

Forgive as You Have Been Forgiven  
Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness is at the foundations of the teachings of Christ. Over and over again Jesus taught that we must forgive people. We must forgive all people—our friends and our enemies, people in the church and people outside the church, the people closest to us and complete strangers.

To be a follower of Christ means to forgive. How often are we to forgive? Peter asks if we should forgive someone as many as seven times. Jesus says, “No seventy-seven times.” Today, if we were to ask Jesus how often we should forgive, he would say, “Seven hundred and seventy-seven billion times.”

In other words, Jesus taught that to enter into the Kingdom of heaven, we must never stop forgiving people.

Now, a question which almost always comes up when we talk about forgiving people is this: Are you supposed to forgive a person who hasn't asked for forgiveness or who has asked for forgiveness but keeps doing the same thing over and over again?

To answer that question, we have to understand the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness is simply wanting someone to have a good life and be happy even if that person has done something hurtful to you or to someone you love.

Reconciliation is when people admit that they have hurt each other and make the changes necessary to stop hurting each other.

There can be forgiveness without reconciliation. You can and should forgive a person who hasn't asked for forgiveness.

Certainly, you should try to work out your differences. Our goal as Christians should be to live together in peace. But we can't control other people. We can't force people to change their ways. We can invite them to join us in working out our differences. But if they refuse, we simply let them go with our blessings for them to have a good and happy life.

The Story of the Prodigal Son is a beautiful illustration of the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. When the father's youngest son came to him and demanded his inheritance, he was saying to his father, “I'm tired of waiting for you to die. Let's just pretend like you are already dead and let me have my inheritance now, so that I can get as far away from you as I can.” Most people would have said, “You're never getting a penny from me now or in the future.” And they would have gone to their lawyer and written that boy out of their will. Not this father. He gave the boy his share of the inheritance and let him go. The father never stopped loving his son. He forgave him immediately and completely. He went out each day to watch for his son to return. His home and his heart remained opened to his boy.

I'm sure there were days when he was tempted to go to the city and find his boy and force him to come back home. But one of the lessons of life is that sometimes you have to love people enough to let them go. This father knew he had to wait until his son

was ready to come home on his own. There could be no reconciliation without repentance.

But there also could be no reconciliation without forgiveness. When the boy finally realized how foolish he had been and did return home, he was not at all sure he would be welcome. But he found a father who had forgiven him.

No, we don't wait for people to repent before we forgive them. We forgive them first. Then, if they repent, reconciliation becomes easy.

How can we forgive the unrepentant? Jesus tells us to remember that God forgave us long before we repented. Spend time reflecting on how many times you have done things that were sinful. I know it's not comfortable. In this age of self-esteem, we don't encourage people to dwell on their faults and failures, their sins. But just because we ignore them doesn't mean they don't exist. They do exist. They are real. We are sinners. There are people who bear the scars of the things we have done to them.

We have wounded God. When Christ appeared in the upper room, he showed the disciples the wounds in his hands and his feet and his side. We put those wounds there. Every time we have done something or said something hurtful to another person, we have wounded Christ.

And yet God forgave us the moment we did those things. Christ died for us long before we repented of our sins. When we finally repented and turned to God, we found the door had always been open. God was just waiting for us to come home. Reconciliation was easy, because we had already been forgiven.

God has forgiven us so much. Has someone crucified your child? That's what we did to the Son of God, and yet God forgave us long before we ever asked for forgiveness. From the Cross Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them. For they know not what they do." He was praying for us.

When we remember how much we have been forgiven, it becomes easy to forgive others. Not to forgive people the little things they have done to us when God has forgiven us so much, would be like a man who had been forgiven a debt of many millions of dollars refusing to forgive someone who owed him twenty dollars.

Why is it so important to Jesus that we forgive one another? Because the Kingdom cannot come on earth until we break of cycle of hurting. I hurt a phrase the other day that is so true, "Hurt people hurt people." It is true. When people are hurt, they lash out to hurt others. And the ones they hurt then lash out. It is a terrible cycle of hurt engendering hurt. The only way it can be stopped is if someone says, "I refuse to let your pain infect my soul. Rather than becoming angry and bitter and getting involved in this hurting business, I will continue to love you and want you to have a happy and peaceful life."

May years ago I had a church member who was very angry with me. I went to her house to talk things out with her. My experience has been that when someone is angry with you and you sit down with them and listen to them in a non-defensive manner that eventually you can work out your differences. You may have to let them vent some first. But eventually they run out of steam, and then you can work on solutions. However, that doesn't always work. The longer I listened to this woman's complaints, the angrier she became and the more outlandish her accusations became. She accused me of plots and schemes that were so intricate and confusing that I couldn't even understand what she was talking about. Since then I've learned of a concept called projection.

People have a tendency to think that others think and act like them. We project our thoughts and feelings on others. This woman was projected her way of thinking on me. She was accusing me of the things she would have done if she had been in my place.

After listening to her abusive language for too long, I realized the conversation was futile. Finally, I gave up and went home.

As I drove home thinking about the thing she had accused me of, I got angry. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. I was so angry with her false accusations that I prayed that God would send down fire from heaven and destroy her. I hated her. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't stop hating her.

I had allowed her to infect my soul. I was so angry that I began snapping at my wife and children. I was hurt, and I start hurting others.

It wasn't until I learned that this woman had grown up in a terribly sick and dysfunctional home and that she was married to an abusive husband that I was able to forgive her. I realized that she had a lifetime of terrible pain and anger, and she was just pouring out a small portion of it on me. I didn't have to pray that God would punish her. She was already suffering far more than I would have wished on her.

More importantly, I realized that I was passing on the hurt which had been inflicted on her. I decided to forgive her. It wasn't so much for her sake, but for the sake of the people I cared about and for myself. I had to stop the cycle of hurting.

We are all sinners. We live in a sinful world. We have all been hurt, and, as someone has said, hurt people do hurt people. Because we have been hurt, we have hurt people.

At some point the cycle of hurting has to stop. It can only stop when someone says, "I refuse to other people's pain and anger infect my soul. I choose to be a person of love and good will. I choose to want good for people, regardless of what they may say or do to me."

Christ has called the church to break the cycle of pain and hatred that has gone on since the days of Cain and Abel. On the cross Christ set the example. We have been forgiven. Let us do the same for one another.

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