

Studies in the Gospel of Matthew #51

Learning to Forgive

Matt 18:21-35

Introduction:

1. Forgiveness is not natural to man.
 - a. Because it is so foreign to fleshly human nature, people find it very difficult to forgive others.
 - b. King Louis XII of France articulated the feeling of many people when he said, "Nothing smells so sweet as the dead body of your enemy."
2. Yet nothing so characterizes the new nature of Christians as forgiveness, because nothing so characterizes the nature of their Lord.
 - a. Jesus' most striking and humanly incomprehensible words from the cross were, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing"
 - b. After being betrayed, falsely convicted, beaten, spat upon, and unjustly nailed to a cross to die an agonizing death, the Son of God harbored no hatred for His tormentors but instead offered them forgiveness.
3. Although Joseph had been terribly wronged by his jealous brothers when they sold him into slavery, he held no grudge.
 - a. Years later, when they were in the midst of a great famine and he was the only person who could help them, he was quick to offer his forgiveness, to embrace them in love, to provide the food they needed, and even to give them the lush region of Goshen to live in.
 - b. When they had begged his forgiveness and fallen down before him, he "said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive. So therefore, do not be afraid; I will provide for you and your little ones.' So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them" ([Gen. 50:19-21](#)).
4. One of the reasons David was a man after God's own heart was his own forgiving and merciful heart.
 - a. Although King Saul repeatedly tried to kill David with a javelin and pursued him relentlessly in the hills of Judah with his army, David not only refused to harm Saul because he was the Lord's anointed but even refused to harbor any hatred against him
 - b. When Shimei asked David's forgiveness for having cursed and thrown stones at him, David was quick to show him mercy, despite the insistence of his officers that the man deserved to be put to death
5. Forgiveness reflects the highest human virtue, because it so clearly reflects the character of God.
 - a. A person who forgives is a person who emulates godly character.
 - b. Nothing so much demonstrates God's love as His forgiveness.
 - c. A person who does not forgive is therefore a person lacking in godly character and without Christlike love, no matter how orthodox his theology or how outwardly impeccable his morals appear to be.
 - d. An unforgiving Christian is a living contradiction of His new nature in Christ.
6. Christians need to forgive because they themselves need forgiveness.
 - a. We are Spiritual children and, like all children, are ignorant, weak, selfish, disobedient, and regularly in need of forgiveness, both from God and from each other.
 - b. Forgiveness is therefore the key to spiritual unity in the church, because it is the key to love and the key to all meaningful relationships.
 - c. Christians are at their best when they are forgiving.
 - d. Because they themselves have been forgiven so much by God, they, of all people, should be most forgiving of others, especially of fellow believers.

Forgiveness

The scene is a courtroom trial in South Africa. A frail black woman stands slowly to her feet. She is over seventy years old. Facing her from across the room are several white security police officers. One of them, Mr. van der Broek, has just been tried and found guilty in

the murders of first the woman's son and then her husband. He had come to the woman's home, taken her son, shot him at point-blank and then burned the young man's body while he and his officers partied nearby.

Several years later Mr. van der Broek and his cohorts returned to take away her husband as well. For months she heard nothing of his whereabouts. Then, almost two years after her husband's disappearance, Mr. van der Broek came back to fetch her. How vividly she remembered that night. She was taken to a river bank where she was shown her husband, bound and beaten but still strong in spirit, lying on a pile of wood. The last words she heard from his lips as Mr. van der Broek and his fellow officers poured gasoline over his body and set him aflame were, "Father, forgive them. . ."

Now the woman stands in the courtroom and listens to the confessions of Mr. van der Broek. A member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission turns to her and asks, "So what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who has so brutally destroyed your family?" "I want three things," begins the old woman calmly, but confidently. "I want first to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned so that I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial."

She pauses, then continues. "My husband and son were my only family. I want, secondly, therefore, for Mr. van der Broek to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining in me." "And finally," she says, "I would like Mr. van der Broek to know that I offer him my forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive. This was also the wish of my husband. And so, I would kindly ask someone to come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so that I can take Mr. van der Broek in my arms, embrace him and let him know that he is truly forgiven." As the court assistants come to lead the elderly woman across the room, Mr. van der Broek faints, overwhelmed by what he has just heard.

And as he struggles for consciousness, those in the courtroom, family, friends, neighbors - all victims of decades of oppression and injustice - begin to sing, softly but assuredly, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." - copied

I. The Inquiry About Pardoning – vs 21

21 Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

- The inquiry is commendable.
- If one wants to know something of importance in the matter of spirituality and conduct, ask Jesus Christ, not psychologists or psychiatrists or other so-called counselors of our day.
- Christ has the answer, they do not!

