

Forgiveness and Repentance

Part 2

Why is it so difficult for people to forgive?

Matthew 6:14, 15

With Study Questions

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For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Matthew 6:14, 15).

Review

From children who thoughtlessly offend other children at play to adults who have engaged in moral or criminal attacks against the person or property, of others – even loved ones – we’ve all been hurt; and that pain doesn’t always go away on its own through time. If unchecked it can actually gain momentum. The ability to forgive, for many people, is elusive – it becomes an old pain that we just learn to live with.

Then we find ourselves confronted with a passage like the one above, which, in my opinion is one of the most disconcerting statements Jesus ever made. Now we’re not merely in pain, we are involved in an egregious transgression.

The above statement follows Jesus’ instruction on how we ought to pray (commonly referred to as the Lord’s Prayer). Jesus taught us to pray that God forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors? Maybe because it is the most difficult or neglected portion of the prayer that we take to heart, Jesus adds the comment:

For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions (Matthew 6:14, 15).

The subjunctive clause “**if you do not forgive**” is related to the virtue of forgiveness. It is regarding forgiveness that we see this powerful ‘**if you don’t then neither shall I**’ statement.

An unforgiving heart is harmful to everybody. It enslaves the offended party, it estranges the offending party and it dishonors God. So figuring out forgiveness is a pretty critical issue. Since forgiveness is inextricably linked to

repentance, we'd better try to figure that one out as well. In light of these things, we are wrestling with the following questions in our current series:

1. **What is forgiveness? What does it mean to forgive? Does it make sense to say I am trying to forgive?**
2. **Why is it so difficult for people to forgive?**
3. **Do we always forgive – even if there is no repentance on the part of the offender? And if there is no repentance, how do we spiritually, emotionally, psychologically or functionally deal with the wound?**
4. **Is there a difference between forgiving and forgetting? Does forgiveness mean ignoring what happened?**
5. **What is repentance? What does it look like?**
6. **How do we reconcile forgiveness as a necessary virtue to salvation?**

Last week we took some time to define forgiveness. The word 'forgive' in the passage above (Matthew 6:14) is *aphete* from the verb *aphimui* literally meaning **"to send away."** The verb is used by Jesus in Matthew 13:36 when **He sent the multitude away.** It is the verb Matthew uses to describe how Peter and Andrew **left their nets** to follow Jesus. Paul uses the verb to describe **divorce** in 1 Corinthians 7:11, 13.

It might be easiest for us to understand forgiveness the way Jesus uses it in a parable addressing the very issue under our discussion – the parable of the unmerciful servant. We see in that parable forgiveness used in relationship to a **financial debt – to forgive a debt** (Matthew 18:27).

Forgiveness, in this respect, should not be thought of as a process but a single action. Once the debt is forgiven, it is no longer owed. So it does not make sense to say that we're trying to forgive someone any more than it would make sense to tell someone you're trying to tell them they no longer owe you a financial debt. Forgiveness is not something we try to do; it is something we decide to do. And once we decide to do it, we must know that what we have decided to do send away the debt.

In the same way God pardons us when we're justified (pardoned), we are to pardon others. Forgiveness is a very forensic term, used to indicate that there has been an acquittal.

All this to say, if we don't have it in our heads and hearts, that forgiveness is a commitment by the forgiving person to send away the debt of the offending party, we don't truly understand what it means to forgive. We must have that squarely before us in this study if we wish to properly proceed with the other components of this difficult issue. It would be like trying to recover from cancer while we allow the tumor to remain.

The rehabilitation and restoration many of us are looking for in these broken relationships will not even begin to take place without the commitment to forgive.

We are to think about the way we forgive others, and then ask ourselves if this is the way we want God to interact with us. We need to excel in our understanding of the nature of God's love and forgiveness toward us – we need to meditate on good theology – if we're to understand how we are to love and forgive others. And the bottom line of last week's message was that God has cancelled our debt by paying it Himself through the blood of His own Son.

This morning we ask the question:

Why is it so difficult for people to forgive?

Remembering Sin

It is not my custom to remind people of their past. I'm not sure how well I'd survive the scrutiny of a media blitz of my own history. It is not generally helpful to get overly historical with people; but at times it is.

When the Israelites were about enter the Promised Land and dispossess the very powerful and evil nations on the other side of the Jordan, Moses warns them not to think that this wonderful deliverance was a result of their own righteousness – but rather the wickedness of the nations that would be driven out.

