

Learning to Forgive, Part 3

Scripture: Matthew 18:28–35

Code: 2335

REVIEW

Ephesians 4:32, a verse that magnificently sums up the intent of the passage we are studying, says, "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven you." It is a great injunction to forgive since God has forgiven us so much, which is precisely the principle that our Lord wants us to understand in Matthew 18. The issue of forgiveness shouldn't split churches--there should never be the kind of unforgiveness in a church that shatters relationships, and families, and church unity.

As we have examined the instruction of our Lord in this important passage about forgiveness, we have discussed...

I. THE ENQUIRY ABOUT FORGIVENESS (v. 21)

II. THE EXTENT OF FORGIVENESS (v. 22)

III. THE EFFECT OF FORGIVENESS

IV. THE EXAMPLE OF FORGIVENESS (vv. 23-35)

A. The Identification of the Persons Involved

B. The Interpretation of the Parable's Instruction

1. The Conviction of Sin (v. 23)

2. The Calculation of Sin (v. 24)

3. The Consequences of Sin (v. 25)

4. The Confession of Sin (v. 26)

5. The Compassion in Spite of Sin (v. 27)

Having seen how the king graciously forgave the servant his debt as God so forgives our enormous debts of sin at the point of salvation, let us now move to the main message in the second half of the parable regarding the Lord's response to the lack of forgiveness.

6. The Pursuit for Payment (v. 28)

"But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, who owed him an hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me what thou owest."

a. The Search "But the same servant went out, and found..." This servant's response is so absolutely absurd that it is easy to wonder, "How soon did this guy forget what he had been forgiven? How soon did he forget his lord's compassion?" The very one who had been forgiven a debt, intentionally went out looking for someone who owed him money. He didn't inadvertently run into the guy. He was out there searching for this fellow, who was... b. The Servant "...one of his fellow servants, who owed him an hundred denarii..." 1) His Identity a) Discussed Here we are introduced to a word that I think has a key meaning in the parable: *sundoulon*, a Greek word which means "fellow servant." I think this term identifies the man as another who has been forgiven. In effect, the Lord applies the parable to the family of those who are fellows in Christ. It describes, I believe, a Christian brother and is used consistently that way in the rest of the parable three more times. So he finds another fellow servant, who serves the same king, though not necessarily in the same rank. Perhaps worked under this first servant. It may have been that the first servant was a provincial governor and this fellow servant was one of his local tax collectors. b) Defended Let me just give you a little interpretive thought here. If the man in this parable were not a true Christian, as some would have us believe, then the whole

parable in its context breaks down, because the impact of the entire parable is that here was a man who was fully forgiven, who went out and wouldn't forgive. Now if you remove the initial forgiveness as not being legitimate, and therefore, not effective, then the whole parable makes no sense--it entirely loses its significance. We can't expect him to forgive if he himself wasn't forgiven. We can't expect him to act like God acts if he doesn't have God in his heart. Furthermore, if he wasn't a Christian, the judgment that came to him at the end of the parable should have come when the unpayable debt was discovered and originally deserved. This parable, however, is not about genuine salvation; it is about divine forgiveness and the obligation for one believer to forgive another. And what makes this parable so powerful is that the guy was really forgiven, and therefore truly saved.²⁾ His Indebtedness This fellow servant that he finds owes him only a hundred denarii, which is, at the maximum, eighteen dollars. It is extremely insignificant when compared with the incalculable debt of the first servant who had been forgiven.^{c.} The Seizure "...and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me what thou owest." Roman writers often speak about men going to their debtors and wrenching their neck until blood ran out of their nose and mouth. That's the old collection agency approach: Just find some big strong-armed guy to strangle him to death if he doesn't pay. In the servant's demand for payment, I see the application of a Christian who has been offended, sinned against, or maybe truly defrauded in some sense, and he won't forgive. You say, "Well, this can't be a Christian." Oh? You mean to tell me you don't think Christians have problems forgiving each other? I think they do, because I am one of them at times. Christians struggle with this. The flesh works its way into our redeemed lives. For example, does anybody owe you money? Do you ever think of them? How many times have you choked them in your mind? We have problems of not forgiving others even in the church of Jesus Christ. Somebody may say something you don't like and every time you see that person anger comes up in your heart and you avoid them. Bitterness is churned up by remembering some injustice which happened in the past that you just can't let go of. No Christian is immune from this kind of problem. So the people who get nervous because this guy is so unforgiving--not believing that Christians can be like this--maybe haven't really thought about what Christians can be like. The flesh rising to seek its vengeance is also well illustrated in 1 Corinthians 6 where the Christians were suing each other. Christians can hold grudges too, so we shouldn't be startled to conclude that this unforgiving servant is a Christian as well.

