

Forgiveness – How to Do I Forgive Others?

This morning we're going to dive into the issue of how to forgive those who hurt us. I'm not going to pretend this is easy for any of us. Last week in the prayer requests, not to mention conversations Pastor Rick and I have had with some of you. There are so many of you asking for God's help to forgive someone who's hurt you.

There's probably another half here, who aren't praying that prayer, not because we don't have anyone in our lives to forgive, but because we don't want to forgive them. For some of the thought of forgiving a certain person is almost inconceivable.

I know there are some of you are carrying around decades of hurt...abuse, a cheating spouse, a business associate who defrauded you. Forgiving them isn't easy. To think that a thirty-minute message, is going to fix your heart after carrying around a hurt so severe for so long, not to put God in a box, isn't realistic.

What if today, we don't focus on getting all the way to extending total heartfelt forgiveness...What if today we set a goal, to take one step in the right direction?

Our passage comes from Matthew chapter 18. At this point, Jesus knows his earthly ministry is approaching the end. The teachers and religious elite are coalescing against him; he's predicted his suffering and crucifixion...it's like sees the cross on the horizon. In response, Jesus turns to prepare his disciples for his departure. In chapter 18 particularly, he's laying down the groundwork for the type of community they should become and teaching the kinds of relationships they should have with one another.

The idea is that the way that they do community with one another will be a witness to God's Kingdom. People will see the way they treat one another, as well as outsiders and they will glorify God because of it.

The story we're going to look at follows right on the heels of Jesus teaching on how to confront someone who sins against you. ***"15 ***If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. 16 But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'*** 17 ***If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.***"***

If you have a conflict with someone and you come for counsel, this is the process we're going to point you to. But there's also an underlying principle. Notice, Jesus is not telling us to pretend it didn't happen or saying it doesn't matter. Sometimes people think when we talk about forgiveness, we're saying, just get over it. As we turn to our passage on forgiveness in just a moment, we have to conclude, from Jesus' teaching here **Forgiveness is not just letting everything go or pretending nothing happened.**

Sometimes people don't want to forgive because they're afraid it means condoning the person's actions. It's like saying it's okay they did that. The fact is, condemning a wrong as wrong, and sin as sin is implicit in extending forgiveness. Imagine if I stood at the door this

weekend. As you're coming in, I held out my hand, and I looked into your eyes and said I want you to know...I forgive you. You'd think I was crazy right...or more likely you'd say, "what do you mean? I didn't do anything to you." If someone tells you, they forgive you without you having done something...some of us might get upset because extending forgiveness entails accusation of wrong. It's not saying it's okay.

Let's look at the passage in your notes. If you brought a bible, that's even better. Verse twenty-one **"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.** Peter probably thought he was generous here. Most rabbis of their day agreed that forgiving someone three times was sufficient. After the third, that's on them. Peter was taking it to another level and probably felt pretty good about it. Jesus' answers Peter with a play on Genesis 4. In Genesis 4 a man named Lamech said **"If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times."** You see what Jesus is doing. He flips it: not vengeance seventy-sevenfold but forgiveness seventy-sevenfold. If you grew up reading the King James, you're more familiar with seventy times seven. The Greek wording isn't obvious, the point Jesus is making isn't the number. It's we've got to quit keeping track.

As he often did, Jesus goes on to tell a story, to help us understand:

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 25 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.

If you're bibles open, you might see a note next to the word gold. If you look to the bottom of the page in your bible, it probably says – 10,000 talents. It also probably says "in those days, one talent equaled about 20 years labor." Which means, the servant owed 200,000 years of labor. That's what it cost to pay his master back. In today's dollars, it would have come to 600,000,000, and that's the conservative estimate.

You might be wondering how in the world does a servant rack up that kind of debt? The word servant doesn't have to mean butler. Based on the amount owed, the servant was probably a regional ruler or governor. One of his primary duties would have been to collect all of the taxes from his region for the King. Even still it's a ridiculous debt, from a 1st-century perspective. The yearly tax haul for Judea and Samaria, where Jesus was teaching was only 600 talents. Clearly, Jesus intended this debt to be shocking to make his point.

At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'

If the amount owed was preposterous, then the servant's response was equally so. "Be patient with me...and I will pay back everything." The Bible tells us of some people living to a pretty old age, but 200,000 years is a stretch. There's no conceivable way that he could pay this back regardless of the king's patience. He had to know that. The king had to know that. Yet **The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.**

Today the word pity has taken on some pretty negative connotations. Most of us know who that can be attributed to I'm looking at you Mr. T. To describe something as pitiful is never good and that's not how the King sees it. A better translation from Greek for us today is "moved with compassion." Jesus tells us that the King was moved with compassion and forgave the debt. Compassion is one of the most consistent emotions that the gospel writers

attribute to Jesus. In the story, Jesus is saying this King, was motivated by the same emotion that he drove and guided him again and again in his ministry.

Why compassion? It's certainly not that the servant was a particularly good servant. He must have been terrible at what he did to accrue such a debt. Let's be honest; he was pretty worthless. He's not even begging for the debt to be forgiven. He's just asking for more time to pay it back. There is nothing winsome nor appealing in this servant's character, as we'll see in a moment. It's as if the entire initiative for compassion originates in the heart of the King for no reason other than the king is compassionate.

Think about this for a moment. What happens to the servant's debt when it's forgiven? Where does it go? Does the debt disappear? No. Ten thousand talents were owed to the king. The debt's no longer on the servant's books, but the loss...is still felt by the King. If it's such a significant amount, it must also be an equally significant loss. Forgiveness doesn't make the debt magically disappear; the King has to absorb the debt the servant couldn't pay.

