
Forgiveness Part XII

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The Problem of Unforgiveness

Matthew 18: 21-35

Peter is seeking a rule or a way to put a limit on forgiveness. He figures seven times was a lot—possibly more than Jesus would require—but Jesus responds with the call that forgiveness is not limited. It is actually the canceling of a debt. It is as if someone owed you one thousand dollars, but he or she could not pay you back. You forgive the debt, which means you never expect to receive the money back. The amount owed to you is no longer owed or expected. You give up your right to seek the repayment of that debt.

As Christians, we who have been saved and have received His mercy are called to give mercy to others when we are wronged! Refusing to forgive makes us the ones who destroy relationships and forfeit the opportunity to glorify our Lord. We imprison ourselves in isolation, cutting ourselves off from real life and from seeing God's redemptive power in action. Unforgiveness is a price that is way too high for any true Christian to pay. Forgiveness gives us the freedom to move on and to build bridges for right relationships and growth. Unforgiveness blows up those bridges that we must cross if we would obtain personal healing and maturity.

- *Forgive*. How often shall we forgive, Peter asks? It is the realization of how much we have been forgiven by Christ (Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 23:34; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13) that enables us to forgive the insignificant things that are done to us. It involves refusing to be resentful to others, and ignoring the wrongs that we have received so relationships can be healed through the expression of Christ's love.
- *Seventy times seven* was not a math formula for 490; rather, it was a colloquialism meaning, forever. It was also a Jewish saying, meaning, never to hold a grudge. Jesus is confirming that we are to let it go. Holding onto grudges imprisons us in bitterness and derails us from our growth in Him. Some rabbis taught that the number three was sufficient in the amount of times to forgive. Perhaps Peter, in saying seven, was being over twice as generous.
- *Certain King*. Jesus is not referring to a Jewish king, but rather a Gentile ruler, perhaps a Greek king.
- *Servants* were the upper level slaves, the house servants, like butlers or personal servants, who were also managers in charge of the rest. Examples of these would be Joseph's position under Potiphar, and then the jailer in Genesis, chapter 39. Most of these upper level servants, called "satraps," led better lives than most of the free people who were peasants.

- *Settle accounts.* Satraps would often gather the taxes for the king. Perhaps in this case, the means and methods of collecting did not meet the king's standards; perhaps it involved embezzlement, or bad management, or the people could not pay the king's demands and the collector was sympathetic. It is interesting that a king would allow a servant to get that much in debt.
- *Ten thousand talents* would be the entire annual income for a very rich king. A talent is usually one year's wages for the rich, and a sliver talent was up to 6,000 days of wages for an average worker.
- *A denarii* was the daily wage for a worker. The amounts of Jesus parable could also be hyperbole speech, as Jesus often uses exaggerations to grab people's attention. Some rabbis saw sins as debts before God.
- *Master, have patience with me.* Most kings in the ancient era would never have accepted an excuse. Here, a person begs for forgiveness and receives it, when he neither deserves nor is entitled to it. It would be impossible for a servant ever to pay such a debt; it would be like a pastor (me), who makes very little money, personally saying that I will get California out of its deficit!
- *Moved with compassion.* Most kings were ruthless and unfeeling. Here is a picture of benevolence and grace. It is the kind of grace our Lord gives us, grace without a possibility of earning it and, certainly, undeserving of it (Psalm 45:2; Gal. 5:4; Eph. 2:5-10). Some of the Egyptian Pharaohs would forgive taxes when the crops failed; seeking to collect upon such a debt would only hinder their future tax earnings. Because we receive grace, we should also impart it to others (2 Cor. 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 4:10-11; 2 Pet. 1:2-4).
- *Laid hands on him.* He was owed a hundred days of wages, an exponentially much, much smaller amount than that for which he was forgiven. He chose not to apply this principle of grace; rather, he became as ruthless to another as the king should have been with him.
- *Choking* refers to the anger this man had. When we do not exercise grace, we become infused with bitterness that blinds us from God and others. It is a heinous attribute we must never exercise! A person who was in prison where no wages could be earned could never pay off a debt. It then became the responsibility of the family, if they chose to redeem him (Lev. 25:25-34; Rom. 4:3-10).
- *Saw what he had done.* The king became angry, and justifiably so. This king, perhaps, had the motivation to receive more revenue by showing how benevolent he was. Now, this servant had ruined that idea as well as the king's income.
- *Torture.* The law forbade torture and it was never practiced officially; it was, perhaps, rarely practiced at all in Judaism. However, Gentile kings would use it as a tool to extract information or receive penance. When we do not forgive, it is not the wrongdoer who is tortured; they "feel" they got off free. It is we who refuse to forgive who are tortured! A forgiving attitude is freedom, and contentment is a result of our rebirth (John 3:3).

