

Forgiving God's Kids

Matthew 18:21-35

1. This week, I read about a pastor who went to speak to a group of fourth graders on the topic of marriage. He asked the class, "**Do any of you know what God has to say about marriage?**" Immediately one little boy raised his hand and waved it back and forth until the pastor called on him. "**Okay,**" he asked, "**what does God say about marriage,**" The little boy replied, "**Father forgive them for they know not what they do.**" I suppose that should teach us something about marriage *and* forgiveness!

2. Nothing is so common to God's nature as forgiveness. Nothing is so foreign to man's nature as forgiveness. King Louis XII of France once remarked, "**Nothing smells so sweet as the dead body of your enemy.**"

3. When the Lord Jesus takes over a person's life, He begins to remove sin and replace it with righteousness. He takes away our anger, hatreds and bitterness and builds in grace and forgiveness.

A. Jesus' own nature can be seen in His words on the cross. After being beaten, falsely tried, spit on and nailed to a cross, He prayed, "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do**" (Lk.23:34).

B. Stephen, the church's first martyr followed Jesus' example. As he was being stoned to death, he cried out, "**Lord, do not charge them with this sin**" (Acts 7:60).

C. After Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers feared he would exact revenge for their selling him into slavery. Joseph said, "**Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones. And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them**" (Gen.50:19-21).

D. Even though King Saul repeatedly tried to kill David, the man after God's own heart refused to bear a grudge. He said in 1 Sam.24:12, "**Let the LORD judge between you and me, and let the LORD avenge me on you. But my hand shall not be against you.**"

E. Eph.4:32 says, "**And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.**"

F. Col.3:13 tells us to be "**bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.**"

4. Forgiveness is a give and take issue. Sin builds walls between us and forgiveness tears them down. Sin carves great canyons to divide us, forgiveness builds bridges over them. Forgiveness is vital for the health and unity of the church.

Not long before she died in 1988, in a moment of surprising candor in television, Marghanita Laski, one of our best-known secular humanists and novelists, said, "**What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to forgive me**" (John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*).

5. Our passage is found in the midst of Jesus' teaching concerning the children of God. Jesus takes a **"little child"** and perhaps holding him on His lap **"in the midst"** of the disciples. He teaches that unless we become like **"little children"** we will by no means enter the kingdom (v.3). He teaches that the one who **"humbles himself as a little child"** is the **"greatest in the kingdom."** In vv.6-9, Jesus speaks of the protection of **"these little ones,"** God's spiritual kids. In vv.10-14, Jesus teaches that we are not to **"despise"** them but care for them. In vv.15-20, we are taught how to restore God's children who have sinned against you. This leads Peter to ask a question about forgiveness.

I. A Question of Forgiveness: How Much? (vv.21-22).

A. Peter's Question: What Is the Limit of Forgiveness? (v.21).

1. Let's say **"your brother sins against you"** and you **"go and tell him his fault between you and him alone"** as Jesus commands in v.15. Let's say that he in fact **"hears you."** He confesses and asks forgiveness. You immediately grant forgiveness. Together you pray, weep and hug. The wall of separation is broken down. A bridge of grace has crossed the canyon of offense. You have **"gained your brother."** Now let's say six weeks later **"your brother sins against you"** again...same song, second verse. What do you do?

2. Peter had the same thought when he asked, **"Lord how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?"** Peter had a habit of asking clarifying questions. He realized that people often commit sin, receive forgiveness and within a short period of time fall right back into that sin or something worse. He wondered just long this process was to go on. The bottom line question is *does forgiveness have a limit?*

3. Jewish rabbis traditionally taught that forgiveness was to be granted three times for a repeat offender... sort of an early version of the "three strikes and you are out" law. This was loosely based on Job 33:29, **"Behold, God works all these things, Twice, in fact, three times with a man"** and Amos 1.

4. How many of us could forgive an offense seven times? Most of us struggle at two or three times!

Rabbi David A. Nelson likes to tell the story of two brothers who went to their rabbi to settle a longstanding feud. The rabbi got the two to reconcile their differences and shake hands. As they were about to leave, he asked each one to make a wish for the other in honor of the Jewish New Year. The first brother turned to the other and said, **"I wish you what you wish me."** At that, the second brother threw up his hands and said, **"See, Rabbi, he's starting up again!"**

5. Jesus was having an affect upon Peter. Divine grace was rubbing off on him. In Peter's mind, he had doubled the forgiveness limit of the rabbis and even added one more time for good measure. Perhaps it was in his resilient pride, thinking himself quite magnanimous that he asked this question. Maybe he thought Jesus would be impressed with his graciousness. We will learn that grace measured is not grace at all.

