

A woman was bitten by a rabid dog, and waited too long until seeing the doctor. He simply said, "There's nothing I can do, you should get your affairs in order." She grabbed a piece of paper and pen and started writing, she wrote for a while. The doctor finally said, are you writing your will? She said no, a list of people I need to bite.

C.S. Lewis observed. 'Forgiveness is a beautiful word until you have something to forgive.' Mahatma Gandhi said, 'The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.'

In a large representative sampling of American people on various religious topics in 1988, the Gallup Organization found that 94% said it was important to forgive, but 85% said they needed some outside help to be able. However, not even regular prayer was found to be effective. The Gallup poll revealed that the only thing that was effective was "meditative prayer". Everyone seems to agree forgiveness is important to personal health and community, but it's difficult, or even impossible without outside intervention, and takes sincere and deep thought/meditation to do so; it's a process.

We're in Matthew 18:21-35 today. Let's remember that this directly follows the familiar passage, Matthew 18:15-20, which speaks of what to do when someone sins against you - confront them, if they don't listen, take another, and possibly another. If they still don't listen, tell the local church, and treat them like a tax collector. What do you do with a tax collector? You avoid them. Now, I don't think that means shunning, but it does mean that you erect healthy boundaries in relationship to them. That's the passage we always go to when someone wrongs us - since there is a sense of justice there - it feeds our anger. But, without the following passage, that's all it does, it feeds our anger and makes us bitter. But let's come back to that thought. Let's dig through this passage a bit:

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?"

²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.¹

Peter has a good questioning heart; he thought he was being generous here, but he reveals how he still sees the need for a measuring rod to govern relationships. The rabbinic teaching on forgiveness was derived from the first two chapters of Amos where God brings condemnation on the various nations using a phrase, "for three sins and for four". From this, the interpretation was that a person could not forgive more than God. Due to the interpretation of Amos they taught that God would only forgive three times, but on the fourth he would punish. So, Peter doubles it, adding one, bringing the number to seven thinking himself very generous. Yet, still he thinks there is a limit to forgiveness.

Jesus responds by saying not seven, but seventy-seven (or, $70 \times 7 = 490$). This was a typical Jewish way of saying, "Don't hold grudges". In other words there should be no

¹ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 18:21–22). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

limit to our forgiveness. Even if we took it to mean 490 times, who could count that? It would be absurd. Jesus was overturning conventional thought. And Paul would further his thought later in saying, "Love keeps no record of wrongs" (1Co 13:5). Jesus is using an absurdity to teach a point. And in typical Jesus style he uses story to drive his point home.

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. 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. ²

Jesus starts out his story with reminding us how the kingdom of heaven works – how we should live as Christians in community with others. The man in debt to the king was probably an upper level slave, or a free provincial satrap (local ruler) who was in charge of collecting taxes from the public – they were allowed to collect taxes at a profit. So this guy would've been well off. Apparently he got greedy. As a matter of fact, he got very greedy, so greedy that the story becomes absurd. Just like the absurdity of forgiving someone 490 times, this man owed more money than the entire annual income of a king, and perhaps, more than the entire actual coinage in circulation in Egypt at the time. He's the Bernie Madoff of Ancient Palestine.

A talent of gold changed value at various times, as does all currency. So, depending on the time, 10,000 talents would have been worth anywhere between 60-100 million days wages! Estimates in modern currency range from several million, up to one trillion dollars! A talent was the largest known denomination of currency in the Roman Empire, and 10 thousand was the highest number for which the Greek language had a word. Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, reported that the annual tribute in tax for Galilee and Perea under Herod's rule was only 200 talents. Therefore, the amount that Jesus puts forth as being owed is absurd. The man could never have even gotten himself into such debt, let alone pay it back. And in the case of debt at the time it would be within the king's right, and customary to sell this man, his family, and their belongings as partial payment for the debt. Yet even that would not come close to paying it back.

²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. '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.³

So, due to the absurdity of the amount in the story, we can see that this man is still deceitful; he's not only stolen money, but is now making promises he knows he can't keep. He's unrepentant and doesn't fully understand, or is making light of what the King's about to do for him.

² *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 18:23–25). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 18:26–27). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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. ⁴

A denarius, a silver coin, would have been one day’s wages, therefore, a hundred denarii would have been one hundred days wages, something that would have been possible to repay over time. It is a minuscule amount compared to the first man’s debt. The contrast cannot be taken lightly; how much God has forgiven you is incomparable to the minuscule troubles we may have with others. The first man’s reaction shows us again that he has no comprehension of the grace he’s experienced from the King. He proceeds with anger/violence, always our first inclination when we’re wronged.

²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ ³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ⁵

So, he proceeds to go the route of justice. He’s been wronged and in the eyes of the law has every legal right to do this. However, morally, under the law of love & grace, he has no right given that his debt had been forgiven him. The King, who obviously images God in this story, rightly sees that his standards are not being met; the first man is not reflecting the heart of the king in forgiveness. The King treats his subjects with grace, but this man treats others by the law.