Forgiveness is bankruptcy; once filed, the creditor may not retrieve the debt, and it is wiped out. We need to see the cancellation of the debt as a write-off, and not some form of embezzlement. When we forgive, we forget; that is, we are no longer to even have a desire for restitution, pay back, or punishment.

God is not determined by income or wealth but by our trust and obedience in Him. It is trust not wealth that forms real authentic relationships with others. How do you suppose God feels when we do as this servant did? The king was angry because the servant's actions reflected negatively on Him! How do our actions reflect on our Lord?

Forgiveness, on our part, does not earn salvation. Forgiveness is a response we give to others because of what Christ has given us (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). We receive forgiveness as a part of our salvation. So, because we have been forgiven for such a high debt, why would we not forgive others for such a small debt? The cost of forgiveness was extremely high for our Lord, and not at all high for us in comparison! It is a part of our fallen nature to receive forgiveness and still not experience forgiveness, so we refuse to share forgiveness (Rom 12:10). The reason we forgive is solely and simply because Christ has done so with us, and calls us to do likewise with others. It is not about how we may feel; it is about what He has done!

Forgiveness is an aspect of God's love for us, and shows us how we are to love others (1 Cor 13: 4). When God tells us that love keeps no record of wrongs, He means we are not to go around with a list, writing down or keeping track of the faults of one another. Rather, we are to look for the positive things that happen in our relationships, and to affirm others. We are to seek reconciliation and forgiveness, never strife or dissension. We should not go around with a negative attitude, but, rather, with one that is positive, enthusiastic, and equipping to God's people. We are not to keep track of the mistreatments we may receive from friends or our spouse. Because God loves us so much, He does not keep a scorecard of our sins as long as we honestly repent of them. We do not need to reflect or gossip about the flaws of other people in order to elevate ourselves. God refuses to do that to us. Love lets things such as resentment and anger go so they do not build up and destroy us and our relationships (Matthew 18:21-35; Mark 11:25; Hebrews 13:21-21). Authentic Love does not keep a scorecard!

Questions:

1. Have you ever gotten yourself into debt besides for a home or car—perhaps credit cards? If so, what did you do? What do you think of people who go bankrupt because of miscellaneous and frivolous spending with credit cards?
2. Be honest; in what ways do you put a limit on forgiveness?
3. What do you think Peter's motive was in this passage?
4. Why should a Christian be generous with forgiveness?
5. How can the realization of how much we have been forgiven by God help fuel our ability and willingness to forgive someone?

6. In what ways have you seen Christians being resentful to others or holding a grudge? How does this glorify our Lord or build up their character? Why do they do it?
7. Have you ever seen someone—perhaps you—who was imprisoned in isolation because he or she refused to forgive? How so? What does bitterness do to that person?
8. How does refusing to forgive help destroy relationships and opportunities to glorify our Lord?
9. Why did the king exercise such grace and mercy? How is the king's mercy like our Lord's?
10. This servant begged for forgiveness and received it when he neither deserved nor was entitled to it. So, why would he "shake down" a fellow servant who owed him so little in comparison?
11. The Bible tells us that because we have received grace, we should also impart it to others. So, why should we? Why would we not want to?
12. How is forgiveness like canceling a debt or declaring bankruptcy?
13. When the king became angry, was it justifiable? Why, or why not?
14. How do you suppose God feels when we do as this servant did?
15. Why would a Christian not be generous with forgiveness?
16. When should we not forgive?
17. Why is unforgiveness a price that is way too high for any true Christian to pay?
18. How is forgiveness an aspect of God's love for us and our love for others?
19. What can you do to make sure forgiveness is offered more freely so you can build a bridge to relationships and growth?
20. Who do you need to seek reconciliation and forgiveness from? What are you going to do about it?