

CONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS? MATTHEW 6:14-15

I've heard it said that the most difficult words to say and sincerely mean are, "I'm sorry." But I think it may be even *more* difficult, at least for some, to say and sincerely mean the words, "I forgive you." Especially if the offender has hurt us deeply, or *keeps* hurting us over and over.

One day Peter asked Jesus, "*How many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?*" (Matt. 18:21). Rabbis in that day had specified that forgiveness should be given up to *three* times before it could be denied, so Peter thought he was being exceptionally gracious by suggesting a number that was more than twice the required amount.

But Jesus' response reveals that Peter didn't really understand the profound nature of forgiveness. He said, "*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times*" (v.22). And then Jesus told this story: "*The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents (millions of dollars) was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

²⁶ "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (a few dollars). He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." (REPEAT v. 35.)

The Bible says that our sin is such an enormous debt that it condemns each one of us to hell forever and ever. But God sent His Son to die on the cross and shed His blood in order to pay that debt so that we wouldn't have to be condemned to eternal punishment in hell, but that we might have eternal life in heaven. Because Jesus paid the penalty for sin that we deserved, God canceled the debt we owed. We did nothing to earn that forgiveness and we certainly don't deserve it; it was given solely by His grace and mercy.

God's forgiveness of our sin is the very heart of the gospel. It is the basis for our relationship with Him, it is the means by which we receive His blessing, and it is the reason for our eternal hope.

The point of Jesus' story is this: How could someone refuse to forgive a relatively minor debt when God has forgiven their enormous debt? It doesn't make a bit of sense that a

person who has received God's grace would refuse to be gracious to someone who has offended him/her. It can only mean that they are either a *stranger* to God's grace, or they have forgotten how *much* grace has been lavished on them.

But one thing is clear. God doesn't tolerate an unforgiving spirit in those who have experienced His forgiveness. Listen to what Jesus said at the end of what we commonly call *The Lord's Prayer*. **Verses 14-15.** ***14 "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (ESV).***

Jesus just finished instructing His disciples how to pray. He told them that the eternal, sovereign God of the universe is also our heavenly *Daddy*. He is an extremely personal God who is intensely interested in our lives and wants to meet our needs. And prayer is the means by which we tap into His willingness and power to meet those needs. Our most basic needs are daily bread, forgiveness of sins, and protection from evil.

But, in verse 12, when Jesus invites us to ask God for forgiveness, He follows it with a statement that suggests that God's forgiveness of us is dependent upon our forgiveness of others. *"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."* And this maxim is so important that Jesus says it in different words in verses 14-15 so there will be no doubt as to what He means. ***14 "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (ESV).***

These two parallel statements are called conditional clauses. The formula is "If...then." *"If you do this then this will happen."* This is a *double* conditional statement, the first stated positively ("if you forgive..."), the second—the more consequential of the two statements - stated negatively ("but if you do *not* forgive..."). Jesus is being intentionally emphatic. He wants His audience to be absolutely clear about the meaning of His words. And the reason He wants His audience to be clear is because the consequences of forgiving and not forgiving are so huge.

God will forgive me when I sin against Him if I forgive others when they sin against me, but God will not forgive me when I sin against Him if I do not forgive others when they sin against me. Look at the text. Is that what you see in the words?

Some of us read this and want to say, "Well, yeah, I see it, but Jesus didn't *really* mean that God wouldn't forgive you. He couldn't have meant that! After all, He's a God of grace. He loves us unconditionally, and His grace is greater than every sin, including unforgiveness. I know these verses *seem* to suggest that our forgiveness of others is a *condition* of His forgiveness of us. But Jesus must have been using a figure of speech or something because this is *not* how God operates."

When you read a passage like this, even a passage that is so seemingly severe, don't try to spin it. Don't try to wiggle around it to fit it into your theology. Let *it* shape your understanding of God and how God thinks and feels and acts.

