

## **Are you forgiving? Forgiven?** Matthew 6:7-15 18:21-35

Portions adapted from "Forgiveness And Relationships" by Rodney Buchanan @ SermonCentral.com

Old Joe was dying. For years he'd been at odds with Bill, formerly one of his best friends. Wanting to straighten things out, he sent word for Bill to come and see him.

When Bill arrived, Joe told him that he was afraid to go into eternity with such bad feelings between them. Then, very reluctantly and with great effort, Joe apologized for things he had said and done. He also assured Bill that he forgave him for his offenses. Everything seemed fine until Bill turned to go. As he walked out of the room, Joe called out after him, "Now, just remember, if I get better, this doesn't count."

Why is it so hard for us to forgive one another? It is one of the mysteries of Christendom that believers are so unwilling to forgive others when the Jesus we claim to follow said it was central to the life of a believer.



In today's scripture, Jesus again points to **the importance of forgiveness in this business of loving each other**. When you think about it, **Forgiveness is probably one of the only two or three major ways we can actually show our love to others: by giving and forgiving!**

It is interesting that Peter was the disciple who brought this question on the limits of forgiveness to Jesus in the first place, because as we track his apostolic history it would be either Peter's compromises or Paul's hot temper who would be most in the need of forgiveness through the years. That's why I take great comfort from the fact that late in life it is a much wiser Peter who advises us ...

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.  
1 Peter 4:8

because if bumbling Peter can finally figure out that **only with the support of genuine love can anyone of us extend forgiveness to another**; well there's still hope for the rest of us old dogs to learn this trick.

In this section of Matthew, Jesus has been specifically teaching his disciples about kingdom living, covering topics such as practicing humility, not being a stumbling block, imitating God's urgent concern for the lost (99 sheep), and discipline within the church family.

It was probably Jesus' comments on discipline that gets Peter thinking about the proper limits to forgiveness. So he asks, "*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when*

*he sins against me? Up to seven times?"* This is actually rather generous of Peter, he is beginning to catch on to Jesus' standards of loving. Because Jewish rabbis taught that you were required to extend forgiveness three times, but after that there should be no more forgiveness; for them, even forgiveness was a law-bound practice. So Peter was probably shocked when Jesus said, *"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."* And if the truth were told, we are also unbelieving that Jesus would demand this kind of forgiveness from us. We often withhold forgiveness after just one offence, let alone seventy-seven times.

But then Jesus follows up his command with this parable, told not to the masses but to his disciples, about the way things work in *"the Kingdom of God."* In other words this is how much God forgives and how much He values our acts of forgiveness.

The parable tells of a king who is settling accounts with his servants – and we all know that this king represents God the King because this is a Kingdom of God parable and His settling of account hints of a judgment day. There is brought before him a man owing the modern equivalent of \$3.84 BILLION dollars; in other words an un-payable debt. So the king orders both him, his wife, and his children be sold into slavery, and all his property liquidated to somewhat defray his losses. Because of his debts, this man has now lost his life.

In desperation this man falls to his knees asking not for forgiveness but patience promising that somehow he would pay off the debt. Of course the king knows and we know that he can never pay off this debt, so instead of patience, the King gives this debtor mercy; he personally takes the loss and completely FORGIVES THE DEBT IN ITS ENTIRETY. Notice there is nothing this debtor had done to deserve the king's mercy, simply because he asked – the King extends complete forgiveness; handing back his entire life, family, and all his property as a gift. He walks out of the king's presence literally re-born. A free man; more free now than he had ever been in his earlier life.

Which is exactly the same level forgiveness God has also extended to each one of us. We owed an un-payable debt (*the wages of sin is death*) and we were destined to ultimate eternal enslavement when with the simple act of asking for mercy, we also received complete forgiveness. God himself, out of his love for us, personally takes the loss, paying the debt with his own life; forgiving our sins, releasing us from our guilt and the bondage of our sin. And we walk out from the presence of the king re-born, having been declared righteous, and given a brand new life along with the added power of God's indwelling Holy Spirit to live our new life in a new way.

**So never forget that the forgiven debtor in this parable is each one of us. And our reflection upon God's amazing act of grace and generosity towards us, should fill us with amazed gratitude and a similar attitude of magnanimous forgiveness toward others. Having been forgiven everything, we should be forgiving everything!**

But in a surprising twist of the story, obviously this newly freed man is not reflecting on the amazing act of grace and complete forgiveness that he had just received. Instead, thinking

he has just pulled off the biggest swindle in history, patting himself on the back for outsmarting another creditor, he meets a person who owes him around \$640 dollars, and decides to settle accounts with his own debtors – its judgment day once again!

