

FORGIVING OTHERS – A KINGDOM PRINCIPLE

Speaker: Rev. Dr. Cecil Clements

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Scripture: Matthew 18: 21-35 (NLT)

Then Peter came to Him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"

"Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. (It says ten thousand talents. One talent was actually equal to fifteen years of wages for a laborer. So you can imagine, the figure is an astronomical one). he couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold – along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned – to pay the debt"

"But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt." What a wonderful master! Released him and forgave the entire debt!

"But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. (in others words, about 100 denarii. One denarius was equal to a day's wage). He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.

"His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.

"When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.

"That's what My heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart."

Would you pray with me?

Almighty God, would You fill the spaces that we occupy with the beautiful invigorating presence of Your Holy Spirit? Lord, touch our minds and our wills that sometimes can be so stubborn and help us Lord, to know and understand what You are saying to us. Help us Lord, to respond to You as You want us to respond. In and through the matchless name of Your Son, we pray. Amen.

Even before we get into the content or the bulk of what Jesus is talking about, let's look at what prompted this. Peter asked the question: Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or someone who sins against me? Then he gives an answer as well. Is seven times okay? Think about this! Can you imagine that this is Peter who is asking about forgiveness? I read all the accounts of Peter, and I'm thinking – Peter was not the one to be thinking of forgiveness. Peter was the one who would have said, "Hey, if you say something to me, I'm going to give it back to you." That was Peter – the kind of Peter we read about in the scriptures.

And yet, here he is asking about forgiving somebody, not just three times, as the rabbis had said. In rabbinical thought, they said that you can forgive somebody three times, at the most four, and then you don't have to. But Peter is being magnanimous here. He was saying: Let's make it double, and then add another one – seven times. This is the same blustering Peter who acted before he thought in so many ways. But it made me think of what a beautiful transformation is happening to Peter, from the time that Jesus picked him up and said, "Come, follow Me," to where he says, "Lord, about this forgiveness thing."

It made me think about how important association with good people is, association with people who can have a bearing on you, that can change you and make you better.

Proverbs 13:20 says, *"Walk with the wise and become wise, associate with fools and get in trouble."*

1 Corinthians 15:33 *"Do not be deceived; bad company ruins good morals."*

We don't know who Peter had a beef with, whether he and Andrew were having some issues, and he was coming to Jesus and saying, "Lord, would You help me out?" But his question is pertinent. How often should I forgive my brother, or how many times? I think that very often, we love to get a number in our mind so that we can say: Okay, I forgave you seven times. Now the eighth time, I'm really going to give it to you. And you can almost see Jesus looking at Peter with love, and maybe a little bit of humor, a twinkle in His eye maybe, putting His arm around Peter and saying: "You know Peter, it's not seven times seven. How about seventy times seven?" and you can see Peter's eyes almost popping out as he does the math. And he's thinking: 490?

He looks at Jesus and realizes that it's not the number. And even as he's probably thinking about this, Jesus goes on to point out something – that there is a principle that those of us who are part of God's kingdom must be aware of. Jesus recognizes that this is a teaching moment, and so then, He tells the story that we just read:

A story is about a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. They bring this man who owes him so much; it's a huge debt and the king rightfully says, "Sell him, his wife and his children. Whatever you get, let it come in." And the man pleads with him. The king has pity and says, "Okay, I'll forgive you your debt, and I'll also release you from that amount." Then the man goes out and he catches hold of somebody else who owes him a fraction of what he owed the king, and he demands that it be paid. When that man responds the same way that he did, crying out for more time, the man has no pity, no mercy. He puts him in prison. Then the people who were watching, go and tell the king. The king is outraged. He says, "Couldn't you have shown mercy to him the way I showed mercy to you," and he throws him in prison to be tortured or tormented.

There's a principle that Jesus was trying to bring to the attention of His disciples, and for you and me this morning. You remember that some time back, we had looked at Matthew's gospel 17:24-27, where Jesus was asked whether He pays the temple tax. We gleaned from that a kingdom principle which was: Where there are rights and responsibilities, responsibility outweighs the rights. Responsibility is key in the kingdom. I believe that this is another principle that Jesus is giving us. What is that principle?

Forgiveness is not an option; it's an obligation.

As citizens of God's kingdom, forgiving others is not an option; it's an obligation on our part. Why? Because, as we see from the story, mercy begets mercy. Or the forgiven must forgive. It's a mandate. It's something that is non-negotiable for those of us who are citizens of God's kingdom.

That's the point of the story: We have been forgiven much by God, therefore, we also should forgive.

