

“Why Should I Forgive?”

Matthew 18:21-35

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There was a story on the web site *Breakpoint* about Willie Williams, a man from Georgia who served more than two decades in prison for crimes he never committed.

In 1985, Williams was accused of kidnapping and rape. He insisted he was innocent, but he was sentenced to forty-five years in prison. For the next twenty-two years, he slept on hard bunks, ate prison hash, and could only dream about the life he might have had.

But he never gave up. And two years ago, he got in touch with the Innocence Project, a nonprofit legal clinic that looks at criminal cases using DNA evidence. They saw he was wrongly convicted on faulty evidence, and brought his case back to court, when Williams was found innocent.

At 44 years old, Williams walked out of prison a free man, and went home to his family. In a few days, he held a news conference and said he wasn't angry about spending half his life behind bars. He showed forgiveness. He said “Anybody can screw up. We're all human.”

How would we react to such tragic injustice? Hopefully, we'll never have to find out. But Williams says that what's made the difference in his life is becoming a Christian in prison. “That's been my rock,” he said. It's what held him together all that time he was labeled a sex offender, waiting for justice.

A bunch of bloggers on a secular web site commented on the case, and most of them couldn't fathom that kind of forgiveness. The only way to get our minds around that kind of forgiveness is to receive it ourselves. That's the kind God offers us through Jesus, the kind that can overcome revenge and bitterness.

In our passage for today, Peter asks Jesus how many times we have to forgive a Christian brother or sister—seven times? The teachers of the Law said you had to be willing to forgive three times for the same sin, but Peter says seven. That's the number for wholeness, or perfection. Peter probably thinks he's being generous.

But Jesus' response is radical. He says don't limit it to seven times. Forgive seventy-seven times! Which is just a way of saying, there's no limit.

There's an ancient song that's recorded in Genesis 4 of the Old Testament. It's sung by a man named Lamech who bragged to his wives:

Adah and Zillah, listen to me;
wives of Lamech, hear my words.
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for injuring me.

If Cain is avenged seven times,
then Lamech seventy-seven times. (Gen. 4:23-24)

That's a sad picture, but it's the way of the world: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, "You hurt me, and I'll hurt you back." Maybe we don't personally strike back with that kind of lethal revenge, but it's where our hearts are sometimes. Just think how we cheer when our hero guns down the bad guys in a movie.

But Jesus is giving us a way to move out of that cycle of anger and bitterness. He isn't saying seventy-seven was the limit of forgiveness. He's saying our default needs to be grace. That's the point of the gospel, the good news about Jesus: every one of us has been forgiven more than we'll ever know.

First, forgiveness is at the center of the Christian life.

There's a reminder of that in the prayer we say every week in our worship service:

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Then Jesus explains,

For if you forgive people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive people their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)

The story of the unmerciful servant that we read this morning illustrates that. Because the bad servant was forgiven a debt of millions of dollars, and he was forgiven his debt. But then he turned around and pounds on a man who owes him a few bucks. He had no sense of forgiveness, no mercy, no proportion. But it all came back on him in the end, on judgment day.

Jesus is saying, if you don't forgive then you don't really know what it is to be forgiven, either. You just see it as a way to get power over others.

So, be ready to forgive. Forgiving is at the center of the Christian life. We love, because God first loved us, and we forgive because he first forgave us. We have to forgive as many times as the person comes back, as many times as they ask, as many times as it takes.

Second, forgiveness means canceling the debt.

I know a man who lost a lot of money in a bad investment, and his family had to move out of their house. His wife said, "I forgive you," but then ever since then she reminds him of how bad his mistake was, but how she forgave him anyway. That's not forgiveness! We have to cancel the debt, to choose to forget.

I'm not saying a hurt doesn't stay with us in some way, or that we don't have scars. But we chose not to be defined by the scars.

After all, what's the alternative? Otherwise, we hold a person's sin and brokenness over them, trying to use the hurt as a tool to manipulate.

We have to throw it away, because it's what God's done for us. Like the prophet Micah says,

You will again have compassion on us;
you will tread our sins underfoot
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19),

And Isaiah says,

I have swept away your offenses like a cloud,
your sins like the morning mist.
Return to me,
for I have redeemed you (Isaiah 44:22).

The thing is, when we don't cancel someone's debt toward us, when we feel like, "You owe me," not only are we hurting them. We're doing the same to ourselves. When we don't forgive, we're compounding the hurt. It's like the difference between a clean wound, and one that's infected. Infection sets in when we get stuck in bitterness.

But Jesus says, I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). As far as he's concerned, our sin is gone forever; the debt's been cancelled. So now he wants us to cancel other people's debt to us. Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 13, his great chapter on love in the church, when he says,

"Love is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Corinthians 13: 5-7).

Always. That's a really big word. And, "no record of wrongs." Paul's saying, there is nothing that needs to destroy our love for one another in God's family. Yes, there will be times we hurt one another. It always happens if we ever allow ourselves to get close to others. That's why he writes in Colossians,

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3: 13-14).

Sometimes we mess up, but love can have the last word.

Now, I have to be really clear on this point. I'm not saying love puts up with garbage or overlooks abuse. I'm not saying if you're in a harmful relationship you just let that stuff go on. You don't. You do what it takes to protect yourself, because letting someone harm you physically or mentally isn't love. It's not loving yourself, and it's not even loving to the person doing the hurting, because it's letting them get stuck in something that's not God's will.

That leads to the next point:

Third, forgiveness doesn't undo accountability.

Did you know there was a bar named "the Office." The guys loved it, because they could call their wives and say, "Sorry, honey, I'm stuck at the office." Sometimes, there's not enough accountability, is there?

But accountability is part of the equation. When we hear Jesus say we have to forgive, we also need to remember what he said the passage before it. He says there that if a brother or sister refuses to turn away from their sin—if refuse to stop a hurtful behavior, we have to hold them accountable. Both go together and keep our fellowship healthy.

It's easy to overlook a hurt and pretend it doesn't matter. That's being passive.

Or to judge too harshly, and to refuse to forgive. That's being aggressive.

But Jesus says we need to speak the truth in love. That's not passive, and it's not aggressive; it's being assertive. It's a hard lesson, and I have to keep on learning it.

So, along with forgiving people, we need to also help them be accountable so they grow to be more like Jesus.

It's why our church has a clear sexual abuse prevention policy. And we have a clear process for accountability for when a church officer or member sins some major way.

It's why we call our kids when they're out, to make sure they're safe and where they're supposed to be. We have to remember accountability.

Four, forgiveness means being grateful.

Whenever I'm tempted to hold a grudge, God reminds me my debt to him is greater than anyone's debt toward me. It's like John Newton, the ex-slave trader who became a Christian and quit the slave trade. He worked to abolish the slave trade, and he wrote the most famous Christian hymn, Amazing Grace. You know the words,

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."

When he was an old man, he said, "I have learned two things:

how I am a very great sinner,

but I have a very great Savior."

It's a lesson we all have to learn, and when we do, we can extend grace, undeserved and surprising love, to others.