

SESSION 3

Forgive



QUESTION 1:

When was the last time it cost you a lot to fix something?

THE POINT

Relationships grow deeper with forgiveness.

THE PASSAGES

Matthew 18:21-28,32-35

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Sometimes we're better off paying a higher price.

- ▶ Ever bought the generic brand of peanut butter, only to discover you should've paid the higher price to get something that actually tasted like peanut butter?
- ▶ Ever bought a cheap tool or appliance, only to replace it a year later because its low price was matched by its low quality?
- ▶ Ever tried to save some money by staying in an inexpensive hotel room, only to discover management kept their prices down by not investing in bug extermination?

A lot of things come at a high price, but they're worth it.

I'd put forgiveness in that "high-priced" category. But even though it can be costly, forgiveness is a great investment in any relationship. Forgiveness is the stuff of healthy marriages, healthy families, and healthy churches. Relationships grow when we let go of a hurt, a wound, or a critical remark.

As you examine Jesus' story of the unforgiving servant, let the Word of God run through you, removing any remnants of resentment and unforgiveness.

Matthew 18:21-22

21 Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

We're going to look at a parable Jesus spoke about forgiveness, but He told the parable in response to a curious question Peter asked. Since Peter was a leader among the twelve apostles, he often spoke for the group. All the disciples may have been wondering about this question, but we know Peter was the one who asked if there was a quota on grace. How many times are we called to let the same person slide off the hook? A legitimate question.

Peter proceeded to speculate at the answer to his own question. He filled in the blank with the number seven, the number of completeness. The rabbis of that day challenged people to overlook an offense up to three times. Three strikes and you're out. To Peter's way of thinking, he was being generous. Forgiving someone seven times more than doubled the cultural expectations for grace. Peter upped the ante on grace, doubling the "grace" of the religious leaders and even raising the bar an extra notch beyond that.

Peter was probably feeling pretty good about himself in this moment, perhaps like we might feel giving a waitress a \$50 tip on a \$20 dinner. In these rare moments of bigheartedness, we like to pat ourselves on the back.

Jesus surely stunned Peter with His response: "I take your seven and raise it seventy fold."

"Seventy times seven" or "seventy-seven times" are both possible interpretations of Jesus' forgiveness formula. Either route you take, the point is perfectly clear: the grace you offer to others should have no limits. Few people are ever offended fifty, sixty, or seventy

times by the same person in a short time. The Lord is exaggerating here for effect, creating a ridiculous scenario to capture the attention of the disciples. Essentially, he says, even if your brother insults you a 78th time or a 491st time, forgive and let it go. Don't keep track; just keep forgiving.

Corrie ten Boom was a woman who lived through the nightmare of a Nazi concentration camp. She was the only one in her family who made it out alive. In that hellish place, she was humiliated, especially in the delousing shower where the women were watched by the leering guards. By the grace of God, Corrie survived it all and found it in her heart to forgive—or so she thought.

Corrie traveled extensively to share her testimony of God's forgiveness. One Sunday in a church in Munich, after sharing her story, a man approach her with his hand outstretched. "A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea! ... I have become a Christian. I know God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein, ... will you forgive me?"

She recognized his face instantly. This was the leering, mocking face of one of the cruelest guards in the shower stall. Her hand froze by her side. Coldness clutched her heart. Ashamed at herself, she prayed, "Jesus help me! ... I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." As she prayed, her hand became unfrozen. The ice of hate melted, and her hand went out. "I forgive you, brother! ... With all my heart!" She forgave as she was forgiven.¹

Have you ever prayed a prayer like that? Have you asked Jesus to supply the power to set others free with extravagant grace?

QUESTION 2:

What can happen when you forgive someone?

Matthew 18:23-27

23 Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants.

24 And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents.

25 But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

26 The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all.

27 Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

KEY WORD: Talents (v. 24)—A talent is a large amount of money. The Greek term (*talanton*) represented about 6,000 pence, what a common laborer might work about twenty years to earn.

Every preacher knows the power of storytelling. Logic and reason can appeal to an audience, but nothing captures a crowd like an imaginative tale. People lean in and listen to a well-told story, and Jesus was the Master Narrator.

To drive home His shocking “seventy times seven” statement to Peter, Jesus told a parable, a story, to illustrate the truth Jesus wanted to teach. The parable is about a man with a major debt crisis. He owed the king a crazy amount of cash and had no means of paying it off. When the king called in the note, the indebted man fell face down on the ground, begging his master to give him additional time to pay it all back.

The king was seasoned and wise. He knew this man could burn the candle at both ends, working 24/7 for the rest of his life, and *still* not produce the cash required to pay this bill. What was the king to do? In an astonishing act of grace and mercy, the king

relieved the man of his responsibility and pardoned the debt. *All of it.*

In Jewish parables, a king symbolized God and the idea of settling accounts symbolized judgment. Each of us is like the servant with an incredible debt. How big is our debt? Jesus used the outrageous amount of “ten thousand talents.” Jesus was using hyperbole to make a point. A talent was the highest denomination of currency at that time, and 10,000 was the largest number in the Greek language. A worker typically earned one hundred pence in three months, and it took 6,000 pence to equal one talent. To earn one talent, then, would take about 20 years. And with a debt of 10,000 talents, it would take this debtor 200,000 years to pay off his debt!

That is an impossible feat.