A. The Source of the Inquiry - "Then came Peter to him"

1. Not surprisingly, Peter was the one who voiced the inquiry here
2. Peter was the most outspoken of the disciples, and he would speak up when no one else would.
3. When puzzled Peter did not hesitate to voice his perplexity to Christ.
4. In light of Jesus' teaching about discipline in the church, Peter wondered how many times Christians as a body and as individuals were obliged to forgive fellow believers who persisted in wrongdoing. How many times should they be allowed to repent and be restored to fellowship?

B. The Subject of the Inquiry – "brother sin against me"

1. The subject of forgiveness was prominent in the talk with Christ
2. Offending others and being offended by others would naturally lead to this subject of forgiveness.
3. Peter's question was: "Does forgiveness have a limit? Granted that a person who commits an offense and repents should be forgiven and restored a few times. But what if he continually falls into sin, over and over again? **How often must I forgive him?"**

C. The Suggestion in the Inquiry – "till seven times"

1. Peter tried to answer his own question by suggesting an answer.
2. The seven times would seem to human nature as being very kind and charitable, but it was limited.
3. The Jews "were very fond of defining and limiting moral obligations" (Williams).
4. Perhaps to demonstrate how magnanimous he thought he was, Peter suggested a limit of **seven times**, which was more than twice that allowed by Jewish tradition.
 - a) *Using references in the book of Amos (see 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; cf. Job 33:29), the rabbis had taken a repeated statement by God against neighboring enemies of Israel and made it into a universal rule for limiting God's forgiveness and, by extension, also man's.*
 - b) *If God forgives men only three times, they spuriously reasoned, it is unnecessary and even presumptuous for men to forgive each other more times than that.*
 - c) *Rabbi Jose ben Hanina, for instance, said, "He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times."*
 - d) *Rabbi Jose ben Jehuda said, "If a man commits an offense once, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a second time, they forgive him; if he commits an offense a third time, they forgive him; the fourth time they do not forgive him."*

II. The Instructions About Pardoning – vs 22

22 Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

- Christ responded to Peter's inquiry with some instructions about forgiveness that would be surprising to the typical Jew.

A. The Respectability of the Instructions – "I say"

1. The highest authority of all is speaking.
2. So what He says must be respected as final.

BYZ **Matthew 18:21** Τότε προσελθὼν αὐτῷ ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν, Κύριε, ποσάκις ἀμαρτήσῃ εἰς ἐμὲ ὁ ἀδελφός μου, καὶ ἀφήσω αὐτῷ; Ἔως ἑπτάκις;

Until seven times? (heōs heptakis;). Peter thought that he was generous as the Jewish rule was three times (Amos 1:6). His question goes back to Matthew 18:15. "Against me" is genuine here. "The man who asks such a question does not really know what forgiveness means" (Plummer).

BYZ **Matthew 18:22** Λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Οὐ λέγω σοι ἕως ἑπτάκις, ἀλλ' ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ.

Until seventy times seven (heōs hebdomēkontakis hepta). It is not clear whether this idiom means seventy-seven or as the Revised Version has it (490 times). If heptakis were written it would clearly be 490 times. The same ambiguity is seen in Genesis 4:24, the LXX text by omitting kai.

BYZ **Matthew 18:23** Διὰ τοῦτο ὡμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ, ὃς ἠθέλησεν συναῖραι λόγον μετὰ τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ.

Make a reckoning (sunārai logon). Seen also in Matthew 25:19. Perhaps a Latinism, rationes conferre. First aorist active infinitive of sunairō, to cast up accounts, to settle, to compare accounts with. Not in ancient Greek writers, but in two papyri of the second century A.D. in the very sense here and the substantive appears in an ostrakon from Nubia of the early third century (Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East, p. 117).

B. The Rejection in the Instructions – “not seven times”

1. Christ rejects the seven-time suggestion of Peter.
2. Peter was still thinking like the scribes and Pharisees and like fallen human nature is always inclined to think.
3. He was thinking in the measurable and limited terms of law, not the immeasurable and unlimited terms of grace.
4. Law keeps count; grace does not.

C. The Rule in the Instructions – “seventy times seven”

1. Instead of seven, Christ uses a play on words and says 490 times, which is another way of saying you should always be ready to forgive.
2. This answer would be shocking to the disciples and to anyone, but this is the high ground of grace.
3. And it is not limited to 490 times, for there would be no salvation if Christ strictly enforced 490.
4. No human has ever sinned so few times.
5. In Luke's account of these instructions, he includes a very vital aspect of forgiveness, namely, the repentance of the wrongdoer.

D. The Repentance in the Instructions – Lu 17:3

3 Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him.

1. All forgiveness in these instructions assumes the guilty party has repented—the illustration given by Christ shows repentance in the acquiescing attitude of the debtors.

III. The Illustration About Pardoning – vs 23-35

- The main character in this parable went through three stages in his experience of forgiveness.