Forgetting the forgiveness that had just been extended to him, he grabs the guy by the throat and demands the debt be repaid immediately. Now, as he had just done previously, this debtor falls to his knees asking not for forgiveness but for patience; \$640 is a debt that could be paid off. But the freed man demonstrating that he knows nothing of forgiveness or love, has his own debtor thrown into prison until he could pay off the debt, which now becomes impossible since you can't work off a debt in prison. He who has just been forgiven an un-payable debt, thinks nothing of forever enslaving another over a – by comparison – extremely petty debt.

Having heard of this forgiven debtor's unwillingness to forgive even the smallest debt, the king calls him back into court, retracts his own forgiveness and turns him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. Jesus then ends the parable with this frightening conclusion

So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Matthew 18:35

Now remember, Jesus is talking to his disciples and to us – we who have already asked for and received the same level of forgiveness from God the king. **So the unspoken question Jesus is asking is, do we really understand, have we even thought about how much love and forgiveness has been extended to us? And in realizing how much we have been forgiven should this not cause us to be more forgiving of others, petty by comparison, debts to us?**

And then not long after the telling of this parable, Jesus demonstrates the level of his own love and forgiveness for us, by taking upon himself our un-payable debt at the cross. And even for the soldiers driving the spikes into his hands and feet he prays, *Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*

**Forgiveness is love in action.**  
**Without love there is no forgiveness.**  
**Without forgiveness there is no love!**

Our own love and forgiveness of others is our demonstration of how much we realize that we are loved and have been forgiven. As always, the apostle John was very straightforward in this teaching.

We know love by this, that **he laid down his life** for us thus **we ought to lay down our lives** for one another.

1 John 3.16:

So, here are three profound lessons that we need to learn from this Parable that Jesus pointed directly at we who call ourselves "Christian."

- A loving person is a forgiving person.
  - A loving person is also a kind person
  - And a loving person is one who speaks and shows their love
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**A loving person is a forgiving person.** This should be obvious, but for many people this is exactly where they get stuck. Remember that Jesus said:

I say to you, Love your enemies,  
do good to those who hate you"  
Luke 6:27

The problem is that in the Christian community we have not even learned how to love our friends, let alone our enemies. We allow petty issues and differences to divide us. How do we ever hope to live up to the command of Christ to love our enemies if we cannot even love those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ? Jesus said...

"Whenever you stand praying, forgive,  
if you have anything against anyone;  
so that your Father in heaven may  
also forgive you your trespasses."  
Mark 11:25

All of us have been wronged by other people. All of us have been sinned against. But you cannot pray the **Lord's prayer** unless you are willing to forgive those who sinned against you.

Do not pray, *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*, if you remain unforgiving of others. If you gloss over that part of the Lord's prayer, or if you are willing to forgive most people, just not everyone, then it is better not to pray the prayer at all; because, according to Jesus, you are just bringing judgment down upon yourself..

Jesus was not just giving us a nice teaching, or some religious poem to thoughtlessly recite. He intends for forgiveness to be a reality in our lives. That is why when he concluded his teaching on prayer, he pointedly refers back to the fact that God, in some way, would base His forgiveness on how we have forgiven others.

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 6:14-15

But what if the person knew exactly what they were doing? What then? What if the harm done to us was intentional and purposeful? Our Bible also addresses this:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves,  
but leave room for the wrath of God;  
for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine,  
I will repay, says the Lord.'  
Romans 12:19

The lesson is clear, we have been freed by God to be in the forgiving business not the avenging business. Leave vengeance in God's hands.

- We are not to try getting back at them,
- or treating them in unloving ways.
- Neither do we say, "God is going to get them!"

We simply leave it in God's hands. He will take care of it; we don't have to. Justice will be done, whether it is here or at the final judgment. The Bible promises, *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad"* (2 Corinthians 5:10).

In Luke's version of Jesus' forgiveness instructions, Jesus says

if the same person sins against  
you seven times a day,  
and turns back to you seven  
times and says, "I repent",  
you must forgive.'  
Luke 17:4

And the disciples reply, **"Increase our faith!"** (Luke 17:5). **Forgiveness is some of the hardest work we have to do**, but if it is to be such a part of our relationship with our enemies how much more must it be a part of our relationship with our friends?

Now let's clear up some misconceptions here. Forgiveness is not in ignoring the hurt; not in saying, *"Oh, that's okay, it didn't matter."* Forgiveness says, *"It wasn't okay, it did matter, and what you did hurt me deeply, but I choose to forgive you anyway."* Forgiveness does not live in denial. It faces the reality of the deed done and chooses forgiveness over revenge and continued bitterness.

