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God questions 6: How can I forgive myself and others Matthew 18 21-35

Portions adapted from: "Extending Grace" by Steve Shepherd SermonCentral.com

"I DON'T GET MAD. I GET EVEN." Who knows who first said this, but a lot of people have sure adopted it as their life philosophy.

For 18 years up until the year 2000, Kevin Tunell had been required to mail a dollar a week to a family he'd rather forget. Why was that?

One Friday in January, 1982, 17 year-old Kevin, driving drunk, killed Susan Herzog, this family's 18 year-old daughter.

Tunell was convicted of manslaughter and drunken driving. Along with criminal penalties, including a year of community service, The HERzogs sued him in civil court for \$1.5 million dollars but settled for \$936 to be paid weekly one dollar at a time. Tunell was to write the check out to Susan, mail it to her family each Friday and it was to be deposited in a scholarship fund for the next 18 years - so Tunell would never forget what happened.

Tunnell has never forgotten. But this punishment has been much harder than he first thought it would be. In 1990 the Herzogs again took him to court, for the fourth-time, for failing to send checks regularly over the past year. A tearful Tunell told Fairfax County Circuit Judge Jack Stevens that the agonizing guilt he felt each time he filled in Susan's name had become too much to bear. "You get to a point where you kind of snap—and you say, it hurts too much," "

Kevin once offered to give the family two boxes of pre-filled in checks – BUT THEY REFUSED THE CHECKS. It's not the money they were after, but penance, they said.

PROBABLY MORE LIKE VENGEANCE THAN PENANCE.

The Herzogs insisted that they were not being vindictive. Apparently, they believed that only through his weekly accountability could Tunell alleviate his guilt. "*We want to receive that check every week on time... We'll go back to court every month if we have to. ... Each time we don't get that check, we think, "He's forgotten Susan."*

The evidence, however, seems to point to the contrary. From the outset Tunell performed his community service duties faithfully. With the help of a local film producer, he made two videos on the dangers of drunk driving. And for years after his required term of speaking to schools and civic groups was finished, he continued donating his time to anyone who wanted him. In the mid-'80s, for instance, he traveled twice to the town of Sylvania, Ohio, to talk to students at area high schools. "They sat there on the gym floor, listening to Kevin's story," says Sgt. Wayne Seely of the Sylvania police force, who had heard of Tunell and sponsored the visits. "It was really overwhelming."

[Kevin Tunnell's story has been featured in People Magazine, April 16, 1990 Vol. 33 No. 15
<http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20117385,00.html> his anti-drunk driving videos are viewable on the internet]

Most of us can understand the Herzog's anger.

BUT IS 936 PAYMENTS ENOUGH?

Will that family ever be able to put the matter to rest?

In some ways, no. We realize this.

But have they ever tried to forgive?

How much restitution will be enough?

If you were that family,

HOW MANY PAYMENTS WOULD YOU REQUIRE?

Or better yet, HOW MANY PAYMENTS DO YOU NOW REQUIRE OF SOMEONE?

What about the person who has offended you?

What are you requiring of him or her?

How many payments?

No one makes it through life without being hurt or injured in some form.

No one.

Just like the Herzogs, you've been a victim.

That 18 year-old girl died because someone drank too much. And perhaps a part of you has died because someone spoke too much, or demanded too much, or neglected too much.

EVERYONE GETS WOUNDED IN LIFE. No one is immune. And when we get hurt or wounded, we must decide: HOW MANY PAYMENTS WILL I DEMAND FROM MY OFFENDER?

We may not require that our offender write checks to us, but we have other ways of settling the score.

SILENCE is one way. We just ignore them when they speak to us.

DISTANCE is another way to settle the score. When they come your way, you walk the other way.

Or just quietly stewing – in your own mind boiling them in the oil of your hot anger.

It's amazing how creative people can be at getting even. "As long as I suffer, you will suffer. As long as I hurt, you will hurt. You cut me, and I'll make you bleed, even if I have to reopen the wound myself."

ANGER IS A BAD ADDICTION. It may start innocently enough with small doses, but we soon come back for more and more. And we generally up the dosage.

We not only despise what he did, but who he is. And we even begin to hate anyone like him. You know, like ...

"All men are jerks."

"Every TV preacher is a huckster."

"You can't trust a woman."

"All politicians are crooks."

