

## At the Corner of Forgiveness and God Part Two

### Matt. 18:21-35

We are in a series titled *At the Corner of Life and God* and last week and this week we are meeting at the corner of forgiveness and God. Forgiveness is central to the Christian faith. The difference between heaven and hell, between God's judgment and God's mercy is forgiveness. What Jesus teaches us in this parable is that forgiveness can't be a one way street in our lives. We can't receive forgiveness from God and then refuse to extend that forgiveness to those who sin against us. If we live by forgiveness we will give forgiveness.

But the truth is, it can be really hard to forgive someone who has sinned against us, especially when that sin goes deep and hurts us badly. As we consider some practical aspects of how we walk forgiveness out, primarily using this parable in Matt. 18 as our guide, let's keep in mind that God wants to meet us at the corner of forgiveness, not just to tell us to get it right, but to enable us to get it right, to help us to forgive from the heart. So let's pause and ask for God's help.

#### 1. The motivation of forgiveness

The first question that hits our hearts is, *why should I forgive this person?* Jesus provides two powerful motivations in this parable for why we should forgive:

##### a. *Amazed awareness of the outrageous debt we have been forgiven of*

The first servant should have internalized the outrageous debt that he had been forgiven of. It should have meant something to him, but it didn't. When the master heard about how he had thrown his fellow servant into prison, he asked him, *I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?*

This is an amazing illustration of a hard heart. He was completely unmoved and unaffected by his master's forgiveness. The pity his master had on him had no place in his heart. He used it for his benefit but had no desire to extend it to anyone else. Jesus is saying that this cannot happen in the heart of a true disciple. We aren't saved by forgiving others, but if we have truly experienced the forgiveness of Christ for our sins, that forgiveness will fill our hearts with forgiveness towards others. When the Holy Spirit opens our eyes and our hearts to see the outrageous debt that we owe to God because of sin, and then see the ocean of forgiveness that we receive by believing in Christ, we can't help but give what we've been given.

When we struggle with unforgiveness toward someone, what we're doing is maximizing that person's debt to us and minimizing our debt to God. We need to take some time to meditate on the amazing forgiveness that God has given us in Christ and let the joy of being forgiven, and the hope of eternal life with God fill our hearts to overflowing. This isn't about us drumming up forgiveness, it's about overflowing with forgiveness. That we allow God's forgiveness that flows *to* us to flow *through* us. So the first motivation is amazed awareness of all we have been forgiven of.

##### b. *Fear of being imprisoned by unforgiveness and bitterness*

The second motivation is fear of being imprisoned by unforgiveness and bitterness. That's really the payoff lesson of this parable:

*In anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. – vv. 34-35*

If we don't forgive, we will be unforgiven and pay the full price of our debt. That's what Jesus is saying not only here, but in other passages as well, such as Matt. 6:14-15: *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

I believe that Jesus is primarily referring to Judgment Day – that those who steadfastly refuse to forgive will find on that Day that they are not forgiven. But there's a secondary meaning that is actually a foreshadowing of Judgment Day: when we hold someone in unforgiveness, the bitterness that comes from unforgiveness becomes a prison for us right here, right now. The wicked servant was a bitter man: when he came across the servant who owed him a hundred denarii, even though he had just been forgiven so much, he seized the servant and began choking him demanding him to pay up. He was angry, bitter over the debt owed to him, and that bitterness has made him totally lose proportion. Bitterness causes us to lose understanding for others – the more bitter we are the more guilty we think others are and the more we think we are justified to be bitter. The Bible talks about the "gall of bitterness" – bitterness is toxic, poisonous, to our souls. And it has this odd effect of making us more likely to prone to further hurt. People who are bitter because they got hurt will tend to get hurt again and again and here's why: in the natural, when we are wounded that wound needs to be cleaned out properly or there's a good chance it will get infected. When a wound gets infected, it becomes so painfully sensitive that just being brushed against can feel like a hammer blow.