A. He Was a Debtor – vs 23-27

23 Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. 24 And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. 25 But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. 27 Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

1. This man had been stealing funds from the king and, when the books were audited, his crime was discovered.
2. In terms of today's buying power, this was probably equivalent to over \$10 million.
3. But this man actually thought he could get out of the debt.
4. He told the king that, given enough time, he could pay it back.
5. We detect two sins here: pride and a lack of sincere repentance.
 - a) *The man was not ashamed because he stole the money; he was ashamed because he got caught.*
 - b) *And he actually thought he was big enough to earn the money to repay the king's account.*
 - c) *In the economy of that day, a man would have had to work twenty years to earn one talent.*
6. His case was hopeless, except for one thing: The king was a man of compassion.
 - a) *He assumed the loss and forgave the servant.*
 - b) *This meant that the man was free and that he and his family would not be thrown into a debtor's prison.*
 - c) *The servant did not deserve this forgiveness; it was purely an act of love and mercy on the part of the master.*

BYZ **Matthew 18:24** Ἀρξαμένου δὲ αὐτοῦ συναίρειν, προσηνέχθη αὐτῷ εἰς ὀφειλέτης μυρίων ταλάντων.

Ten thousand talents (muriōn talantōn). A talent was 6,000 denarii or about a thousand dollars or 240 pounds. Ten thousand times this is about ten or twelve million dollars, an enormous sum for that period. We live today in the age of national debts of billions of dollars or even of pounds sterling. The imperial taxes of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria for one year were only 600 talents while Galilee and Perea paid 200 (Josephus, Ant. xi. 4). But oriental kings were free in the use of money and in making debts like the native kings of India today.

BYZ **Matthew 18:25** Μὴ ἔχοντος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἀποδοῦναι ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ προαθῆναι, καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰ τέκνα, καὶ πάντα ὅσα εἶχεν, καὶ ἀποδοθῆναι.

BYZ **Matthew 18:26** Πεσὼν οὖν ὁ δούλος προσεκύνη αὐτῷ, λέγων, Κύριε, Μακροθύμησον ἐπ' ἐμοί, καὶ πάντα σοι ἀποδώσω.

BYZ **Matthew 18:27** Σπλαγχνισθεὶς δὲ ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου ἐκείνου ἀπέλυσεν αὐτόν, καὶ τὸ δάνειον ἀφῆκεν αὐτῷ.

The debt (to danion). The loan. Common in the papyri for a loan. The interest had increased the debt enormously. "This heavy oriental usury is of the scenery of the parable" (McNeile).

B. He Was a Creditor – vs 28-30

28 But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. 29 And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. 30 And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

1. The servant left the presence of the king and went and found a fellow servant who owed him 100 pence.
2. The average worker earned one penny a day, so this debt was insignificant compared to what the servant had owed the king.
3. Instead of sharing with his friend the joy of his own release, the servant mistreated his friend and demanded that he pay the debt.
4. The debtor used the same approach as the servant: "Have patience with me and I will pay you all of it!"
5. But the unjust servant was unwilling to grant to others what he wanted others to grant to him.
6. Perhaps he had the *legal* right to throw the man in prison, but he did not have the *moral* right.
7. He had been forgiven himself—should he not forgive his fellow servant?

C. He Became a Prisoner – vs 31-34

31 So when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. 32 Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: 33 Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee? 34 And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

1. The king originally delivered him from prison, but the servant put himself back in.
 - a) *The servant exercised justice and cast his friend into prison.*
 - b) *"So you want to live by justice?" asked the king. "Then you shall have justice!"*
 - c) *Throw the wicked servant in prison and torment him!*
 - d) *I will do to him as he has done to others."*
2. The world's worst prison is the prison of an unforgiving heart.
 - a) *If we refuse to forgive others, then we are only imprisoning ourselves and causing our own torment.*
 - b) *Some of the most miserable people I have met in my ministry have been people who would not forgive others.*
 - c) *They lived only to imagine ways to punish these people who had wronged them.*
 - d) *But they were really only punishing themselves.*
3. Our Lord's warning is serious.
 - a) *He did not say that God saves only those who forgive others.*
 - b) *The theme of this parable is forgiveness between brothers, not salvation for lost sinners.*
 - c) *Jesus warned us that God cannot forgive us if we do not have humble and repentant hearts.*
 - d) *We reveal the true condition of our hearts by the way we treat others.*
 - e) *When our hearts are humble and repentant, we will gladly forgive our brothers.*
 - f) *But where there is pride and a desire for revenge, there can be no true repentance; and this means God cannot forgive.*

BYZ **Matthew 18:28** Ἐξελθὼν δὲ ὁ δούλος ἐκεῖνος εὔρεν ἕνα τῶν συνδούλων αὐτοῦ, ὃς ὄφειλεν αὐτῷ ἑκατὸν δηνάρια, καὶ κρατήσας αὐτὸν ἐπνίγεν, λέγων, Απόδος μοι εἰ τι ὀφείλεις.

