

Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Part 2

Mt 18:21-35

ABC 6/7/20

Once upon a time, there was a man bitten by a dog which was found to be rabid. The man rushed to the hospital where tests revealed he'd contracted rabies. At the time, there was no cure. His doctor had the difficult task of telling him his condition was incurable & terminal. *Sir, we'll do all we can to make you comfortable. There's nothing more we can do. My best advice is you put your affairs in order as soon as possible.* The dying man sank back on his bed in shock, but asked for pen & paper. He then set to work, writing feverishly. An hour later, the doctor returned & the man was still writing. The doctor said, *I'm glad to see you're working on your will.* The man responded, *This ain't no will. This is a list of people I'm going to bite before I die!*<sup>1</sup>

Many of us live & die with that kind of list, not on paper but in our hearts & minds. A list of people who've wronged, hurt, or mistreated us & we've never forgiven. As we saw last week in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18), we're to forgive as we've been forgiven by God. The overall meaning of the parable is clear but some of the details raise questions which we'll look at this morning. Because of the context & the audience Jesus told this parable to, the disciples, it appears it's about Christians forgiving other Christians. Do Christians have trouble forgiving at times? Of course. I know this because I have trouble with it & so do you. Someone may say something you don't like or agree with & every time you see them after that, anger or the desire to set them right rises in your heart. Bitterness is churned up by remembering some injustice you haven't let go of. No Christian is immune from this kind of problem. So those who get nervous because this guy is so unforgiving, not believing that Christians can be like this, possibly haven't looked into their own heart. But again, the application of the parable is obvious: Compared to our sins against God, our sins against each other are trivial, so how can we be so petty as to not forgive each other? For a Christian to be willfully unforgiving is unthinkable. We who've been forgiven by God of the massive debt of sin we owe have no right to withhold forgiveness from our fellow sinners. In fact, Scripture plainly commands us to forgive in the same manner as we've received forgiveness, we're to forgive **each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you** (Eph 4:32). Since God commands us to forgive others, refusing to do so is an act of disobedience against Him. Yet we must admit that forgiveness doesn't always come easily. Often we don't forgive as quickly or as graciously as we should.

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<sup>1</sup> Told by Gary Inrig, *The Parables*, p 63

Forgiveness requires us to set aside our selfishness, accept with grace the wrongs others have committed against us, & not demand what we think is our due. Let's read it again: **21-35**

I believe the severity the punishment the king gives the unforgiving servant is descriptive of how God disciplines unforgiving believers. As parents deal harshly with a rebellious child, God can use harsh measures to correct a disobedient Christian. Notice how the king addressed the unforgiving servant: **You wicked slave**. Would God refer to one of His own children as **wicked**? He certainly isn't blind to our wickedness & this slave was behaving in a way that was undeniably **wicked**. Sin is **wicked**, whether committed by a believer or unbeliever. But unforgivingness in a believer is more **wicked** because the Christian's refusal to forgive is a slight against God's grace on which he depends for salvation.

**1. What is forgiveness?** God's forgiveness is His undeserved, unearned compassion that doesn't hold the sinner guilty but completely passes by the transgression because His Son took the punishment for it. When we're forgiving, no matter what someone has done to us, we don't remain angry, desire vengeance, or hold a grudge. We pass by the wrong & extend love to them. That's forgiveness & it's a godlike character trait. I'm convinced forgiveness is the most godlike favor we can extend to others. If it's our desire to be Christ-like we must possess & demonstrate the attitude of forgiveness. We're never more like our heavenly Father than when we forgive someone. Forgiveness is necessary both because God is just & because all humans are guilty of sin & deserving of death. Rather than simply ignoring the guilt of sin, God the judge became the One who was judged for the guilt of men; the guilt was punished justly, but the guilty receive forgiveness instead of punishment. God didn't unfairly or abusively punish His Son, but Christ submitted to His Father's will joyfully & willingly. This forgiveness should lead all those who've received it to rejoice & praise God for His mercy & grace. But can God really be just & merciful at the same time? If He forgives sin rather than punishes it, is He acting unjustly? Didn't God say, **I will not acquit the wicked** (Ex 23:7)? Scripture makes very clear that God is both just & merciful, but it isn't immediately obvious how He can be both. But an explanation is provided in Christ's atonement. Through His perfectly sinless, obedient life on earth Jesus bore our griefs & carried our

sorrows, &, on the cross, He was pierced for our transgressions & crushed for our iniquities. Why? Because God **has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him** (Is 53:4-6). Jesus **bore our sins in His body on the cross** (1 Pt 2:24). God remains just when He mercifully forgives our sin because Christ has stood in our place. Though He wasn't personally sinful, He took our guilt upon Himself & suffered the punishment we deserved. In forgiving His people, God doesn't wink at sin. He administers the just penalty for sin but a Substitute bears it in our place. Justice is served. Divine forgiveness is rooted in the substitutionary or vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ. There's no more important moment in a person's life than when they go from being under God's condemnation to enjoying His favor. Accordingly, Scripture calls Christians to respond in gratitude to this wonderful gift & to forgive one another. But this parable raises some questions. I originally had 10 questions but narrowed it down & combined some to simply 2.

