

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 Peter approached him and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?”

22 “I tell you, not as many as seven,” Jesus replied, “but 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 legit 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 50, 60, or 70 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 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:

How dependent is your forgiveness on someone else's apology?

Matthew 18:23-27

23 “For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

24 When he began to settle accounts, one who owed ten thousand talents was brought before him.

25 Since he did not have the money to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.

26 “At this, the servant fell facedown before him and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything.’

27 Then the master of that servant had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.

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

Every preacher knows the power of storytelling. 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, seasoned and wise 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 denarius in a day, and it took 6,000 denarii 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:

How are grace and mercy connected to forgiveness?

Matthew 18:28,32-35

28 “That servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, ‘Pay what you owe!’

.....

32 Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.

33 Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’

34 And because he was angry, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed.

35 So also my heavenly Father will do to you unless every one of you forgives his brother or sister from your heart.”

KEY WORD: Denarii (v. 28)—A denarius was a Roman coin. 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 to the debt just canceled. The second man's debt was 100 denarii, about three month's wages, but what's that compared to 60,000,000 denarii—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.

DIGGING DEEPER

JESUS ON FORGIVENESS

For a more in-depth explanation

about God's forgiveness and His expectation that we forgive those who have hurt or wronged us, see the article on pages 128-131.

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.

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.

QUESTION 5:

Since Jesus has forgiven us, what hinders us from forgiving others?

ENGAGE

Circle the answer that most accurately describes how our culture feels about forgiveness:

- Only if they say they're sorry.
- If I don't feel like it, I won't.
- Some things just can't be forgiven.
- Revenge is better.
- You have to earn it over time.

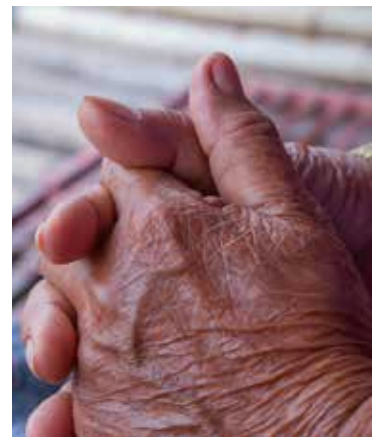
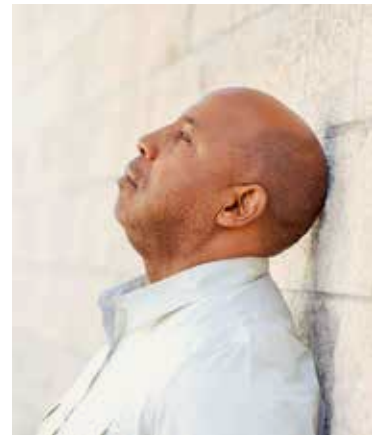
Why must genuine forgiveness mark the lives and relationships of Christians?

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?

