

**The Virtuous Cycle of Forgiveness**  
**Finding Forgiveness Series**  
**April 12, 2015**

Welcome/intro

Great week to join us, last week we kicked off our new series called “Finding Forgiveness”

The idea being that in many of our lives one of the most defining moments is either some mistake we made that we can't quite forgive ourselves for

OR something terrible someone else did to us that we can't quite forgive them for—and in some cases we're not even sure that we WANT to forgive or that we SHOULD forgive

And we walk around and carry with us unresolved pain and anger and resentment and to have conversations in our heads with people for days and weeks and months and years and sometimes even decades

And it feels kind of weirdly good for a little while, right?

But you don't have to be a Christian or agree with the Bible to see and experience and know that when we're carrying un-forgiveness around with us  
what it does is it continues to GIVE POWER and INFLUENCE over US to the person who hurt us

What unforgiveness does in our lives is it gives power to the pain inflicted on us in past to continue to shape our present and our future

Whether the person we can't forgive is OURSELVES or SOMEONE ELSE, walking around with un-forgiveness is giving that event or that person continued power to undermine us and in some cases ruin our lives.

Last week we talked about the first step for us, which is about RECEIVING forgiveness from God for things that we've done wrong

Today we're going to talk about EXTENDING forgiveness to others who have hurt us

Because this work of forgiveness is what BREAKS the vicious cycle of sin and brokenness

One of the heartbreaking things in working with families is you see people who perpetuate cycles of brokenness they swore they would break and not pass along to their kids

For example, people who were abused as kids become abusers themselves as adults  
they swore they'd never do it, but they pay the sin against them forward to  
the next generation

You see people who were children of addicts become addicts or marry addicts—  
they swore they'd never do it, but they do anyway

At a smaller level It's why you get snubbed at work and then you come home and  
snap your spouse

There's this vicious cycle of sin and brokenness that we repeat and pass along to  
others

And this vicious cycle of being sinned against and then sinning in response is part of  
what Jesus has come to end and reverse.

Jesus has come to establish a virtuous cycle by his own work of absorbing and  
forgiving people's offenses  
and pouring MASSIVE, inestimable amounts of MERCY into this system that's  
cycling through sin and damage and pain over and over and over again.

When that mercy gets applied to us, it is intended to be extended and paid forward  
to other people as they bump up against us, sin against us, or just make simple  
mistakes that impact us

It would seem that God's goal here is to not only to forgive us, which is literally ilfe-  
saving

and on top of that, God's goal is not only to free US from carrying around  
unforgiveness

but he forgives so that we might participate in this virtuous cycle of mercy  
and forgiveness, participating in his movement and his dance of mercy and  
forgiveness

we're forgiven in part so that we might also become forgivers.

And at the outset I want to make a very important distinction because sometimes  
what forgiveness actually is gets conflated or blurred together with some other  
things

and this could keep some of you from hearing what you need to hear today.

### ***1. Forgiveness and reconciliation are two different things***

Forgiveness means we no longer count someone's wrong against us in either a  
cognitive way or in an emotional way

Forgiveness MIGHT lead to reconciliation, but it might not.

If the person is not particularly sorry about what they did, they might not be a safe person to be in a relationship with  
That might require a very clear and very firm boundary.

Ultimately, God's desire is always reconciliation, but that requires both parties willing to enter into a process of reconciliation  
and sometimes people just aren't safe to be around or aren't trustworthy

We are commanded to forgive; we are called to work towards reconciliation if and when it is possible. We're going to drill down into that in greater detail in a couple of weeks

## ***2. Forgiveness does not mean giving up on justice***

We had our house broken into many years ago. When we got home with the kids, we prayed a prayer of blessing and forgiveness over the guys who did it.

But if they had gotten caught, my prayer and my forgiveness of them does NOT mean that I wouldn't ever press charges  
They have still sinned against me

And so for the sake of protecting my neighbors and for the sake of their own need to experience the consequences of their sin, it's very possible that I could FORGIVE them entirely and completely

AND still at the same time call them to face the consequences of what they've done.