## **2. Did the king renege on the forgiveness of the servant's debt? 27, 34**

Does this suggest that God might go back on His forgiveness of us? Is Jesus teaching that forgiven believers might be unforgiven later & punished eternally? The king's response is so severe it causes many to think the unforgiving servant can't possibly represent a true believer. They assume punishment this harsh must represent hell & since no genuine believer is ever subject to the threat of hell, this man must represent an unsaved person. Others cite this parable as an argument in favor of the view that Christians can lose their salvation. Again, it's always dangerous to read parables as if every detail has theological significance. The purpose of this parable is to illustrate the truth that we must forgive as God forgives us. We can never make a parable teach a doctrine or duty that's contrary to plain Scripture elsewhere. But if there's a point being made here, it deals with the present consequences of an unforgiving spirit, not the eternal. Does this teach we can lose our salvation, become unforgiven once we've been forgiven? Of course not! The security of the believer is clearly taught in Scripture (Jn 10:28-29). Again, this is about the duty we have to forgive our brethren & the wickedness of not forgiving when one offends us. This is a difficult passage & it can be read to mean the unforgiving servant was saddled with the same debt that had already been forgiven. But that causes some problems. Does it suggest that God will withdraw

His forgiveness from those who fail to forgive others? Certainly not. That would make our salvation hinge on our own works. It would also suggest that God is fickle, granting forgiveness but withdrawing it later. Scripture plainly says He will not & cannot do that (Ps 103:12; Is 43:25; Jer 31:34; Heb 8:12). He doesn't forgive & then rescind His forgiveness. Could it be the unforgiving servant represents a professing believer who actually was never saved to begin with? This is a popular view. Those who believe this say this servant pictures someone who hears the gospel & embraces it superficially, but never really receives the forgiveness offered in Christ. But the king clearly forgives him his huge debt, implying He was God's true child. I think it's best to see the punishment given as discipline, not eternal condemnation. The king **handed him over to the torturers**, not the executioners, **until he should repay all that was owed him** (34). What was now owed to the king? It seems since the earlier debt was already legally forgiven, the remaining debt was this man's duty to show the same kind of mercy & forgiveness to others. Until he forgives he'd experience discipline. Though the guilt of sin is forgiven so it will never be an issue in eternal judgment, God may permit the consequences of sin to be severe in order to motivate us to obey. Therefore, the **torturers** or **tormentors** represent the rod of God's discipline. The lesson of the parable is that Christians who refuse to forgive others will be subject to the severest kind of discipline until they learn to forgive as they've been forgiven (35). Christians should be the most forgiving people on earth, because we've been forgiven as no one else has. & when we refuse to forgive we're worthy of discipline from the hand of our loving Father. If God in His grace has forgiven us for a lifetime of sin, who are we to withhold forgiveness from others?

What kind of discipline does an unforgiving Christian experience? It's been said, *The moment I start hating a man I become his slave. He even controls my thoughts. I can't escape his tyrannical grasp on my mind. When the waiter serves me steak it might as well be stale bread & water. The man I hate will not permit me to enjoy it.*<sup>2</sup> Unforgiveness leads to bitterness, hatred, & discontent. We shouldn't be shocked that God disciplines His own because that's partly how He conforms us to image of His Son. We also know from Heb 12 that God chastens & disciplines His children. Every

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<sup>2</sup> S.I. McMillen, *None of These Diseases*, p

Christian at some point is turned over to some tormentors, representing the means by which God puts us under the stress, difficulty, & pressure of chastening until we confess our sin. If you're not forgiving someone, the Lord will put you under His discipline until your response is right. & when God chastens His children it's always perfectly evenhanded. While always angry at sin, He disciplines us because He loves us (Heb 12:6, 10–11). If we forget the forgiveness we've received & refuse to forgive fellow believers (as the 1<sup>st</sup> slave did), God causes us to endure such **torturers** as stress, hardships, troubled consciences, lack of joy, & other trials until we deal with the sin. We must reflect God's forgiveness because we've experienced forgiveness to a much greater degree. To forgive is to let go of the wrong, of the desire for revenge, & in the end, a release of the situation to the Lord proving you trust Him. An unforgiving spirit can be *a refusal to let go a wrong suffered that locks a person into a prison of his own making, where resentment, bitterness, & anger become one's constant companion.*<sup>3</sup> God withholds blessing because of our grudge-filled, selfish spirit that refuses to forgive.

