



# It's **His Forgiveness** to Give, Not Yours to Withhold

Matthew 18:21-35B

Pastor Jim Rademaker

The room was dimly lit and those in the room knew they would never see each other again. It made it easy to discuss things that really mattered. The tall, tanned, grey-haired man spoke first. "I've been thinking about forgiveness lately. You see, my brother was murdered 20 years ago and the killer was never caught. I always wonder what I'd do if I met him. I don't think I could forgive him. I don't know if I should forgive him."

Someone else spoke quietly, but with conviction. "Forgiveness is really hard when the hurt is deep. I know. My young daughter was sexually assaulted many years ago. It has taken a long time to release my anger and forgive the perpetrator. Sometimes, I'm still not sure that I have." (Cheryl Davis)

What's our default setting when we're wronged? To get back at the person? To get even? To get angry and hold onto our anger? Joseph had every reason in the world to get even with his brothers. They had dumped him in a pit and sold him to slave traders. Joseph wound up in Egypt, where he went from Pharaoh's prison to being in charge of Pharaoh's granary, the food supply of Egypt. When famine hit the land of Israel, his brothers came to him to buy grain.

What a chance for Joseph to get back at his brothers for all that they' done to him! And yet, what does he do instead? He forgives them. "*Do not fear,*" he said, "*for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*"

Have you ever been wronged? Has anyone ever sinned against you? How do you respond? Get even? Get back at them? Get angry, and stay angry for the rest of your life? How about forgive them and let it go? Why would you do that? Why *should* you? They don't *deserve* your forgiveness, do they, after what *they* did? Do *you* deserve God's forgiveness? You and that person have something in common, you've both sinned. Christ forgave you. Will you forgive them?

God's little ones of faith. It's not the Father's will that even one should perish, but ALL come to eternal life! There's a need to care for them, to guard and protect them from stumbling, to rescue those who do stumble, to consider them the most precious thing there is, and to seek them out when they stray, to confront the sinning brother or sister in a humble, loving manner in order to win them to repentance.

And then to loose them from their sin. Declare to them the good news that Jesus has taken their sin upon Himself and been punished in their place. They are now free from their sin, forgiven by God. Through your forgiving them here on earth, they are forgiven in heaven. What you're doing on earth is being done in heaven. God working through you to declare forgiveness of sins. "*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*"

The disciples' spokesman posed a follow-up question. *Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?"* Good question. Something the others were likely wondering as well. How often should I forgive someone? How about three strikes and you're out? Sounds reasonable, even generous. Peter goes even further. Maybe Jesus would be impressed. How about seven times? WOW! Good boy Peter! Did the rest of you disciples hear his impressive answer?

But there's a *deeper* question behind Peter's question of how *often* should I forgive. Underneath that question is the more basic question we all have to answer. *Why?* Why should I forgive in the first place? Why not hold a grudge and strike back? An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth!

If you read in much of the literature on forgiveness, you'll read about the reasons to forgive and the benefits of forgiveness. A lot of good reasons to forgive. Here's a few from *The Forgiveness Project* website: "As I got older, I realized that I couldn't keep holding all of this anger and hate inside me. I needed to get rid of it. I also realized that I was not in control of anyone except for myself and my emotions, and that they could only hurt me if I allowed them to." Another, "If I think about them too much I start to dream of revenge so then I have stop myself because I know revenge will destroy me."

Why do we forgive? What's our *motive* in forgiving someone? Because it's the right thing to do? Because God says so? Because we feel like it? Because the other person deserves it? Because we'll feel better afterwards? Because it will help us let go of the anger, help us get on with our lives? There are a lot of reasons to forgive, many of them good reasons.

Jesus gives a different reason. It's not primarily about us or the other person. We forgive, because we've been forgiven. Remembering the great debt of sin God has forgiven us of, we forgive those who've sinned against us. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. It's when we forget the great debt we've been forgiven, that we have trouble forgiving others.

*"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. Way more than he could ever repay! And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'*

Notice he does two things. He begs for mercy and tries to cut a deal. *"Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything."* Sound like anyone you know? Lord, be patient with me. I've got a long way to go. I'll try harder from now on. I'll try to be better. I'll stop sinning. This time, I'll really surrender all! Just give me one more chance. *"Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything."* There was *no way* in the world he could ever pay everything back, no matter how much time he was given, no matter how many promises he made.

"He could not pay." Neither can you. The debt is too high. There's no way you can pay for all of your sin, even if you tried. Despite all your best promises, your best efforts, you could never pay your sin debt. It's way too high. Like this servant, we're in debt up to our eyeballs. Beyond bankruptcy. Hopeless. And every day that passes, we go further and further in debt.

*And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.* WOW! How amazing is that! The master did the outrageous, crazy, reckless, insanely Gospel thing. He forgave the entire debt. Let it go. Completely forgiven, just like that! Not earned. Not deserved. And the servant walked away scot free!

Our debt of sin we could never repay - gone forever. Free at last! A fresh start. Free to begin a new life. What do you say to that? How to say "thanks" to our wonderful, gracious, forgiving, merciful heavenly Father for all He's done for us?