³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Remember, legally this man had every right to do what he did, but what is legal is not always is ethical. And the others intuitively know this.

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. ³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”⁶

From the beginning this man didn’t understand what the King had done for him. He had been in a jail of his own making; a jail of his own sin of theft. I was watching American Greed the other day about a guy who had run a Ponzi scheme. When his investors asked for an accounting and he did not have the money, he went directly to the FBI and confessed. The FBI were dumbfounded he would do so. The only thing they could say

⁴ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 18:28). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 18:29–30). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 18:31–35). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

was that he was in a jail of his own making - constantly looking over his shoulder that he would be found out. This man probably felt like that before the King asked for the accounting. Then he had been released by the King, but had not learned the lesson of Grace. The end result is that he puts himself back into a literal prison due to his unrepentant heart. In other words the King says, if you want to live by pure justice/by the law then you will. This man was not reflecting the heart of his King. The King's hand was forced by the unrepentant heart of the servant. The servant caused his own incarceration, not the king.

This story isn't talking about salvation. In other words, if I don't forgive others then I'll lose my salvation; that would contradict Scripture as a whole. Rather it's a lesson in comprehending grace and how that works out in relationships. The passage is not here to deal with the issue of lost peoples in relation to God, but in a Christian's relations with others. It's here to illustrate how much you have been forgiven in Christ, and therefore, how much you should extend grace and forgiveness to others; no limits.

Proposition: So, as gracious as he is, Peter begins by asking for a just measuring rod. He wants a way to still judge his relationships with others by the law; Christ said forget the rod, sacrifice your rights, and live by Grace. God's grace towards us should produce a life of grace in us towards others.

Question: Have you experienced God's grace so deeply it's transformed your outlook on others? Even those who wrong you? So much so that you would be willing to sacrifice your rights? It was the right of the king to be paid but he did not exercise that right - you will notice, he did not say, "Okay, I will let you go so that you can pay me back," but rather he canceled the debt. It's only the king who can cancel the debt, and likewise, it's only us which can cancel the debt of the wrongs people have meted out on us.

I think Jesus is driving us to see that it's not enough for you just to receive forgiveness. Grace must revolutionarily transform how you view others; it must be limitless in the Christian World View. God's grace and forgiveness must refocus your eyes on the world around you. It has to change your heart so that you see through the lens of a sinner saved by grace. Eph 4:32, ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.⁷ Col 3:13, ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.⁸ There is a sense here that we might have to question whether we truly understand the Cross if we cannot see others through the lens of our own need of Grace. Christ is pushing us to come to deep grips with how much God loves, and forgives us; how this reality in our own lives can bring peace in relationships and to our own hearts as well. We must remember where we came from:

⁷ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Eph 4:32). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Col 3:13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Romans 5:6 “You see, just at the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.”

Titus 3:3-7 “³At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”

There are probably thousands of illustrations of sin and forgiveness just within the walls of this room today. Quite possibly there is something in our dark pasts, horrific actions people have visited upon us or, maybe things in the present, something that we are experiencing in relationship with another right now. They could be very large issues like rape, incest, beatings, verbal attacks, theft, abandonment, or constant belittling. They could be small like, a sharp look, an unkind word, a disagreement about an issue, etc. However, the given is that no matter the issue, when you are in the middle of it, it seems large and inescapable - ‘Forgiveness is a beautiful word until you have something to forgive.’ You see no way through it.

I think there are a few things that we have to remember when speaking of forgiveness:

1. Forgiveness is not synonymous with reconciliation.
 - a. Forgiveness is an internal issue between you and God; it is not dependent on the offenders response. It does not mean necessarily that you have to be best friends with that person who has wronged you. It does not even necessarily mean that you must go to the person.
 - b. Reconciliation is relational between you and another.
 - c. Reconciliation has to do with relationship, resolution has to do with issues
 - i. There can be reconciliation without resolution – we can agree to disagree
2. Forgiveness sometimes is extended for normal hurts
 - a. At times you will need to forgive someone not for anything they have done wrong, but for something that just plain hurt.
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3. Our forgiveness does not absolve the abuser of their guilt/consequences
 - a. God says it is mine to avenge – the culmination of history.
 - b. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that you do not seek the route of justice in some cases; it may be morally wrong for you not to (example). However we must remember that life is not always fair; justice does not always happen in this life as we think it should.
 - c. We must remember that in the previous verses (15-20) Jesus gave direction on how to deal with someone that has sinned against you. So, there are consequences to sin which reveals his concern for the abusers

wrongs. But in these verses he is saying the victim must be released by forgiveness of the offender.