**3. Is repentance necessary for forgiveness?** Let me answer as clearly as I can: Yes... & No. Bear with me & hopefully you'll see what I believe the Bible teaches. To be fair, Jesus doesn't explicitly address this in the parable. Its context, however, is significant. The entire chapter is Jesus teaching the disciples, & includes the passage on church discipline (15–20). When a Christian sins against another believer there's a process to be followed in hopes of bringing about repentance & restoration. But at each stage, if the offending person refuses to repent, the next level of discipline is initiated. At the end of the process, if nothing else works, Jesus concludes, *treat them as you would a Gentile & a tax collector* (17b). When we understand that vss 15–20 describe what to do with the unrepentant, then we're in a position to understand Peter's question & Jesus' answer in vss 21-22. Peter thought he was being gracious in suggesting **up to 7 times** (21), but Jesus replies, **I do not say to you, up to 7 times, but up to 70 times 7** (22). These vss are often cited out of context, so the contrast with vss 15–20 is lost. But unless Jesus is contradicting Himself (which He cannot

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<sup>3</sup> Inrig, *Parables*, 64

do), we have to understand vs 21–22 as meaning what Christians are to do when someone sins against them & truly repents. Therefore, ...

**A. Repentance is required to forgive.** In the parable it appears, both servants were penitent when their debts were exposed (26, 29). Every sinner should be as overcome by his sin as these servants were by their debts (Mt 5:3–12; Lk 18:13). They both repented & the 1<sup>st</sup> man was forgiven by the king. The 2<sup>nd</sup> man wasn't forgiven & the 1<sup>st</sup> servant was held accountable for not forgiving him. Jesus said in Lk 17, **If your brother sins ... & if he repents, forgive him. & if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him (3-4).** While God's offer of forgiveness is unconditional (Mt 11:28; Jn 3:16), forgiveness itself is conditioned upon repentance (Mt 21:32; Mk 1:15; Acts 2:38). Rom 10:13 says, **whosoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.** This also means that those who don't call on the name of the Lord won't be saved. 1 Jn 1:9 reminds us that **If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** God doesn't forgive those who refuse to ask for it. John the Baptist was justified in refusing baptism to the Pharisees until they showed the reality of their profession of repentance (Mt 3:8). God forgives us when we repent (Mk 1:15, Lk 13:3,5, Acts 3:19). He doesn't grant forgiveness to those who refuse to repent. God requires repentance & so must we for full fellowship and reconciliation to occur. It's also crucial to remind ourselves of the biblical definition of *repentance*. Far more than merely saying one is sorry, *repentance* refers to a 180-degree turn, a change of action so one no longer commits the sins in question. One may sin in new areas, leading to the frequent need for forgiveness, but continuing to commit the same sin repeatedly against another person usually demonstrates that no true repentance has occurred. Forgiveness is a two-way process: repentance on the part of the offender & pardon on the part of the offended. Repentance is required for forgiveness. We all know we've been saved by grace but we sadly turn into legalists when we deal with each other in this area of forgiveness. So...

**B. Repentance isn't required to forgive.** Many Christians believe they're justified in withholding forgiveness as long as the one who wronged them refuses to admit their sin. They think that God, who hates injustice, would never want them to suffer an injury & simply forgive the offender

unconditionally. They believe they're obeying the command of Col 3:13, which says, **just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you** forgive, because, after all, God doesn't forgive apart from our repentance. Believers experience 2 kinds of forgiveness by God. The 1<sup>st</sup> is once & for all & is permanent. When a person trusts in Jesus as Savior, all their sins (past, present, & future) are judicially forgiven, totally & eternally. But because we're still subject to the temptations & weaknesses of the flesh, we sin even after we're saved. For that sin we need God's ongoing forgiveness & cleansing, not to preserve our salvation but to restore the broken relationship with Him that the sin causes. Jesus had these 2 aspects of forgiveness in mind when He said, **He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; & you are clean** (Jn 13:10). Of course, believers' forgiveness of each other has no power to cleanse sin as God's forgiveness continues to cleanse theirs. Nevertheless, our forgiveness of each other should reflect the 2 kinds of forgiveness we receive from God. We're to have an internal, general spirit of forgiveness that's ready to forgive whether or not the person has asked or ever asks for forgiveness. That forgiveness should be constant & unchanging, reflecting a divinely empowered love that Peter says **covers a multitude of sins** (1 Pt 4:8). If & when the offending person repents, then relational forgiveness is happily given & the broken relationship is restored.