*But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.'* And the man pleaded just as the servant did with the master. "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back." Never! Off to jail, until you pay back every last cent!

After all his enormous debt was cancelled, to not do the same from one who owed him a few measly dollars! Forgiven so much, yet unable to forgive so little. How would you feel if you were the master who took such pity on him and graciously forgave him so much more? The same way God feels when we, who've been forgiven so much, forgive others so little. How many years has it been and you still won't let go? You still won't forgive. Even after God has forgiven you of so much!

In anger, the master had the man handed over to the jailers to be tortured until he paid his entire debt. Tortured forever! Jesus said, *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*

Sin is inevitable. We are sinners. And when two sinners come together, inevitably, someone will say the wrong thing, do the wrong thing, look at you the wrong way. Sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally. Some of us are just prone to giving offense. Others of us are all too eager to *take* offense. We're so easily offended. As one person put it, "If you want to know how much of the old self you still have in you, consider how much you're offended by others. The longer we've walked with Jesus, the less offended we should be by others, because the less of us there is to offend."

One thing is certain, we will sin against each other, and the closer we live and work together, the more likely that will be. As another person put it, "If you want to avoid sinning against your neighbor, don't have neighbors. Live by yourself. Then you'll just have to worry about sinning against God ... But you'll still be a sinner in need of forgiveness. Just a lonely one." (William Cwirla)

"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Notice what Peter's doing. He's still keeping count. He thinks he's being generous, but he's still keeping count. When can I be done? When can I stop forgiving? What's the limit I have to do? What's the minimum that's required. Okay, what do I *have* to do? Not that I really *want* to.

If I didn't 'have' to, I wouldn't. I'm only forgiving because I 'have' to, not because I want to." Forgiveness, not as a gift, but as a requirement, a law. Forgetting the cross. Forgetting the great debt we were graciously forgiven, and instead, fixated on the small debt we're owed.

Then *our* master summons *us* and says to *us*, '*You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?*'

Do we "have" to forgive, or do we "get" to forgive?

A word about reconciliation. In an article entitled, "*Forgiveness is one thing ... Reconciliation another*" the author reminds us, "Now, we're not necessarily talking about *reconciliation*. Especially in situations where *abuse* is involved. Just because you *forgive* doesn't mean that you should run back and allow yourself to be abused again and again. Reconciliation takes two. And unless the abuser recognizes his or her own problems and takes responsibility and seeks help for [themselves], reconciliation is not going to happen." (Steve Cornell)

Corrie ten Boom, along with her sister and father, were sent to Ravensbruck, a Nazi concentration camp. Her sister and father died there. After the war Corrie returned to Germany to declare the grace of Christ. She writes, "It was 1947, and I'd come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth that they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land. When we confess our sins,' I said, 'God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever.

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a cap with skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush—the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were! That place was Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard - one of the most cruel guards.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course - how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there. ... But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein," - again the hand came out - "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there - I whose sins had again and again been forgiven - and could not forgive. It could not 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 had ever had to do. For I had to do it. "If you do not forgive men 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 as horrible as that.

And still, I stood there, with the 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. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out 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, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "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 then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.

And having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving: I wish I could say it! I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn't. If there's one thing I've learned at 80 years of age, it's that I can't store up good feelings and behavior - but only draw them fresh from God each day.

All the bitterness and anger in our culture today. All the bitterness and anger in us. All the finger pointing and blame. All the attacks and accusations being thrown around. *Lord, how OFTEN will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?* As often as God forgives you. Luther says in the Large Catechism when you forgive another, that's an audible sign to you from God of your own forgiveness. The forgiveness you speak is not your own; it belongs to Jesus. It's His forgiveness to give, not yours to withhold.

You don't get to decide who gets forgiveness and who doesn't. Jesus decided that, on the cross, where He was loaded with all the sin of all people of all time, from the sin of Adam and Eve, to your sin and mine, to the sins of those who haven't even been born yet. All the guilt of all the world, heaped on Jesus on the cross. That all be atoned for; all forgiven. Our Lord never tires of forgiving you. Not seven times, or seventy-seven times, or even seventy times seven times. Our Lord doesn't count. He forgives. It's already been done, at the cross. Once and for all.

Forgiveness begins not in our hearts, but in the merciful heart of God. In the heart that seeks and saves the sinner. In the heart that beats with compassion for the least and the lost, the heart that reaches out to the ungodly and the enemy. The heart of God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish in sin, desiring everyone to turn and live. It's the heart of Jesus who prays, even on the cross, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

The source of forgiveness is the heart of Jesus, pouring out forgiveness on the entire world, on you. Our forgiveness is nothing else than His forgiveness, the overflow, flowing over to our neighbor.

And that evil perpetrated against you that you maybe have trouble forgiving? Like Joseph, you might just be surprised at how God is able to use that for your good ... and even for the good of those who sinned against you. For that's the kind of God He is: *merciful and gracious . . . and abounding in steadfast love.* (James Douthwaite)

