

The Necessity of Forgiveness (18:21-35)

On June 17, 2015, a self-proclaimed **white supremacist** entered a historically black Methodist church in Charleston, SC and incomprehensibly murdered nine members of the church who were there for a bible study. Less than 48 hours after the shooting, many of the victims' family members were able to address the shooter directly at his bond hearing. And in an almost equally incomprehensible moment, many of the family members got up to the mic and offered *forgiveness* to the man who murdered those closest to them. They didn't downplay the horrific nature of his crimes—some of them spoke of the hurt in intense, vivid language. But they still *forgave* him in unambiguous terms.

One person who offered forgiveness to the shooter was a man named **Chris Singleton**, a former minor league baseball player. His mother Sharonda was killed in the attack. Chris was asked later, after the hearing, what inspired him to forgive his mom's murderer. He responded by quoting Christian author **Lewis Smedes**, who said in one of his books: "**to forgive is to set a prisoner free, and discover that the prisoner was you.**" Expounding on that, he also said this: "the narrative [around] forgiveness is [that it is] *submitting* and it means that you're weak." "But I've realized that forgiving is so much *tougher* than holding a grudge. It takes a lot more *courage* to *forgive* than it does to say 'I'm going to be upset about whatever forever.' "

I want us to talk this morning about the tough, often *grueling* work of forgiveness. And I start with a story like that because I don't want to give off any wrong impressions: forgiveness is, like Chris Singleton said, "tough." And that, really, is putting it mildly. Forgiveness might be one of the most difficult things in the *world* to do—especially when you've been legitimately, deeply wronged by another person. But as difficult as it is, Jesus is going to show us this morning that it is also absolutely *necessary*. *Especially* if you want to experience life and freedom in the kingdom Jesus calls home. And *especially* if you want to experience life *outside* of the prison that bitterness and *unforgiveness* can create.

So if you have a bible, **turn with me** to **Matthew 18**. If you're new to our church, we've been walking through the gospel of Matthew for about two years now, off and on. And in *this* section of the book, Jesus is talking a lot about how we approach *relationships* with other followers of Jesus. And no series on relationships with other followers of Jesus would be complete without a teaching on *forgiveness*.

So let's **dive straight in** and take a look, starting in v. 21, here's what it says:

[21] **Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”**

So **remember: in last week’s passage**, Jesus talked about how to engage another follower of Jesus on their sin—and then what to do if they won’t hear you out. Here, it seems like Peter (one of the disciples) is doing his best to process and apply that teaching from Jesus. But he has a follow-up question. “Okay, Jesus—but how many times do I forgive a brother or a sister who sins against me? **Which is not all that unlike questions I hear from people as a pastor. People will ask, “okay, but how many times do I have to forgive someone? How many times can they wrong me before they become an ‘unsafe’ person? How many times do I forgive them before I’m just enabling their behavior?”** Very common question.

That’s Peter’s question for Jesus. And **speculating on potential answers**, Peter follows with, “up to seven times?” You see, in Jewish thinking, *seven* was the number of completeness or perfection. So Peter likely thinks he’s being really *generous* and *over the top* here: “should forgive them *up to seven* times?” Jesus’ response, v. 22:

[22] **Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”**

Now, **some translations say** “seventy-seven” here; others actually say “seventy times seventy”—it could be translated either way. But it doesn’t really *matter*, because the specific *number* of times to forgive isn’t even Jesus’ point (as if after you forgive someone the 77th time, you’re off the hook). See, just like *seven* was the number of perfection, *seventy-seven* or *seventy times seven* was like saying “perfection upon perfection.” **Jesus is saying that you should forgive the other person as many times as it takes.** He’s saying that **followers of Jesus are meant to operate with an essentially unlimited supply of forgiveness towards each other.**

Now, we’re **gonna talk in detail here in a bit** about what Jesus does and doesn’t *mean* by the word *forgive*, because that *is* important to know. But for now, I just want us to sit in how *challenging* of an idea this is. Because that’s Jesus’ intention in saying it. **He wants his disciples to offer forgiveness at a much deeper level than they currently are.** They have not yet grasped how to understand forgiveness, and he wants them to see why that’s a problem. And to do that, he tells a parable: a story that *frames* forgiveness in a radically new way. Here’s the parable, v. 23:

[23] **“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.**

Okay, since most of you **probably don't count your currency** in “bags of gold,” ten thousand of them in modern-day terms would be anywhere from the high *millions* to low *billions* of dollars. The point being is that he owes an *astronomical* amount of money. Pretty much impossible for *anyone* to pay back. **Unless of course you're here this morning and you roll like that, in which case I would love to talk to you about how easy it is to give to City Church online. Let's talk.** But to most of us, this is an absolutely *ridiculous* amount of money. The point is that this guy in the story owes more money to the king than he could ever *feasibly* pay back. Verse 25:

[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.