“It is not because of your righteousness” we read in Deuteronomy 9:5, **“or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of their wickedness.”** Moses goes on to say in verse 6 **“Therefore understand that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people.”**

Then, just in case they're wondering just how Moses could say such a thing about them, he gets specific in verses 7 and 8: **“Remember! Do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day that you departed from the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD.”** ⁸ Also in Horeb you provoked the

LORD to wrath, so that the LORD was angry *enough* with you to have destroyed you."

Sometimes it's important to remember. When Nathan brought it to David's attention that a wealthy man killed a little ewe lamb that was the singular household pet of a poor family, David was outraged! We read that **"David's anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this shall surely die" (2 Samuel 12:5)!**

It wasn't until Nathan brought it to David's attention that he was merely telling a parable about David himself that David's disposition became radically altered.

I remember having a conversation with a person who I happened to know very well – pastors have the habit of getting to know a lot about people. This particular person just couldn't understand how someone they knew could behave a certain way. It was genuinely torturing this person's soul to see someone engage in such unseemly behavior. The words came forth, "How in the world could they do that?"

Trying to avoid sounding overly accusatory, I reminded the person of one of their own past trespasses – a big one. Things got quiet. It was my prayer in this conversation that this particular person would reflect on how weak and sinful they could be given certain circumstances. Pride becomes a huge impediment for those who begin to walk with integrity.

I believe it was the 18th century theologian, Matthew Henry, who after being robbed, went home and prayed something like, **"Lord, I thank you that though I was robbed I wasn't hurt badly. And I thank you that I didn't have much on me to steal. I thank you that I arrived home safely. And I thank you that I was the one robbed and not the one doing the robbing."**

I have seen the torture experienced by offended parties and I've also seen the torture experienced by the offending parties. Sometimes I'd prefer to go through what the offended party goes through than the offending party. To go through life knowing how badly you've hurt someone is a dreadful thing.

But the long and the short of it here is, the reason it is so difficult to forgive others is due to a lack of insight when it comes to our own sin and guilt. There are two facets to this question. One, in my opinion, is much more serious than the other, but I believe they both have the same root problem.

The first facet pertains to the hesitancy people have in forgiving – a commitment, if you will, not to forgive. This, I believe, is the very dangerous disposition of which we spoke of last week. I believe it is this commitment not

to forgive that receives the “neither will your Father forgive you” warning by Jesus.

The second facet has to do with the emotional or psychological lingering of resentment which seems to take residence in our souls, even though we’ve made the commitment to forgive. And I suspect that this is the more common issue. I also must warn you that there is no easy trick to this. This requires we become bigger people than we’ve ever been. And by bigger I mean more insightful, understanding, trusting, humble and godly.

The Unmerciful Servant

Jesus told a parable many have entitled ‘The Unmerciful Servant’. It’s a parable about a man who had a debt to a king so large it couldn’t be paid. He asked and received forgiveness from this debt by the merciful king. After the debt was forgiven the man met a debtor (a fellow slave) and refused to offer him any forgiveness concerning his debt. When the king heard about this, he took the man whose debt he had forgiven and threw him into torturers until all the original debt was paid.

What is often missed in this parable is the context – which is the confrontation which leads to church discipline. The one on one confrontation followed by the two or more confrontation followed by the church disciplinary action – all in an effort (among other things) to restore the sinning brother (Matthew 18:15-20).

Peter seemed to be a little disturbed (or at least confused) by this. Perhaps Peter had friends who failed on a regular basis and then were restored only to fail again and be restored again. Peter wanted to know how often! He offers a suggestion.

Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times? (Matthew 18:21)?

How Often Do We Forgive?

It is this question which launches Jesus into the parable. And in this parable I think we begin to grasp just what it is that constrains us from being forgiving people – both in our convictions and passions?

The youthful, confident and exuberant Peter desires to know the reasonable limits of human forgiveness. No doubt, thinking himself generous, he blurts out the number of perfection, of completion. The offender Peter has in

mind has completely offended him (seven transgressions), which require seven acts of forgiveness.

Peter's question tells us something about Peter. And I think it is something common to man. Although Peter was willing to forgive, his forgiveness carried with it a sense of entitlement – as if he were entitled to stop forgiving at a certain point. If our willingness to forgive is founded upon an overly developed sense of our own worthiness then it is unavoidable that we will say “thus far and no more”. Somewhere in the recesses of our mind the words are ringing “I deserve better.”