7. The Plea for Patience (v. 29)

"And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all."

Does that sound familiar? That's the same speech the first servant made in verse 26. The guy got the same speech back that he had given his lord when faced with an insurmountable debt. He had begged the king to let him off the hook, yet now he was strangling a guy who owed him eighteen dollars. Even the familiar words echoing in his ears couldn't find a response in his heart. What is more amazing is that the servant who was begging him to be patient could have paid. The application is obvious: Compared to our sins against God, our sins against each other are trifles, because, though our debt to God is unpayable, the other debts we incur are easily payable. When we have received forgiveness so vast, how can we be so small as to not forgive another?

Furthermore, we ought to get used to forgiving, because we are going to need it, not only from God in a parental sense, but possibly from the very person we won't forgive ourselves.

It's unimaginable, but Christians do this. The reason churches split is that they have relational friction. For example, rather than giving an irritating situation to the Lord and forgiving and embracing the person who caused it in love, a lot of people get bitter. And if that bitterness remains unresolved, it becomes divisive and can eventually split a church. That is what devastates God's family. It may well be that even the disciples were in the midst of doing this themselves. Fighting to see who would be the greatest in the Kingdom, they may have cultivated in their hearts demeaning attitudes toward

the others, putting them down lower than they were so that they could feel good about their own self-exaltation. They may well have been holding grudges.

8. The Placement in Prison (v. 30)

"And he would not, but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt."

This lack of compassion is an unimaginable reaction. Having been pitied and forgiven in a merciful love himself, he should have dispensed the same act of mercy. The greatest sins that a man commits against a man are like pocket change compared to the sins committed against God...and yet, God offers forgiveness for them all. Who is man not to forgive lesser offenses? The whole point of the verse is that he wouldn't forgive, and what gives the parable its power is that he was forgiven. That's the strength of the argument. How can those truly forgiven not forgive, when God has forgiven an infinitely greater debt? How easily we forget.

Are you fighting against your new nature?

In Titus 3:2-6, Paul says that Christians are "to speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, showing all meekness unto all men. For we ourselves also were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. But after the kindness and love of God, our Savior, toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ, our Savior." In other words, he says, "Don't treat people like you used to...look at what Christ has done for you." It's the same idea. But sadly, the church has been riddled all along by the tragic sin of unforgiveness, and the consequent bitterness and discord. I really believe such reactions go against your new nature, because if you're in the Kingdom you should be characterized by mercy: "Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt. 5:7). I think we are marked as merciful people. It's a product of our newness. It's only the flesh that rises up and makes us merciless. So, consider the source.

If you are not forgiving, that isn't the new you, that's your sinful flesh vaulting itself into prominence. When you do that, you will cut yourself off from that relational forgiveness with God that makes communing with Him sweet. If you look at your spiritual life and see a lack of power and depth, a lack of a hunger for God's Word, and a lack of love for the private place of prayer and communion, resulting in the loss of the richness in your relationship with God, it may be that there is a barrier of unforgiveness that you have built which is preventing the Lord from giving you the forgiveness that issues in a sweet relationship with Him. If that is the case in your life, the Lord isn't going to open up the flow of communion with Him until you forgive where forgiveness is needed.

9. The Process of Pursuing (v. 31)

a. The Rejection "So when his fellow servants saw what was done..." Here was a group of believers who had seen what had happened. At the risk of reading too much into the parable, let me suggest to you that if this parable were a true story, these fellow servants would have no doubt followed the sequence of church discipline in Matthew 18:15-20. They would have seen this unforgiving servant and confronted him, then taken two or three with them, and finally told the whole assembly before they would have put him out if he still failed to respond. Assuming that the fellow servants would have done all they could to get the guy to do what was right and forgive the debt, whether or not the fellow paid it back, they were faced with a servant who was determined to get his due out of this guy and was resistant to all of their efforts. But, to their credit, when these fellow servants had witnessed his response, they became involved in the process of discipline.