So I could FORGIVE and press charges or I could NOT forgive and press charges—on the outside they LOOK the same but the person I'm becoming underneath and the motives of my heart are very, very different

This is one of those situational, case-by-case things  
and in the passage we're going to talk about today forgiveness means NOT pressing for justice

But it's important to see that the decision and the process of forgiving is one step, the decision about whether or not to pursue issues of justice is a subsequent and different step

And for some of us we're hung up on thinking that we've got to make all of those decisions at the same time and that's keeping us from engaging in the process altogether

Today we're going to look at a story that Jesus tells about forgiveness where the virtuous cycle SHOULD get illustrated

And if you're not a Jesus person, this is a great week to join us  
because you're going to see how Jesus himself talked about this practice of forgiveness that in many ways is the main thing that he was all about

If you've got a Bible turn with me to Matthew 18/screen/no Bible free ones available

If unfamiliar with Bible—4 biographies of Jesus' life, Matthew one of those, and here he's telling a story when one of Jesus' best friends and closest confidants comes to him with a great question about forgiveness—Matthew 18:21

***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?"***

Pause here, Peter is a good Jew and Jesus is a good Jew and the conventional wisdom at the time was that you had to forgive someone who sinned against you THREE times

So as Peter opens up with this question, he's feeling extremely magnanimous and like he's a forgiving rock-star

because he's offering to forgive more than DOUBLE the number of times required by the conventional wisdom of the day

Now, just a quick aside—I find both in the Scriptures and in my own life, whenever I approach God with how wonderful I am, it generally gets turned around on me

And Jesus here is going to do exactly that to Peter:

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

And some manuscripts say 70X7—like near-infinite, always, forever, whatever it takes—Jesus is saying "just stop counting and forgive!"

Before we skim past that and just laugh at Peter for being cornered, think for a second about someone that you've had a hard time forgiving

And think about being in an ongoing relationship with someone where you'd have to keep on forgiving that person—near infinite numbers of times

When I think about that person, I'm pretty overwhelmed at this command.

But there's two problems for those of us who are ready to give up on this command and just say we can't do this

The first problem all of us face even if you're not a Jesus person is the problem generated by the alternative.

Our only two options are either forgiveness or un-forgiveness.

One of those options is emotional and spiritual death for you and the other one is emotional and spiritual life for you

We can either continue to live in un-forgiveness and become bitter and angry and give power the pain in our past to disrupt our present and our future over to that person

OR we can do the better, harder work of forgiveness which is what reclaims us and all the real estate of our lives BACK from that person and that sin against us

And the work of forgiveness reclaims the real estate of our lives back to us in order that we might then turn around and have something to give over to God—that's his goal for us!

Jesus comes to us and says, I've given my life for you now I want you to trust me with all of your life and watch what I want to do

And for many of us we CAN'T give God our lives even if we wanted to because we've already given them over to someone else who inflicted pain and sinned against us!

Listen, if we can choose between giving our lives over to someone who damaged us or to the God of the universe who died for us

I want to strongly suggest we go with door number two!

The second problem is unique to those of us who are Jesus people and who want to give up on Jesus' impossible command and that is the problem of context

Your story and my story and the story of the person who sinned against you is not happening in a vacuum, it's happening in the middle of story that we're living with other actors and other factors

And so Jesus tells us a story to help us to hook our lives into this larger story

***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.***

Pause here: the Greek for the amount owed is "talents"—this dude owes 10,000 talents and for the average day-laborer, ONE talent was worth between 15-20 YEARS of wages

With my new and improved math skills I added all that up and this guy owed him almost 200,000 years worth of wages

Wikipedia is the source of all truth and they say that the median HOUSEHOLD income in the United States today is about \$51,000

Do that math to help us out and translate this debt for us so we can understand what's happening here:

\$51,000/annual income times 200,000 years is \$10,200,000,000 is the rough modern equivalent of what this servant owed the master  
and suddenly your credit card bill doesn't look quite so bad does it?

So the king does the math, and calls in the servant who owes him this impossibly humongous debt and here's what happens next

***<sup>25</sup> 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.***

***<sup>26</sup> "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' <sup>27</sup> The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.***

I've confessed here before you many times that I'm not especially handy

Some of it is because at a couple points along the way I've sized something up and said to someone "I think I can figure that out" and then ended up only making it worse

One time we eventually called to fix the toilet said to my who was home at the time, 'Ma'am, tell your husband, next time something goes wrong with the toilet? Don't touch it. Just give me a call.'

Here in this story, this servant is worse than me at making promises to fix things that he can't possible fix.

"I will pay back everything?" NO WAY! It would take him 200,000 years of his pay to pay off this debt!