HURT BECOMES HATE. And hate grows.

Seeking vengeance.

How will the score be settled? How many payments can I reasonably demand from my offender?

Peter had a similar question for Jesus in our text in Matthew 18.

V. 21 *"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

Peter is willing to be forgiving but doesn't want to be too generous with his forgiveness. The Jewish law required that the wounded person forgive three times.

Peter is willing to double the number and throw in one more for good measure. HE PROBABLY THINKS JESUS WILL BE IMPRESSED. But he isn't.

V. 22 Jesus replies, *"I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times."*

Now If you're thinking 77 times is really good, you're wrong. Jesus is not saying that we are to keep tabs on how many times we forgive others. If we're keeping score on our graciousness, our forgiveness, then we're not being gracious! **Jesus is saying that there should never be a point when our grace is exhausted or extinguished!**

When Jesus said 77 times, he was giving the number of perfection. He was saying that our forgiveness should be complete and without limits – just like God's.

I Cor. 13:5 says that love *"keeps no record of wrongs."* Nor does it keep a record of how many times we forgive. God's grace has never been exhausted and neither should ours be. Even as they were nailing him to the cross Jesus was praying out loud to for his tormentor's *Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*

Complete and without limits. This is the level at which God forgive (thank God!) And this is the level at which God expects us to forgive. And this is what Jesus meant when he said to forgive 77 times.

So how can we learn to forgive others in the same way that Jesus forgave us: completely & without limit?

Well to help Peter come to grips with this command, Jesus tells him a parable. Notice that unlike most of Jesus' other parables – this is one he tells directly to his followers. And this is also one in which he clearly explains the application. Jesus wanted Peter and us to understand and apply this parable's lesson to ourselves.

You know the story of the unforgiving servant fairly well

Its bill paying time, and a servant is brought before the king owing him "ten-thousand talents [of silver] " (\$10 million dollars.).

There is no way that the servant can pay off this debt, so the king passes judgment: the servant, his wife, his children, and all his property would be sold into slavery to recoup at least a portion of the debt. It was the king's legal right to do so. It was just good and standard business practice.

But upon hearing the judgment against him, the servant falls to his knees and pleads for mercy, claiming that he would find some way to pay off this debt.

There is no way this debt can be paid off, this the king knows.

Even if the servant could pay him \$1,000 a day (365,000 annually) he would still take over 27 years to pay off the debt ... and then only if it was an interest free loan

Realizing that this was a debt that could never be repaid by the servant, the King decides to forgive him completely:

- no slavery for the servant, or his wife, or his children,
- none of his property forfeited,
- not even a token, or a percentage, pay back.
- Instead the servant walks out of the king's presence completely forgiven. The king having willingly taken all the loss, the forgiven servant in effect being made \$10,000,000 richer!

Does this servant know what just happened to him?
Does he realize how extravagantly he has been forgiven?
And does he himself, now have a forgiving heart? Apparently not.

Literally while walking down the front steps of the king's palace, this newly forgiven servant bumps into one of his own personal debtors, who owes him 100 denarii (around \$10,000 – less than a loan on an old used car, less than one tenth of 1% of what he had just been forgiven).

Gasping for breath because he is now being choked by the unforgiving servant, debtor number 2 gives the same plea for mercy, the same request for a second chance and the same promise to repay.

But forgiveness is not forthcoming.

The newly forgiven servant is himself unwilling to forgive.

He has his small-time debtor tossed in jail until he could somehow come up with the money. One assumes that will be for a really long time.

Now here is the punch line. When the king hears about this lack of forgiveness on the front steps of his palace by one whom, moments before, had just been forgiven so much. The king goes into rage.

Calling the servant back in, The king withdraws his forgiveness, And has this unforgiving servant not sold into slavery, but now delivered to the torturers until his own debt was paid in full – in other words, for the rest of his life (*thankfully, according to the story, the wife and children do not suffer the same withdrawal of forgiveness -- they at least continue to live free*).

Jesus makes the moral and application of this story quite clear: *So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'*

Jesus meant for us, like Peter, to clearly understand and personally apply this lesson.

The King is God, we are the servants having been forgiven the unpayable debt, so in comparison and in remembrance or our own forgiveness, we had better learn to forgive other's debts: fully, completely. Just as we weekly pray: *forgive us our debts in the same manner that have forgiven our debtors.*

And our refusal to learn this lesson will produce the the same result: we will be handed over to the torturers until we learn to forgive as we have been forgiven – fully, completely, and without limit.