We've all encountered people who don't repent or even acknowledge any wrong doing. How does this change our responsibility to forgive? Does it? I don't think so. We can & we must forgive them from the heart, especially other Christians. After all, Jesus tells us, **love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you** (Lk 6:27-28). Are we to do less for fellow believers? Of course not. These enemies don't stop being our enemies when we love & bless them. They haven't asked for our forgiveness. They're content being our enemy & making life difficult for us. It's been said, *We are to bless them, & that blessing means that our part of the inward forgiveness has happened. The opposite of forgiveness is holding a grudge, but blessing is the opposite of holding a grudge, & so blessing is a kind of forgiving.*<sup>4</sup> I find it helpful to consider our Savior's words when He was on the cross. He said, **forgive them; for they**

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/can-i-forgive-someone-who-doesnt-confess-wronging-me>

**do not know what they are doing** (Lk 23:34; cf Acts 7:60). Jesus was setting an example for us to follow. He prayed for those who killed Him. He prayed for their forgiveness. & **while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously** (1 Pt 2:23). Even after multiple offenses, the offended Christian must be prepared to forgive, even eager to forgive. Even the hardest & most deliberate offender should never be permanently written off; rather, complete forgiveness & reconciliation should remain our goal. Rom 5:20 tells us, **where sin increased, grace abounded all the more**. If we are like Christ, we won't allow a brother's sin to abound more than our grace. We must keep short accounts. Of course, there's a difference between granting forgiveness & re-establishing trust. When someone sins against you, he destroys trust in the relationship. Forgiveness is granted freely & graciously, but trust is earned over time.

The bottom line is we're to be known as a forgiving people, because we've been forgiven as no others on earth. When we're not forgiving, we're living in opposition to our being in Christ. When we refuse to forgive fellow Christians we cut ourselves off from God's relational forgiveness that cleanses us of the sins we continue to commit. We also forfeit the inner peace, power, joy, & spiritual life that only close communion with the Lord can produce. Forgiveness is essentially a matter of the heart. This is important because we often think forgiveness is about what we do or what we say. But it's possible to say kind words of forgiveness while harboring anger & bitterness within. Forgiveness begins in the heart & eventually works its way outward. There's a profound sense in which all forgiveness, even forgiving someone who hurt you deeply, is between you & God. Other people may or may not understand it, or recognize it, or own up to their need to receive it. Forgiveness in its essence is a decision made on the inside to refuse to live in the past. It's a conscious choice to release others from their sins against you. It doesn't deny the pain or change the past, but it does break the cycle of resentment that binds you to the wounds of yesterday. Forgiveness allows you to let go & move on. You can, & should, forgive even when other people make no confession. You can forgive without a restoration of the relationship. You can forgive when the other person has done nothing to earn forgiveness because forgiveness is like salvation, it's a



gift that's freely given & cannot be earned. You can forgive & the other person may never even know about it because forgiveness is a matter of the heart. We must always be open &, by God's grace, eager to extend forgiveness. We mustn't harbor hatred or malice in our heart toward our offender. We must understand forgiveness involves 2 parties not just one, but we can only control ourselves. By God's grace & power we can & must overcome anger & resentment. We must release our bitterness to God, commit those who wrong us to Him, & always be ready & willing to forgive & reconcile. Then when the offender does request forgiveness we can immediately say, *Forgiven!* There's no deliberation because we've been ready & eager to grant them forgiveness & have already done so in our heart. Let me also say that not every offense requires repentance. Let's not be so thin-skinned & self-centered that every time someone says or does something that offends us that we require repentance from them. Many offenses are unintentional, & instead of becoming offended & requiring repentance we should follow the advice of Prov 19:11: **A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, & it is his glory to overlook a transgression.**