b. The Regret "...they were very sorry..." Their response really stands out against the refusal of the one servant to forgive. By being sorry about it, these people were acting in accord with their new nature in Christ. A predominant attitude of those who have been forgiven is that they are willing to be forgivers. They not only knew how much they had been forgiven, but they knew the holy standard of God's law and that He longs

for forgiveness and unity in His family where the fellowship should be rich. Consequently, they were excessively grieved (Gk. sphodra). Such distress is a beautiful thing when it is the result of Christians becoming concerned about another Christian's sin...grieved about the lack of response to the law and the will of God which only serves to disrupt the fellowship.c. The Report"...and came and told unto their lord all that was done."In their sorrow, this group came and reported to the king what had taken place. What do you do when you've taken all of the steps of discipline and the person hasn't responded? You go to the Lord, don't you? I see these servants coming before the king in the same way that believers are to come before God with a broken heart in their concern about each other's sinfulness. Oh, what a healing there would be in the fellowship if more did this!The Greek word for "told" is a strong one which suggests that they gave him a carefully detailed outline of everything. No doubt they recited the whole process to the king and said, "We've tried everything we can to settle this thing, and we have come to you as a last resort. We are so sad about this unforgiving servant." That is a picture of God's people going to the Lord in prayer about a sinning brother or sister. I really believe that we have the same responsibility to take such a situation to the Lord like they did.

10. The Pattern for Pity (vv. 32-33)

a. The Example of the King (v. 32)"Then his lord, after he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou besoughtest me!"What is God's attitude? He comes to him and says, "O thou wicked servant...." Now some people get nervous here and say, "This servant can't represent a Christian, because God would never say that to one." Oh? What is wickedness? It is sin. Do Christians sin? Could God say to a Christian, "O you sinful person"? Yes. There's no problem here with that. This believer was acting in a wicked manner. One sin constitutes wickedness. The Lord is simply affirming what is true about the guy when he sinned...he acted in an unrighteous and wicked manner. Emphasizing the basic principle of the whole parable again, the king says, "...I forgave thee all that debt...." As the interpretative key to the whole passage, that phrase verifies that the transaction of forgiveness was actually made and was effective.The king also gives the reason why he forgave: "...because thou besoughtest [begged] me!" Back in verse 26, the servant "fell down, and worshiped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me...." Here we find that at the same time he begged. The king's description confirms that he was a broken person aware of his sin and brought to conviction in the same way that a sinner, pleading for God to be merciful, is saved, having been forgiven the debt of his sin. This is why I think it was real forgiveness the king bestowed on the servant.b. The Expectation of the King (v. 33)"Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee?"The point is, if the first forgiveness wasn't legitimate, the king's expectation is meaningless. Is he saying to him, "If my forgiveness didn't work for you then maybe yours doesn't need to work for somebody else"? No, the first forgiveness had to be effective, because that's the substance on which the expected forgiveness of the servant is built.Lenski, reflecting the king's amazement, calls the servant's response of not forgiving someone else a "moral monstrosity" in light of being forgiven so much himself. The king assumes that the servant would have had compassion since he had showed him pity earlier. He could have said to him, "Now, you should have given the guy the opportunity to pay back the debt by working it off in freedom without putting him into prison. You should have sought out justice some other way." No, he doesn't say that. He says, "You should have had compassion and pity just like I did." And how did he express that compassion? By loosening him from the debt and thereby absorbing the loss.Forgiveness is the most liberating thing there is. When somebody owes you something, or they've done something to hurt you, or they've irritated, offended, or slandered you or your family, you shouldn't react in bitterness that burns inside you until you get your due. No. You should have compassion, because that's what was shown to you when you pleaded for forgiveness from God.