- i. So, forgiveness is separate from discipline of the offender. We may still need to seek to implement discipline after having forgiven a person if they continue in destructive behavior.
 - ii. And if we seek punishment of the offender without forgiveness then we seek revenge which is not our place to seek.
4. Forgiveness many times is ongoing, revisited and grown into; it deepens and widens as you grow in Christ
 - a. (Eph 3:17-19) “¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”
 - b. The pain will not instantly vanish but as we grow in Christ we grow in our ability to forgive.
5. The lack of forgiveness has dire consequences in our hearts
 - a. Bitterness - hardening of our hearts before others and God
 - b. Physical effects like high blood pressure, heart attacks, etc.
 - c. Someone once said, “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.”
6. Forgiveness is not forgetting
 - a. When God says, “I will remember your sins no more”, he is not saying he will forget them. He is saying he will not hold them against you; he will not bring them up as a charge against you again.
7. Forgiveness does not mean you lose, they win.
 - a. It is taking back control of your heart and submitting it to Him which will do best with it, which is God.
 - b. “The fully forgiven man does not rejoice in his own forgiveness but in the divine love to which he owes it; and his past sin persists in his experience no longer as a source of shame but as the occasion of a new wonder in his adoration of the love divine.” Alan Paton, ‘Instrument of Thy Peace’
8. Forgiveness is hope
 - a. Rick Warren, in Better Together says, “As you read the Bible, it becomes very clear that forgiveness is not optional for the Christ-follower. God sets the standard so high because he knows how much is at stake in your life. Bitterness and un-forgiveness are a cancer that will eventually destroy you from the inside out. Forgiveness is the scalpel that removes the tumor of bitterness. This doesn’t mean you’ll always be able to forgive and be done with it. You may have to keep forgiving again and again until you

know you've released the offender. But forgiveness is a choice you can make and that God expects."

9. Forgiveness is a constant recognition of our own need for Grace
 - a. Seneca, the Roman Philosopher, said, "Sin can be well guarded, but free from anxiety it cannot be. We are all sinful, therefore whatever we blame in another we shall find in our own bosoms." (Akan said this with his fingers)

Having said all that, let's listen to a real life story from a woman who had experienced some deep scars from a man in her past:

For me, forgiveness is easier said than done. It's been an area that I wish I could say that I can do easily, but it's a struggle. The first time when I had to truly forgive someone happened during high school. It was a night when there was a snow storm and my mom was working a late shift. So, I started praying for my mom's safety. What I thought was going to be a short 5 minute prayer turned into a wrestling match between me and the Lord. As I started to pray for my mom, the Lord brought forth memories of my father who abused me. The Lord was asking me to forgive him. I resisted. Why should I forgive a man who robbed me of so much? Why should he be forgiven? He doesn't deserve my forgiveness. But the Holy Spirit continued to urge. I was a young Christian at the time so I didn't really know or understand a lot of theological ideas about forgiveness, but as a follower of Christ, I obeyed. At that moment, obedience meant that I forgive my father. So, I surrendered and prayed for the Lord to help me to forgive him. But as I continued to pray, the Lord urged me to pray for his salvation. I became angry. Why should he be saved? Why should he be forgiven by Jesus? What he did to me was criminal and detestable. It was hard enough for me to forgive him but to pray that he will be saved? Why should he go to heaven? Why should I have to face my abuser in heaven? I wrestled with the Lord. I told him that I didn't want to. I pleaded, arguing that this man didn't deserve to be saved. But the Lord was persistent and brought this verse to my mind: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:14) The fear of not being forgiven was what finally convinced me. I started to pray for this man's salvation. By the end of that prayer, I was convicted. For me, what originally drew me to Jesus wasn't that there's forgiveness in Him, but that in Him, the ugliness of my childhood would somehow be redeemed. My identity as a victim of abuse, in some ways, blocked me from seeing my own wickedness. That night, I argued with the Lord because I thought that there are conditions to His salvation. That night, the Lord exposed that my confidence rested in myself rather than in the grace of the cross. I based my salvation on the fact that I was a good, decent person. If this man was beyond the reach of the cross then maybe I am too. That night, after I prayed for this man's salvation, I prayed for forgiveness of my own sins. This journey of forgiving and learning how to forgive has been a difficult journey. But the Lord has been gracious to me. By the Holy Spirit, he has walked me through forgiving a lot of difficult of things. In that process, I've

surrendered my right to justice for justice is the Lord's, my identity as a victim of abuse has been replaced by my identity as a child of God, I've been freed from the bitterness and anger, He has taken away the sting of the past, and He has brought me to a place where He can heal me.

Someone once said, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you. It is the giving up of the possibility of a better past."

That woman has given up the right to strike back, she can now see her victimizer in a different way, and she can say that she wants what is best for him. She has given up the possibility of a better past and has been set free by understanding her own need for the Gospel. And to do so means we are on the road to being well adjusted, mature Christians despite our past. Forgiveness in the way of the Gospel of Grace is a truly wonderful thing when we find it.

Josh Billings (Henry Wheeler Shaw) said, "There is no revenge as complete as forgiveness." We can see this principle in Romans 12:17-20, ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

So, God's grace towards us should produce a life of grace in us towards others. If we do not, we live in a self made prison of law. I will ask my question once more, have you experienced God's grace so deeply it makes a difference in your heart towards others, even those who've harmed you?