We're always responsible to forgive in the sense of never holding grudges & bitterness. Without this, we'd be unable to reach out in love to bring about healing or to help a person grow & get right with the Lord. But on the hand, we aren't able to forgive in the sense of ignoring persistence in sin by a stubborn & rebellious believer. We have the responsibility to rebuke in love & refuse intimate fellowship if the sinning believer is unwilling to confess & deal with the sin (Mt 18:15-20). The goal is never revenge but restoration & healing. It's our desire to see them repent & get their life right with God. Instead of giving in to revenge, we can soften our hearts toward those who have hurt us when we humbly admit that we, too, have hurt others. It's only by God's grace that we can enjoy His goodness toward us at all. Just as important, we can have faith that God will avenge if necessary (Lev 19:18, Rom 12:19-21) & that He'll hold each one accountable (Rom 14:12; Heb 4:13). We don't need to worry because our pain doesn't go unnoticed by our Lord (Ps 147:3). With that in mind, we can demonstrate a deeper trust in God & be led to pray for those who've hurt us. Yes, forgiveness can be granted without the offender ever knowing they've hurt us. But the ultimate purpose of forgiveness is the healing of a relationship. This healing occurs only when the offender

repents & demonstrates remorse & the offended one grants a pardon & demonstrates loving acceptance.

**Conclusion** The secret of forgiveness is grace. God's grace to us creates the obligation we have to forgive others. Grace received means grace displayed. **Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?** (33). The phrase **should you not** could be translated, *wasn't it necessary?* There's nothing optional about forgiving one another because it's the logic of Calvary. The duty to forgive isn't grounded in society's needs but in the cross of Christ. What Jesus did shows what we must do. We're to be **forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you** (Eph 4:32). Forgiveness is a choice because it's God's will for us. But it's also available because of the power of God in us. Forgiveness is the great evidence that we've become new creatures in Christ & that His Holy Spirit lives within us. Believers should, in the midst of an extremely angry, merciless, unkind world, extend kindness. We have the greatest, purest, highest example of forgiveness in Jesus. When He hung on the cross, condemned to death by evil men who plotted to murder Him, who produced lying witnesses to convict Him, as He surveyed the howling mob assembled to cheer His suffering, Jesus the Son of God, the One who knew no sin, the only truly innocent Man who ever walked this sin-cursed planet, in His dying moments uttered words that still ring across the centuries: **Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing** (Lk 23:34). Those words sweep away all our stupid excuses. They reveal the barrenness of our heart; they rip the cover off our unrighteous anger & show it for what it is. Many of us say, *If only the people who hurt me would show some remorse, some sorrow, then maybe I'd forgive them.* But since that rarely happens, we use it as an excuse to continue in our bitterness, anger, & desire to get even. Consider Jesus on the cross. No one seemed very sorry. Even as He said those words, the crowd laughed, mocked, & cheered. Those who passed by hurled insults at Him. They taunted Him, **Let *this* Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!"** Those who were crucified with Him were also insulting Him (Mk 15:32). When He died, the people who put Him to death were quite pleased with themselves. They didn't repent & ask for forgiveness. Pilate washed his hands of the whole affair. The Jewish leaders despised Jesus

with a fierce, irrational hatred. They were happy to see Him suffer & die. The forces of darkness had done their work & the Son of God would soon be in the tomb. No one said, *I was wrong. This is a mistake. Forgive me.* & yet He said, **Father, forgive them.** That's precisely the attitude we must have if we're going to follow Jesus. We must say it to people who hurt us deliberately & repeatedly. We must say it to those who intentionally attack us. We must be willing to say it to those who casually & thoughtlessly wound us. We must say it to those closest to us. & we must say it to our fellow Christians.

2 final thoughts: 1) Forgiveness isn't an optional part of the Christian life. It's a necessary part of what it means to be a Christian. If we're going to follow Jesus, we must forgive. We have no other choice. & we must forgive as God has forgiven us: freely, completely, graciously, totally. The miracle we have received is a miracle we pass on to others. 2) We will forgive to the extent we appreciate how much we've been forgiven. The best incentive to forgiveness is to remember how much God has forgiven you. Think of how many sins He's forgiven you. Think of the punishment you deserved that didn't happen because of God's grace. Your willingness to forgive is in direct proportion to your remembrance of how much you've been forgiven. You are never more like Jesus than when you forgive in love. The only question that remains is the most basic one: Have you been forgiven by God or are you still carrying the heavy burden of your own sin? God is calling you to repent & turn to Him for forgiveness right now. If you've done that, how forgiving of others are you? May God soften our hearts to hear the truth. & may God give us courage do the hard things & let go of our bitterness, give up our anger, turn away from our resentment, stop keeping score, & enter into the peace of extending forgiveness to each other.