11. The Punishment in the Parable (v. 34)

a. Its Provocation (v. 34a)"And his lord was angry..."This response bothers some people. They say, "Oh, this can't be a Christian." Can the Lord be angry with a Christian? Sure! The Lord gets angry

every time you sin, don't you think so? What makes Him angry? Sin makes Him angry. And if He doesn't get angry, then something is wrong with His holy nature. He always gets angry about sin. That's a built-in response. The Lord has holy indignation against evil even in your life and in mine.b. Its Purpose (v. 34b)"...and delivered him to the inquisitors [tormentors], till he should pay all that was due unto him."You say, "This can't be a Christian. What is the king doing turning him over to the inquisitors?" If you don't think that this could apply to a Christian, then consider...1) Hebrews 12:5-8 - "And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto sons [children of God], My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him; for whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, of which all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons."Every Christian at some time in their life will be turned over to the inquisitors. The inquisitors merely represent the means by which God puts you under the stress, difficulty, and pressure of chastening until you confess your sin. That is one of the main purposes that the Lord's chastening is designed to accomplish. If you're not forgiving someone, the Lord will put you under chastening until your response is right. I think that's what He means at the end of verse 34, where it says, "...till he should pay all that was due unto him." He could never pay the whole debt--even an unbeliever could not pay it--so at that point the physical parable cannot convey the full understanding of the spiritual truth. I think the intent of the parable is simply to say that the king put him under chastening pressure until he paid what should be paid in light of what he had done. And I believe that all it is saying is that the Lord delivers us to chastening, something which we all have experienced.2) 1 Corinthians 11:30 - Paul informed the Corinthians that many of them were weak, having lost their physical strength because of illness, and were severely sick, and that some of them were even dead as a result of divine discipline for having abused the sacrament of communion.3) 1 John 5:16 -- "...There is a sin unto death..." that Christians can commit.4) 1 Corinthians 5:5 -- I believe this verse is referring to a believer who is literally put out of the church where Satan is allowed to destroy his flesh so that his spirit may be saved.

I believe there is discipline and chastening to every son that God loves. It is then that He puts us into the hands of the tormentors, parabolically speaking, who apply the pressure to us until we admit our sin and confess our sin. And in this case, it is the sin of not forgiving.

Do you wonder why there is trouble in your life?

Do you wonder why things aren't going well and you feel as if inquisitors and tormentors are in your life? Do you feel pressure and chastening being applied and do you sense a lack of joy and freedom that you think you ought to have as a child of God? Then maybe you ought to look around in your life and find if you have an unforgiving spirit, because if you're not forgiving the way you were forgiven by God--magnanimously and compassionately and totally--then you are not going to experience relief from these inquisitors.

I think what the parable is saying is plain and simple: The sinner will satisfy God, paying what can be paid, when he is broken in repentance and contrite in heart, stepping into the sphere of obedience. At that point, fellowship is restored. So, chastening, in a sense then, makes us pay with a view not merely to punishment, but to refinement as a goal. You wouldn't punish your child for the sake of inflicting pain. You do so with a view to changing their behavior so that they will do what is right next time. God is doing the very same thing with His children.

This very strong and powerful passage is summed up in...

12. The Principle of the Parable (v. 35)

"So likewise shall My heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye, from your hearts, forgive not every one his brother his trespasses."

One reason I believe Jesus is speaking to a group of believing disciples is that unbelievers cannot

act like God toward each other and forgive. It is to them that He is simply saying, "Just like in that story when a guy was forgiven and wouldn't forgive and therefore was punished, you have been forgiven and therefore had better forgive or you too will be chastened."

CONCLUSION

Two perspectives stand out in this parable--one positive, and one negative. First, we ought to forgive, because we have been forgiven so much. Second, we ought to forgive, because if we don't, we are going to be chastened. It's a very strong word to us.

A. The Statements About Forgiveness

Lord Herbert said, "He who cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he himself must pass." One old saint of long ago said, "Revenge, indeed, seems often sweet to men; but, oh, it is only sugared poison, only sweetened gall, and its aftertaste is bitter as hell. Forgiving, enduring love alone is sweet and blissful; it enjoys peace and the consciousness of God's favor. By forgiving, it gives away and annihilates the injury. It treats the injurer as if he had not injured, and therefore feels no more the smart and sting that he had inflicted. Forgiveness is a shield from which all the fiery darts of the wicked one harmless rebound. Forgiveness brings heaven to earth, and heaven's peace into the sinful heart. Forgiveness is the image of God, the forgiving Father, and an advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world. Your unalterable duty is clear: as surely as we are Christians, men who have experienced great compassion, who see in every man a brother in Christ, and are going forward to God's righteous judgment, so surely we must forgive."

