



This morning, as we continue our study in the parables of Jesus, we come to the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18. It's a story that deals with the healing of hurts between people, the way to resolve differences between members of families, churches and communities. It's a story that teaches us the way to deal with the resentment and bitterness that develops in our heart towards those who've hurt us. And it's a story that gives us a distinctively Christian answer to these problems, an answer that is both simple and radical. The answer lies in the power of forgiveness. The story teaches us how to forgive, why to forgive, and how much to forgive.

One of the things the story takes for granted is we understand exactly what forgiveness is. Forgiveness isn't being broad minded and tolerant. It's not looking at a wrong and saying, "it's no big deal." It may very well be a big deal. Nor is forgiveness denying the fact you've been hurt. Chances are you should be hurt. Nor is forgiveness being a doormat; refusing to ever call someone to account for their actions; seeing to it they don't have to suffer any consequences.

What is forgiveness then? Forgiveness literally means "to leave behind." When we forgive we choose to leave behind the wrong we've suffered along with the hatred and the need to get even. One thing that's clear from this parable is forgiveness is a battle that's waged within our hearts. We can act forgiving, but the forgiveness God wants to produce in us is internal in nature.

Forgiveness is the virtue we most enjoy and least employ. We all love to be forgiven; we even expect it. But, we find it very difficult to do ourselves. In many ways, it's the hardest trick in the whole bag of personal relationships. And yet it's also the most important. Without it, long-term, meaningful, and fulfilling relationships are impossible. Without it we become prisoners of our own emotions.

We all know this, but somehow our heart doesn't always cooperate with our head. As much as we might want to, we feel we can't forgive. This is how Corrie ten Boom felt. She was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. After being released, she began a journey of learning to let go of her hatred for the Nazis. She preached the message of forgiveness and reconciliation all over Europe, and even in Germany. But, one day, after speaking in Munich on this very thing, she was confronted with the ultimate test. A man walked over to her and reached out his hand, expecting her to take it. But Corrie knew that man. He was one of the guards in the concentration camp where she'd suffered so

much. He was the beast who'd mockingly looked on as she and other naked and shamed women were herded into showers. As he reached out his hand to her, he said, "Yes, Fraulien Ten Boom, I'm so glad Jesus forgives us all of our sin, just as you say." At that moment, She froze. Rage and hurt welled up within her; her hand stayed close to her side. She felt she couldn't forgive.

All of us have felt the same thing. Forgiveness doesn't come naturally to any of us. Our hurts and our suffering might not be as dramatic as Corrie's. It might just be something as seemingly insignificant as a social snub; but the effect is the same. Our sense of fairness is violated and we can't seem to let go of the hurt and the hatred it's spawned within us. We begin to rehearse in our minds bitter confrontations yet to come. We savor the thought of hurting them back, of delivering a knockout blow to their ego that all can see. How do we work through these feeling to forgiveness? Why is it so important we do so? And how far do we take it?

It's these questions our parable answers. In Matthew 18, Jesus had been talking with his disciples about relationships among believers. Specifically, he'd taught them how to treat weak, erring, even sinful members of his body. He'd taught them to be willing to seek out, restore, and forgive these brothers and sisters. But, then Peter comes along and has a question for Jesus. Look at v. 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?"

Peter's Question: How Often Shall I Forgive?

Notice Peter's question has to do with personal hurts inflicted by a so-called "brother." In essence, what Peter wants to know is how far to take this forgiveness business. Where do we draw the line? How many times should I forgive before I lay down the law?

Peter is feeling very generous here. The religious leaders of his day taught to forgive someone three times was very generous; they believed that was as far as anyone should go. But Peter says, "Hey Jesus! I know you want us to love people, so I'll double that and throw one in for good measure. Seven times! That ought to be enough."

