

"How Often Must I Forgive?"

One day Peter asked Jesus a question: "Lord, if a brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). Do you ever have a problem forgiving someone? How forgiving does Jesus expect us to be?

"How many times must I forgive?" Peter asked. "As many as seven times?" Jewish rabbis taught that one is obligated to forgive 3 times. One rabbi was very clear on this. He wrote: "He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than 3 times." Maybe Peter thought, "I know Jesus talked about going the extra mile - so I'll double the 3 times and add 1 for good measure!" What was Jesus' answer? Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." (Some translations have it 77 times). Peter, you haven't gone far enough! Forgive - not 7 times, but 70 times 7! Seventy times seven! That's how many? Well, does this mean you can keep a score card. You forgive 490 times. But the 491st time, you can let the person have it!

No. Peter is trying to get Jesus to put a limit on our capacity to forgive. I have to forgive, but only up to a certain point. But Jesus says, *you can't place a limit on how much you will forgive!*

Jesus goes on to tell a story, a parable. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him" (Matthew 18:23-24). One man owed this king *ten thousand talents*. That would be about \$10 million! That's ten million dollars back in that time! How's that for being in debt! We really can't comprehend the enormity of this debt! 10,000 talents! The entire revenue of a wealthy province like Galilee for the whole year was only 300 talents! A "talent" was worth more than 15 years wages for the common worker in that society. A person would have to work 45-50 years just to earn 3 talents! He owed \$10,000! It would take 10,000 people working 15 years to pay off this man's debt!

Back then, there was no such thing as filing for bankruptcy, so the king ordered the man, his wife and children, to be sold into slavery. Hearing that the man pleaded - on his knees (a pathetic sight) - "Lord, have patience with me, and I'll pay you everything I owe." Right!! He was going to pay all of this back? Look at what happens: "And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt" (verse 27). The king's heart was touched. He took pity, and in one sweep of incredible mercy, the king forgives this man the *entire amount of money he owed!* The whole debt is erased!

What a touching, inspiring story of human generosity! But the story doesn't end there. "But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe'" (verse 28). Walking out of the king's court - totally free and forgiven - he runs into someone who owes him "a hundred denarii". How much is that? Twenty bucks. He grabs the other guy by the throat and demands, "Pay up". The other man, just about ready to be choked to death, pleads for mercy. And what happens? "Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt" (verses 29-30). He throws this poor guy in jail until he is able to pay back the money, the 20 bucks.

But, there were people who witnessed what took place. "When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place" (verse 31). They went right to the king. And the king took action. "Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt" (verses 32-34). Then Jesus gives the punch line to this parable: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (verse 35).

*I think we get the point, don't we? **This is a parable of the kingdom of God. A story Jesus made up to show us what God is like, and how God rules.** How does God, the King, treat us? With incredible mercy and forgiveness!*

This God-King created a good world, where people live in harmony with God, and one another, and all would share in the goodness of life. But we humans messed it up. Instead of putting God at the center of life we put self and our own will at the center. The Bible calls it "sin". The result is we have alienated ourselves from God, from one another, and even from the natural world God created. The debt we owe God for our rebellion is staggering!

But this God-King did an incredible thing. He sent His Son Jesus into the world. And out of incredible mercy and love for us all, He allowed His Son to die for us, execution style on a cross, so the debt we owe God for our sins can be paid off. The entire debt is erased! We are forgiven! That's how God treats us! Now if God the King, out of sheer mercy, forgives our \$10 million mountain of debt, how can we not forgive one who owes us a mere \$20?

Colossians 3:13 says, "forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." And Ephesians 4:32 tell us: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." *Remember, the basis of our forgiving others is not whether or not they say they are sorry. Not whether or not I think they deserve forgiveness. But rather I forgive because I've been forgiven so much in Christ.*

How hard is it for you to forgive? If you find it hard, you are not alone. It's sometimes hard *for me* to forgive. I'll bet there are some of us here holding onto anger and resentment towards someone: maybe a family member, somebody in church, a person at work, a neighbor, etc. Think of how our inability to forgive ruins relationships, creates discord in families, churches, government, schools, work places, and communities.

Not only that, *resentments that we hold onto can destroy us too!* We may think if we hold onto a grudge that we're showing that person thing or two, that we've got the upper hand. But our reluctance to forgive gives that person power over us, and also robs us of a healthy spirit and inward wholeness.

Besides, unless we are willing to forgive others, God will not forgive us! Jesus said, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not

forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-5). These words follow the Lord's Prayer, where we are taught to pray, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". This is the only part of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus elaborated upon.

How can we forgive? I want to talk about some steps we can take towards forgiving people, things I've found helpful as I work at forgiving others too.

Step 1: Acknowledge our anger and resentment. We have to first recognize the hurt or injustice committed against us, and the *feelings* that go with it - feelings like anger, resentment, rage. Some of us have no problem being in touch with our anger and expressing it. In fact, we may be too quick-tempered. But others of us may have a hard time owning feelings of anger and resentment. Maybe we grew up in a home where, as a child, we were not permitted to be angry. It was ok for mom or dad to be angry, but not us kids. Also, it's often hard for Christians to own up to feelings of anger, since some have the mistaken idea that "good Christians" should never get angry. So, somebody hurts or offends us, and our response is: "Oh, that's ok. No problem" - but underneath this facade of pleasantness we may be churning with hostility towards the person.