Took him by the throat (epnigen). "Held him by the throat" (Allen). It is imperfect, probably inchoative, "began to choke or throttle him." The Roman law allowed this indignity.

29 Πεσὼν οὖν ὁ σύνδουλος αὐτοῦ εἰς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ παρεκάλει αὐτόν, λέγων, Μακροθύμησον ἐπ' ἐμοί, καὶ ἀποδώσω σοι. 30 Ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἤθελεν, ἀλλὰ ἀπελθὼν ἔβαλεν αὐτόν εἰς φυλακὴν, ἕως οὗ ἀποδῶ τὸ ὀφειλόμενον.

And he would not (ho de ouk ethelen). Imperfect tense of persistent refusal.

BYZ **Matthew 18:31** Ἴδόντες δὲ οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτοῦ τὰ γενόμενα ἐλυπήθησαν σφόδρα· καὶ ἐλθόντες διεσάφησαν τῷ κυρίῳ ἑαυτῶν πάντα τὰ γενόμενα.

Told (diesaphēsan). Made wholly clear to their own lord. That is the usual result in the long run.

32 Τότε προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ λέγει αὐτῷ, Δούλε πονηρέ, πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφήκα σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεισάς με· 33 οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλόν σου, ὡς καὶ ἐγὼ σε ἠλέησα;

BYZ **Matthew 18:35** Οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ ἐπουράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφήτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν.

A little boy was sitting on a park bench in obvious pain. A man walking by asked him what was wrong and the young boy said, "I'm sitting on a bumble bee." The man urgently asked, "Then why don't you get up?" The boy replied, "Because I figure I'm hurting him more than he is hurting me!" How many of us handle forgiveness like this little boy? We endure pain for the sadistic satisfaction of believing we are hurting them more than us. When we get off the bench of unforgiveness, both parties can begin to realize relief from their pain.

From the land in which our Lord walked comes a story of mercy and forgiveness. In November of 1989, Sergeant Zeev Traum was patrolling the beachfront road south of Gaza City. He and another Israeli soldier were ambushed in their jeep by Palestinian gunmen. The forty-year-old's death brought a unique dilemma for his widow. She could simply bury her husband, or donate his heart to an ailing Palestinian. Bittersweet revenge could be found if she denied the request and let one of them die, since they killed her husband. Instead, she opted to forgive. So outside the city walls where Jesus Christ replaced our heart with his, fifty-four-year-old Hanna Khader, who had waited four months for a heart, received new life from his political enemy. In response, Zeev's widow said, "If it's possible to save a man's life, I think it's a mitzvah" (commandment of Jewish law, or meritorious act).

Compassion He Didn't Deserve

Almost a year ago now, a handful of teen-agers put a series of dreadful events in motion. They stole a credit card. Then they used it to buy some DVDs and video games. Next they went to a grocery store and bought a series of items. And they hit the road. The worst event of the night was yet to come. From the backseat of the car, one of them got the bright idea of throwing some of the things in the grocery sack at vehicles in the oncoming lane of traffic. One of the missiles he launched was a 20-pound frozen turkey! It doesn't take a genius to figure out the lethal damage something so heavy and so hard could do at highway speeds. One could only hope nobody was hit by it.

Victoria Ruvolo was unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at that terribly wrong time. The frozen bird came crashing through the windshield of her car and hit her flush in the face - shattering every bone in Ms. Ruvolo's face. She somehow survived her injuries! Then came two weeks of drug-induced coma, several surgeries, and months of rehabilitation. She suffers several permanent impairments from the trauma she suffered that night in November 2004. Last week she saw the young man who did her such harm for the first time. She was in court to witness the sentencing of 19-year-old Ryan Cushing. With the multiple felony charges initially lodged against him for the attack, Cushing could have been sentenced to as many as 25 years in prison. He got only six months in jail and five years probation. Now before you go ballistic about the leniency and irresponsibility of our courts, you need to know that Ms. Ruvolo is the person responsible for the light sentence. She pressed the district attorney to temper justice with compassion - in the hope that Ryan won't lose his adult years in prison because of his stupid, criminal behavior that night. After sentence was pronounced, Ryan approached his victim to apologize. She embraced him and tried to comfort him while he sobbed his remorse. Although Ruvolo made no statement to the press, the boy's lawyer said she whispered to Ryan that she loves him and wants him to behave and enjoy his life. "Had she taken a different position than she did," he said, "my client would have been incarcerated for many years. This to me is a very spiritual thing."

Maybe Ryan learned that "turkey toss" is not a cute prank for the highway. And maybe the rest of us can be reminded that the mercy we have all received from God and other important people in our lives opens creative new options.