

How Can I Forgive?

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Matthew 18:21-35 (ESV Adapted)

²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will **my brother or sister sin against me, and I forgive them?** As many as **seven times?**”

²² Jesus said to him, “I do **not** say to you **seven times**, but **seventy times seven**.

²³ Therefore the **kingdom of heaven** may be compared to a **human king** who wished to **settle accounts** with his **servants**.

²⁴ When he began to settle, one debtor was brought to him who owed him **ten thousand talents** (*several billion dollars*). ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his lord **ordered him to be sold**, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.

²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and **I will pay you everything.**’ ²⁷ And out of **compassion**, the lord of that servant **released him and forgave him the debt**.

²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him **a hundred denarii** (*several hundred dollars*), and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’

²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and **I will pay you.**’ ³⁰ He refused and went and **put him in prison** until he should pay the debt.

³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly **distressed**, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! **I forgave you all that debt** because you pleaded with me. ³³ And **should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?**’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord **delivered him to the tormenters**, until he should pay all his debt.

³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not **forgive your brother or sister from your heart.**”

Matthew 5:44-45

⁴⁴ “But I say to you, **Love your enemies** and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be **children of your Father who is in heaven.**”

Matthew 6:11-15

¹¹ “Give us this day our daily bread, ¹² and **forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.** ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. ¹⁴ For **if you forgive others their trespasses**, your **heavenly Father** will also **forgive you**, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Matthew 26:27-28

²⁷ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is **my blood** of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the **forgiveness of sins.**”

Mark 11:25

²⁵ “And **whenever you stand praying, forgive**, if you have anything against anyone, so that **your Father** also who is in heaven **may forgive you your trespasses.**”

Luke 23:33-34

³³ And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there **they crucified him....** ³⁴ And Jesus said, “**Father, forgive them**, for they know not what they do.”

The Problem of Forgiveness

With this passage Mt brings us to a turning point. Jesus leaves Galilee and heads to Judea and Jerusalem where his confrontation with the Temple and the cross take place. His disciples know he is Messiah, anointed King, the topic is the Kingdom of Heaven (18:1,3,4,23). Jesus surprised his disciples with a child, and instructions for reconciliation not overthrow.

Peter recognizes how striking and new Jesus' teaching is and asks for clarification. He wants to follow and be generous but there has to be a limit. Jesus' response highlights a deep problem we have with Jesus. He's so impractical. We suspect he's not really in our world.

We've got no problem with God forgiving us (them?). "That's his job." But for me to forgive? If you've experienced some deep betrayal, abuse, hurt, defeat, you know how hard it is. They don't deserve it. It's not fair. They need to pay. They're getting away with it. They're not really sorry, haven't really apologized. Or, To understand all is to excuse all. But Peter is a disciple. He knows wrong, sin is real. It can't be excused away. It carries a real cost.

But Jesus is insistent (70x7). He calls disciples to step into the life shown in God's forgiveness, into self-giving love, breaking the grip of anger, revenge, retribution. Our wars and movies.

An All-too-clear Parable

Then Jesus tells this 'parable of the unforgiving servant.' We find ourselves wishing for enigmatic parables, for needing 'ears to hear.' The story is simple, hyperbolic, and clear.

A king with subjects (slaves) who owe him (taxes, debts). He demands payment. One is brought in owing a vast sum. (1 talent = 75 lb. of gold or silver). All life and property are forfeit – slavery ahead. He begs, helplessly, hopelessly. "I'll pay everything. Give me time."

Then the surprise. The hard-nose lord, demanding payment, has compassion on him and forgives the debt. What happens to the debt? The lord bears it, absorbs it. He'll never get the billions due him, not even years of labor. He releases the servant and bears the cost.

Then there's the other servant and his debt. He owe 1/600,000th of the first debt. But the first servant is like us and the disciples and Israel. Just because I was good and my debt was forgiven, doesn't mean somebody else can treat me unfairly, hurt me and get away with it. The lord finds out. The forgiveness is reversed, fairness enforced. The servant goes to jail.

Jesus concludes with truly fearsome words – his last before going to Jerusalem. Jesus says this is not just a quirky suggestion. This is profoundly serious. A key to everything else I teach.

The Unfairness that Opens New Life

Forgiveness seems unfair, and it is. It challenges my instinct for what's just, especially for me.

I have a rightful claim and I release it. I refuse to strike back. I don't let their wrong control me.

Forgiveness is not excusing wrong. If a deed can be excused, there's no need for forgiveness.

Forgiveness is being honest about past wrongs and who's responsible. But it sees that revenge/retribution continue and empower the past wrong. Forgiveness strikes our instinct for self-centered life and a cycle of revenge. Forgiveness opens the possibility of new life.

In forgiveness Jesus shows us the character of God. This is God's way of dealing with, entering the problem of human evil, sin, brokenness. In Jesus and his death, God enters and take on himself all our sin and evil and releases us from the debt. This is his heart of self-giving love. He knows that forgiveness is a necessity if love is to be real. He renounces his complete right to fair revenge. He chooses the joy, healing, reconciliation that requires the cross.

He invites us into his Life! Let it go! Die to it. Gain life. Forgive. Seventy times seven, Forgive!