Similarly, our debt of rebellion and offense against God is so huge it is an impossible feat for us to pay off the debt. But Jesus paid the debt in full for us, and God has forgiven the debt. We do not deserve forgiveness, but God in His grace and mercy has extended forgiveness to us through Jesus. We are free.

QUESTION 3:

What are some obstacles that hinder us from forgiving others?

Matthew 18:28,32-35

28 But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest.

.....

32 Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: **33** Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?

34 And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

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

KEY WORD: Pence (v. 28)—The Greek term (*denarion*) was the daily wage a Roman soldier or a day laborer earned at the time Jesus told this story.

The king set the man free from his enormous debt. He was allowed to run free, but unfortunately, he ran in the wrong direction. He ran after someone who owed him money. The second man's debt was not small, but it was insignificant compared with the debt just canceled. The second man's debt was 100 pence, about three months' wages, but what's that compared to 60,000,000 pence—*200,000 years* worth of wages?

QUESTION 4:

How do the king's actions in this parable mirror God's actions toward us?

Jesus' story was designed to produce outrage in the heart of the hearers. Jesus wanted Peter and the others to ask themselves the question: "What kind of person would be so cruel as to require his friend to pay, right after he just got pardoned?" To use modern lingo, why would this man not choose to pay it forward?

Herein lies the real question. Why do we behave like this? Why do we withhold forgiveness when we've been forgiven so much, and when we have it in our power to give it so easily?

We can wrongly rationalize lots of reasons for postponing forgiveness, but one of the leading reasons for withholding grace is the desire to "teach the offender a lesson." Sometimes we think our

offer of forgiveness could send the wrong message. *If I forgive and let go of the offense, he will think I am condoning his behavior, which could encourage him to keep doing wrong. Therefore, I would be contributing to his downfall and would allow him to hurt me again.*

Forgiveness is not always easy, but it is always right. Only a heartless, cruel person would make a friend pay a petty bill in the wake of his own extravagant pardon.

As children of a compassionate Father, we must find it in our hearts to forgive. We need to be forgiven ... and we need to become forgivers. This means more than a one-time transaction. It means we strive to continually forgive and clear the hurts that hold us back.

Perhaps I can clarify this with an illustration from the sea. Many boat owners are familiar with the problem of barnacles in the ocean. Barnacles are organisms that bunch up on the underside of a boat or ship and can become quite a nuisance. A boat left in the water for six months can become so encrusted with barnacles it will use up to 50 percent more fuel to travel at the same speed. Barnacles can seriously weigh down a boat.

Even worse, barnacles are notoriously difficult to remove once they take hold. The longer they remain, the more difficult they become to remove. These crustaceans secrete a cement-like substance that firmly adheres to the underside of the vessel. They come off only by strong force.

How do barnacles belong in a study of relationships? Our past hurts and the unforgiveness we hold on to are like barnacles that take hold of us, weighing us down and preventing our relationships from moving forward. Only through Christ can we tap into the supernatural power needed to remove these barriers and forgive. Those who have been raised with Christ have been endowed with the strength to break free from unforgiveness.

Forgiveness is not always easy. It is costly too. After all, look at what it cost Jesus. But even as Christ has forgiven us, He empowers

us by His Spirit to extend that same forgiveness to others. We can overcome past hurts and set our relationships free from the crusty barnacles of unforgiveness.

QUESTION 5:

How have you seen forgiveness deepen or restore a relationship?

The extravagant form of forgiveness Jesus calls for is *only possible when performed as an act of worship*. Forgiveness is not an emotional reaction to a person but a grateful response to our loving Lord. We forgive for His sake, as an offering to Him who has forgiven us.

ENGAGE

Circle some of the ways you have been hurt or offended.

Betrayal

Hurtful words

Unkept promises

Lies

Bullying

Shut out from friendships

Not included

Physically harmed

Being treated unfairly

What would it cost you to forgive the person who has hurt you?

What did it cost God for Him to forgive you?

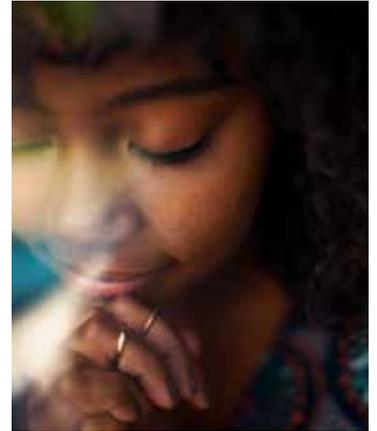
What could be the rewards of forgiving someone?

LIVE IT OUT

Imagine three bills in your hand. Each bill represents a person who has hurt you and “owes” you. How can you apply grace, mercy, and forgiveness to the situation?

- ▶ **Evaluate.** Consider your current relationships and spend time identifying areas of unforgiveness in your heart.
- ▶ **Take a small step.** Make an effort to extend forgiveness in a relationship where you’ve been wronged or slighted. Take the first step even if you’ve done nothing wrong.
- ▶ **Take a large step.** Identify a relationship in which you need to be forgiven—one where you’ve contributed to bad feelings, or even where you’re completely in the wrong. With humility, make an effort to bridge the gap.

Your sin is a 10,000 talent debt forgiven by God. Someone’s comparatively small “debt” to you just doesn’t compare. God forgives. You can too.



END NOTES

1 Corrie ten Boom, *Tramp for the Lord* (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 1974), 55-56.