

Unforgiveness 7-17-05

Matthew 18:21-35 (NIV)

²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²²Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵Since 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. ²⁶The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' ³⁰But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³²Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Let us begin by reviewing what took place before this passage, as it might give us some insight into what Peter was thinking when he brought up this important topic of forgiveness. Jesus had just explained what to do when someone sins against you. The first step was to go to them one on one and tell them their fault. If they listen to you then that is the end of the matter. Relations are restored. The person is forgiven. All is well. Jesus went on to explain what to do if they refuse to listen to you, but I think Peter got stuck on step one.

Did Jesus really mean to say if my brother or sister in the Lord causes me great loss or emotional pain and they listen to my explanation of how it hurt me and they apologize I'm just supposed to let it go? I think that is what was behind Peter's question. *²¹Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"* Peter is asking, "So if the same person keeps hurting me and I keep going to him like you asked, and he keeps apologizing, can I figure he or she is not sincere after seven repeated events." (Colossians 3:13)

Peter was asking for some boundaries. After all, people are often very insincere in their apologies. Jesus' statement seemed too broad and to not take into account

Commented [notes1]: ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Colossians 3:13 (NIV)

human tendencies to abuse generosity. Peter may have thought that he was quite generous and finally getting the Spirit of Christ for he doubled the limit that the rabbis taught. They said a person should forgive up to three times but never a fourth time. Peter's seven times sounded very magnanimous. (Matthew 6:12)

²²Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Some translations say seventy times seven. Either could be correct. The idea is that we are to forgive so many times that we lose count. There is no boundary on forgiveness. We are not to worry about them abusing our generous spirit. In Luke, Jesus said we are to forgive a person even if he sins against us seven times in one day! (Luke 17:3-4) Seventy seven appears in the book of Genesis in the second recorded murder. Lamech feared that if Cain was avenged seven times, he would be seventy-seven times. (Genesis 4:24) The wrath of man knows no boundaries. To the same extent on the other side, the forgiveness of Christians should show no boundaries. Just as unrestrained revenge demonstrates the depravity of man, so abundant grace and forgiveness demonstrates the Christian life. We are taught to forgive as we desire to be forgiven in the Lord's Prayer. (Matthew 6:14-15) We are warned that if we will not forgive others, God will not forgive us. I think it is a matter of the new birth opening our eyes to all that we are forgiven. In the light of that, how can we withhold forgiveness from those who ask it? (Luke 7:47)

To help Peter and all of us understand, Jesus told a parable.
²³"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵Since 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. ²⁶"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.
The world may act one way, but this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. It is in keeping with Peter's question about how many times he had to forgive a brother or sister.

Ten thousand (*urias*) was the largest numerical term in Greek. It doesn't say in silver or gold. The point is not the exact amount but that it is an impossible amount to pay. It is sometimes translated as "countless". (1 Corinthians 4:15) If we had to place a dollar value on that amount of gold, it would have been somewhere around \$150,000,000. How do you waste that much? Jesus used this countless number because we perceive some debts toward us to be incalculable.

The king demanded justice. He was going to have the man and his family and all his possessions sold as a payment on that huge debt. The servant pleaded for mercy and begged for a chance to try to repay it. The king, knowing the man could never repay it in ten lifetimes, had mercy and forgave him outright. (Psalm 78:38)

Commented [notes2]: ¹² Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
Matthew 6:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: ³ So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."
Luke 17:3-4 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: ²⁴ If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times."
Genesis 4:24 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: ¹⁴ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.
¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.
Matthew 6:14-15 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."
Luke 7:47 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: ¹⁵ For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.
1 Corinthians 4:15 (RSV)

Commented [notes8]: ³⁸ Yet he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath.
Psalms 78:38 (NIV)

What a picture of the forgiveness we have received! You do realize that your debt to God was unpayable don't you? (Romans 5:8) Our deliberate willful rebellion against the goodness of God, our insistence on ignoring His commands, and our ingratitude for being given everything we have is simply not something we could have repaid. If we realized the destructive consequences of all our sins, we would forever live in a state of depression. (Job 42:5-6)

Some people think you just outweigh your bad deeds with good deeds. That would be funny if it wasn't so sad. Most of our good deeds are attempts at making others respect us which emanates from our own pride. (2 Chronicles 26:16) If it is a truly good deed, Jesus orchestrated it and empowered us to do it, so what do we deserve? (Ephesians 2:10) He said in Luke that was merely our duty, not merit earning behavior. (Luke 17:10) We are supposed to be doing good and bringing glory to God. That isn't a credit to our account, but God's. The wages of sin is death, but the death of a sinful soul can't pay for another's debt. (Hebrews 7:27) They die for their own sins. We had one hope. That a sinless One would die in our place. (1 Peter 3:18) That is the mercy of God. The pity of the King is the only way we could ever be forgiven for our countless debt.

The offer of the servant to repay that huge debt is much like some of the things we say when we first come face to face with our debt toward God. We say things like, "If You will have mercy, I'll live only for You", or "All I have is Yours and Yours alone." You probably remember some of those statements that you weren't able to live up to. Realize that the King forgave you, knowing you could never repay Him. (Luke 15:19)

²⁸"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back. ³⁰'But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. What is wrong with this picture? The forgiven man went looking for someone who owed him a small fraction of what he was forgiven. You would think he was going with joyous news of forgiveness. After all, he had just been the recipient of incredible grace. Wouldn't you want to pass that on?