Jesus is saying is that our relationships with each other are so important to God that when I do not forgive another person when he/she sins against me—when I refuse to let go of that hurt, when I insist on nursing a grudge or harboring resentment so that there is a wall between me and that person, there *will* be a wall between me and God as well. Let me say it another way: when I refuse to extend grace to others, God will refuse to extend grace to me.

Friends, mark these words. If you think that everything is okay between you and God,

when it's not okay between you and another one of His kids because you're holding a grudge, then you are tragically mistaken. If you think you can have peace and fellowship with God when you don't have peace and fellowship with your brother or sister, you're only fooling yourself. When you refuse to forgive you *forfeit* the opportunity to be forgiven.

You might be thinking to yourself, "But Stan, Jesus can't possibly be referring to forgiving *all* offenses. I can understand forgiving someone who has treated me unkindly, or disappointed me, or let me down. But I've been betrayed. I've been abused. I've been taken advantage of and lied to and have had to suffer horrible consequences because of it."

My dear brother and sister, Jesus is in no way trying to minimize the hurt of a major offense or the suffering that results from it. You may have legitimate reasons to be hurt, but you have no *right* to hold on to it and hold it against that person. You gave up your right when you received *God's* grace and *God's* forgiveness. And as long as you're holding on to that hurt it is going to be a barrier to your fellowship with the Lord, whether you are an innocent victim or not, and it will remain a barrier until you release it.

You say, "But shouldn't that person ask me for forgiveness?"

Ideally, yes. But whether he or she does or not has no bearing on whether you should forgive that person. Jesus did not put an asterisk on this verse and then a footnote that said, "This excludes people who are not really sorry...or who keep on hurting you...or who haven't reformed their behavior." He didn't make any exceptions to this obligation to forgive. He simply said, "Forgive those who have sinned against you," and we can deduce that this means *all* those who have sinned against you.

You say, "But he doesn't deserve it!"

No, he doesn't, but neither do *you* deserve God's forgiveness. Nobody *deserves* to be forgiven. Forgiveness has nothing to do with fairness or justice, it has to do with grace and mercy. We *deserve* justice, which is condemnation in a place called hell. But that's not what we got from God. We got grace and mercy instead of justice.

Let me ask you something: How do you stand in relation to Jesus' words? With your spouse? Your kids? Your parents? Your in-laws, relatives, friends (or former friends), your business associates? Is there unresolved conflict between you and someone else? Are you holding a grudge or harboring resentment?

Jesus' words ought to compel each of us to do some serious soul searching to see if there are any people in our lives that we are either knowingly or unknowingly holding a grudge against. I say unknowingly because some of us may not even be aware that we're doing it. Some of us, perhaps, are so used to living with the hurt that we think it's normal. Some of us, perhaps, have grown so accustomed to harboring resentment or ill feelings towards someone that we've gotten used to the wall. We've learned to tolerate the tension, or we pretend it isn't there.

So I want to suggest some ways that might help us know if we are harboring resentment or holding a grudge against someone.

1. You can be pretty sure that you need to forgive someone or you haven't yet forgiven someone when you cannot stop **thinking** about what that person did or said to you. When you obsess over it. When the thoughts about that offense are like intrusions that come into your mind and practically take over so that you can hardly think about something else. You're lying in bed, trying to go to sleep and there it is; the tape starts playing, and it plays over and over in your head. You're driving in the car, washing the dishes, working in the yard, minding your own business and it keeps replaying.

If you can't stop thinking about that offense or hurt, or if it just keeps coming back and haunting you, it's likely that you haven't yet forgiven that person. Because you're not only holding on to the hurt, it's holding on to you. It's controlling you.

That's why when you think about that person you get a knot in your stomach. When you are around that person you get stiff or silent. Your sense of humor goes out the window. You're guarded and tense and self-conscious.

But you can know that you have forgiven if you are free. That person and their offense no longer control your thoughts. You no longer obsess over it or feel compelled to talk about it. It's over, because forgiveness is the funeral of the offense.