Let's stop here and define forgiveness. Forgiveness is the generous release of a genuine debt. It's generous because it's unexpected and undeserved. It's also generous because the one doing the forgiving must bear the cost to release the debtor from their debt. In this story, Jesus is telling us the gospel. Jesus, our King, forgives us an unthinkable sin debt we could never repay. That debt doesn't just disappear. He bore the cost himself on the cross to release us from it. To set us free.

The story's not over ***“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.”*** The silver coins were denarii. One denarius was roughly equal to one day's wage. This second servant owed the first four months-worth of wages not counting sabbath days. Four months of wages isn't an insignificant sum. But look at the comparison Jesus is setting up: four months, versus 200,000 years of wages. It's not a drop in the bucket; it's a drop in the ocean.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’” Who does that sound like? Sounds like the first servant. The words are almost identical. His master just generously dismissed his unthinkable debt, we would expect him to forgive his fellow servant generously. Maybe even be thankful for the opportunity to pass on the gift. At the very least, give the man what he wanted – more time to pay.

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 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. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ 34 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.”

These are hard words. If God should release us of our uncountable debt against him, then we must forgive those who have sinned against us. Jesus makes it clear this is not an option; it's not elective. Some of you might ask me afterward, Andrew, are you saying our forgiveness is dependent on forgiving others. No, I'm not saying that...Jesus is. I believe Paul was right, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from

yourselves, it is the gift of God.” We received a generous gift, but it’s not one we were intended to keep to ourselves. We have to pass it on.

Let’s go back to our definition. Forgiveness is a generous release of a genuine debt. To release, someone from their debt means we bear the cost ourselves in order to forgive. It’s easy to see how that works with financial debt, but it works the same way with any wrong done. We bear the cost of forgiveness, and we do so by surrendering our right to pay back. We forgo our perceived right to get even.

Whether it’s physical revenge or holding the individual in contempt in our hearts and minds, or tearing them down verbally, sometimes it’s manifest even in cold, bitter silence. That’s how we pay them back for the pain they caused us. To release them, means we pay the price ourselves...It brings pain, doesn’t it? To know they won’t experience the pain of payback.

In his book *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller said:

“However, to refrain from lashing out at someone when you want to do so with all your being is agony. It is a form of suffering...you are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking out of the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death.” This is the hang-up for us. It’s why we can’t let it go. Because to do so, to forgive someone who hurt us so deeply feels like death. Keller continues....yes, forgiveness is a type of death. **but it is a death that leads to resurrection instead of the lifelong living death of bitterness and cynicism.”** We’re going to carry the pain either way. It can be the pain of bitterness, or it can be redemptive, creative pain that gives us new life and it will be a pain that can heal. I’m convinced that there’s no act which you and I can perform, that makes us more like our savior, that has more redeeming potential in our lives than to forgive those who have hurt us.

For those of you thinking, that sounds great Andrew, but it still impossible for me to forgive. Forgiveness is often a process, not an event. An even better word to use might be a journey instead of a process. Imagine we were going to go on a road trip after worship. We’re going to pile in the car and drive up the coast to Vancouver. If we got out to the parking lot, and you climbed up on top of the car to get a better view, and looked North. If you couldn’t see Vancouver, standing on top of the car would you get discouraged? Would you say, Andrew, we’re never going to get there? No that’s silly. Just because you can’t see it today, doesn’t mean we can’t get there. Chances are we’re going to have to be on the journey for some time before we can finally see the destination. It’s no different with forgiveness. We’ve just got to keep taking the steps, and we’ll get there.

The first step is **to look in the mirror**. You might even want to put look to the cross there in the margins of your note. We need to recognize that with God, we are all 10,000 talent debtors. The way we are going to be able to forgive and forgive freely is by recognizing how great is God’s forgiveness of us. So we look to the cross, again and again, to see what it cost for Jesus to bear our sins, and release us. I don’t know if you’re a journaler or a prayer walker, or maybe just in your quiet time in the morning – we make this practical by reviewing our day, or week. And then confess to God this is where I’ve fallen short. This is where I’ve sinned. Do it often enough, and you will begin to grasp the magnitude of forgiveness.

The second thing we do is **stop telling the story**. I am not a trained therapist. If you want to meet with me, I can pray for you and direct you to some scripture, and maybe share some wisdom. But some of you have been hurt in such a way that to experience healing and to

extend forgiveness; it may take a trained counselor. I think that's the best thing for a lot of people. And you will tell them your story, and they will walk you through the appropriate steps. But there comes a time, when in order to forgive, you've got to stop telling the story. A time comes when telling your story is no longer healing, or asking for prayer, but a way of confessing someone else's faults. We tell it to show how we have been hurt and how we're right. And it's not the road to forgiveness. It's paying them back. So, if we want to forgive, we need to stop telling the story.

The next is **we pray for them**. I don't mean pray like King David did, that God would pour down his wrath upon his enemies but pray God's blessing on them. In praying God's blessing on them, your heart will begin to follow your prayers. Too often don't forgive until we feel like doing so. When we choose to pray for them, we are choosing to love and forgive long before the feeling ever shows up.

Lastly, we **ask for accountability**. Life is too difficult to do alone, and forgiveness is too important to leave to chance. We need people who know – "I'm struggling to forgive this person." And who asks where we are on the journey? People who call us on it, if we keep retelling the story, and whether we're praying for the one who wronged us. Above all, they help us to recognize how greatly we've been forgiven.

Galatians 2:20 Says. ***"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."***

As we close may you take comfort. The one who died to forgive the sins of the world lives in you. By his power, not your own, he will make you faithful to do the impossible. To forgive and love as he has forgiven and loves you. Let's pray.