

# Forgiving Others

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Joining Wisdom and Love

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Mary and George have been married for twenty-five years. Mary speaks proudly of her five children, but her tone grows quiet, even edgy, when the conversation turns to her husband. Fifteen years ago, George had sex with both female and male prostitutes. Mary found out about it five years later. In the ten years since, she has mulled this devastating information over and over in her heart. She once thought she had forgiven George, but now realizes that she has not. Her sorrow, pain, and anger find expression in cool bitterness. At times, Mary aims this bitterness at God.

Ben was ten when his sister Kim was born. His parents' blatant favoritism towards her was apparent to everyone, especially Ben. After he left for college, he eventually stopped speaking to his parents. Now married ten years with children of his own, he fluctuates between demanding and despairing. His wife complains, "Ben is cold and short with me." Ben counters, "Mary pays more attention to the kids than to me." He carries his anger and resentment towards his parents and sister into his own family.

Like Mary and Ben, we all struggle with forgiving others. What's more, we struggle with our need to *be* forgiven: in any given week, we all will sin against someone else. It comes with the territory when you are a fallen sinner. We sin even though we have received ultimate forgiveness by God.

I, for example, am married and the father of four. Each week brings many opportunities to ask for or extend words of forgiveness to my wife and children. They have the same opportunity with me. Does that sound strange? It shouldn't. Sin is a daily reality, but so is the wonderful grace of God. Until we die or Christ returns, we will have to practice forgiveness in our relationships with others. But words of forgiveness such as, "I was wrong. Will you forgive me?" and "Yes, I forgive you" are rare.

### **What Is Forgiveness?**

The parable of the unmerciful servant is a classic biblical passage about forgiveness (Matthew 18:21–35).

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Forgiveness is an act of compassion: we see that the master “took pity” on the servant he forgave. Forgiveness is love expressed in difficult circumstances. What does love look like when you are sinned against? This passage teaches us several things about the nature of love as we forgive others.

*Forgiveness cancels a debt.* In these verses, the practice of canceling a debt is a metaphor for practicing forgiveness. When there is a debt, *someone* must pay. Either the one who owes must pay it back, or the one who is owed must absorb the loss. Forgiveness requires something similar: either the one who has sinned must make amends or the one who has been sinned against must bear the pain and loss himself. The offense can't be minimized or ignored.

Suppose you borrow my wheelbarrow. When you return it, the wheel is flat. I can make you pay for the repair or I can pay for it myself. Either way, someone has to absorb the cost. We cannot pretend that the wheelbarrow is not broken. We can't minimize its brokenness. If I choose to pay for it myself, I have “forgiven” you your debt; it is canceled. The person who forgives no longer expects to be repaid for what he has suffered and lost.

*Forgiveness is a three-fold promise.* When you forgive someone, you absorb the cost of the offense committed

against you. You cancel the debt, and when you do, you make a three-fold promise.

- *“I will not bring up this offense again or use it against you.”* The only reason to raise the offense with the offender is for the purpose of reconciliation, not vengeance.
- *“I will not bring it up to others in gossip, or malign you because of it.”* Appropriate counsel may help you handle an offense against you. But we so easily fall into gossip to place all the blame on the other person.
- *“I will not bring it up to myself and dwell on this offense.”* I will not replay the videotape of your sin so that I can savor every excruciating detail.<sup>1</sup>

Failure to forgive breaks these promises. When we choose not to forgive, we choose to make the other person pay for what he or she has done.

*Failure to forgive turns victims into victimizers.* The servant in the parable did not forgive. Instead, he grabbed and choked the one who owed him (Matthew 18:28). When we fail to forgive we are active, not passive. We want to extract every penny until we are satisfied. Both Mary and Ben have an unquenchable thirst for such payback. Mary expresses it coldly, Ben explosively.

When we fail to forgive even the little offenses of daily life, we move down that same path—a path different only in degree, not kind. We feel the initial rush of justified anger when someone sins against us. We take God's place and dole out doses of our own version of "biblical justice."

*Failure to forgive has an eternal cost.* Practicing forgiveness is not easy, and it is costly. But we also pay a price when we do not forgive. Bitterness destroys the hearts and relationships of those who refuse to forgive. Mary did not forgive and her marriage failed. Ben did not forgive and his sinful, destructive attitudes and behavior damaged his marriage and family.

But Jesus would take us beyond even these concerns. He focuses our attention on the eternal, vertical dimension. Forgiveness is a spiritual matter. The failure to forgive ultimately costs you heaven itself! It reveals an unforgiving heart and an unforgiven heart.

*Forgiveness is an event and a process.* Notice Peter's question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:21–22). When we forgive someone, it is an event: "I forgive you." But that is not the