Here's something important to remember: we can't forgive and let go of resentment until we first hold it and own it. Jesus got angry at times! Anger can serve a useful purpose. It can motivate us to appropriate action. It is a normal, healthy emotion God gave us.

I believe some of us forgive too much, too soon. That's right, that's what I said! For instance, one of the worst things in the world we can do if we're in a family with a drug or alcohol abuser, or a credit card abuser, or we're in a church where someone is mean and controlling, is to hastily and readily forgive that person - leave them off the hook. This casual overlooking of *serious or destructive behavior* can actually increase abuse, and teach people to avoid taking responsibility for their actions.

Now if the offense against us is mild - a good friend forgets to call us, or says something that kind of hurts a little, it shouldn't take 10 years of therapy to get over it! But if a drunk driver kills family member...or we have been physically or emotionally or sexually abused as a child ...that's a horse of a different color. Often it takes months, or even years, to work through the resentment and rage deep inside us. I once preached a sermon on forgiveness, and after the worship service a lady I didn't know came out of that service, and told me (as I recall) that her step-father had murdered her husband. She said to me, "You're saying I have to forgive this man?" My heart went out to this woman. Yes, Jesus says we have to forgive - but when the offense is great and the hurt is deep, it will probably take a long, long time to work through the anger and the pain someone has caused us.

Step #1: Acknowledge whatever feelings we have as a result of being hurt.

The second step in being able to forgive is this: Express what you feel. If we back up a few verses from this parable in Matthew, we have these words of Jesus: "If your brother or sister

sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you" (Matthew 18:15).

Note: Jesus says we are to speak to the person who has offended us! Sometimes we let fly with our anger, but not against the person we're mad at! Who do we take it out on? Maybe our husband or wife, or the kids, or our parents, or the dog or cat, or perhaps the wall or a door! Or we turn our resentment inward, and internalize our anger, then as a result get depressed, or just kind of function with this low-grade hostility churning inside us.

So, express what we're feeling to the person who has offended us. Some of us need to learn to do this: to be able to say to the offender, "You know, I resent...", or "Do you realize what you did hurt me...". To be honest, this is something I've had to work through. In my earlier years if someone hurt or offended me in some way, I'd act like it was no big deal, I wasn't mad at them - but inside I'd be steaming and stewing over what had happened. So, over the years I've had to learn how to be more open and honest with my feelings and to express them to the individual. If you're like that, and perhaps you get too emotional or tongue-tied, you might express what you feel through a letter or email. Even if the person we hold the resentment against is dead and gone, we can still write a letter, or visit the grave, and say what we need to say in expressing our anger.

Step 2 then is this: Express what we're feeling to the person who has wronged us.

Step 3: Realize we must eventually forgive. Jesus said we have to, if we want God to forgive us. Forgiveness is the way of the kingdom of God. Remember: *forgiveness is a process*. But at some point, we have to let go and forgive!

Step 4: Give our resentments over to God. Holding onto resentment may be ok, *for while*. Remember, forgiveness is a process. But the final step is to give our anger and resentment over to God. Don't fight it. Don't focus on your bitterness. Rather relinquish it to the Lord. *If Jesus commanded us to forgive, then He will give us the power to do so!*

You may ask: What if I have forgiven someone, but then the old resentments come back? This is normal. It often does. So, check back over the steps. Have I acknowledged my *feelings*? Have I gone to the person who's hurt me? If not, go back to these steps. If you have done these things, just simply admit you're feeling resentment again, and submit it again to God. Then just try to go on with things and don't dwell on it.

Sometimes people ask: If I forgive, must I forget? I've heard people say, "Well, I'll forgive, but I can never forget!" Realistically, we may never forget some things. e.g. If someone swindles us out of a sizeable sum of money...or our husband or wife cheats on us or divorces us...or a parent or step-parent was cruel to us when we were a young child...it's hard (maybe impossible) to block that totally out of our memory. Here's a suggestion: Don't worry about forgetting. Because the more I focus on forgetting, the more I will remember! Try not to dwell on it. If the memory comes back, simply acknowledge it and the pain associated with it, and then try to turn your thoughts to other things.

There were two men, once good friends, but they had argued over some things that built up ugly feelings and ruined their friendship. One of them, Joe, found out he was dying. He began to be bothered by some of the hostile feelings he felt towards his old friend. So he thought he would try to patch things up. He sent word to the other guy, Mack, to come to his bedside. They talked a while. Joe said he didn't want to die with a lot of bad feelings between them. So he reached for Mack's hand and said, "I forgive you for everything. Will you forgive me?" Mack said he'd forgive too. Well, it was a great moment between the two. They talked a while longer, but as Mack went to leave and got to the doorway, Joe shouted from his bed in a rather gruff voice: "But remember, if I get better, this doesn't count!"

Unlike what took place between Mack and Joe, Jesus talked about a kingdom where people forgive without calculating and placing limits on it. Why? Because that's the way the King has treated us.

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