We often hear people say, **"Forgive and forget."** In some situations that may be possible, but in other situations it would be impossible to forget. **You don't have to forget to forgive someone, in fact, real forgiveness remembers everything and still chooses to forgive.** The memory of the event or situation is still there, but the bitterness

is removed and left behind. To forget some of the horrible situations that people have faced would force them into unhealthy denial. Real love really remembers and feels the full force of the pain and still extends forgiveness to the offender. That kind of forgiveness is what it means to live like Jesus.

In this matter of forgiving like Jesus, I constantly reflect upon how the country of Rwanda restored itself after its **1994 Civil War** in which the Hutu majority committed genocide against their Tutsi neighbors, brutally murdering somewhere between 500,000 and million innocent people; 70% of the Tutsi population. After the war, Rwandan jails were incapable of holding all those guilty of war crimes. It was the Rwandan Church that helped the government work through this aftermath of the war. Those criminals who were guilty of lesser crimes were released if they agreed to live in reconciliation villages – often times as the next door neighbor of the families they had previously hurt. They then faced local reconciliation courts made up of those same neighbors, to which they apologized, made whatever restitution they could, and received forgiveness. I remember one woman saying, *the man who killed my husband now lives next door, But I must forgive him, because God has forgiven me.*

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Here is some interesting advice from the book of Ecclesiastes,

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| <p>Do not give heed to everything that people say,<br/>or you may hear your servant cursing you;<br/><b>your heart knows that many times you<br/>have yourself cursed others.</b><br/>Ecclesiastes 7:21-22</p> |
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Part of forgiveness is remembering that you have said and done many things for which you needed other people to forgive you. It is in being so grateful for God's forgiveness that you are willing to extend that same forgiveness to others. This is a major part of what it means to be a follower of Christ. **Without forgiveness we are locked in a prison of bitterness and anger. It is such a relief to forgive someone, because when you do, you realize that you were the one being held prisoner by your unforgiving spirit — not by them.** Jesus Christ has come to free us from this kind of bondage. He has come to give us freedom and joy. Or to put it like the 3-year-old boy, who was asked what he learned in Sunday School, said, "*Jesus died so that we could have ever-laughing life!*"

**So a loving person is a forgiving person; they are also a kind person.** Why is this so easy to forget. If I don't have kindness and patience I am not living the life of Christ. Like forgiveness, kindness is an essential part of living a loving life. Most of us have the Ten Commandments down pretty well. We don't steal, kill or commit adultery. But we somehow forget that being a Christian goes beyond that, and an essential part of obeying God is being nice to people.

Being negative, critical, fault-finding, rude, gossiping, is not the will of God. Some people's lives are marked by constant conflict. It seems they are always in the middle of a fight.

They are ready to be offended and go to war at the drop of a hat. Just because you are a Christian or work in the church, you do not have a license to be nasty and rude. Just because you believe in God and the Bible is not a pass for being mean-spirited. You can still disagree with other people, but you do it in an agreeable way. It is important to maintain the bond of love. Jesus said

Be merciful,  
just as your  
Father is merciful"  
Luke 6:36

Translated that means, "Be nice." Be nice to waitresses, to the slow driver in front of you, to the person who stepped in line in front of you, the salesman, your children, your spouse. Be nice. It is so much more fun than being nasty and ill-tempered. Besides.

Being a nice person means being a gracious person. There is a saying: *mercy is not getting what you deserve, grace is getting what you do not deserve.* Both mercy and grace are characteristics of love in action.

Here is another lesson from old and wiser St. Peter

Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse;  
but, on the contrary, **repay with a blessing.**  
**It is for this that you were called —**  
that you might inherit a blessing.  
1 Peter 3:9

Because we have received grace from God, and he has treated us better than we deserve, we treat others with that same grace, treating them better than they deserve.

- This means blessing instead of cursing.
- This means giving without thought of being repaid.
- This means actually looking for those to whom we can be generous and open-hearted; just as Jesus looked for us, to save us.

In 1989, Mother Teresa visited Phoenix, Arizona to open a home for the destitute. During her visit, she was interviewed by KTAR, the largest radio station in town. In a private conversation, the announcer asked Mother Teresa if there was anything he could do for her. He was expecting a request for a contribution, or media help to raise money for a new home for the poor in Phoenix. Instead, she said, "**Yes, there is. Find somebody nobody else loves and love them.**"

That is what it means to exhibit the grace and kindness of Christ. *Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me"* (Matthew 25:40).