Perhaps Peter would think it feeble at that point to continue to forgive – unwilling to say ‘enough is enough’!¹ You wonder if Peter reflected upon this conversation later after having denied his Lord three times in a brief period (Luke 22:60).

One must also wonder if Peter remembered this parable. If Peter remembered how comfortably he questioned whether or not the weak and failing sinner should continue to be forgiven. Did Peter consider this lesson when, after denying His Savior repeatedly, the Lord, being led to His death, took the time to turn and look at Peter (Luke 22:61). When the penetrating eyes of Jesus see us in our darkest moments, how we take refuge in His lessons of mercy!

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22).

Peter now finds his magnanimity blown to smithereens by Jesus; seventy times seven clearly meaning infinitely. How rabbinic of Peter! How Pharisaical we tend to be. We desire to set standards on other people's behavior that are quantifiable. When we make the statement “I am willing to forgive so much but no more,” it is not so much a testimony to the irritation that others bring us as it is a testimony to our own weakness and lack of willingness to imitate the graciousness of Christ.

William Hendriksen states that the forgiving spirit is not,

...a commodity that could be weighed, measured, and counted...the spirit of genuine forgiveness recognizes no boundaries. It is a state of heart, not a matter of calculation. One might as well ask, ‘How often must I love my wife, my husband, my children?’ as to ask, ‘How often shall I forgive?’

¹ Addressing another person's continual and habitual sin is an issue that should be addressed; just not here.

The Forgiving Victim

Forgiving somebody, it must be stated, even over and over, does not necessitate allowing them to continue to sinfully take advantage of your amiable nature or convictions. The wife who continues to allow her battering husband to abuse her without turning him into the police is not serving God or her husband. John Calvin states,

For when God commands us to wish well to our enemies, He does not therefore demand that we approve in them what He condemns, but only desires that our minds shall be purified from all hatred.

It is not contained in the act of forgiveness to disregard God's justice in the life of another person. If a person were to murder your friend, it would not at all be inconsistent thinking to forgive that person, while at the same time turning them over to the authorities for judgment – even execution. Forgiveness and justice are not mutually exclusive, but work together. Our forgiveness should never undermine nor over-rule God's justice.

Jesus explains His answer with a parable – a parable that will help us understand why we find it difficult to forgive.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 And when he had begun to settle *them*, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents (Matthew 18:23, 24).

Settling Accounts

We learn here that the kingdom of God is not a kingdom where people's debts are ignored. The king (who is God) has slaves (*doulon*) and he is about settling accounts with them. We should never view our relationship with God as having been reconciled by His ignoring of our sins. The king does not ignore the debt but he settles the account (*sunarai* – can be understood as in the ASV "make a reckoning". All debts are due and payable).

The Un-Payable Debt

An Attic talent is equal to six thousand denarii. A denarii is one day's wages. Just to make the story clear to us. This slave owed his king ten thousand times six thousand days work. My math may be wrong on this but this slave owed his king 60,000,000 days work. If he were to work seven days a week and give 100% of his earnings to his king, he would have to live 164,383 years to get even. The point is, it was an un-payable debt. How critical is it for us to understand that we have nothing to contribute to such a debt.

And there is no bankruptcy or white-collar club-fed prison here. The man will pay forever – if one considers interest, his debt increases at a higher level than his payments – to follow the parable this man would owe more every day. Jesus adds to the intimacy of this with a reference to his wife and children – something that during the Roman Empire, when this was written, many of His listeners would have some level of experience. Owing this kind of debt would cost you everything. Jesus explains:

But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made (Matthew 18:25).

The Consequence of Debt

We see here the consequences of debt before God. At the apex of our lives we may view ourselves as strong and victorious. The idea of God settling accounts is a fearful thing.

For behold, the Lord will come with fire And with His chariots, like a whirlwind, To render His anger with fury, And His rebuke with flames of fire. ¹⁶ For by fire and by His sword The Lord will judge all flesh; And the slain of the Lord shall be many (Isaiah 66:15, 16).

According to Jesus, there will be a day of reckoning. And there is simply not a man who has the financial, moral or intellectual capital sufficient to settle his own account.

With what shall I come before the Lord, *And* bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings,

With calves a year old? ⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn *for* my transgression, The fruit of my body *for* the sin of my soul (Micah 6:6, 7)?

The implied answer to these rhetorical questions is that none of these offerings are sufficient. We, therefore, see the plea.

The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything' (Matthew 18:26).

The Foolish Plea

When it came to the face to face confrontation with the king, this slave became very religious. The King James Version says 'he worshipped him.' Then he offered to do something that he, in no conceivable manner, could have actually done...pay the debt.