That's what Peter meant when he said, "...*love buries a multitude of offenses*" (1 Pet. 4:8). When you forgive someone there is no longer any obstacle between you and that person, so you can move on and not keep tripping over that hurt. You've been released from that hurt so that you're free to live, free to love, free to heal. Not that you won't ever have sorrow over what happened, not that there won't necessarily be any more consequences from what happened, but you're not crippled by them anymore. You are free to move on and move forward.

2. Another way that you can be pretty sure that you have not forgiven someone is when you have a ***distorted*** view of the person who offended you.

Usually when you get hurt it's by someone you care about, someone you love, or someone you respect. It might be a spouse or a sibling or a dear friend or family member. But when you are angry with that person for a prolonged period of time, or you're harboring resentment toward that person your view of him/her is almost completely negative. When you think about that person you cannot remember hardly any of their good qualities (qualities you once admired), while their bad qualities are magnified.

I'll tell you why this is: Anger, resentment and bitterness are incredibly powerful attitudes. They are so powerful that they distort our perspective and cloud our judgment. Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians that when we let the sun go down on our wrath—when we stay angry with someone—we give the devil a foothold. In other words, we become vulnerable to the enemy's attack and the enemy's influence. Since he is the father of lies, we are more receptive to those lies and more prone to believe them.

One of the ways you can know if you've forgiven a person is if you are able to think about him/her from God's perspective. I'm not saying you have to *like* that person, necessarily, or be best friends with that person. But you *can* view him/her as a person created in the image of God whom God loves and for whom Jesus died. And you can pray for that person. You can be like Jesus who, when He was being abused and shamed and murdered on the cross, looked down on those who were doing it and said, "***Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing.***"

3. Another way that you can be pretty sure that you have not forgiven someone is when you want the person who offended you to be severely ***punished*** for that offense. You are bound and determined that he get his just deserts. You want her to pay dearly for what she's done. You may even want something bad to happen to him or her.

Justice is not a bad thing. Wanting justice is not a bad thing. Pursuing justice in a criminal case is not a bad thing. But if you forgive someone you won't be *obsessed* with justice. You will even be willing to settle for mercy.

By the way, let me remind you that when you forgive someone you are not absolving

that person of the guilt of their offense. We cannot pardon anyone's guilt. Only God can do that. Even after *you've* forgiven the person he/she is still responsible to God for that act, and God will either choose to exercise justice (in which case he/she will be punished) or He will grant His mercy. But that is up to God, not you.

One of the ways you can know that you have forgiven a person who has sinned against you is if you have released that person to God, and you are able to trust Him to deal with that person in whatever way He chooses. You can rest in the promise that God made when He said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord." And you can also be content if God exercises mercy.

4. Finally, you can be pretty sure that you haven't forgiven someone who's hurt you when you cover yourself with **layers of self-protection** when you are around the person who offended you. You are self-conscious. You get defensive. You clam up. You avoid interaction with the person. You're not free. And if you're not free, that's a clue that something isn't right.

So what does true forgiveness look like? And *how* do you do it?

May I remind you that forgiveness is a supernatural response to God's grace in forgiving you? Paul said in Ephesians, "*Forgive one another, just as God in Christ has forgiven you*" (Eph. 4:32). We are commanded to forgive, but we are *able* to forgive, because we have God's Spirit living in us. And so if you *need* to forgive someone, don't wait until you contrive the feelings of warmth and charity for that person. Ask Jesus for help, ask the Holy Spirit to take control of your mind and heart, then take a step of obedience and faith by releasing the hurt to Him. Give it to God, and then watch His love and grace flow into you and then out of you.

Several years ago I preached on forgiveness at a church in Nigeria. A woman "happened" to be there that morning because the church she regularly attended was some distance away, and somehow she got delayed and wouldn't have been able to make it on time. When she heard me preaching on the passage, "*Love buries a multitude of offenses*" (1 Pet. 4:8), she suddenly knew why God wanted her to be there. After the service she approached me rather nervously and asked if she could meet the next day so she could talk about this matter privately.

