in the dirt with his finger. When they persisted, he famously stated: *"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her"*. "Jesus told her to *"go and stop sinning."* Saying in essence her repentance would produce forgiveness.

The Thief on the Cross (Luke 23:39–43): Jesus assures the repentant criminal, *"Today you will be with me in paradise,"* (Luke 23:43) demonstrating forgiveness in his final moments.

Those Who Crucified Him (Luke 23:34): Jesus asks for forgiveness for those who crucified him, as "*Father, forgive them they know not what they do*". (Luke 23:34)

1 John 1:9 highlights that if followers confess their sins, He is faithful to forgive. "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*"

- God Takes Forgiving Those Who Have Offended Us Seriously.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded." Matthew 18:26-27

When we refuse to forgive, He takes that very personally, because it is the same grace of forgiveness that He gave to us. It's very difficult to understand why, if we were so wonderfully touched by forgiveness, we wouldn't extend it to others.

"When the king heard what this servant had done..." Matthew 18:32

Jesus was saying this is how God feels about you when God has forgiven you so much. When you refuse to forgive others after you have been forgiven so much, God takes it personally. We forget how deeply our sins have offended God.

- God Will Not Understand If I Don't Forgive.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'" Matthew 18:32

In Matthew 6, in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus says, "*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*" Matthew 6:12 There's no other part of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus explains except that forgiveness phrase.

At the end of His teaching of the Lord's Prayer, "*For if you forgive men their transgressions, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive them, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.*" Matthew 6:14-15

When we refuse to forgive, we break a bond of fellowship with God. I would treasure my relationship with God more highly than harboring something from the past. Jesus is telling this story in a way to force us to face the reality that when we intentionally refuse to forgive someone after God has so sacrificially spilled the blood of His Son to grant us forgiveness... that God is deeply offended by that.

- Unforgiveness Is Expensive.

The people who do number crunching in the Bible tell us something really important about the amount here. Ten thousand talents or bags of gold are worth about ten million dollars! In our day, it is calculated to be 2 billion dollars. He could never pay all that debt back! This guy owed a huge debt. That's why the king says, "*Sell him and sell his wife and sell his kids and sell all that he has.*" Matthew 18:25

This guy is hopelessly in debt. He needs to be forgiven much, and the King of Heaven forgave Him much. You and I have been forgiven much. There is not enough forgiveness for his debt. Our sin was so great that Jesus spilled His blood because my sin is so very great and your sin is so great. Our best works, the prophet says, are like "*filthy rags before Him.*" Isaiah 64:6

It's hard for us to understand what we were forgiven for until we think about the fact that our sin cost Jesus His life! A ten million dollar debt forgiven compared to about three months wages, 100 denarii. It was so little compared to what he's been forgiven, and he can't find it in his heart to forgive him after he's been forgiven much. What kind of a guy is it who has just been forgiven all that and refuses to turn around and extend the grace to somebody else?

- Unforgiveness Hurts Me.

The one who didn't forgive is the one who ended up in prison and suffering.

"In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed."
Matthew 18:34

"Unforgiveness is like drinking rat poison and hoping it kills the other person." – Ann LaMont

"See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." Hebrews 12:15

Every time you think of something in your past that has caused you great hurt and pain, you stand at a fork in the road. Each time, you've got to choose which road you're going to go down.

Sometimes we tell ourselves, "I'll just live with it."

Some of us say, "I'll just stuff it all inside and forget it." The only problem is, it doesn't work that way. Love does not forgive and forget, it remembers and still forgives anyway.

Bitterness will destroy you physically.

It's like a constantly running machine. It's not an occurrence, it's a lifestyle. It enters into your subconscious mind, and it runs while you're sleeping, eating, watching TV, talking to a friend. Medical doctors say bitterness will affect your body, your physical health. Bitterness has been medically linked to glandular problems, high blood pressure, cardiac disorders, ulcers, and even insanity.

Bitterness will discourage you emotionally.

Where there's bitterness, there's discouragement. Because bitterness leads to paranoia, you start to develop a victim's mentality, that everyone's out to get you. You become negative, critical, and paranoid. You become judgmental of others and think you know their motives. You think people are talking about you.

Bitterness will divide you socially.

We're all human, and at times, we'll give each other reason to be offended... sometimes unintentionally, sometimes not!

I don't mean to minimize your pain, or sound arrogant, but you're not the first person to get hurt in church!

Bitterness will defile your relationships.

There's a spill-over effect with bitterness. You don't have to be bitter toward your spouse to ruin your marriage. You can be bitter toward your mom or dad and ruin your marriage! You can be bitter toward your boss and ruin your relationship with your children! All because of the spill-over effect. Be sure of this: Bitterness toward anyone, living or dead, will destroy your relationship with God.