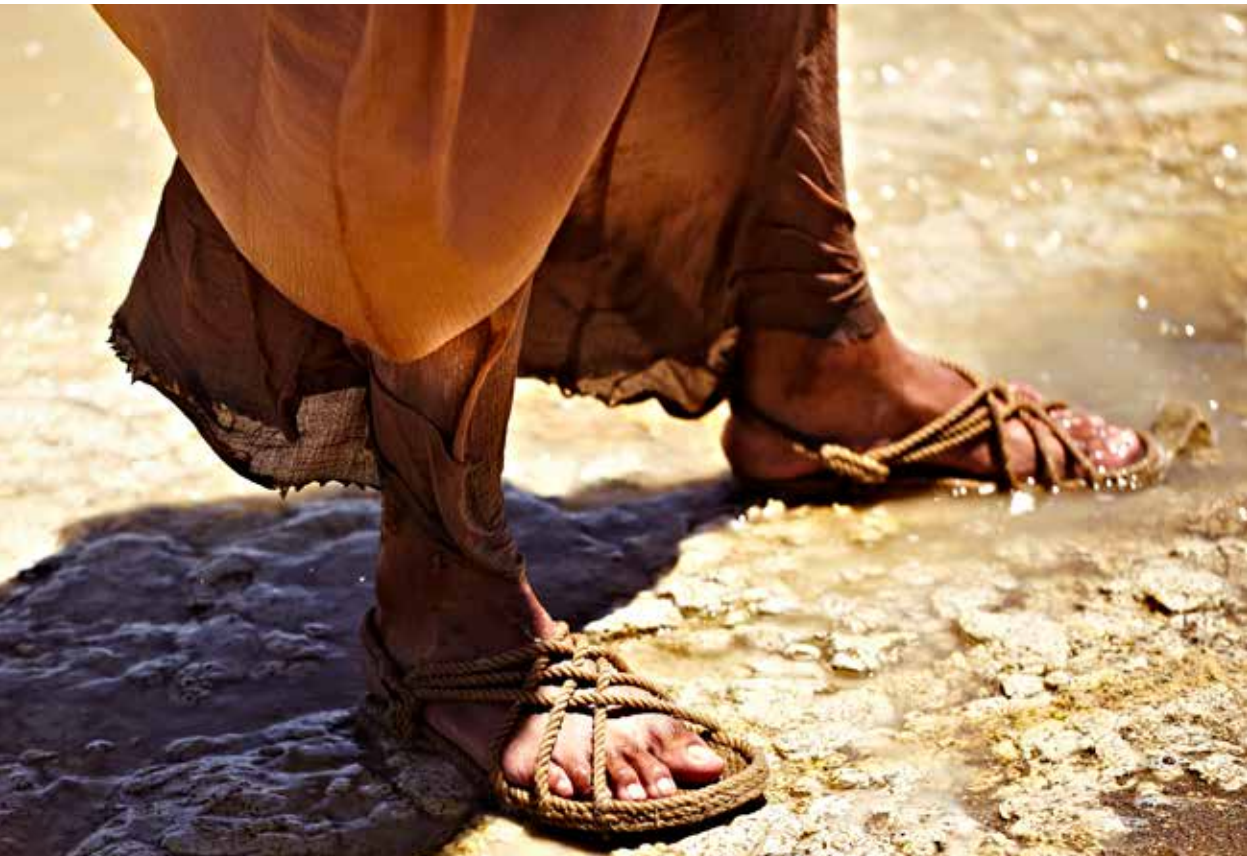
- ▶ **Evaluate.** Consider your current relationships and spend time identifying areas of unforgiveness in your heart.
- ▶ **Take a small step.** Make an effort to extend forgiveness in a relationship where you’ve been wronged or slighted. Take the first step even if you’ve done nothing wrong.
- ▶ **Take 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.



JESUS ON FORGIVENESS

By Chris Johnson

Forgiveness was at the heart of Jesus' teaching and ministry. Early in His ministry He taught, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matt. 5:7).¹ While hanging on the cross, He prayed, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

SIMON PETER'S QUESTION

Jesus' teachings on forgiveness consistently communicated that God forgives us and expects us to forgive those who have wronged us. Matthew 18 begins with a description of a situation that required confrontation for resolution. When Peter heard these words, he came to Jesus with a question. Should he forgive his repeatedly errant brother—even up to seven times (Matt. 18:21)?

Peter's question reflected extreme generosity. Then-current rabbinic teaching required a person to forgive his brother three times, but not four. Said the Talmud, "If a man commits a transgression, the first, second and third time he is forgiven, the fourth time he is not forgiven"² The Jews based this in part on something Elihu, Job's friend said. He spoke of God rescuing a repentant man's soul from the pit: "God certainly does all these things two or three times to a person" (Job 33:29). Generous beyond rabbinic requirements, Peter offered to forgive seven times.

Jesus responded, that forgiveness should essentially know no limits. "'I tell you, not as many as seven,' Jesus replied, 'but seventy times seven'" (Matt. 18:22). Then He told of the king who forgave a man his debt of 10,000 talents and how the forgiven man then refused to forgive a man who owed him the comparatively paltry sum of 100 denarii. When the king heard of the unforgiving man's merciless behavior, he became angry and "handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed." Then Jesus added, "So also my heavenly Father will do to you unless every one of you forgives his brother or sister from your heart" (vv. 34,35). Essentially Jesus was saying, "If you refuse to forgive those who have wronged you, do not expect God to forgive you." What a startling statement!

OLD TESTAMENT FOUNDATION

Why was Jesus so adamant that we forgive those who have wronged us, hurt us, or sinned against us? He made that requirement because forgiveness is an essential part of God's nature. It is who He is. It is His character. We discover this in Exodus 33–34. While at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses made a request of God: "Please, let me see your glory" (Ex. 33:18). God responded, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim the name 'the LORD' before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Then the Lord added, "You cannot see my face, for humans cannot see me and live" (vv. 19,20).