Bitterness is the infection of the soul that happens when we are hurt and don't deal with that hurt properly. When someone says, "I'm still hurt over what that person did to me ten years ago and I can never forgive them for what they did", the reality is, that person isn't hurt anymore. That hurt has long ago turned to bitterness and that bitter wound, left to fester, will become infected and painfully sensitive to other slights. A small offense won't feel small. To the embittered soul even something that may not be an offense might be interpreted as a terrible offense. If you've been married any length of time, there's probably a good chance you've seen this at work. I think a lot of marriages have low grade bitterness because as sinners we tend to hurt each other and over the years those hurts, if not properly and completely cleaned out, will turn to bitterness. So when a spouse says something or does something to offend us, if there's bitterness, that offense seems much larger and more offensive than it really was. We aren't just reacting to that comment; we're reacting to the ten years of history that we read into that comment. We aren't just seeing that action, we're seeing twenty years of "they always do that." Every time we get into an argument with our spouse, we become historians who dredge up all the offenses of the past.

Another example are those who have been hurt by a church or a Christian. There are some who have been legitimately hurt and wounded by other believers and churches. And God cares about that – if that's happened to you, I don't want you to think that God doesn't care or that it's not important. Forgiveness isn't about saying, *what they did to you is no big deal*. The pain and wounds that can be inflicted by others can be very significant and very painful. But if we don't forgive, over time we will become cynical and critical. We will think that all believers or all churches or all pastors are phoney, hypocrites, and will eventually hurt us if we let our guard down. It's a prison of hurt and pain and joylessness, and the only key that can open the door is forgiveness. The only cleanser that can wash the infection out is forgiveness. We need to ask God to help us not become bitter from past hurts but to clean them out with

forgiveness. Jesus wants to meet us at the corner of bitterness and relocate us to the corner of forgiveness and God. Here are three steps the Lord wants us to take towards forgiveness.

## 2. The steps of forgiveness

### a. Go to the offender

Forgiveness isn't just ignoring it when someone hurts us. A few verses earlier, verse 15, Jesus says, *if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.* Then Jesus outlines a process for repeated approaches and appeals to a sinning brother or sister, and if they do not listen to any of these appeals, it culminates in what we call church discipline. Now, this process is to be reserved only for clear and flagrant violations that can be biblically confirmed and most of the offenses that we experience from others – and commit against others – will not rise to this level. But going to someone who we feel has sinned against us and talking about it in a redemptive way is healthy and good. Forgiveness isn't the same as ignoring a sin or acting like it didn't happen. When possible, we are to go to the offender and try to work it out in a redemptive way.

### b. Absorb the cost

The parable in Matt. 18 uses the metaphor of a great financial debt that is being forgiven because whenever someone sins against us; there is a debt that they have incurred against us. When someone hurts us, we want to make them pay. We might try to make them pay back in kind: if they said words that cut us deeply, we retaliate with words that will cut them just as deeply (hopefully more so!). Or we might try to make them pay in other ways. We pull back from them, avoid them, refuse to have anything to do with them, so that the price they pay is a lost relationship with us. Or we talk about them behind their backs – we try to hurt their reputation by exposing them to others in ways that make them look bad.

The point is, there is a debt that is incurred and our natural response is to want payback. But here's the thing: payback doesn't really pay back. When someone hurts us with their words, saying something even more hurtful back to them might feel satisfying for a moment, but it leaves us feeling even more empty. When a son doesn't talk to his father for ten years because of how his father let him down, yes it hurts the father, but it hurts the son too. Vengeance leaves us feeling more wounded and empty than ever – pay back doesn't pay back.

Forgiveness acknowledges there is a debt, and absorbs that debt. It sets the debtor free, not by pretending it didn't happen, or ignoring it, but by saying, I forgive you. I absorb the debt, the hurt, the disappointment, the betrayal, the grief, and free you from it so there is no more debt. That's what Jesus did for us on the cross. God didn't ignore our debt. God couldn't just act like our sin didn't happen – that would have corrupted His justice. Jesus absorbed the punishment that was due to us so that God could say to all those who put their faith in Jesus, "you're completely forgiven. You are set free from your debt." When Paul tells us to "forgive as God in Christ forgave you", he's urging us to absorb the hundred denarii debt others owe us as Christ absorbed the 10,000 talent debt we owed God.