For our unwillingness to forgive -- will indeed be our own torture.

The man in our story had a great debt. You do too.

And of course, the point of the story is not about money, it's about sin, it's about offense, it's about the hurt that we have given God! Because *We have all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*"

Once as the evangelist, Billy Sunday, (Presbyterian Elder) was preparing for a revival meeting in a large city. He wrote a letter to the mayor asking him for names of people who had spiritual problems and needed help. Billy Sunday was somewhat surprised when he received back from the Mayor the city's telephone directory!

All of us have a serious spiritual problem and it's called sin. All of us have a deep indebtedness because of our sin! All of us are in a deep, dark hole because of our sin! OUR DEBT TO GOD IS FAR GREATER THAN WE CAN PAY!

"Our pockets are empty while our debt is millions. We don't need a salary; we need a gift! We don't need swimming lessons; we need a lifeboat! We don't need a place to work; we need someone to work in our place! AND THAT SOMEONE IS JESUS CHRIST!"

This is what our Bible teaches us:

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds (his death) you have healed (or forgiven)." I Peter 2:24

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." II Corinthians 5:21

Jesus traded places with us! He became sin and we became righteous! He paid our unpayable debt in full.
God forgave us completely, we walk out debt free.

Do we realize what has happened to us?

Do we realize how extravagantly we have been forgiven?

And have we, as a result, grown a forgiving heart?

Have we?

Think of the consequence of not learning this lesson:

We also are still standing on the steps of the king's palace. And when someone "sins" against us, All we have to do is look back up the steps. Reflect upon how much we have been forgiven by our heavenly father. Then the other's debt to us will become miniscule in comparison.

We have been shown abundant grace,
can we now learn to extend it to others!

If we don't – it's off to the torturers for us. Because the world's worst prison is the prison of our own unforgiving heart. When we do not forgive others we lock ourselves in a prison of hatred, misery and sorrow.

How can a person who has been forgiven so much, not forgive others?

How can a person who is shown such great mercy not show it to others?

How can a person who is received such kindness not give it to others?

Jesus said, "He who has been forgiven little, loves little." (Luke 7:47). If we believe that we have only been forgiven a little, we will only forgive a little!

So how do we apply Jesus' lesson on forgiveness to our life. **Let's do some imagining.**

Put yourself in the shoes of that forgiven servant.

- Right now you are standing on the steps of the King's palace.
- Just now, you have walked out of God's presence a free person - having been completely freed from your unpayable debt.
- Think about the immensity of the debt you owed God -- the debt that through the death of Jesus has been completely paid, completely forgiven you.
- Five minutes ago you were on the verge of being sold into slavery for the rest of your life -- now you are completely free.
- And just now walking up those same steps, walking right up to you comes:
_____ (say their name in your mind).
- Yes, they owe you a debt, but nothing in comparison to what you have just been forgiven. And whether or not they are asking, they still need your forgiveness for a thoughtless word, a hurt feeling, a financial disagreement.

What are you going to do? Grab them by the throat?

Keep them locked in jail of your anger until they have paid for all the hurt you have suffered?

I suggest you stop and look back up those stairs, right into the king's palace and remember where you just came from.

Also look on the hillside beside the palace, where stands a cross – with Jesus still hanging on it, praying for you ... Father forgive! And think about how much you have just been forgiven.

Now once again, look back up those stairs and notice that God is watching you.

What are you going to do?

The choice is yours.
Either you forgive – as you have been forgiven
Or get yourself thrown to the torturers.

This is the simple lesson of learning how to forgive.
And this is perhaps the hardest lesson for us to learn.

Whoever has been forgiven little loves little.
Whoever has been forgiven much loves much.

How much have you needed to be forgiven?
In light of that, how much are you willing to forgive?

The lesson is simple.
The application life changing.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

And that also goes for forgiveness.

Remember Peter – trying to tally up an appropriate level of forgiveness? He must have paid attention to Jesus' story, because later in life he wrote:

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4.8).

How about you,
How much do you love?
How much are you willing to forgive?

Just remember how much you have been forgiven ...
And respond appropriately, completely, fully.