B. Jesus' Answer: There Is No Limit to Forgiveness (v.22).

1. Jesus must have smiled when he said, "**I do not say to you, up to seven times but up to seventy times seven.**" Peter must have been blown away!
2. Peter was thinking in terms of the law, not of grace. The law measures. The law counts. The law keeps detailed records. Grace does not. The very nature of grace is that it is both undeserved and immeasurable. Grace has no limits. If we deal in limitations we forfeit grace. When Jesus spoke of "**seventy times seven**" He did not mean four hundred and ninety. If I am counting the number of times I forgive you, I am still harboring that bitter attitude toward you. I am just waiting 'til the 491st time so that I can sock it to you. Is that forgiveness? No.

A 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 she heard the little girl scream. Rushing back in, she asked, "What happened?"

The little boy replied, "She knows now." [source: www.preachingtoday.com]

3. It is as though Jesus is saying, "**Peter, your concept of forgiveness is generous by the standard of tradition. However, your forgiveness is stingy by the standard of grace.**"
4. Remember Jesus teaches this in the context of our relationship as God's children, Kingdom Kids. It is easy to forgive children. As parents, we love our children whole-heartedly. We realize their inexperience and immaturity. We expect them to sometimes be rude and inconsiderate. We know that is part of growing up. We discipline them but we always forgive them because they belong to us and we love them.
5. The Lord wants us to have that same attitude when our "**brother sins.**" Because he is a "**brother,**" he is God's child. The father has limitless forgiveness for him. Remember what Paul said in Eph.4:32, "**And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.**"
6. Think about how limitless is God's forgiveness toward you. Rom.5:20 says, "**But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.**" If we are like Christ, we have grace that is greater than our brother's sin.
7. If I have learned one thing in my personal walk with Christ, it is to *keep short accounts*. Just as my horizontal fellowship is dependent on my vertical fellowship, my vertical fellowship with God can be hindered by my horizontal fellowship with other believers. Speaking about love, 1 Corinthians 13 says, "**It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.**"

II. A Picture of Forgiveness (vv.23-35).

A. The Compassion of the King (vv.23-27).

1. To help Peter and the others better understand the grace of forgiveness Jesus shares a parable, a common story with an eternal message. He describes to them "**the kingdom of heaven.**" In the kingdom is a "**certain king.**" The king is a picture of God the Father.

2. The king wanted to "**settle accounts**" with his servants. He wanted to call in all that was due him. "**Servants**" here is a general term referring to all under his rule.
3. As the king "**began to settle accounts**" "**one**" particular servant was brought before him. This man owed the king "**ten thousand talents**." Probably this servant was a person of great responsibility in the kingdom, because he owed a huge amount of money to the king. He may have been a taxcollecting official who owed the king for taxes collected. He owed "**ten thousand talents**." Ten thousand is the highest numerical term in the Greek language, an infinite, uncountable number sometimes translated "myriads."
4. This was an incalculable and unpayable debt. It represents the sin debt of every man. We cannot pay it. David said in Ps.51:4, "**Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight; That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge.**"
5. The common sentence was that he be "**sold**" as a slave along "**with his wife and children**."
6. The reaction of the servant is that he "**fell down**" and in anguish cried out, "**Master have patience with me and I will pay you back.**" A sinner's only hope is to "**fall down**" before God and plead for mercy.
7. The king knew the servant could never pay his debt and being "**moved with compassion**" "**released him**" from it and "**forgave him**." In much the same way when we confessed our sin and asked for forgiveness, God "**who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us**" (Eph.2:4) "**released**" and "**forgave**" us for sin. He set us free! Remember that moment?!!!
Forgiveness sets us free.

B. The Cruelty of the Servant (vv.28-30).

1. It seems that no sooner had he been forgiven that the servant "**found one of his servants who owed him a hundred denarii**" (about 100 days wages). He "**took him by the throat**" and demanded payment. This man who was forgiven an unimaginable debt now violently demands immediate payment of a minor debt.
2. The second servant also "**begged**" for mercy. He uses almost the exact same words the first servant had said to the king (compare vv.26,29). But it was to no avail, for the cruel servant threw his fellow servant into a debtor's "**prison**."
3. You see the picture don't you? Through the blood of His cross, Jesus has paid our sin debt. "**I owed a debt I could not pay, He paid a debt He did owe.**" Yet when we put a limit on forgiveness, when we refuse to continually offer grace we are just like this vindictive servant.