The next day, Moses ascended Mount Sinai. Exodus records the dramatic encounter: "The LORD came down in a cloud, stood with him there, and proclaimed his name, 'the LORD.' The LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed: The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the fathers' iniquity on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation" (34:5-7).

One might have expected God to focus on His role as Creator, Warrior, or King. Such was not the case. Instead, one aspect of God's character that He revealed to Moses was His mercy. God who is compassionate and gracious offers forgiveness to those who sin against Him. This message of God's forgiving nature echoes throughout the Old Testament (Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17,31; Pss. 86:15; 103:8-13; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

Psalm 103:7-13 retells Moses' experiencing God's presence at Sinai and further describes the great forgiving heart of God. In poetic form, the psalmist declared, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (v. 12).

In the writings of the prophets, we find this same truth. Micah 7:18-19 says: "Who is a God like you, forgiving iniquity and passing over rebellion for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not hold on to his anger forever, because he delights in faithful love. He will again have compassion on us; he will vanquish our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." Jeremiah 31:31-34 declares that God will establish a new covenant with His people. As part of that covenant, God explains, "For I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin" (v. 34).

Isaiah 43:24-25 gives us a remarkable glimpse of God's motive for forgiving us. God's accusation against His people was that instead of bringing offerings and

sacrifices to Him, the children of Israel brought only their sins: "You have not bought me aromatic cane with silver, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. I—I sweep away your transgressions for my own sake and remember your sins no more." God does not want to be burdened with our sins and wearied by our iniquities. So He forgives. He sweeps our sins away and remembers them no more. What a remarkable statement! God forgives sin because they burden Him. He forgives for His sake.

The word used when God revealed Himself to Moses gives us a hint of this (Ex. 34:7). When talking about God forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin, the Hebrew text uses the verb *nasa'*, which means to lift or take away.³ God lifts or removes our sin because they are a burden to Him and to the sinner.

JESUS' TEACHING

This Old Testament overview helps us better understand Jesus' teaching. Jesus taught the necessity of practicing absolute forgiveness. His followers are always to forgive and offer infinite forgiveness to those who sin against them—in the same way that God forgives.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus said, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). The only commentary that Jesus gave on the Lord's Prayer comes immediately following the prayer itself: "For if you

forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses" (vv. 14-15). As God's children, we are commanded to be forgiving. Anything less would lead to spiritual and moral defeat. Salvation is not gained by our forgiving others but it is demonstrated by our doing so.

Jesus not only taught radical forgiveness, He also practiced it. He forgave the least deserving, including the woman caught in adultery, the thief hanging on the cross, and those who crucified Him. To the sinful woman who washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7:48). The observers were shocked, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" (v. 49). When four men brought a crippled man to Jesus and lowered him through the roof, Jesus both healed *and* forgave him. The religious leaders responded with incredulity, "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (5:21).

The Jews understood that only God could forgive a person's sins. And Jesus pronouncing a person's sins were forgiven was a way of proclaiming His divinity. The religious leaders considered such statements to be blasphemous. At Jesus' trial, part of the condemning sentence was that Jesus spoke blasphemy (Mark 14:64). He was willing to die to offer forgiveness. Paul stated it

simply, "He [Jesus] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25, NIV).

Simon Peter thought he was being extravagant. Should he forgive a brother "As many as seven times?" (Matt. 18:21). Jesus taught forgiveness that knows no limits. Why? Such forgiveness reflects the nature of God. And following God's example of forgiving others benefits us. Explained the Jewish scholar Jonathan Sacks, "When we forgive and are worthy of being forgiven, we are no longer prisoners of our past."⁴ God does not want us to be burdened with heavy hearts because of our refusal to forgive those who have wronged us.

If we are Christ's followers, we are to be like Him. We are to forgive wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin in the same way He has. He forgives for His own sake. He invites us to forgive those who have sinned against us and wronged us for our own sake.

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1. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).
2. *The Babylonian Talmud—Mas. Yoma 86b*. [accessed 30 September 2016] Available on the Internet: juchre.org/talmud/yoma/yoma4.htm#86a.
3. § 1421 (nasa', "lift, carry, take") in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:600-601.
4. Jonathan Sacks, "The Birth of Forgiveness" [22 December 2014; accessed 30 Sept. 2016]. Available from the Internet: www.rabbisacks.org/birth-forgiveness-vayigash-5775/.