Amen

Study Guide: How Do I forgive others? Matthew 18:21-18:35

Adapted from: How Do I Forgive Him? How Do I Forgive Her? by Jim Butcher SermonCentral.com

Last Sunday we spoke of why to forgive. Quickly on the heels of that question, though, comes the equally difficult question of how you forgive.

We begin this morning with the knowledge that Jesus has commanded us to forgive.

We add to that our general belief that forgiveness is a good thing.

But, then, when we get into the actual situation where our heart has been stomped on and our emotions have been ripped to shreds, we need a little extra encouragement. It helps us in that moment not simply to know that we are supposed to forgive, but why forgiveness is the course that we want to take.

When we are in those hard situations where forgiveness is so unnatural, How Do I Forgive Him? How Do I Forgive Her?

1. Acknowledge that you have been seriously hurt.

- The starting point for being pursuing forgiveness is to admit that you've really been hurt. We like to pretend like what he said didn't really bother us or what she did didn't even phase us, but until we are willing to admit that we were hurt by them, we're not in a place where we can begin to pursue forgiveness.

- There are many incidents in life that are not candidates for forgiveness - things like minor disappointments or passing slights. Situations that require forgiveness are ones where the pain inflicted is personal, unfair, and deep. Things like betrayal and brutality (physical or emotional) come to mind.

- At this point, as we hurt, we are likely to find some hatred in our heart. Hatred, of course, is never a good thing, but we must be careful that we don't try to get rid of it by covering it up. When we find that hate in our heart, that's simply a sign we're going to need to forgive.

2. Surrender your right to get even.

The mother ran into the bedroom when she heard her seven-year-old son scream. She found his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. She gently released the little girl's grip and said comfortingly to the boy, "There, there. She didn't mean it. She doesn't know that hurts." He nodded his acknowledgement, and she left the room. As she started down the hall the little girl screamed. Rushing back in, she asked, "What happened?" The little boy replied, "She knows now." [source: www.preachingtoday.com]

- Few would dispute our right to get even. The rule of the world is 'do unto others as they've done unto you.'

- When we choose to forgive, though, we choose to lay aside our right to extract our revenge. In the moment of making that decision, we are doing a couple of things:

1. We are leaving ultimate justice and vengeance to God, and
2. We are deliberately choosing for ourselves the path of forgiveness.

This is the first step down a different path. Acknowledging that we have been hurt gets in the right place to begin, but surrendering our right to get even is the first step down the path.

- Some would argue that choosing such a path is inevitably going to make us a patsy - we're yielding all our power and are going to end up as a doormat. I believe, though, that there is a power that is unleashed in this decision that cannot come from any other source. What does this power look like? Consider the following story:

- Albert Tomei is a justice of the New York State Supreme Court. A young defendant was convicted in Judge Tomei's court of gunning down another person execution style. The murderer had a bad record, was no stranger to the system, and only stared in anger as the jury returned its guilty verdict.

The victim's family had attended every day of the two-week trial. On the day of sentencing, the victim's mother and grandmother addressed the court. When they spoke, neither addressed the jury. Both spoke directly to the murderer. They both forgave him.

"You broke the Golden Rule—loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind. You broke the law—loving your neighbor as yourself. I am your neighbor," the older of the two women told him, "so you have my address. If you want to write, I'll write you back. I sat in this trial for two weeks, and for the last sixteen months I tried to hate you. But you know what? I could not hate you. I feel sorry for you because you made a wrong choice."

*Judge Tomei writes: "For the first time since the trial began, the defendant's eyes lost their laser force and appeared to surrender to a life force that only a mother can generate: nurturing, unconditional love. After the grandmother finished, I looked at the defendant. His head was hanging low. There was no more swagger, no more stare. The destructive and evil forces within him collapsed helplessly before this remarkable display of humaneness."
[source: www.preachingtoday.com]*

In choosing the path of forgiveness, that grandmother unleashed a power that could not be tapped in any other way. And that power was what caused the defendant to hang his head for the first time.

3. Search for the real person beneath the evil mask.

- When we have been wronged, we like to caricature our wrongdoer. We emphasize all the bad things about them, we twist anything that looks remotely good, we are quick to impugn their every motive, we see them only and always in one way.

- The process of forgiveness requires that we begin to look for the real person behind the caricature we've created in our minds. We begin to see that they have not only hurt, they have been hurt. We begin to see that they are weak, needy, and fallible. We begin to find reasons for our hearts to turn toward mercy instead of malice.