“Be kind to each other, tender hearted. Forgiving one another even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you.”
Ephesians 4:32

- You Will Need Forgiveness Again.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” Matthew 18:35

You’ll bring that negative, critical spirit to church with you. You won’t come looking for a blessing, you’ll be looking for what’s wrong...and you’re sure to find it!

How do we forgive?

Step One – Think it through.

Why do we harbor resentment? Why do we enjoy keeping all the hatred inside? It makes us feel better than the one who hurt us. We feel superior.

Sometimes it allows us to indulge in plots of revenge. TV feeds this feeling. Have you ever had had a conflict and got in the car and rehearsed the whole thing? It is because we are full of resentment. There is some sadistic pleasure in it. A husband and wife have conflict when someone has done wrong, and nothing is said out loud, but it’s being rehearsed in their head.

Step Two – Write it down.

Write at the top of your paper, “This is why I am filled with resentment.”

Put the facts down. Don’t make them worse than they are. Don’t make yourself better than you are. You hold onto them because they are the memories of past wounds so you can hurt yourself. Neurotic pleasure and religious pride, all wrapped up in one.

Step Three – Work it out.

Learn to talk it out. Learn to listen to each other. Learn to put yourself in their shoes.

Step Four – Talk it over.

Do you have a friend who lets you get angry with him about somebody else? You can get it all out without hurting anyone. It’s best to sit down with the person and tell them what’s budding in your heart. A good friend will tell you that you are probably overreacting.

J. B. Phillips translates that verse, *“If you are angry, be sure it is never out of wounded pride or bad temper, don’t ever go to bed angry. Don’t ever give the devil that kind of a foothold.”* Ephesians 4:26 Don’t keep it one night. That can lead to one week, to one month, to one year, to one lifetime, to eternity.

Step Five – Give It Up.

The evil others do to us is written in bold black ink, and love erases it from the journal, but the blood of Christ has forgiven us and washed away our sin in the same way. Allow the blood of Jesus to wash away your sin as well. *“Be kind one to another, forgiving one another as God, for Christ’s sake, has forgiven you.”* Ephesians 4:32

The grizzly bear will only share his lunch with a skunk. Why would he share when one swipe of his paw would drive him away? Even the bear knows the high cost of getting even, so that is why he shares.

There are five pictures of what it means to be forgiven by God. One of these days, the enemy's going to come, and he's going to tempt you to think you're not forgiven. The pictures also remind us how we should forgive.

- God's forgiveness is like putting your sin as far away as the east is from the west.

“For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” Psalm 103:11-12

- God's forgiveness is like burying something in the deepest sea.

“You will cast all of our sins into the depths of the sea.” Micah 7:19

Go to the deepest sea on planet earth and realize that Almighty God took all your sin and buried it at the deepest part of the deepest sea, never to be retrieved.

- God's forgiveness is like casting something behind your back.

“You have cast all my sins behind your back.” Isaiah 38:17

That means that you can't see them. God doesn't see your sin. He's cast all your sin away from His ability to see it.

- God's forgiveness is like erasing something from existence.

“I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgression, and like a cloud, I have erased your sins.” Isaiah 44:22

God has taken a cloud and covered all your sins.

- God's forgiveness is like God forgetting that it ever happened.

“I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.” Hebrews 8:12

When you confess your sin before God, He forgets it.

“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.” Psalm 32:1

The word "blessed" is another word for happy. Happy are those whose sin is forgiven. The truth here is so incredible, so revolutionary, that your life is bound to be changed forever if you just grasp it. When God forgives us, He welcomes us into His presence, where there is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. David's words about forgiveness appear in the Old Testament hymn book of Psalms.

God's forgiveness turns the burden of unforgiven sin into a joyful song of praise, what a blessing.

Why can't I get rid of this sense of guilt that I'm carrying around?

Sometimes our standard of forgiveness is higher than God's. It's one thing to believe that He forgives you, it's another thing to receive His forgiveness.

Since God has forgiven us, we have to accept His forgiveness. When God forgives us and we accept it, we become free of our sin. When we forgive those who have offended us, we become free of our bitterness, and we are made whole. The Christian church is the community of the forgiven. All of us have been forgiven, all of us have been forgiven by others. And, if we're honest, all of us either have forgiven or need to forgive someone. That's the uniqueness of who we are as the Body of Christ. We know how blessed we are because we have been forgiven by God, and it sets us free to forgive others, even when they do things that hurt us deeply. Christ wants to offer you the free gift of his forgiveness, and He asks you only to reach out and accept it. If you will do that, you can become a part of the community of the forgiven, and you will never face your sin again.