When you think about it, that is being very generous. Imagine a friend doing something to you that is unfair and hurtful. Perhaps they say something about you to other people that isn't true. When you find out about it, you confront them and they

apologize and you forgive them. Now that's one thing. But then suppose they go right out and do it again. Once again, when you confront them they apologize and you forgive them. You're being generous. But, suppose they did it again, and again, and again, and again, and then again. Would you keep forgiving? At what point does forgiveness become stupidity? Where do you draw the line? That's what Peter wanted to know. "I'm willing to be extremely generous, Lord, but everything has a limit." What's the limit of forgiveness?

Jesus answers him very directly in a way I don't think Peter was prepared for. Look what he says in v. 22.

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

In Jesus' day, 77 was a number commonly used to refer to something that was unlimited. Jesus isn't saying the limits of forgiveness for his people are 77 times, but rather there are no limits. We're to forgive without end.

This must have shocked the disciples. At the very least, they had to wonder, why? On what basis could Jesus possibly make a claim like that? Not only that but, how? How could someone possibly forgive that much? Anticipating their question, Jesus went on to tell them this parable to illustrate why the standard of forgiveness for his people should be unlimited. Let's read the entire story.

"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 was 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" (verses 23–35).

Jesus' Parable: Why Should I Forgive?

As we read this parable, the parallels are clear. The King in the story is somehow like God; the first slave like us; and the fellow slave like those who we are called to forgive. In this parable we see three successive encounters, with each encounter making an important statement about why the forgiveness that God requires of us is unlimited in nature.

In the first scene we learn forgiveness is unlimited because of the immensity of our debt to God and the boundless nature of his forgiving grace. We see an encounter between a King and one of his slaves. The King has decided to call in his debts. These weren't slaves as we think of them. These were men of high rank themselves who owed the King a great deal of money. They were most likely responsible for the tax revenue from a particular district within the King's realm. One of these slaves was brought to the King, owing him 10,000 talents. Anyone hearing this story in the first century would have immediately been taken back by this sum. This was an unheard of amount of money in that day! The talent was the largest unit of money they had, and 10,000 was the largest number. So this was the largest amount of money one could refer to. It would be like saying today that someone owed "zillions" of dollars. So we aren't surprised this slave can't pay it back. No one could ever pay an amount like that back. But, just to retain some form of repayment, the King orders that this slave, his family, and his possessions be sold. This was something he was justified in doing. But then the slave humbled himself and begged for more time to pay it back. This is almost humorous because we know that was impossible. But the King was moved with compassion over his hopeless situation and not only released him but forgave the entire debt! He did much more than the slave asked for; the slave just wanted time to pay, but the King freed him from having to pay at all.

This is a picture of our relationship with God. We see here the sum of our offenses against God constitutes an immense debt we could never repay. All of our willful choices against God, the things we've done and the things we've left undone, our selfish and impure thoughts, our lovelessness towards others, our pride, our jealousy and envy, our outbursts of anger, our lies, even our lack of faith; all of this adds up to a staggering debt.

Many of us have lost sight of this today. We've forgotten the awful predicament we were in. We no longer see sin as a debt which God has every right to demand we pay. We see it as the unfortunate result of an unhappy childhood or of circumstances beyond our control. But, the Scripture lays the responsibility squarely at our feet. It's our debt and God calls us to account for it.

Then comes the good news. Notice the tender mercy of God; the boundless nature of his forgiving grace. He wipes away our debt

and declares us forgiven in Christ. Paul tells us in Colossians that the certificate of debt, which consisted of a long list of decrees against us, was actually nailed to the cross with Jesus. We can imagine on that certificate was written the words "Paid in full." The result is we stand before God free from any and all debt. This is how we become a child of God—by recognizing our staggering debt to God, crying out to him for mercy, and trusting that Christ himself paid that debt. If you do that, regardless of what you have done, he will cancel the debt forever! That's the good news!

This is the most fundamental reason why unlimited forgiveness is required of us towards others—because God's forgiveness towards us is unlimited. When it comes to forgiving others, Jesus focuses first on the vertical rather than the horizontal. He doesn't say, "You ought to forgive because it's the right thing to do." Or, "You ought to forgive because they really aren't that bad after all." No, the issue begins in our relationship with God, and when that's understood properly, the horizontal falls into place. That's why true forgiveness is a distinctively Christian virtue—those who haven't experienced the forgiveness of God can't truly forgive. They have no basis for it in God's forgiveness of them. That's why the reality of us being a forgiving community, a fellowship of forgiveness, marks us as different from the world. To forgive is to be Christlike in the most radical way. We forgive because we've been forever marked by the experience of being forgiven.

