

Topic 18: Forgiveness

Being a Conduit of God's Mercy and Grace

“Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

—Colossians 3:13

We live in a fallen, broken world. There's no way to avoid getting hurt—or hurting others. We collect scars even as we cause them. How then, is it possible for things like the following three examples to happen?

- ▶ Only days after a man opens fire in a church Bible study, killing nine innocent people, relatives of the victims attend a legal hearing to address the gunman. The teary first words of the very first speaker are, “I forgive you.”
- ▶ A POW, who was sadistically abused while in captivity during World War II, longs to meet with the vilest of his guards, not to exact revenge, but to extend forgiveness.
- ▶ A mother befriends the young gang member who murdered her son and, when he finishes his prison sentence, unofficially adopts him.

Since, on any given day, we are both victims and perpetrators, we need to become experts at *forgiveness*.

Two things are true about a devoted follower of Jesus:

- ▶ He or she understands being *forgiven*.
- ▶ He or she understands being *forgiving*.





Bible Study

To learn about the concept of forgiveness, we could go to multiple places in the Bible. But perhaps one of the best passages is a story Jesus told. Take a moment to read the parable of the unmerciful servant from Matthew 18:21–35:

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?"

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

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 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.

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

"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.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

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

1. Jesus told this story when Peter asked a question about forgiveness.

a. How would you explain forgiveness to a child?



The Meaning of Forgiveness

The Greek word, *aphesis*, translated “to forgive” means to pardon, or to remove guilt. This gracious act doesn’t erase the wrong act itself or take away the consequences of hurtful words and bad behaviors; however, it does effectively remove the wrongdoer’s *guilt* and our own need to *get revenge*.

The other primary New Testament verb translated “forgive” (Luke 7:42–43; Ephesians 4:32) is *charizomai*. It means to graciously and generously cancel a debt.

The Mechanics of Forgiveness

Consider Matthew 6:15, “If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

To understand this verse and the concept of forgiveness more fully, let’s dig into one of Jesus’ parables. Take the time to read it now, Matthew 18:21-35.

In this parable Jesus is teaching us about sin and forgiveness. It is not difficult to tell who the characters are intended to represent. The king or master is representative of God. The servant, represents an average person.

- b. In the parable, what was the plea of the man heavily in debt (vs. 26)?

The man’s proposal is both ridiculous and sad. One scholar claims that a single silver talent represented 6,000 days’ worth of wages for an average Palestinian worker (that’s twenty-seven years of work!). So, ten thousand talents would be the equivalent of sixty million days wages (working for 164,383.5 years). And that’s if we’re talking about talents of *silver*. It would be far more if Jesus meant talents of *gold*!

- c. What’s Jesus point? What debt do we owe God because of our failure to properly love and honor him?



We are either naïve, ignorant, or prideful to think we can somehow erase the debt we owe God. Spiritually speaking, the truth is that we keep dishonoring God *and adding to our debt!* Jesus' point is that our debt to God is far greater than we could ever pay back or even comprehend.


d. Read verse 27 again. What does the master or the king do for the man?

e. Read Colossians 2:13–14. How—not in the parable, but in the real world—is God able to cancel the enormous spiritual debts of sinful people?

The man in the parable asked for time. “Be patient!” he cried. He got infinitely more than that. He got the slate wiped clean, a big, thick ledger book full of bills—all cancelled! The king purged the books, expunged the records. Can you imagine?

f. Summarize the rest of the story. What did the forgiven man do next?

Just before he died on the cross, Jesus cried out, *tetel'esthai*, or “It is finished!” This word was found on first-century invoices or accounting ledgers. It’s meaning? *Paid in full.*





g. How did the king respond when he heard about what the forgiven man had done?

2. Read Matthew 18:34–35 and James 2:13. What’s the warning for those who have experienced God’s forgiveness but are unwilling to extend such mercy to others?

The “Messiness” of Forgiveness

All this talk about forgiveness raises a number of questions. Let’s look at a few of them.

How are we supposed to forgive the “unforgiveable”?

3. How would you counsel a friend who has been the victim of a great betrayal, horrific abuse, or a criminal act resulting in tragic loss? What can we possibly say that doesn’t seem glib, trite, or like a cliché?

The word “resentment” comes from two Latin words *re* meaning “again” and *sentire* meaning “to feel.” Resenting someone is to relive over and over again the pain or hurt they caused. In a real sense it is to be tortured by the pain of bitterness and unforgiveness.

What about vengeance? Isn’t forgiveness unfair?

4. Read Hebrews 10:30 and Romans 12:19. What do these verses say about divine justice?



What if I have lingering negative feelings?

For instance, sometimes I think about the person who hurt me and I start to feel angry or weird all over again. Does that mean I haven't forgiven?

5. Read three passages from Philippians: 1:6; 2:12-13; 3:12-16. How do these verses suggest that forgiveness might be

All too often we lose sight of how lavishly God has forgiven our wrongs, and we focus instead on how others have violated our rights.

a. A decision:

b. An event:

c. And an ongoing process?

What about the person who continues to cause me harm?

6. Read 1 Corinthians 5, NLT. What does this passage say about putting up boundaries? Note the reference to abusive people in verse 11.



Loving and forgiving our enemies means seeing them as fellow human beings who are loved by God and in need of his mercy and grace. The Bible *never* suggests that forgiving others—especially those who continue to act in hurtful ways—means tolerating abuse or subjecting yourself to ongoing physical or emotional danger. That isn't love; it's a kind of masochism. It isn't helpful or honorable; it's dysfunctional.

What about reconciliation and restoration?

7. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:11 and Romans 12:10. What do these verses suggest about restoring relationships after one or both parties have engaged in hurtful actions?

Forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Forgiveness means to pardon others, to no longer demand payment for their sins. Reconciliation is "restoration to harmony in relationship." With God, such restoration is always possible; but with humans it's tricky. Forgiveness is required, but the person who is forgiven may not change or become more trustworthy. In some instances, one person may not want to remain bitter, but he or she also may not wish to resume a relationship like before.

We can take the initiative to release people from their moral debts and still not enjoy reconciliation and restoration. Those blessings require repentance, confession on the part of the offender, and sometimes, restitution.



Take-Home Reflections

From Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant, we see that

To be unwilling to forgive is to . . .	To forgive is to . . .
D isobey God's command (Colossians 3:13)	L earn what it means to trust God deeply
I gnore the infinite mercy God has shown us	I ncarnate the Gospel
E xperience the tortuous effects of bitterness	V anquish the power of evil (Romans 12:21)
	E xperience freedom and peace
Refusing to forgive is lethal!	Choosing to forgive is life-giving!

Forgiveness is the only path to the abundant life Jesus offers. The unwillingness to forgive is a kind of living death. Disciples of Jesus are marked by a forgiving spirit.

Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God's truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you've learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize our verse, Colossians 3:13.
2. Read one or two of the stories in the chart "Bible Stories of Forgiveness."
3. Wrestle with one or two of the following:
 - ▶ Is it possible to "forgive and *forget*?" Is it necessary to forget?
 - ▶ When we've wronged another, is it enough to simply ask God's forgiveness?
 - ▶ Is there anyone you can think of from whom you need to ask forgiveness?
 - ▶ What person or people in your life do you need to forgive?

Bible Stories of Forgiveness

Story Title	Reference(s)
Jacob and Esau	Genesis 25, 27, 32, 33
Joseph Forgives His Brothers	Genesis 37—50
David and Mephibosheth	2 Samuel 9
Prodigal Son	Luke 15
Casting the First Stone	John 8