Have we been forgiven? Yes! We know that. Not only do we know it experientially as we look at our own lives and understand the peace that comes when we are forgiven, but scripture tells us that as well. Look at just the sprinkling of scriptures that remind us.

Psalm 130:3-4

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness.

Luke 1:77

Jesus came to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.

Matthew 26:28

This is My blood which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

We hear that so often as we partake of communion.

Luke 24:27

Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations.

Acts 10:43

Everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.

Ephesians 1:7

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.

We've been forgiven so much. And therefore, Jesus says, "Because you have been forgiven, you too ought to forgive." Forgiveness is not an option; it's an obligation on your part and mine. Now we can say, "Okay! That's what we need to do. I'm a citizen of God's kingdom and what I need to do is to forgive." But knowing what we need to do doesn't automatically work itself out into action. You and I know that. In all the decisions that we make every day, unless we know why, we rarely do what we are supposed to do. Because if we don't know the why and we just do it because one has got to do it, then we become sullen, irritable and resentful. We're like children who get the "Do it because I'm telling you to do it."

But I believe that God has given us a why. Right through in His word, we find that He says that we ought to delight in doing His will; that we do it because we love to do it, we do it because He did it first to us. We look at the enormity of what He has done, and then, out of love for Him we say, "Lord, if You can do that for me, then I want to do it for other people. And I'm not going to do it just because You say that it's got to be done, but out of an incredible amount of love that I have for You."

So, when we look for the why or the motivation, we realize that God forgave us at a staggering cost to Himself. God has forgiven, just like the king. He forgave this servant as a huge cost to himself. His treasury was depleted of all that money, but he was willing to do that out of compassion and mercy. In the same way, all of us have been forgiven so much.

Ray Pritchard says, "We too must see that the sum of our offenses against God through the years is that kind of debt and therefore we too must forgive." So, God forgives us and we forgive others.

A few years back, there was kind of a phenomenon. I don't hear about it now, so I'm assuming that it is not currently prevalent. At that time, people came up to a drive-in restaurant and then paid forward. In other words, they would pay their bill and then say, "Pay for the person behind me." This just caught on. Everybody got captured by the thought of just being generous and paying for somebody else. I'm receiving and I'm paying for somebody else. It reached such proportions in St. Petersburg: At a Starbucks, 378 cars went through the driveway, everybody paying forward. I received it; I come up to the window and the person there says – Oh don't worry about your coffee. It's been paid for by the person who went in front. And you say – Hey, I want to pay for the person behind. From seven in the morning to six in the evening, they just kept paying forward.

McDonald's had a similar kind of thing – 167 cars went by in Illinois. So beautiful! I received, and therefore I want to do something about it. The hostess there says that it was so heart-warming. It was so blessed to be in that window and see what was happening, the smiles on people's faces, the joy that was there. What a wonderful thing!

That's what God is saying to us: I've given to you and now you give to others. I dispensed mercy to you, now you dispense mercy to others. That's our motivation. Our mandate is that we need to do it because God says so; our motivation is to do it because we have received mercy and therefore, mercy begets mercy. But knowing what we need to do and why we need to do it, and in this case forgiveness, we also need to know how to forgive. Sometimes we don't know the steps. We have more questions about forgiveness than answers.

I want to give you a couple of pointers in terms of **how to forgive**.

1. Forgiveness is a choice that we must make.

We choose to forgive. We must get to the point where we say: I know I've been hurt. I'm angry about it. I don't feel like forgiving but I'm making a choice that I'm going to forgive. It's a decision and it's not based on feeling good about it. We do it because it's the right thing to do.

2. We must be proactive with God's love and not reactive to the hurt that has come our way.

We must be proactive with God's love. So we concentrate on connecting with God, and therefore we forgive. Not looking at what has happened and then being reactive to that. Remember, retaliation always has an escalation clause. Always! The moment we react, then it just keeps going. Instead of that, we turn away from this and we say: Mercy I receive from you. I'm going to be proactive with God's mercy in my life. I'm going to forgive regardless of what has happened to me. It in no way minimizes the hurt that has been perpetuated on you. It is not saying you were not hurt. It's not saying you don't have reason to be angry. It's just saying – I release you. I don't want to carry you around wherever I am going.

3. The memory of the hurt takes a while to get distant.

We need to accept that the memory of the hurt takes a while to get distant. I want to read to you something about Corrie Ten Boom where she talks about the time when she was trying to forgive somebody. I'm going to read it verbatim.