Instead of forgiving like he had been forgiven, he had no pity at all. He grabbed the man by the neck, choking him, demanding payment. The indebted servant asked with the same wording that the forgiven servant had just used. That should have jarred him back to his senses, but instead, he did an even crazier thing, he threw him in jail. How can you repay a debt from jail? That is irrational, and so is the refusing to forgive our fellow believers when they ask for mercy.

By now, Peter was probably starting to get the point. The little offenses that men commit toward one another are nothing like all that we have been forgiven by God. Maybe he recalled Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "For if you

Commented [notes9]: ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: ⁵ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. ⁶ Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." Job 42:5-6 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: ¹⁶ But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. 2 Chronicles 26:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" Luke 17:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: ²⁷ Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. Hebrews 7:27 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: ¹⁸ For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, 1 Peter 3:18 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' Luke 15:19 (NIV)

forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." (Matthew 6:14 (NIV)) Surely he will remember this parable when a few months later he heard Jesus ask the Father to forgive the ignorant men that crucified Him. (Luke 23:34) What an example of living this message!

³¹*When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master 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?'*

Notice that it was the other servants that reported him. When a fellow believer acts in a way that doesn't represent our Lord, we should all be troubled. When a fellow believer is suffering because of carnal actions of another brother, we must act. Do you see how this ties in with the previous instruction to take an unrepentant believer to the church? They took him to the king. The king stated the obvious. "If I was so gracious to you, shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant?" That is what the Lord will say to us if we do not forgive. (Luke 12:48)

Ephesians 4:32 (NIV) tells us to, *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* James warns us that *judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.* James 2:13a (NIV) This is such a repeated message in Scripture because it is so important for us to learn. I'm sure everyone listening to or reading this sermon has struggled with it at one time or another. Unforgiveness hurts the person who hangs onto it. It causes all kinds of physical problems as well as emotional problems. It even affects how you treat others that are not involved. (Hebrews 12:15) We focus on the offense, but Jesus wants us to focus on grace and forgiveness because He loves us and wants what is best for us.

Then Jesus closed the parable with this chilling conclusion.

³⁴*In anger his master turned 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 from your heart."*

I'm sure you've experienced those torturers. They replay the offense over and over in your mind. They keep you up at night plotting what to say or how to get even.

There is only one way to escape the torturers, forgive from your heart the brother who offended you. I'm glad Jesus added "from your heart". You know what we would do if He didn't say that. It also keeps us from fooling ourselves.

Now I want to share from personal experience some ideas as to how to deal with the bitterness than can so easily take root in our hearts. Jesus gave us the best steps in the previous passage. Even after we confront the person and they ask for forgiveness, we can find bitterness rooted in our heart. It will dominate our thought life. You may have said you forgive the person, you may intend to

Commented [notes17]: ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."
Luke 23:34 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: ⁴⁸ But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.
Luke 12:48 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: ¹⁵ See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.
Hebrews 12:15 (NIV)

forgive them, realizing it is what you should do, but the critical and mean spirited thoughts keep returning. What now?

First, make sure you've followed Jesus' instructions in this chapter. Then realize that you could have done or perhaps have done the same thing. (1 Kings 8:46) None of us is so close to the Lord that we could not fall and do something we would regret. (Galatians 6:1) When I put myself in their shoes, I find it much easier to sympathize with their weakness.

I have found it very helpful to realize that sin is subtle. (Genesis 3:1) Regardless of how obvious the error is to you, sin has a way of distorting the truth. The person who offended you may actually see the situation from a completely different perspective. That is not to say that they may be right, although you should always consider that, but that even when they are wrong, they may not be able to see it. That means they truly believe they are in the right. Think about the times you discovered you were wrong when you were just sure you were in the right. Then you can sympathize with their condition, and be upset at the real problem, the sin that so easily deceives us. (Hebrews 12:1) If you look at them as a victim of sin, then you can pray for them in the Spirit. Between prayer for them, and prayer for your own attitude and thought life, the cycle of replaying the incident in your mind can be broken. Your focus has shifted from your wound to the real cause of it, sin that takes people captive. Anger can be replaced with genuine concern.

Once you have been able to let go of anger and bitterness, you can progress to the love that we are to have for one another. Jesus gave us that command. (John 15:12) Ask for the Lord's heart for that person. How does He feel about them? What is His heart for them? Will you share that heart? If you are willing, you will be liberated from that bitterness. (Ephesians 4:31) You'll find more of the joy of the Lord. You'll find your thought life is not nearly the battleground it once was. That is when you can be a witness to the world of what Christ in you can do. This is not something that we might attain to if we are exceptional, rather it is the heart you must have if Christ is reigning in you. The Holy Spirit will not leave you with comfortable unforgiveness. An unforgiving Christian is an oxymoron.

It isn't easy. It isn't instant, but for the follower of Christ it should be inevitable. The Holy Spirit will remind us until we either yield or harden our heart. Determine in your heart to forgive for their sake and yours.

Commented [notes20]: ⁴⁶ If they sin against thee, (for there is no man that sinneth not,) 1 Kings 8:46 (KJV)

Commented [notes21]: ¹ Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Galatians 6:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: ¹ Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? Genesis 3:1 (KJV)

Commented [notes23]: ¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Hebrews 12:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. John 15:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Ephesians 4:31 (NIV)