Now while that may seem extreme to *us*, this **was actually the standard practice** back in the day. There weren't any bankruptcy courts or credit consolidation services, so if you owed more money than you could pay back, you and your family would be sold into debt slavery: you worked for someone until your labor *itself* could repay the debt. That was the only possible outcome for you in this scenario. But all of *that* is really beside the point, because look what happens next, v. 26:

[26] “At this the servant fell on his knees before him [the king]. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ [27] The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

Alright: **“...took pity,”** there in v. 27 may not be the best translation. Everywhere else in the Bible, that word is translated as “being moved with *compassion*.” **The king is emotionally moved with compassion towards the servant that owes him the money. His heart goes out to the guy, so he changes his mind, and decides to just cancel the servant’s debt altogether.** He zeroes out the guy’s account and says “you’re all paid up—you’re free to go.” *Unbelievable, extravagant* generosity from the king to his servant. Jesus’ disciples listening to this story would’ve thought it almost *absurd* that any king would be that generous towards a servant.

But that sets up the *most* shocking part of the story, which begins in v. 28:

[28] “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.

So *this second* servant owes, at the most, **a few thousand dollars**. Still a decent amount of money, depending on who you are. But it's obviously *nothing* compared to the *millions* or *billions* of dollars the *first* guy was just *forgiven for*. The *differences* between these two amounts of money is almost comical. Which makes the first servant's response all the more baffling. He grabs the guy who owes him a couple thousand dollars, starts to *choke* him, and yells "pay me back, right now!" **All the disciples listening** to the story at this point are thinking, "who does this servant think he is?! Is he crazy? Is he completely calloused and cold-hearted?" Nobody in their right mind would be *forgiven* millions upon millions of dollars, and then immediately go choke somebody out over a few *thousand*. This guy has issues. Or, at the bare minimum, an *unbelievably* short *memory*: he doesn't remember what was just done for him. That's the point. And the madness actually *continues*—look at v. 29:

[29] "*His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'*"

Now notice that this language in v. 29 is **almost verbatim what we saw** from the *first* servant up in v. 26. *This* servant *also* falls on his knees, *also* begs, and makes the *exact same request* the *first* servant made to the king: "be *patient* with me, and I will pay it back." So at this point, listening to the story, you're thinking "surely the first servant sees it now! Surely he has *deja vu* and *this* is where he remembers what was *just done* for him in the same scenario. Surely this is where he *forgives* his fellow servant." That's what you'd expect to happen. But that's not what happens, v. 30:

[30] "*But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.*"

The first **servant's heart remains completely closed** towards the servant who owes him money. He throws him into prison, "...until he could pay the debt." Just an utterly *incomprehensible* response. But the story doesn't end there. There evidently are *other* servants watching all this play out. And now *they* enter the story, v. 31:

[31] *When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master [the king] everything that had happened. [32] "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.*

Then **after concluding the parable**, Jesus turns and addresses his disciples directly, and makes his point. Look v. 35:

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

Jesus absolutely **drops the hammer** at the end of the story. ‘Unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart,’ he says, ‘you’ll receive a similar treatment from God himself.’ So notice: Jesus is so convinced that *receiving* forgiveness from God will make you *into a forgiving person*, that he feels comfortable saying it in *reverse*. In other words, **if you refuse to forgive your brother or sister, God the Father will not forgive you.** And matter of fact, *that’s exactly* what Jesus says back in Matthew 6: if you don’t forgive others, you won’t be forgiven.¹

Now, let’s **make sure we hear this correctly**: Jesus *isn’t* saying that’s how the Father will treat anyone who ***struggles*** to forgive their brother or sister. Or how he will treat anyone who finds it ***difficult*** to forgive their brother or sister. But it *is* how he will treat anyone who ***refuses*** to forgive their brother or sister. Who claims to receive complete and total forgiveness from God, and yet closes their heart towards a brother or sister and says “but I *will* not forgive you. I refuse to do it.” In the same way that the *servant in the story* could not have possibly understood and appreciated the depth of *his* forgiveness, based on his actions: we must not either, if that’s how we respond to a brother or sister who wrongs us.