Corrie Ten Boom tells of some Christian friends who wronged her in a public and malicious way. For many days, she was bitter and angry until she forgave them. But in the night, she would wake up thinking about what they had done and get angry all over again. It seemed the memory would not go away. Help came in the form of a pastor to whom she confessed her frustration after two sleepless weeks. He told her, "Corrie, up in the church tower is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. When the sexton pulls the rope, the bell peals out 'ding, dong, ding, dong,' and so on. What happens if he doesn't pull the rope again? Slowly the sound fades away. Forgiveness is like that. When we forgive

someone, we take our hand off the rope. And when we do that, then the memory of that gets further and further and more distant and more silent. But if we hold on to that rope, the bell keeps on ringing." So, make sure that you know that the memory of that doesn't disappear the moment you have forgiven, but it takes time for that memory to go.

4. You cannot forget it, but you can choose not to remember it.

So many people say: I can forgive but I can't forget. Well, to forgive and forget is not biblical. It's not something that is found in the bible. Because we can't forget things, or else we'd all be running around with amnesia. But we get a clue as to how to deal with these memories that just persist, that keep coming back to us so often.

In Hebrews 10:17 God says, "Their sins and their lawless acts I will remember no more."

God's forgiveness means that He chooses not to remember. That's how we deal with this recurring memory that keeps coming back to us – by choosing not to dwell on it. When it comes, we treat it as a temptation and say, "I will not deal with that. I will not think about it." Because if you do, then it stays fresh in your mind. Every time it comes to you, you need to treat it as a temptation and replace it with something else.

As we look at this whole idea of forgiveness where we have a mandate to forgive – it's an option, not an obligation. Our motivation: we have been forgiven much, and so we forgive. Mercy has been shown to us, so we too ought to show mercy. And then our modus operandi here on how do we forgive? It's a choice that we make; it's not based on a feeling. A mandate, a motivation, and a modus operandi. But that still leaves us with that last verse.

v. 35 Jesus finishes by saying, "That's what My heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart." He ends on a very serious note. He says, "This is what will happen to you. You'll be turned over to the tormentors, you'll be tortured. Now He's not talking about hell here. Salvation is not based on our forgiving people. Salvation is full and free. The forgiveness that Jesus is talking about is for those of us who have experienced Jesus and are able to forgive in His power. That's the only way that we can forgive.

So, then what is this torture that Jesus talked about? If you know what it is to not forgive, you know that it leads to all kinds of things. You know that it leads to headaches and back pain and ulcers, nightmares and bitterness, all of these things that come and torment us because we haven't forgiven. It's like a piece of poison that we have and we nurture all the time. Sleepless nights that we may sometimes end up with, constant revision of thoughts, we pull thoughts, we get angry. There's not a moment of peace. All of these things get taken care of when we listen to what Jesus is saying and we forgive just as we have been forgiven.

Those are serious words that Jesus has given us in answer to a question about forgiveness that Peter asked: How many times should I forgive? And Jesus says, "It's paramount that you keep on forgiving." That must begin to be a way of life for you, because as you forgive then you're releasing yourself and you're able to continue to enjoy this beautiful association that you have with God.

So beloved, I'd like for us to take a moment and ask ourselves the question: Are there people around me who have hurt me very deeply, who have maligned me, who have said things to me that I'm seething and angry about? Every day I replay it and I say that one day I'll get even. I wonder whether the Holy Spirit is knocking on your heart's door and saying: No. that's not the response of a forgiven son or daughter of God. Your response is to forgive. It's a mandate beloved, it's an obligation on your part. You've got to do it. If you're struggling, just think about how much you have been forgiven and use that as motivation to forgive.

Then think about freeing this will be when you do it. Maybe the other person hasn't said sorry or repented. But even so, when you don't forgive, you end up carrying that person on your back wherever you go. Maybe today is the day that God is saying to you to forgive that person and just enjoy the wonderful benefits of being not only a forgiven son and daughter, but a forgiving son and daughter. Not being tormented or tortured by any of those things but living a beautiful peaceful life.

So beloved, would you just take a moment. Let's bow our heads and allow the Holy Spirit to bring up faces of people whom you haven't forgiven. Then would you forgive? And say: Lord, I don't feel like it. But because You say so, I'm going to do it. Because You have forgiven me, I'm going to do it for Your sake, Lord, I will. Would you do that beloved? Let's just pause and allow you to respond.

Heavenly Father, even as forgiveness has gone out, Master replaced with peace. Lord, unforgiveness has given way to joy. Fill each heart with joy. Master I pray that everyone who has forgiven, maybe only a couple of times, we don't know, that You would just rush into that room, hold them and let them know how proud You are, how much you love them and care for them for being obedient to Your Word. We love You and we want to say thank You so much for forgiving us. That you so much for Your mercy to us. We bless Your holy name. in that name, the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.