But watch what the master does here in this story that's super-important for us to think about and engage with

The master FORGIVES and cancels the debt, he doesn't EXCUSE the debt.

EXCUSING means generating excuses for someone else to cover for the mistakes that they've made:

"they didn't mean it that way"

"he only did that because he's under a lot of stress"

"she didn't realize that would be so hurtful when she said that"

Excusing is basically a mental way that we let people off the hook

When we get sinned against, it's toxic! And we have to figure out how to get rid of this toxin introduced into our lives!

And so we sweep it under the carpet, and try to excuse people for the things that they do to us

Now this is in many cases a very generous impulse.

It's the impulse of a heart that wants to believe and trust best intentions of others and not cause trouble

and in some situations simply excusing someone for a very minor offense is the best thing we can do

For some of us, however, we've habituated EXCUSING other people inside our own brains

simply to AVOID having to deal with the hard stuff that they've done to us and to AVOID having to have a difficult conversation with them about how much they hurt us

EXCUSING in some cases is the coping strategy for those of us who want to continue to live in denial about what someone else has done to us

and to avoid having to deal with our own damage and to avoid having a conflict or hard conversation

And it's important to see that when we get to the heart of the issue, what EXCUSING does is try to deal with the offense as LITTLE as possible—we skim the surface of the offense when we excuse it

FORGIVENESS tallies up ALL that's actually owed, looks at it straight in the eye, counts all that cost

And then does away with it—forgives it. This debt, this pain, this thing you said or did WAS hard, it WAS painful, it DID do damage—YOU DO OWE ME SOMETHING

but I am willing to no longer count it against you.

I cancel your debt to me. I forgive you.

This is exactly what this master does here—he looks the full debt in the eye and he forgives it

When Jesus talks about forgiveness, he means forgiveness, not excusing

When Jesus gives us a model prayer to pray, he doesn't say, "excuse us our debts as we excuse our debtors"

He says FORGIVE us our debts as we forgive our debtors

Some of us have spent an awful lot of mental and emotional energy attempting to justify other people's actions in our own heads and construct all these stories and back stories on behalf of other people

So that we might do all the mental gymnastics required to EXCUSE the person for what they did

When in fact what we REALLY need to do is acknowledge that what they did was painful, awful, horrific, and there was no excuse for it

And then do the harder, more significant, and finally more FREEING work of forgiving.

Because EXCUSING the big stuff doesn't actually set us FREE from the big stuff, it just covers it up—it just covers it up and we end up continuing to carry it around with us

And what Jesus is offering us is not a giant cover-up but a giant, powerful, enormous forgiveness.

That kind of forgiveness has been extended to this servant, here's what happens next

***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.***

***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.***

***31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged 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?' 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.***

One of the things that I appreciate about our little church community here is that you all teach me so much about a variety of topics

And a couple of months ago I stumbled across Christian Stith's Youtube channel, Christian is one of the folks who regularly plays guitar up here for us

Christian recorded a song on Youtube lamenting what life is like to be just a goldfish because GOLDFISH only have 3-second memories—did you know this? I had no idea

Christian writes this moving, touching beautiful, haunting song—a lament, really that it's hard to be a goldfish, just got a three second memory, I can't remember my history, it looks like we'll never be more than friends

This is a song of epic proportions, you should search it out on Youtube some time when you've got way too much free time on your hands

It's commonly held that goldfish have only a three-second memory.

When it comes to you and I and our own recollections and attuned-ness and alive-ness to what God has done for us, our own spiritual memories are about 3 seconds as well

We forget all the time how much God has forgiven us

In some of us maybe it's just entitlement—we think it's God's job to forgive us when we mess up.

So we get this entitlement thinking that's self-righteous and non-chalant about the debt WE owe, and so of course we're not especially touched or transformed by it

For many of us, there's just an un-knowable nature to all this

someone in my small group talked this week about how it was hard to get her mind around her \$10 billion dollar debt—she didn't fully understand how much she might owe God

But she FULLY understood when someone ELSE owed her ten bucks!

Whether it's forgetfulness or entitlement or just a lack of understanding of what we've been forgiven

All of those things block the transforming work that MERCY received is supposed to do in our hearts

And when we come face-to-face with the pain of what someone else has done to us, that pain or sense of being offended

often speaks so much louder than the forgiveness that we ourselves have received

Now Jesus is a GREAT story-teller, one of the most famous in all of history, and there's one detail in this story that we might miss that's important to catch

The greek for those 100 silver coins there is denarii, and one denarii was about one days' wages—so this guy owes him one hundred days worth of work

If someone owed you the equivalent of over three months of your take-home salary, you might be a little bit eager to collect on that debt, too!