- This doesn't mean we grant them victim status and excuse all their wrong - we're forgiving, not excusing. It does mean that we begin to try to treat them as another participant in this messy thing called life.

- **What is our motivation for doing this? As our passage points out, we are doing for them what God did for us.** God could have simply seen our sin and said, "I've seen enough, that's all I need to know about them." But God looked beyond our sin and saw something worth loving. And that's what we've been called to do as well.

4. Desire that good things would happen to your wrongdoer.

- I know that sounds impossible when you first hear it, but stay with me for a minute.

- In the process of forgiveness, we move from dreaming of bad things befalling them toward hoping for good things in their life.

- At this point, it might be helpful to address a related question: does forgiving mean there's no punishment?

The answer to that is, No, forgiving does not necessarily mean there should not be punishment.

If they are unrepentant, punishment that leads to sorrow may be the loving thing to want for them because it will bring them toward where they need to be. The key in this is your motive. Whereas before you prayed for them to be punished because of your anger and hatred toward them, when you're pursuing forgiveness you might pray for them to be punished because you want to see their heart changed and that is the most likely route for that to happen. Your motive has changed from wanting something bad to happen to praying for something good to happen.

- What are some examples of this?

a. A thief breaks into my house and steals most of my stuff. He is caught and put on trial, but is completely lacking remorse. If I go to the court and plead for his release, he will immediately return to stealing. In that situation, the good things I want for his life are a change of heart and a change of lifestyle. Because this is most likely to happen with punishment, forgiveness does not keep me from supporting punishment, although I might well want to write or visit him while he's in there to try to share the love of God with him.

b. My spouse says some things in an argument that hurt me. Forgiving her and wanting good things for her life doesn't mean I pray, "God, I hope you'll bless her by giving her the ability to win all the arguments we have from now on." Rather, wanting good things might mean praying that God would open her heart (and mine) to where each of us could be a better spouse.

c. When Chris Carrier was ten, he was abducted, stabbed, shot through the head, and left for dead. Surprisingly, he survived, but the emotional and physical scars were very difficult to heal. Eventually, though, his commitment to Christ helped him to move on with his life. The perpetrator was never found.

Over twenty years later, on September 3, 1996, Chris received a phone call from a detective in the Coral Gables, FL police department. The detective said that an elderly man in a local nursing home had confessed to being his abductor. The man's name was David McCallister.

Chris visited David the following day. Here are his words: "It was an awkward moment, walking into his room, but as soon as I saw him I was overwhelmed with compassion. The

man I found was not an intimidating kidnapper, but a frail seventy-seven-year-old who had been blind for the last half-dozen years. David's body was ruined by alcoholism and smoking - he weighed little more than sixty pounds. He had no family, or if he did, they wanted nothing to do with him, and no friends. A friend who had accompanied me wisely asked him a few simple questions that led to him admitting that he had abducted me. He then asked, 'Did you ever wish you could tell that young boy that you were sorry for what you did?' David answered emphatically, 'I wish I could.' That was when I introduced myself to him.

Unable to see, David clasped my hand and told me he was sorry for what he had done to me. As he did, I looked down at him, and it came over me like a wave: Why should anyone have to face death without family, friends, the joy of life - without hope? I couldn't do anything but offer him my forgiveness and friendship." In the days that followed, Chris was able to share the love of Christ with David. [Source: J. Arnold, 'Why Forgive?']

- What is our motivation for doing such a difficult thing? Again, as our text points out, we are doing for them what God did for us.

5. If possible, enjoy the healed relationship.

Sometimes the other person can't join you in moving toward reconciliation: for example, in forgiving a parent now passed on. And sometimes the other person won't join you

- Perhaps they won't acknowledge that they've hurt you.
- Or they have no intention of forgiving you!

For reconciliation to happen, both people must understand the pain that they've caused each other and must be sorrowful over it. And when this happens, make sure you enjoy the healing and the renewed relationship that can only come through forgiveness.

But even without reconciliation, the other's unwillingness to reconcile only entraps them, your forgiveness still frees you to live life more fully.

Forgive – in the same manner that God has forgiven you.

**"He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic , rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him In !**

From the poem " Outwitted"
Edwin Markham (23 April 1852 – 7 March 1940)