William Arnot, a great commentator on the parables, wrote this: "A traveler in Burma, after fording a certain river, found his body covered all over by a swarm of small leeches, busily sucking his blood. His first impulse was to tear the tormentors from his flesh: but his servant warned him that to pull them off by mechanical violence would expose his life to danger. They must not be torn off, lest portions remain in the wounds and become a poison; they must drop off spontaneously, and so they will be harmless. The native forthwith prepared a bath for his master, by the decoction of some herbs, and directed him to lie down in it. As soon as he had bathed in the balsam the leeches dropped off.

"Each unforgiven injury rankling in the heart is like a leech sucking the life blood. Mere human determination to have done with it, will not cast the evil thing away. You must bathe your whole being in God's pardoning mercy; and these venomous creatures will instantly let go their hold. You will stand up free."

We must bathe our whole being in God's pardoning love--that's the whole parable. We must realize how much we have been forgiven. We can stand around praying for the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, but we'll experience it when we learn to forgive.

B. The Stages of Forgiveness

There are three stages in forgiveness:

1. Suffering

Somebody creates the condition that brings the need for forgiveness, by saying or doing something to hurt or offend you.

2. Surgery

Here is the inner response where the forgiver performs spiritual surgery in his memory, just like God did, who remembers our sins no more. Sure you've suffered, but now you are going to do surgery and cut out of your mind all of those injustices committed against you by the power of God and the meditation on His forgiveness.

3. Starting Over

Forgiveness is complete when alienated people are fully reconciled.

Now, when you forgive it doesn't necessarily mean that you forget right away, because our minds hang on to some things for quite a long time, don't they? It doesn't mean that you excuse the sin in

the sense of ignoring it. But it does mean that you end the cycle of pain by restoring the relationship. That's what our Lord is after. We are children in the family of God. We came in like children; we have to be cared for and protected like children; we need to be disciplined like children; and we need to forgive each other because we're just human. Only when we become a people, who consistently forgive, will we be unlike the rest of the world around us, won't we? We, who are forgiven, not only have the capacity to forgive, but the motivation to forgive as well.

Focusing on the Facts

1. According to verse 28, what had the servant apparently forgotten?
2. What is the significance of the second servant being a fellow servant?
3. Explain why the second servant is understood to be a believer.
4. Compare the amount of the two debts.
5. Why shouldn't we be startled to conclude that the unforgiving servant represents a Christian?
6. Could the familiar words in verse 29 find a response in the first servant's heart? What is amazing about his response to his fellow servant with regard to the debt that was owed to him?
7. State the application of verse 29 in your own words.
8. What are two reasons that we ought to get used to forgiving?
9. If you are a Christian, a citizen of the Kingdom, why are the reactions of an unforgiving and bitter spirit evidence that you are responding contrary to your new nature?
10. Presumably, what have the fellow servants in verse 31 already done, based upon the context of the passage?
11. What is the response of the servants who witnessed the refusal of the one servant to forgive?
12. What does the scene of the group of servants reporting to the king tell us that we should do?
13. In what sense can God say to a Christian, "O you wicked servant"?
14. Explain why the king's forgiveness is legitimate, based on his expectation of the servant.
15. Against what does the Lord have holy indignation with regard to Christians?
16. What do "the inquisitors" in the parable represent?
17. What is one of the main purposes that the Lord's chastening is designed to accomplish?
18. To what extent will God discipline a believer? Give a Scripture reference to support your answer.
19. When does the sinner pay what can be paid in satisfaction to God?
20. What are the negative and positive perspectives for why we ought to forgive others?
21. Identify and briefly explain the three stages in forgiveness.

Pondering the Principles

1. Though you probably haven't physically choked someone who has wronged you, have you done so mentally, or even verbally? What things have you thought or said this past week which show that you haven't fully forgiven someone? Maybe you know someone else who is choking another, figuratively speaking. In preparing yourself to lovingly confront them, meditate on Paul's gracious letter to Philemon, noting how he encourages him to forgive Onesimus.
2. Read Titus 3:1-6. Do the qualities in verses 1-2 characterize your life? What type of change did you notice in your life when you first trusted in Christ for your salvation? What qualities in verse 3 were evident to some degree in your life before you came to Christ? What in verses 5-6 should we constantly be praising our God for? Having had the "washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit" mercifully and abundantly bestowed upon you, are you willing to make a commitment to consistently reflect that transformed nature as you forgive others without limit? If you fail in your commitment, don't give up...just confess it to our merciful Lord and be ready for your next opportunity to express His love to others.

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