In a vacuum, without the backstory of what just happened with the master, the collection of this debt and the actions of this man would make perfect sense

But of course it's the back story that makes all the difference.

We are much, much, much more attuned to any and all offenses committed against us than we are tuned into the amount of grace and forgiveness that we've already received

And we, too, start to demand payment from others after our own huge sins and our own huge debts have been counted up and then wiped away

In the beginning of the story, the master does the math, the servant pleads for mercy, and the master grants him mercy—mercy trumps math in the first interaction

We expect the mercy of the master to start a virtuous cycle of forgiveness to be extended to the man who owes him a much lesser debt

But in the second movement of the story, the servant does the math, his fellow servant pleads for mercy, but the first servant sticks with the math and does not move on to mercy

Even though he himself had just benefitted from it

He wants mercy for himself and math for the other guy.

And I want to suggest that most of us are exactly this same way:

***We want mercy for ourselves and math for everyone else, ESPECIALLY the people who owe us.***

And so the servant who demands that math trumps mercy ultimately gets exactly what he demands.

If he refuses to participate in the virtuous cycle of mercy extended by the master and if he will instead demand that the math be accounted for

Then he himself will receive the consequences of his own math instead of the mercy the master WANTED to extend to him.

Let me ask you something: is there anyone in your life that Jesus is calling you to extend mercy to that you're still doing the math with?

Is there anyone in your life where you're hung up on demanding the accounts be balanced somehow, the math to work out

when Jesus is calling you to extend mercy, a much smaller amount of mercy than he has already extended towards you?

Jesus then closes this story about forgiveness with these harsh words about what happens to us if we break the virtuous cycle of mercy

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

This past week we studied this passage in our small groups and I closed us with the ill-advised prayer that the Holy Spirit might show us both how much we’ve been forgiven

And I prayed that in the next 24 hours he might bring anyone to mind that we might still be holding onto the math with, who we’ve still not forgiven  
who Jesus was calling us to extend mercy and to forgive

Great prayer for everyone ELSE in the small group, right? Because I felt pretty sure that there wasn’t ANYONE in my life who I was carrying around unforgiveness towards

And then the next morning, I opened up my computer and the first thing on my Facebook newsfeed was a dude from like 2 lifetimes ago that brought up all this baggage

Instantly grumpy and started to rehearse the math as to why I didn’t like this person

Now all of this all happened long ago and I thought I’d already forgiven him!  
But I realized as soon as I saw his picture

That God was answering my prayer from the night before in small group.

I was still doing the math with this guy, and God was calling me to extend mercy not on my own strength but from the vast reserves of mercy that he had first extended to me.

And so I pulled out my journal and I spent several pages and almost an hour just churning through and forgiving this guy who HAD sinned against me and against others

I wasn’t excusing him. I was forgiving him.

I thought I’d done it already but there was more to be done, the voices of frustration and accusation towards them came back pretty quickly

And in the process of forgiving them and thinking about that season of my life, I began to count up the sins and the mistakes I had made during that time of my life

And I began to remember other situations in that season where other people had to forgive me for my mistakes and a couple of very clear situations where I had to go to the Lord and ask forgiveness for a couple of things I had done

And I remembered where and how I had been a recipient of mercy at about the same time that these people were sinning against me

And just like the servant in this story, I was able to receive mercy and forgiveness from others and from God

while at the same time I then lived in real-time with this animosity and unforgiveness in my heart towards this guy

And what all that mess reminded me was that forgiveness is often a process. It's not linear, it's often not one-off or one-time, there are often layers to stuff

And there is stuff that gets deposited into our hearts when we get sinned against that we don't even know is there until something happens and the curtain gets pulled back

And the good news is that Jesus is patient with us in this process.

Wednesday morning as I was journaling, he heard my confession and struggle and desire to forgive this guy who I should have already forgiven forever ago.

Jesus calls us to receive this story as a call to participate in the virtuous cycle he has been sent to begin in a more comprehensive and definitive way than any other attempt at accessing forgiveness in the history of all humanity

It begins with him, with what we celebrated last weekend, his death on the cross for all our sins

Into a beautiful world that is saturated with this toxin called sin, Jesus has come and taken all that sin upon himself

And he has forgiven me, and he's forgiven you. Not excused us. Forgiven us.