That leads to the second thing this parable teaches us. It teaches us the absurdity of us refusing to forgive the trifling debt of others. We see this in the next encounter in this story. Almost in the same breath the forgiven slave went out and found a fellow slave who owed him some money. Notice how harsh and demanding he is—he seizes him by the throat and demands payment. And notice how this fellow slave used the exact same words that the first slave had in begging for mercy: "Have patience with me and I will repay you." But, unlike the King, the first slave was unwilling to forgive the debt and had him thrown in prison.

The story "turns" on us noticing one very important thing—the amount the second slave owed was a pittance compared to 10,000 talents! One hundred denarii equals about twenty dollars, which was more than it is now, but still very possible to pay back. This makes the actions of the first slave all the more reprehensible. Think of the utter hypocrisy of being unwilling to forgive so little when he's been forgiven so much. I'd even say we're led to believe such actions are absurd; they don't make any sense.

This is meant to be a picture for us of the incongruity, the hypocrisy, the absurdity of our refusing to forgive others. Yes, someone may have wronged us. There's a real debt here. But no matter how bad a person has been, no matter how much they've hurt us or violated us, it's nothing compared to the debt we owed to God. It's like comparing twenty dollars to zillions! If God forgave

us so much, how can we justify refusing to forgive others what is so small in comparison?

And yet we do this all the time. Every day of our life we count on the grace and mercy of God. Not one of us here stopped sinning when we were first forgiven. Every day we come to him in need of his forgiveness. We count on that and we enjoy it. Even as we come in brokenness and confession with the same sin over and over again, we know he cancels out our debt and makes us clean. Yet how often do we turn around and almost in the same breath revert to a basis of justice in our relations with others? How often do we demand of others they pay what they owe, treat us fairly, give us our rights, or at least apologize if they haven't? We act or speak harshly just as the slave did. In our own way, we grab people by the throat and demand they pay what they owe. Some of us do that by our silence, others lash out with a verbal assault. It doesn't matter which tactic we use; both of them are based on the same absurd premise—that we deserve better; justice must be served; we'd never do such a thing.

As parents we act this way frequently. We consign our children to a prison of rejection and scorn by demanding justice of them when we ourselves don't stand on that basis. We're harsh and severe with them, terribly offended by their misdeeds. We feel we're trying to defend the truth and bring them up right, but that's not the way it appears to them. To them we're just being hypocritical, demanding that they live by a standard that we ourselves don't fulfill. We expect them to be always truthful, always good, always responsible, when we ourselves can't do this. It's not that discipline isn't necessary, or that we don't confront wrong in our children. There's an important place for that. But, we have to find a way to do it that communicates humility and grace and unconditional love.

This is true in marriages as well. How often we relate with our spouses on the basis of a justice system. How often we keep score of what we've done compared to what they've done. One generous act from us requires one from them. We say or think things like, "I watched the kids all day Saturday; now tomorrow is my turn to play." Or we think to ourselves, "What he said hurt me so much that I'm going to make him pay by giving him the silent treatment for a week!" When we act this way we're acting in a way that's totally absurd given the reality of how God has acted towards us. It just doesn't make any sense.

And because it doesn't make any sense, this parable makes a third statement about forgiveness. It teaches us that those who refuse to forgive cannot expect to be forgiven. In v. 31 we see some fellow slaves deeply grieved over this guy's behavior. Apparently, they'd heard of how the King had forgiven his debt. I imagine upon receiving his pardon he'd boasted of it to his friends. Perhaps he even thought he had gotten away with something. "That old King sure is a generous fool!" And so, when they saw the way he treated his fellow slave, they were stunned

and saddened by his hypocrisy. They went and told the King, and the King confronted him with his hypocrisy, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?" Then he became angry and handed him over to torturers until the repayment was made. A "torturer" was a little bit like our bill collectors are today, but much more severe. Their job was to pressure the defaulter of the loan to pay up. It was a method sanctioned by the gentiles and not the Jews. Jesus uses this as a model for how the Father will treat all those who don't forgive from the heart.