Okay, let’s talk. Because with that unpacked, we find ourselves in a similar situation to our passage last week. A situation where the *ideas* we just read about aren’t very complex at all. **Very straightforward**: you should forgive people, because God forgives you. *Simple*. I don’t even know that any of you needed *me* up here to help you draw that point out from the passage. But while forgiveness is a very simple concept to *understand*, I would also insist that it’s a pretty difficult concept to *apply*. In fact, **I would argue from personal experience that forgiveness is quite honestly one of the most difficult things in the world for us to do.**

One reason for that is that sometimes, we bring **cultural assumptions to the table** about what forgiveness *is*. There’s actually a lot of misinformation floating around out there about forgiveness. And all of that can, at times, convince us Jesus is asking us to do something in this passage that he actually *isn’t* asking us to do at all. So what I’d like to

¹ See Matthew 6:16

do first is see if I can clear some of that up. Let's talk for just a bit about **what forgiveness isn't**. After that, we'll circle back and talk about what forgiveness *is*. First up...

Forgiveness *isn't* ignoring or forgetting.

Forgiveness is not the same as *ignoring* wrongs done to you or sins committed against you. **How many of you have heard** someone say something like, "oh...you've just got to *forgive and forget*"? Or how about: "you've just got to *let it go*"? The Queen Elsa method of forgiveness. Or how about "you just need to get *over it*? Have you heard *that one*? Okay, I'd like to apologize that people have given you that advice on forgiving. I'm sure it came from well-intentioned people—but those just aren't what forgiveness *is*. And if you don't believe me, just think back to the passage we covered last week—the one that immediately *precedes* this one. **What does it say you should do in that passage if someone sins—and especially if they sin against you? You should go and "point out their fault."** So *whatever* Jesus means in *this* passage by "forgiveness," he *can't* mean *ignoring* or *forgetting* about a person's sin. That's not forgiveness.

I would also add, just at a practical level: **have you ever tried to forget** something? That's pretty much an *impossible* task, isn't it? The only way I can forget things is by accident, never on purpose. So **just because** you haven't *forgotten* about something someone did doesn't mean you haven't forgiven them. That's not what forgiveness *is*. *Second...*

Forgiveness (also) *isn't* condoning or excusing.

Forgiveness also isn't *condoning* or *excusing* someone's sin. When we *forgive*, we **don't have to minimize** the sin committed. We don't need to make excuses or justifications for it. Sometimes *that* can actually be one of the *worst* things you can do. I'll give you a really intense example: **a friend of mine found out, once he was an adult, that his dad had abused his sister during much of their childhood. And when he addressed it with his mom, she responded by saying that their dad "wasn't doing well" during those years, and that he "couldn't help the type of person that he was."** And then she said that the best thing for the family was for them all to just "forgive" their father and "move past" it. Do you hear that language? The assumption there is that forgiveness is giving someone a pass because they weren't doing well or because they couldn't help it. But forgiveness doesn't *condone* or *excuse* sin.

To put it another way, **forgiveness doesn't mean a complete absence of natural consequences** for the offender, whether they are sorry or not. **If someone did something illegal, you forgiving them doesn't mean they won't or shouldn't face legal repercussions. If someone stole money or property from you, they may still need to pay it back, even if you forgive them personally for stealing it.** The families of the Charleston 9

forgiving the shooter doesn't mean he *doesn't* go to prison for what he did. **Forgiving someone doesn't mean they don't experience natural consequences of what they did.**

Now, I **do want to be careful here**, because there may indeed be *situations* where the Spirit *prompts* you to *release* a person from *some* of the consequences of their actions out of love and compassion for them. I say that because literally in the passage we just read, "forgiveness" is represented by a king *cancelling* an enormous amount of debt: that, on some level, *is* an alleviation of consequences. So **sometimes forgiveness can look like that, but my point is that it isn't necessarily that.** It can still be forgiveness, even if it doesn't alleviate consequences for the offense. Because that's also not what forgiveness *is* at its core. And finally...

Forgiveness *isn't* reconciliation or restoration.

Forgiveness also **doesn't mean that the relationship returns automatically to what it was like before the offense occurred.** *Sometimes*, returning the relationship to what it was isn't even *possible*. One person may have since moved away, or joined a different church, or began a new relationship with someone else, such that restoring the relationship isn't even feasible at a logistical level. Other times, returning the relationship to exactly what it was may be *dangerous* for the offended party, specifically in instances of violence or abuse—and especially when the offender isn't repentant. There could be a variety of reasons that restoration of the relationship isn't wise or logistically possible. So forgiving someone doesn't automatically mean the relationship returns to what it was.