The more forgiven we know we are, the greater our capacity to forgive others. In the end, we see that trying to exact payment from those who hurt us is to condemn ourselves to the prison of bitterness, but with the kingdom of Christ extending eternally before us, why could we not absorb some pain and

suffering in this life? And as we forgive as Christ forgave us, God fills our hearts with a joy. Spurgeon said that even as it is more blessed to give than to receive, there is more joy in forgiving than in being forgiven, as joyous as being forgiven is!

By God's grace, this enables us to take the pain and wounds of this life and turn them into something redemptive. I read recently of a young teenager who found a post on her fb account urging her to die. It was cruel and a form of bullying. But instead of trying to find out who the culprit was and "pay them back", she went positive and began to leave positive post it notes on every locker in her school. Doing that didn't erase the pain and hurt she must have felt reading those words, nothing could. But she absorbed the pain and cruelty and chose to pay forward with positive, redemptive messages.

c. Give the feelings of forgiveness time to come

I believe it was Corrie Ten Boom, who likened forgiveness to the boy who pulls the rope at church to ring the steeple bell. Even after he stops pulling, the bell continues to ring for a time, but less and less and eventually it stops.

When we choose to forgive, there may still be the ringing of the feelings of unforgiveness and hurt in our hearts. Choosing to forgive doesn't stop the feelings immediately, but it does stop pulling the rope. It stops the dwelling on the offense. Stops the active wishing for payback, for something bad to happen to the other person. And eventually, over time, the ringing of the offense will stop and we will feel forgiveness in our hearts for them.

### **3. The limitations of forgiveness**

a. Forgiveness doesn't – and shouldn't - always remove the consequences of the sin

There are some situations – especially criminal offenses – where the gospel absolutely offers forgiveness but it doesn't necessarily lift the consequences. Forgiveness is not at odds with justice, and in some cases, forgiveness and justice need to go hand in hand.

Let's say there is a husband who is physically abusive to his wife and/or children. Forgiveness and love can and should be extended to this man, but the wife and children should not be subjected to abuse again and again and again in the name of forgiveness. Until he has proven over time that he has changed, there needs to be a separation for the safety and well-being of the wife and children. In this case, forgiveness doesn't remove all consequences of his sin.

If someone violates a trust, forgiveness can be given but trust may need to be removed until they have earned that trust again. If someone commits a crime, there should be appropriate consequences in accordance with their crime. In these kinds of cases, forgiveness is a posture of the heart, but it doesn't always – and shouldn't always - remove the just consequences of the sin.

b. Forgiveness can't always restore the relationship, but it always restores the forgiver

It would be wonderful if forgiveness always had the power to restore a relationship, but sadly that is not always the case. The other person might not be repentant or see their sin. They might refuse to receive your forgiveness or acknowledge that they need it. In other cases, someone might be the kind of person who is going to commit the same sin against you again and again – poking you in the eye every time

they see you. The Bible does tell us to forgive again and again, but it doesn't tell us we have to subject ourselves to people's sin again and again. If someone has a track record of gossiping, and passes on sensitive things that you shared with them confidentially, you would be foolish to share anything beyond superficial things with them. Forgiveness can't restore or build a close relationship with people who are unrepentant and entrenched in their sin.

And then there are the cases where the offending person has died. In these cases, forgiveness can't restore the relationship, but it always restores the forgiver. To choose to forgive, even if wisdom dictates you keep your distance, sets you free from bitterness. Romans 12:18 is a verse that has helped me keep this in balance:

*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* Rom. 12:18

Paul acknowledges it's not always possible: *IF possible*. And he acknowledges that we are only ever one side of the equation: *so far as it depends on you...*

When we choose to forgive, we are imitating our Lord Jesus, we are bending the outrageous forgiveness we have received from God outward towards others, and we are refusing to allow our souls to be locked up in the prison of bitterness and unforgiveness.

As we close in prayer, I want to pray for those who are struggling with unforgiveness this morning. God wants to meet you in that struggle and help you to forgive. Jesus isn't saying if we struggle to forgive, or struggle with feelings of bitterness, that God won't forgive us. He said if we *refuse* to forgive. The Lord wants to meet us where we struggle with hurt, bitterness, and unforgiveness and help us be free from it. God wants to meet us here, church. It's not always easy, and often it takes dying to ourselves, but the Lord is right here to help us and give us grace to overflow with His forgiveness to those who sin against us. Let's pray.