Finally, as a wise proverb teaches us: **Love is nothing until you give it away. A loving person is one who speaks and shows their love by their actions.** Can we really say that we love someone if we don't show it by our actions towards them, our mercy and forgiveness extended to them, our gracious acts done for them? The Bible says, "

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; **the only thing that counts is faith working through love.**

Galatians 5:6

In other words, all the religion in the world will do you no good; What counts with God is in your demonstration faith by extending to others the love and grace that He has already shown you.

In the prologue to his book, Leadership Jazz, Max DePree write: "Esther, my wife, and I have a granddaughter named Zoe, the Greek word for life. She was born prematurely and weighed one pound, seven ounces, so small that my wedding ring could slide up her arm to her shoulder. The neonatologist who first examined her told us that she had a 5 to 10 percent chance of living three days. When Esther and I scrubbed up for our first visit and saw Zoe in her isolette in the neonatal intensive care unit, she had two IVs in her navel, one in her foot, a monitor on each side of her chest, and a respirator tube and a feeding tube in her mouth. To complicate matters, Zoe's biological father had jumped ship the month before Zoe was born. Realizing this, a wise and caring nurse named Ruth gave me my instructions. *"For the next several months, at least, you're the surrogate father. I want you to come to the hospital every day to visit Zoe, and when you come, I want you to rub her body and her legs and arms with the tip of your finger. While you're caressing her, you should tell her over and over how much you love her, because she has to be able to connect your voice to your touch."* It was this experience of connecting the voice of love and the touch of love that saved her.

When God came in Christ he had already spoken his love to us in his Word, then he came to love us with his touch. Jesus was always touching people. It is essential for human life. People all around us need us to speak and demonstrate our love and encouragement. We need to build up instead of tear people down. And they also need to connect our voice with our touch.

There are so many people dying for the touch of love. It is what makes life real and worthwhile. We can do it for each other. The church can be an intensive CARE unit where we are loved back to health and life.

Let the people of God show the love of God by our own love with kindness. Let us love with word and touch. Let us be kind in thought and deed. And let us forgive thoroughly and completely just as we have been forgiven.



We cannot leave these thoughts on forgiving and being forgiven without returning to the warning Jesus gave, both at the end of his parable and at the end of his prayer:

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 6:14-15

How does God's conditional forgiveness spoken of here reconcile with the Bible's declaration of our salvation, by faith alone, through God's grace alone?

If our request for mercy has granted us complete and unconditional forgiveness from God, in what ways will our own lack of forgiveness unravel what God has already given to us? I honestly don't know.

Scripture is clear that my salvation is given, sealed, and held secure by God himself so entrance into Heaven is not my concern. But scripture also teaches that even as His child, I will give God some accounting of the life I have lived. *For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.* (2 Corinthians 5:10).

In another letter, Paul suggests that at this judgment, I will receive either reward or loss of reward for whatever life I have built upon the foundation laid for me by Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). Perhaps there, at the judgment seat of Christ, just as we have always prayed, we will find how well our life of forgiveness has merited God's forgiveness of us.

I honestly don't know. But I do know that I will strive to please my heavenly father by remembering how much I have been forgiven and by demonstrating my love, forgiveness, grace, and mercy towards others just as it has been extended to me.

**Having been forgiven everything, I will forgive everything!**

Let's pray about this.

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## **Study Guide: Are you forgiving? Forgiven?**

Sometimes this thing of Christian fellowship can seem less like a pat on the back and more like a poke in the eye. It is one of the mysteries of Christendom that believers love each other so poorly when the Jesus we claim to follow said it was central to the life of a believer."

In both Matthew 6:15 and Matthew 18:35 Jesus points to the importance of forgiveness in this business of loving each other. As we recall last week's emphasis on unity in the body of Christ we will discuss the synergy of these two important New Testament teachings.

1. From Ephesians 4:1-3 list the kinds of things which should characterize our lives as believers in Christ.
2. Now review Romans 12. Again, list the characteristics that should be evident in our lives as Christians from Romans 12:9-21. (Note that we added verses 14 to 21 to what you read for last week)
3. Now, read Colossians 3:12-17. How does this list of character traits compare to the things we discussed last week? What additional things does Paul include in this listing? Why do you think forgiving one another is such a key to living together in unity?
4. Now read I Corinthians 12:31 and 13:1-7. Think about the way Paul characterizes love in these verses. Which of these things gives you the most trouble?
5. Jesus concludes the Lord's Prayer with an admonition to us to "forgive others their trespasses (debts)." He says that if we do this our "heavenly Father will also forgive" us, but if we aren't forgiving of others, we won't be forgiven. What do you think he meant by this?
6. Finally, think back to the concluding questions from last week's lesson. Reread Hebrews 12:1-3 and 18-24. How does the fact that we are united with our brothers and sisters not only in this life but also with those who have gone before us make you feel? How then, ought we to live?