Now, forgiveness **can lead to restoration** and reconciliation—when it's possible and when there are two willing, genuinely repentant parties in the situation. But it doesn't *necessarily*. Forgiveness is not the *same thing* as reconciliation. **Which means, and this is important: you can forgive someone, even if and when they don't apologize.** I've heard people say that **it takes one person to forgive; it takes two people to reconcile.** I think that's a helpful way of putting it. And even then, *reconciliation may not look like full restoration.* When we talk about "forgiving," we don't necessarily mean "returning the relationship to exactly what it was." That's not what forgiveness *is*.

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So forgiveness *isn't* ignoring or forgetting, it *isn't* condoning or excusing, and it *isn't* reconciliation or restoration. Which brings us to the question, *what is forgiveness?* When Jesus talks about "*forgiving* your brother or sister from your heart," what is he referring to, exactly? Let me give you a definition, and then we'll walk through each part of it together.

Forgiveness is:
Acknowledging the wrong done
Absorbing the hurt it caused
And making a conscious effort not to *punish* (the offender)

Let's take each of those in turn. Forgiveness is, first...

...acknowledging the wrong done...

When we forgive, we're **not just releasing** some sort of **vague good vibes** into the universe, towards the person who hurt us. We are forgiving them for a *specific wrong* that they committed. Maybe *multiple* wrongs. Another way to put it is since people sin *against* us in *specifics*, we *forgive* in *specifics*. This keeps us from ignoring or forgetting, *and* it keeps us from excusing or condoning the sin—because we're calling it for exactly what it is: “this person did *this thing*, it was *wrong*, and I'm choosing to forgive them for it.”

This also keeps us from *overstating* the nature of the wrong. One of the benefits of putting into words the wrong that was committed against us is that it acts as a *filter*. It helps us learn to distinguish between sins *against* us, and then just other people's actions that negatively *impacted* us. Do you hear the difference there? There's a pretty big difference. **Not everything that negatively affects me is a sin against me.** Let's say a few guys from my LifeGroup decide to go do **Schulz Brau** for bratwursts and delicious German beer. If you didn't know, now you know. Go to Schulz Brau. But let's say the three of them decide to go, and they didn't invite me to go with them, even though I like them and happen to like Schulz Brau.

Question: is that a *sin* against me? I hope not! Otherwise every one of you jokers who have ever taken a trip to Schulz Brau without inviting me needs to repent right now! No, that's not a sin against me. Now, it's possible they could have gone about it in a sinful way. They could've plotted together and said “hey, let's go to Schulz Brau, and I know Kent really likes going there, but honestly we hate him and he tells dumb jokes so let's make sure we don't invite him.” *That's* a sin against me. But simply going somewhere I like and not thinking to invite me is not a sin *against* me. And I would argue if I elevate things like *that* to the level of a “sin against me” in my heart, that's not a *them* problem; that's a *me* problem. ~~I've actually sinned against them by assigning sinful motive to their actions.~~

So **when you're considering something** you may need to forgive someone for, I think it *helps* to actually put the wrong into *words*. Because no matter what, that'll help you be

able to clearly think through what you're forgiving them *for*. And you might even discover that the "sin against you" wasn't a sin at all. Which is also helpful to realize. So *either way*, it's a necessary thing to do.

So *first*, we acknowledge the wrong done, in specifics. Second, it means...

...absorbing the hurt it caused...

So remember from our passage in Matthew: the king forgiving the first servant meant that he **absorbed the debt**—to the tune of high millions to low billions of dollars. So there's no way around it: **forgiveness requires absorbing the hurt into ourselves that the other person caused by their offense**. Do you know what that means? It means that **forgiveness, usually, hurts**. It *hurts* to just absorb the pain that someone else caused by their sin. *Sometimes* it hurts a lot. Just personally, we've had people leave City Church over the years, and decide to do it by writing angry letters. People who have just taken a few parting shots at me or at other leaders in our church or at our church as a whole. That *hurts*. And so you know what I've *wanted* to do in those moments? Write a letter back! I like writing—I'll write my *own* angry letter! It would feel *so good* to do that in response. But do you know what *Jesus* would have me do? *Absorb it. Let it sting, let it cut*. Maybe even let parts of it *convict* if it needs to. But then, in the words of 1 Peter 2, "entrust myself to the one who judges *justly*." I need to trust that *God* is judging this situation fairly and equitably, which means I don't have to prove or justify myself by *retorting back*. That's what *Jesus* calls his followers to do when we're wronged. *Absorb* the wrong done to them.

