

## Forgiveness

*Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.  
(Mat 18:22-35)*

It's one of the most misunderstood things of all: forgiveness. It's also one of those things we are secretly uncomfortable with; we'd prefer to not have to deal with forgiveness very often.

It's strange that Christians also have such a poor understanding of forgiveness. We seem to think that if we are on speaking terms with another then we have forgiven or are forgiven. You would think that a forgiven people would be experts on forgiveness. But we know we aren't. Not only do we too often fail to forgive biblically, but we also harbour unforgiveness.

Unresolved unforgiveness is one of the main reasons for hindered usefulness in a Christian's life. Ephesians 4:27 speaks of giving place to the Devil through unforgiveness and bitterness.

Biblical forgiveness is supernatural. It is not the eye-for-an-eye mentality of the world. It turns this world on its head. It's truly an example of God's presence in this world – the idea of forgiveness.

Today we want to look at forgiveness – the false and the true through the parable of Jesus. We'll look at it as a series of contrasts: what it is and what it is not.

### **I. Forgiveness is not a feeling, but a release.**

Notice the illustration Jesus uses is one of financial debt. That is really the best way of thinking about forgiveness :debt. Indeed, the Disciple's Prayer is, 'forgive us our debts....' To illustrate forgiveness, Jesus talks about somebody owing money. The master chose to write off the bad debt that was owed to him by his servant. The other servant chose to demand payment of the debt owed to him by the other slave.

Forgiveness is a decision to release another person of the debt he or she owes you. Forgiveness is releasing a person from the hurt he has done to you. If someone offends you, he or she has done damage to you, as it were. He owes it to you to make it up, to repair the damage, to make restitution. Very often, it's impossible. All the offender can do is ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness cancels the debt; it writes it off.

Joseph's brothers had messed up a good part of his life. He had the power to demand they make restitution. But he released them.

Though feelings are involved in forgiveness, they are not the primary marker of forgiveness. In other words, because you simply feel very little emotion at all, or no longer feel anger, does not mean you have forgiven. It may simply mean that you have learned to live with the injury. It may be that you have learned to live with the debt they owe you.

Forgiveness is not an apology (though an apology may lead to forgiveness). Sometimes "I'm sorry" means simply, "I'm sorry you were hurt. I feel bad." It can remain quite indifferent. But to ask for forgiveness is more than a feeling. It is saying, "I wounded you; I owe you. I stand in your debt. Please forgive me." It's a humbling experience to place yourself at the mercy of another person.

True forgiveness is decisional, not emotional. We are not trying to feel better about others; we are cancelling the debt of damage they have done to us so that we can treat them as if the offence had never occurred.

## **II. Forgiveness is not limited, but repetitive.**

Peter asked Jesus in Matthew 18:21, "how often must I forgive?" He thought seven times was a vast improvement on the Rabbinical teaching of three times. But Jesus said, seventy times seven. He meant, "put no limit on the amount of times you forgive".

Limited forgiveness is a contradiction in terms. God's forgiveness of a man encompasses all his sins. God forgives again and again and again. The illustration in the parable suggests an absolutely unpayable debt. For us to forgive once or twice, but then to shut the door is to show that original forgiveness was really no forgiveness at all.

We glory in the idea of "You can only push me so far", but then we expect God to forgive us repetitively when we repeat the same sin over and over. We have no earthly authority to refuse forgiveness to anyone. We must forgive as often and as freely as we have been forgiven.

The moment we try to put limits on our forgiveness, we remove it from its source – God. In so doing, we begin to forfeit our own sense of being forgiven.

### **III. Forgiveness doesn't forget; it refuses to remind.**

People say, "forgive and forget". I do not think that this master would have forgotten the huge debt of this slave. There is no way that a debt of this magnitude could ever slip out of his mind. Forgiveness does not call on us to forget. It calls us to choose to not remember.

This master, in forgiving that servant, was not going to try to lose that piece of information from his mind. He was going to treat this slave as if he had no debt to him. That's what he did.

Consider: God cannot forget anything. He is omniscient. He knows and remembers that David committed adultery, that Moses murdered. He hasn't lost those pieces of information. He knows them. He remembers our sins. But since He has released us, those sins are not relevant to our relationship with Him. He won't remind us of our sin to shame us. (He may in order to warn us.) Misplaced guilt is the sorrow of the world: our pride hating our failure and writhing in agony. Conviction is godly sorrow: God bringing you to repentance.