This is man's concept of religion at its lowest. 'Let's go to church and see if we can pay off God.' Perhaps the later transgression of the servant is related to the foolish promise made here. The plea is foolish but the response is compassionate. God's answers are wiser and more gracious than our requests.

And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt (Matthew 18:27).

The Compassionate Response

As ludicrous and impossible the promise on the part of the slave, the Lord felt compassion and released him. As bad as religion might be and as fickle as our approach to God might get, we serve a compassionate God. Though we be ignorant of Him and even insult Him with our trifles, selfish requests and petty offerings, He looks beyond our short-comings and lavishes His grace and mercy upon us. We should never view this as license for continued sin or ignorance, but it is, at some level for all of us, the nature of the case.

The man asked for patience and time to repay. The wise and merciful master doesn't set up a payment plan, he cancels the debt. Such mercy, such grace should have transformed every grain of this servant's character. Imagine calling the bank to get an extension on your home loan only to find they have

cancelled your debt! That is nothing compared to this reprieve. The eternal slavery for him and his family – pardoned!

But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began* to choke *him*, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ ’ 29 “So his fellow slave fell down and *began* to entreat him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ 30 “He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed (Matthew 18:28-30).

Justice or Mercy?

Is our primary disposition toward our brothers ruled by justice or mercy? In the parable the comparison is obvious. The man’s fellow slave owed him (and he did owe him) much less than he had owed – it was a payable debt (probably three or four months of work). His vicious disposition is revealed by grabbing the man by the throat and demanding payment – something we did not see his master do to him. And when asked for the same leniency, instead of extending the clemency he had received he threw the man into prison.

I read this parable and at first thought, ‘What an ingrate!’ Marveling at how any man could be so clueless. But then I realized this parable has this strange “**you are the man²**” ring to it. How easily we forget the canceled debt. How quickly we cry for justice while we ourselves bask in mercy. How true the hymn which reminds us:

O to grace how great a debtor Daily I’m constrained to be!

We should not approach our offending brother with our hands around their throat. Our lack of willingness to forgive or our lack of ability to emotionally or psychologically forgive reveals our pathetic understanding of our sinfulness before a holy God who has graciously forgiven a debt we could never pay. This should be a somewhat horrifying epiphany to any of us who struggle in our forgiveness of others.

So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 “Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all

² From 2 Samuel 12:1-7 when Nathan had told the story of the rich man who had exceeding flocks who took and slaughtered the one ewe lamb owned by a poor man—David was incensed and said that the man should surely die. Nathan then revealed to David that he had been speaking of him and what he had done with Uriah and Bathsheba.

that debt because you entreated me. 33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you' (Matthew 18:31-33)?

All That Debt

There are only three words (in both Greek and English *pasan ten opheilen* in Greek), that we don't get, that we need to grasp, that keep us enslaved to a sinful and unforgiving disposition. The three words are **"all that debt."**

I mentioned earlier than those of us who might struggle with forgiveness are called to be bigger people than we've ever been. And by bigger I mean more insightful, understanding, trusting, humble and godly. One of the premiere components of godliness is an awareness of our sin...of **"all that debt!"**

The Psalmist asks the rhetorical question, **"If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand" (Psalm 130:3)?** The implied answer is no one could stand. The Psalmist continues in the next verse, **"But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared" (Psalm 130:4).** It can easily be said that our sins outnumber the sand. But that is not the only thing that outnumbers the sand. David writes,

How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! ¹⁸ If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand (Psalm 139:17, 18).

The two greatest aids in overcoming our pathetic efforts at forgiving others are to plumb the depths in understanding our own sinfulness and then seek to scale the heights of God's love, forgiveness and precious thoughts toward us. It is toward that end that we approach the Lord's Table.

Questions for Study

1. Take some time to review what it means to forgive (pages 2-4)?
2. Is it sometimes valuable for us to remember our sins? Why or why not (pages 4, 5)?
3. There are two aspects of forgiveness spoken of on page 6; what are they?
4. How often are we called to forgive others? Why so often (pages 6, 7)?
5. Compares the two debts Jesus speaks of in the parable of the unmerciful servant. How do they compare? Why are they so different (page 9)?
6. What are the consequences of our debt before God (pages 9, 10)?
7. How did the master reply to the foolish plea of the debtor (pages 10, 11)?
8. What three words must we master in order to battle an unforgiving heart (page 12)?