He offers us that forgiveness free and clear, no hoops to jump through, we just receive this huge deposit of mercy into the bank accounts of our hearts and our spirits and our souls

And that gift of mercy is given to us in part that it might transform our hearts, break the vicious cycle of being sinned against and sinning in response and that we might pay that forward

That we might receive forgiveness, break that vicious cycle and participate in the generous and merciful dance of God who loves to forgive and who has already forgiven us

And who invites us to forgive one another as we have also been forgiven

And here at the end, we see Jesus calling us to forgive one another from the heart, not just in a perfunctory or superficial way, but a deep forgiveness

Again, as he's forgiven us deeply, not superficially—and in part because only a forgiveness from our hearts cleans out the toxins in our hearts fully and completely

So that we're not carrying it around with us any longer and it's not dragging us down any more either!

So how, how do we do this?

### **1. Ask God to show you a small slice of how much mercy you've received**

Many of us, whether we're Christians or not, don't feel very in touch with the amount that God has forgiven us or needs to forgive us.

For some of us, our mistakes feel small and kind of vague and God's mercy seems far off and distant

While at the same time we can rehearse and recount EXACTLY what someone else has done wrong towards us!

SO...ask him! Ask him to show you at some point this week one slice or example of how much mercy he's ready to show you or already given to you

Scriptures declare God is always at work in our lives and around our lives, even if we don't believe in him, don't want him to, he's always, always at work

So ask him to pull back the curtain on just a small piece of how much mercy you've received

One specific way to experience this is the wonderful spiritual exercise of **confession**

The Scriptures declare that Jesus is the lamb of God who dies and who takes away the sins of the entire world—including all our sins before we're alive to commit any of them!

He's already taken away our sin, already absorbed it and extended to us mercy instead!

In the Christian tradition, confession is not about dredging up all the awful things you've ever done so you can feel terrible about yourself

Confession is a celebration of God's mercy and grace. Every sin we can possibly come up with is like counting up how much mercy and grace has already been poured into your bank account

Nothing that you are ready to confess and give over the Lord will remain on the negative side of the ledger in your life

Every single thing that you've ever done wrong and are willing to give over to Jesus is like more stock piles of mercy and grace that's already present in your account!

Confession is celebration! It is connecting you more deeply and more richly with the reality of mercy poured out into your life and available to you

And it connects us with this virtuous cycle of mercy that actually changes our hearts

So this week, every day, pray a brief prayer asking God to bring to mind any thought, word, or deed, anything you've done or left undone, that you need forgiven

And then celebrate the fact that mercy has been given to you

## **2. Ask God to show you someone in your life where you're still stuck on the math and God's inviting you to pay forward his mercy**

I want to invite you to pray some version of the prayer that I prayed at my small group last week if you're willing:

To ask God if there's anyone any place where you're still stuck doing the math where the master is calling you to extend mercy

And then when it happens, when some memory comes back or you see that person or maybe right now you know exactly who it is that God's calling you to extend mercy to

Don't duck it, but spend a little time talking it over with God. Let him know what's hard about this for you

Ask him to more fully understand HIS mercy poured out to YOU so that you might in turn pay it forward and participate in this virtuous cycle of being forgiven and extending forgiveness

## **3. Count the cost of unforgiveness**

At least initially for many of us, we don't want to forgive because it feels too costly or too hard.

Sometimes that's because we've made the mistake of saying that forgiveness means we give up on justice or that we have to totally throw ourselves back into an unhealthy situation or relationship

But forgiveness is just forgiveness, and let's deal with those other things in the next couple of weeks

AND, as we count the cost of forgiveness and all that we have to give up, we must also recognize that UNFORGIVENESS has cost, too.

That whenever we're clinging onto un-forgiveness we're giving continued power to shape our present and our future to someone who hurt us from the past

We're giving over real-estate in our hearts and minds and souls to someone who often cannot and should not be entrusted with such prime and important real-estate

So we've got to count the cost of carrying around unforgiveness in our hearts.

My friends, good news: the master has forgiven all our debts!

And he invites us into this virtuous cycle of mercy extended, mercy received, and mercy paid forward to those around us who are also in need of great mercy.

[GIVING PEOPLE 1 MINUTE TO FILL OUT CONNECTION CARDS PRIOR TO COLLECTING OFFERING]