Unforgiveness makes us vindictive.

4. If God in His grace has forgiven us for a lifetime of sin, who are we to withhold forgiveness for relatively minor offenses? Do we dare to put a limit on grace?

C. The Judgment of the King (vv.31-34).

1. The "**fellow servants... were grieved**." When we fail to grant forgiveness we hurt everyone around us. They "**came and told the master all that had been**

done." We are deceiving ourselves if we think God doesn't notice our lack of forgiveness.

God **cares** whether we forgive others or not.

2. The king called the cruel servant on the carpet. He called him a "**wicked servant.**" His desire was that the servant forgive even as he had been forgiven (v.33). Therefore he was "**delivered... to the torturers**" that he might "**pay all that was due him.**"

3. Some Bible teachers have suggested that this means the man was back under his original debt. If that is so, then salvation is only temporary or God's forgiveness is conditional. The Bible teaches neither. This was God's discipline, to treat him as he had treated his fellow servant.

D. The Principle of Forgiveness (v.35).

Jesus said "**so My heavenly Father... will do to you if each of you from his heart does not forgive his brother.**" God will visit discipline upon our lives if we fail to forgive. *We are never more like God than when we forgive and never more unlike Him than when we refuse.*

I know it hurts when people have wronged you. There may be some of you here today who have endured years of cruelty from someone who should have loved you. How do you forgive them? – By God's grace and His strength.

Corrie Ten Boom lived through the holocaust during WWII. Her family hid Jews from the Germans in Holland. Eventually, her whole family was caught and arrested. Her beloved father died 10 days after he was imprisoned.

Corrie and her sister, Betsie, ended up in a Nazi prison camp called Ravensbruck. 80,000 people died in that camp over a period of seven years. Many were shot, given a lethal injection, or gassed. Sick prisoners had to strip in front of the Nazis. Corrie watched her sister Betsy grow ill, suffer, and die.

After the war, Corrie began to speak around the world about her experiences and the forgiveness of Christ. In 1947, she spoke at a church in Munich. That's where she saw him. The man had been a guard at Ravensbruck, one of the most cruel guards.

After she had spoken that evening He approached Corrie with an outstretched hand. "What a fine message," he said, "How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are forgiven."

Corrie fumbled in her pocketbook. She didn't want to take that hand. He obviously did not remember her. But she remembered him. She was face-to-face with a man who not only hurt her, but her sister. He said, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me." And his hand came out again.

Corrie recalls the event in these words:

I stood there - I whose sins had again and again needed to be forgiven. And I could not forgive. My sister, Betsie, had died in that place. Could this guard erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It couldn't have been many seconds that he stood there - hand held out. But to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I ever had to do. For I had to do it - I knew that. If you do not forgive others their

trespasses, Jesus says, neither will your Father in Heaven forgive your trespasses.

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and horrible as that.

And still I stood there with coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion - I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. So, I prayed silently, "Jesus, help me! I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You must supply the feeling."

So woodenly, mechanically, I placed my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm and sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

I was able to say it, and to mean it, "I forgive you, brother, with all my heart."

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands - the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love - not my forgiveness. I had tried and I did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Romans 5:5: "The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit." Forgiveness. It sets us free.

Here is a truth to take home: **Forgiving others sets me free.**

A verse to remember: **Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.** (Ephesians 4:32, ESV)

Questions to answer: Who do I need to forgive for good? When will I do it?

Because I have been forgiven of such a great debt by Christ, by faith I now forgive - _____ unconditionally in Christ. No matter how he/she sinned against me, it doesn't compare with how I sinned against God. I release him/her from the hurts. He/she is no longer accountable to me for them. I do not have the power to forgive this way. So, I trust Jesus to forgive through me. I put _____ in the hands of God - the One who will handle things righteously. Jesus has set me free.

Think about these verses. Think about what Jesus said on the cross: Father forgive them. Think about the person who has hurt you. And ask Jesus for the power to forgive. Take a step of faith.

You must forgive - decide that someone who has wronged you doesn't have to pay. That will set you free.