On the surface, it appears Jesus is saying if we don't forgive others, the forgiveness we've received from God will be revoked; he'll revert to a legal basis of dealing with us if we do so with others. But we know this contradicts the rest of the New Testament, where we're told forgiveness is once for all, and it can never be revoked. This includes even the sin of not forgiving others. If our forgiveness can be taken away by our failure to forgive others, then salvation isn't by faith alone, but rather through a combination of faith and works. So what do we do with this?

The answer to this question lies in the whole idea of the slave's action being utterly absurd. Jesus is saying the idea of someone who has been forgiven so much withholding forgiveness from someone who owes so little is so absurd it can't really even happen. If it appears to, it proves forgiveness really never happened in the first place. God's forgiveness of me is proven by my willingness and ability to forgive others. These two things go hand in hand. Each needs the other to exist. To receive the gift without using the power it provides is absurd; it's like exhaling without inhaling or walking without using your legs.

This doesn't mean believers who've received God's forgiveness will never struggle with resentment or hatred; it doesn't mean we won't go through periods when we feel as if we can't forgive someone even though we know we should. This happens to all of us, and it's a battle that can last for a long stretch of time. I'd say the mere fact that you're trying to forgive, that you see the inconsistency of **not** forgiving, and that you cry out to God to help you forgive, indicates you've been forgiven. There's a big difference between, on the one hand, being unwilling to forgive and feeling justified in that and, on the other hand, being unable to forgive and feeling horrible about it.

One of the things we need to remember is this is for our own good. Those who don't forgive from the heart pay a dear price for it. As the story indicates, there's a certain torture that we experience when we don't forgive. We open our lives up to the "demons" of seething bitterness and malice and rage. We think we're just giving others their due when in fact it's us that's being

torn apart. Have you ever lived with deep bitterness and resentment for a long time? It's not a pleasant experience.

One of my favorite quotes on this comes from F. Beuchner in his book, *Wishful Thinking*: "Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll your tongue over the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

So we asked the question, why forgive? We've learned three things: First, we forgive because of the immensity of our debt to God and the boundless nature of his forgiving grace. Second, we forgive because of the absurdity of not forgiving the trifling debt of others when we've been forgiven so much more. Finally, we forgive because of the accountability that God requires of those who won't forgive; if we will not forgive then we can expect that we are forgiven.

We also asked, How do we forgive? The answer to that question is hidden beneath the surface of the story. Jesus teaches us the way to forgive is **not** to start with trying hard to be forgiving. Christianity never starts with being good, rather it starts with God's goodness. We start by focusing fully on the enormous debt which he forgave us. When we do that, when we live each day, each moment, in the knowledge of his immeasurable grace towards us, then we'll find ourselves to be forgiving people. This doesn't mean we won't get hurt, but we'll begin to see those who have hurt us through the same compassionate eyes that God sees us.

I started by telling a story about Corrie ten Boom, but I only told you half the story. We left Corrie frozen in her hatred of the Nazi guard; unable to acknowledge his forgiveness by extending herself to his outstretched hand. Well, at that moment, Corrie prayed, "Lord, I can't forgive this man. Forgive me for this." Immediately, in a way that she wasn't prepared for, Corrie says that she felt forgiven. Forgiven for not forgiving. At that moment her hand went out, she took the hand of her enemy, and she released him from his terrible past. In doing so, she freed herself from hers as well. You see, forgiveness is a miracle that God works in our heart. We can't forgive, but as we experience the reality of our own forgiveness, we find ourselves growing into forgiving people.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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300 Piedmont Avenue | San Bruno, CA 94066 | 650 349.1278 | www.cpcweb.org. Additional copies available on request.