There is no glory in forgetting. Forgetting is passive, accidental. However, there is great glory when, after being hurt in a grievous way, you yet choose to treat that person like new, as if it never happened. There is honour in refusing to remind yourself of another's sin, and refusing to remind him of his sin. You put it in the 'unusable' category. Forgiveness means we release another, cancel the debt, and it can't be brought up again to hang over his or her head. The problem with seeing forgiveness as a feeling is that when the feelings go bad, the unresolved issue comes up again.

God knows your sin but says, "your sins will I remember no more". I will not call them to remembrance, I won't remind myself or you about them. They are forgiven and past, they are buried and a 'no digging' sign placed over them. Someone who has written off a debt can't claim it back, it's written off. Love thinketh no evil – that is, it does not keep a record of wrongs.

### **IV. Forgiveness is not passive, it seeks restoration.**

In this parable, the slave sought out the master. But in God's scheme, He seeks us out. God did not wait till we began to seek Him, even though He was the one sinned against. God sought reconciliation. The kind of forgiveness that is in view here is the kind that is not satisfied with tension and debts owing. True forgiveness seeks for the relationship to be what it was.

If we take the attitude that another wronged me and therefore the onus is on him to seek forgiveness from us, we have not understood the biblical pattern. Luke 17:3 says that if you have been wronged, rebuke the one who has offended you and then forgive. If we take the attitude that it is the other person who has the problem with us, and it is up to them to seek reconciliation, then Matthew 5:23 says that if someone else has a problem with you, you must approach him to sort it out. Both offended and offender must approach each other. If they both swallowed their pride, they'd meet halfway. This is no

sweeping under the carpet of the offence. It takes courage and humility to approach your fellow man and seek restoration of your personal relationships.

What if someone is impossible, implacable, and hostile? As you obey God in seeking to forgive or be forgiven by that person, then you have done what is right before God. It is not that you have to secure the other person's forgiveness to be successful. But you do have to try to be biblical.

## **V. Forgiveness is not found within, it resides in God.**

Forgiveness cannot be conjured up within ourselves. The only way to exercise true forgiveness is to find it in God. The reason is this: in God, we can trust there will be both justice and mercy.

Forgiveness is supernatural. Selfish human beings do not naturally forgive. They 'make peace', they 'ignore', they 'cool down', but only God can give us the grace to truly forgive. Only He can supply the motive to forgive. We must not forgive because we figure it will make life easier. We must not forgive because the Christian community expects us to.

**We must forgive because we have been forgiven.** To withhold forgiveness from another is treason against Heaven. It is high hypocrisy. When God forgave you, it wasn't a feeling, it was a release. When God forgave you, it wasn't a limited thing; it was and is repetitive. When God forgave you, He wasn't passive: He sought you out. When God forgave you, He has since never brought it up again, He refuses to remind you of your sin.

The only way you will ever forgive someone is to reflect on God's forgiveness of you: to see that however you have been wounded, it is tiny in comparison to how we offended God. See how a guiltless God was willing to forgive while we sinners refuse to do so. The motive to forgive comes when we reflect on a God who will punish every sin, and leave nothing undone. If such a God is taking care of the justice of the situation, we are commanded to carry on with the mercy of the situation.

Ephesians 4:32 tells us to forgive even as God has forgiven you in Christ. In the Disciples' Prayer we are told to ask for forgiveness, 'even as we forgive those who trespass against us'. Interesting that that is the only phrase in the whole prayer that Jesus comments on. To expect vertical grace while denying it horizontally is hypocrisy. Those who've been forgiven have every reason, and are expected to forgive.

Forgiveness is so hard, isn't it? It sometimes costs more to offer forgiveness than it does to ask for it. But real forgiveness is a gift from heaven. It frees your life from repetitive sin. It lifts that heavy burden from your shoulders.

True forgiveness is not a feeling; it's a release.

True forgiveness is not limited; it's repetitive.

True forgiveness is not forgetting; it's refusing to remember.

True forgiveness is not passive; it's seeks restoration.

True forgiveness is not found within, it's a gift from God.