The next morning she arrived at the guest house where Mindy and I were staying, and we began to talk. She was attractive, intelligent, articulate, and relatively wealthy (she worked as a news anchor for the local television station). But she was deeply troubled. In tears she told about how the father that she deeply loved and trusted had sexually abused her when she became a teenager, and from that point on had treated her with contempt. Then, when she was in her late teens, her boyfriend, whom she loved and hoped to marry, sexually assaulted her, and then dumped her like a piece of trash. She told about how she had sought help from her pastor, who trivialized the matter and told her to drop it.

And the anger and hurt and shame had built and festered until she became bitter; until she felt hatred and hostility for those men. And the devil got a foothold through that bitterness and turned her into a hard-hearted spiritual invalid, even though she was an innocent victim. I asked her what she wanted to do, and she said, "I want to forgive those men! I want to be set free. I don't want there to be a wall between me and God anymore."

As Mindy and I put our hands on her shoulders and began to pray for her I have never in my life heard such sobbing and wailing as all of that hurt and hostility surfaced, and as she deliberately began to release it to the Lord and forgive her offenders. This went on for two

hours, until she finally calmed down and said, "I've let it go. It's gone."

We got a letter from this woman six months later saying, "I just want you to know that I'm still free. When I forgave my father and former boyfriend and pastor it was the funeral of those offenses. They have been buried forever. And, I also want you to know that God has brought a godly man into my life and he's just asked me to marry him. Would you please come to my wedding?"

Some of you might be saying, "That's wonderful! I'm happy that she seems to have let go of her hurts for good. But I've had a different experience. There have been times when I have released my hurts, when I *thought* I've forgiven, but then something happens to trigger the memory of that hurt and, all of the sudden, those feelings of animosity and bitterness resurface. What's that all about? What do I do?"

Let me say that it is not unusual for feelings to resurface in situations where the hurt has been really deep, or you have to live with the consequences of that hurt, or where the offender keeps repeating the offense. And let me also remind you that this is exactly what the devil tries to do. He hates forgiveness and reconciliation, and he will do everything he can to rekindle the anger or replant the seeds of bitterness.

And that's why we need to be vigilant. At such times we need, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, to take those thoughts captive and make them obedient to Christ (10:5b). Don't entertain those thoughts. As soon as you become aware that those old hurts are starting to haunt you again, ask the Holy Spirit to shine His light on them, and to empower you to let them go.

As we prepare for communion...

Pastor Stan Myers
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CONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS MATTHEW 6:14-15

MAIN IDEA: *GOD FORGIVES ME WHEN I SIN AGAINST HIM IF I FORGIVE OTHERS WHEN THEY SIN AGAINST ME*

THE CONDITION FOR FORGIVENESS (14-15)
IF I FORGIVE, GOD FORGIVES (14)

IF I DO NOT FORGIVE, GOD DOES NOT FORGIVE (15)

PRINCIPLE: *IF THERE IS A WALL BETWEEN ME AND SOMEONE ELSE, THERE IS A WALL BETWEEN ME AND GOD*

PRINCIPLE: *IF I REFUSE TO EXTEND GRACE TO SOMEONE, GOD WILL REFUSE TO EXTEND GRACE TO ME*

THE EVIDENCES OF UNFORGIVENESS

WHEN I CANNOT STOP _____ ABOUT WHAT A PERSON DID OR SAID TO ME

WHEN I HAVE A _____ VIEW OF THE PERSON WHO OFFENDED ME

WHEN I WANT THE PERSON TO BE SEVERELY _____ FOR THEIR OFFENSE

WHEN I COVER MYSELF WITH _____ OF _____ WHEN I AM AROUND THE PERSON WHO OFFENDED ME

THE METHOD OF TRUE FORGIVENESS

LETTING IT GO

TAKING YOUR THOUGHTS CAPTIVE

THE MATTER OF UNREMOVABLE, UNREPENTANT OFFENDERS