But he **doesn't ask them to do it alone**: *Jesus himself* does the same thing. He did it when we were the ones who sinned against *him*. 1 Peter 2, the passage I just mentioned, in its full context, puts it like this:

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins (i.e. bitterness and unforgiveness) and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed."*²

Jesus, more than anybody, knows what it feels like to embrace hurt that wasn't just. And he knows, more than anybody, the feeling of *absorbing* that pain into himself. So in telling us to forgive, *Jesus* isn't asking us to do something he *hasn't* or he *won't* do. He's asking us to follow him into it all. *Sometimes* I'll hear people say things like, "well it still hurts—so I must not have *forgiven*." *Maybe*. Or maybe the fact that it *hurts* means you are

² 1 Peter 2:24

truly embracing what it *means* to forgive: *absorbing the hurt* of the offense. Instead of holding onto bitterness, or retaliating or lashing out in return.

Which **leads to the final piece** of forgiveness. Which is...

...making a conscious effort not to punish.

To me, this is **the truest test** of whether or not you've chosen to absorb the offense: have you ceased looking for ways to *punish* the other person for what they did? *We tend to dole out punishments for people a lottttt of different ways.* Sometimes it's as simple as just **withholding relationship** or friendship from them when we could reasonably offer it. Sometimes it's **passive aggressive comments** or jokes at the other person's expense, meant to be funny, *but also* knock them down a notch or two. Maybe it's giving them the **cold shoulder** or the silent treatment.

Maybe it's going and **gossiping** about the other person, tearing them down in front of others so that other people are really clear on what they did and just how awful of a person they are. Sometimes it's just **anger fantasies** in your head about what you *would* do or *would* say to them, if you knew you could get away with it. And the list goes on: we can get really creative with the ways we punish people for crossing us. But if you are actively entertaining ways to get back at the person who wronged you (or just *rejoicing* when bad things happen to them), chances are you haven't yet entered into forgiveness. I say that because of passages like **Romans 12**. Take a look at v. 17-19 on the screen with me:

Do not repay anyone (who? *Anyone*. Do not repay *anyone*) *evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*

Okay so notice what Paul says here. **Hear his logic**. He doesn't say "don't take revenge because your desire for justice is wrong." He doesn't say "don't take revenge because you're a Christian and Christians are called to be nice." He doesn't say "don't take revenge because what happened to you wasn't really a big deal anyway and you just need to get over it." He says—and *I'm quoting directly here*—"leave room for God's wrath." That's the *opposite* of minimizing what was done against you. Paul is saying if you're a follower of Jesus and you've been legitimately sinned against, *the attention of God himself* has been summoned by the wrong that occurred.

So, **in light of that, please leave it up to him** to take care of it. Live at peace with that person. You and I aren't good at justice on our own terms. We're just not. We're prone to escalation and grudges and lifelong shouting matches in response to people hurting us. When we pursue revenge, we almost always screw it up. So Jesus says, "let me avenge. That way, *you* can live in peace." At the end of the day, true forgiveness is an exercise in trusting that God is good on his promises. That he will not let wrongs go unaddressed, and that if that's true, we can forgive. We can live at peace. **We can let ourselves out of the lifelong prison that is anger and unforgiveness**, because *Jesus* makes it possible for us to do that.

So let me **just ask as we close**: as we've talked about forgiveness this morning, what's the one person's name who keeps coming to mind? What's the one person's name that the Holy Spirit just keeps bringing to your attention, that you need to forgive? There could be *more* than one person, for sure. But chances are there's at least *one* person for a lot of us. Relationships are messy. Which means chances are, if we are living in close relationships with people, we're going to, every so often, need to offer forgiveness—just like we're going to need to *be* forgiven. So who's the person you're currently withholding forgiveness from?

We're about to sing some songs about God's extravagant, *baffling* offer of forgiveness towards us. How he sent his only son to absorb the weight of our sin into himself and offer us grace and compassion in response. So my only ask of you is that we wouldn't stand and sing about *that forgiveness*, while *withholding* it from people in our life. I know it's not easy—it might be the most difficult thing in the world—but it's what we're called to, and it's what Jesus makes possible for us.

Let me **pray** for us.

