

Looking Back: Finding Healing through Forgivenessⁱ

Matthew 18:21-35

We are continuing our series on relationships this morning with one more look in the rearview mirror. We've all experienced pain in relationships – we've been hurt by others and if we're truly honest with ourselves we've also been the ones who've hurt others. When it comes to relationships, one of the most important lessons we can learn is about forgiveness. We can't achieve a better future in our relationships until we seek reconciliation for hurts that have occurred in the past.

A Story About Forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35)

²¹ Then Peter came to [Jesus] and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?”

²² “No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven!”

²³ “Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. ²⁴ In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. ²⁵ He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.

²⁶ “But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ ²⁷ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.

²⁸ “But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

²⁹ “His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. ³⁰ But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

³¹ “When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had

happened.³² Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

³⁵ “That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.”

Oh, how I love this parable. If ever there were someone who got what they deserved, it’s this guy! He owed a huge debt. In today’s dollars, a debt of more than half a billion. (NLT)

Imagine opening up a bill for that!?!

Then, imagine that debt being forgiven. Wouldn’t you be a little relieved? Perhaps even a little overjoyed? Maybe you’d want to *pass it on*?

Not this guy. After being forgiven half a billion, he went to another, who owed him just a few bucks, he had him arrested and put in prison.

When the king, who had forgiven the half billion heard about this injustice he had the first guy seized and tortured, until he could repay the debt, which was of course...never!

Isn’t it a great story!

But then these words of a Jesus haunt me...

You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt... Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ (Matthew 21:32 NLT)

Oh, crud...The servant in this story is me. I’ve been forgiven so much. Why don’t I extend the same to others? ⁱⁱ

And, THAT’S what this passage is about. Forgiveness.

So, what is forgiveness? According to Dictionary.com “it is the act of forgiving; the state of being forgiven.” Notice it can either be an action on your part or you can be a recipient of it.

But, what does it mean to forgive or be forgiven? According to Dictionary.com, to forgive is:

to pardon an offense or an offender.
to give up all claim on account of a debt, obligation, etc.,
to cease to feel resentment against

Bible scholar and author Philip Yancey calls forgiveness “an unnatural act.” We all know the difficulty of offering forgiveness to those who have hurt us. But if we stubbornly refuse to carry out this “unnatural act,” we choose to remain in a state of ungrace.” According to Yancey:

Ungrace causes cracks to fissure open between mother and daughter, father and son, brother and sister...and tribes, and races. Left alone, cracks widen, and for the resulting chasms of ungrace there is only one remedy: the frail rope-bridge of forgiveness.ⁱⁱⁱ

Asking for forgiveness is an act of humility. It is hard to admit when we are wrong. And yet, perhaps as challenging as asking for forgiveness is the granting of forgiveness. After all, forgiveness heals relationships by requiring us to let go, to turn the page, to refuse the right to hold on to grudges, bitterness and anger. Forgiveness, in short, sets things right again. Forgiveness is a powerfully healing force but also an incredibly difficult thing to receive or share. As memories of past pain flood our minds, we ask, “Why should I be the one to cross the chasm?” Why should I forgive?

This is where we need to go back to the story Jesus told. It was in response to a question asked by Peter – how many times do I need to forgive someone? What is the limit on grace? The rabbis taught you were to forgive three times. Peter thought he was generous by

doubling the number and adding 1 more for good measure. Should I forgive someone as many as seven times?

But Jesus, as he often does, poses a radical suggestion: not seven times but 70 times 7. Of course, what Jesus is suggesting is not a larger ledger upon which we can keep track of offenses. Instead, he is suggesting there is no need for a ledger whatsoever because forgiveness isn't something we do but a way of being, a way of being in relationship. A way of being a disciple.

We are to forgive as we have been forgiven. Forgiveness lies at the heart of our faith in God and our love of one another. Forgiveness, which we receive from God our King in the person of Jesus is what our King expects from his subjects in their dealings with each other.

Forgiveness is not only relational it is reciprocal and reliant. When teaching his disciples to pray Jesus would have us say, "Forgive us our trespasses *as we* forgive those who trespass against us." (Matthew 6:12). This fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer is echoed in the lesson of this story, reflecting it back in reverse. We ought to forgive as our King has forgiven us.

Two key principles emerge from this parable. First, to refuse to forgive someone for anything is hypocritical. We ourselves have been forgiven every transgression, every wrongdoing at the cross. At the cross, the maximum forgiveness was offered on our behalf. So we're called to offer the same forgiveness and reconciliation to others.

True forgiveness is a choice – a deliberate choice to release the person who has hurt us from the pain they have caused and extend to them the same grace that has been given to us.

Second, to refuse forgiveness inflicts more torment on you than it does on the person you refuse to forgive. Let me say that again – when you refuse to forgive someone, the one who is harmed the most is you.

“A friend betrays our trust, so we trade grace for grudges. A spouse cheats with our best friend, so we bypass compassion to take up the chains of bitterness. A parent abuses us in hurtful ways, so we banish reconciliation to the abyss of anger and unforgiveness. But Jesus reminds us that when we don’t release from their debts those seeking forgiveness, we incur the very punishment we seek to inflict.”^{iv} If we persist in “ungrace” toward anyone – whether they ask for our forgiveness or not- we leave ourselves to the “torturers,” otherwise known as bitterness, hatred, anger, and malice.

Forgiveness is spiritual surgery. We can move, change jobs, change churches, change friends or even change families, but until we yank up the root of bitterness and kill it with forgiveness, we will live with unresolved pain that can cripple our lives until we deal with it and forgive the hurt. A family member has wounded you and shows no sign of remorse. Maybe a friend has betrayed you and refuses to apologize. Or you may be struggling to forgive yourself because you don’t think you deserve to be forgiven. None of us deserves forgiveness. Forgiveness is a gift from God. Today is the day to make the choice to forgive.

Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness could well be abused. Forgiveness does not mean the embrace of violence perpetrated against us. It does not mean giving free reign to those who would do us harm. It does not mean submission to those who are stronger than us. The context of this teachings is key. Forgiveness is a gift of grace, a reflection of God’s love, not the curse of a lifetime of abuse or a reflection of our worst tendencies as humans.

We’ve all wronged others, and we’ve been wronged – some of us terribly. But either way, it’s our move. We can’t achieve a brighter future until we seek reconciliation for hurts that have occurred. So, take the first step onto the fragile ropebridge of forgiveness today. You won’t regret it.

VIDEO: Signs of Forgiveness

<https://www.rightnow.org/Content/illustration/99857>

ⁱ Swindoll, Charles R. *Gaining A Fresh Perspective: Seeing Relationships through New Eyes*. Insight for Living, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Morley, Rick. “The Weasel”

http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/3139?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=the-weasel

ⁱⁱⁱ Yancey, Philip. *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.

^{iv} Swindoll, Charles R. *Gaining A Fresh Perspective: See Relationships through New Eyes*. Insight for Living, 2002.