

Have you heard of the man who was bitten by a rabid dog? It occurred before modern medicine – so when he arrived at the hospital all the doctors could do was make him comfortable b/c his condition was incurable. The doctor told the man, “If I were in your shoes, I’d get my affairs in order.” Of course, the man sank back in shock, but after a few minutes, rallied enough to ask for pen and paper. Then w/ a burst of energy, he began to write furiously. A few hours later, when the doctor checked back in on the man, he found him still writing. He said, “I’m glad to see your working on your last will and testament.” The man replied, “This isn’t my will! This is a list of everyone I’m going to bite before I die!”

Sadly, too many people live and die w/ such a list – a list of people they believe *have it coming to them*. A list of people they’d like to see *get what they deserve* b/c of the way they think they’ve been mistreated, wronged, and hurt by them.

Unforgiveness is a vicious companion – no one is exempt from her talons. In some cases, the offended have turned to devastating means to seek to right a perceived wrong against their alleged perpetrators – and sadly, in the process, have inflicted great harm on the many innocent people who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when their revenge was exacted.

Still, more often than not, the greatest harm of unforgiveness occurs on a much smaller scale – like in destroying a marriage, dividing a family, splitting a church, or ruining a friendship. ***The primary culprits in these devastating results are always an unrepentant heart and an unforgiving spirit.***

Today, as we look at the final lesson in our Red Letters series, we're going to look at the topic of forgiveness in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. (Read **Mt.18:15-35**)

*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, b/w you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along w/ you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

*Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to (7) times?" Jesus replied, "I tell you, not (7) times, but (77) times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts w/ his servants. As he began the settlement, a man*

who owed him 10,000 bags of gold was brought to him. Since he wasn't able to pay, the master ordered he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient w/ me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a (100) silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient w/ me, and I will pay it back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours b/c you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Matthew 18:21-35

In **Mt. 18** we find a discourse on the topic of forgiveness. Inside this discourse there's a narrative providing instruction on the **APPROACH** we must take to forgive while in the parable we discover the necessary **ATTITUDE** to forgive.

The simple truth is it's easy to proclaim the virtue of forgiveness but quite another thing to actually do it.

C.S. Lewis said it well – Forgiveness is a beautiful word until you actually have something to forgive.

**What is forgiveness?** Forgiveness is a decision to release a person from the obligation that's resulted when they harmed you. It's an act of pardoning somebody for a mistake or wrongdoing by officially releasing the guilty party of the consequence of your judgment for their infraction.

Unforgiveness is a toxin. It poisons the heart and mind w/ bitterness, distorting one's whole perspective on life... it is a soul-pollution that inflames evil appetites and emotions. Such bitterness can even spread from person to person, ultimately defiling many. Forgiveness is the only antidote. Forgiveness is a healthy, wholesome, virtuous, liberating act. Forgiveness unleashes joy. It ushers peace. It washes the slate clean. It sets all the highest virtues of love in motion. In a sense, forgiveness is Christianity at its highest levels.

## I The APPROACH of Forgiveness

Shortly after the Transfiguration, Jesus found himself in a dialogue w/ His disciples on a number of topics. In this exchange, Jesus offered a few pointers on how to confront a brother/sister whose sin has affected and infected them.

The first things we must do should we discover a brother/sister in sin is to personally and gently go to them.

## A PRIVATE Encouragement

*If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, b/w you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. Matthew 18:15*

Notice – *If your brother sins against you...*

This is **NOT** – if you don't see eye-to-eye – or if you have a difference of opinion... or if your brother does something you don't like or agree. **It's about a brother who's moving in a direction opposite of God's heart, will and Word.**

This may come as a shocker, but just b/c we don't see things the same way doesn't necessitate that one of us is in sin. But if we are, I'm sure that it is you who are in sin... right?

We sin when our attitudes, ambitions, and actions are in direct opposition to God's will and Word – not another person's wants, whims and wishes.

Consider **Galatians 6:1** – *If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.*

Whether your brother/sister sins against you or is just in sin – it doesn't matter. The N.T. teaching is if a brother/sister is in a sinful state and you know it then you have a personal responsibility to go to them to gently confront the issue and encourage them to repentance.

*Go and show him his fault, just b/w the two of you.* The goal is to keep the circle as small as possible as long as possible. So don't talk to others about another brother's sin – or else you'll be in sin. Which sadly is our tendency? While I'm here – **stop** posting your differences, frustrations, and disappointments on FB or in a group e-mail. If you have an issue, take it up w/ your brother/sister face-to-face in love.

If we were to follow Jesus' plan – we'd likely prevent 95% of issues that destroy our families, friendship, and churches.

But in the instance where our brother/sister spurns our encouragement – Jesus says – *Take 1 or 2 others along...*

## **B SMALL GROUP Admonition**

Quoting from **Dt.19:15**, Jesus says, if your brother ignores your one-to-one edification then bring another believer along to express your love/concern. The idea here is that a brother or sister in Christ might need another point of reference to affirm the issue at hand. In receiving such counsel, there's a good chance the person will have a change of heart/mind.

The point is to broaden the circle slightly so 1 or 2 others might help the fallen to see their sin through the love and concern of a few close spiritual allies. ***The goal isn't to gang up but to love through.*** Btw, this doesn't necessarily require a church leader or pastor, though it could. Oftentimes, it's far better if it doesn't – and that we police ourselves. 99x out of 100x – if we take this approach, our brother will be restored.

If this doesn't work, Jesus says – *If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

## C CURCH Caution

Here Jesus is referring to the local body of believers – the *ekklesia* – the gathering of the saints.

This is where the circle expands and discretion is set aside for concern. Now you might think this sounds unloving, even embarrassing, but we'd be wise to sense the tone behind Jesus' words. The intent isn't to embarrass but to restore. You may think, “But why tell the whole church? So that together, the church can say, “We love you. We're concerned for you. We want you to come back to Christ.”

**God loves us so much that if any of us are caught in sin, He will send an entire army of believers to demonstrate His love, mercy, and grace to bring us back to Him.**

If in such an instance, the wayward believer refuses to return to the Father, the body is charged w/ a very difficult task...

## D CORPORATE Discipline

*Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

In other words, treat him as an unbeliever outside of the church. For his sake and for the church, we can no longer treat the unrepentant person like they are our brother/sister in the faith – the person must be expelled from the immediate fellowship of the church – it is not optional. It is a command. The intent isn't to be hostile but loving. It's far more unloving to allow a person to place themselves in harm's way but not warning them than to warn them w/ tough love.

If my friend likes to wander off and cross busy roads, and in spite of my encouragement to stop has ignored my warnings – it is more loving to say nothing or do something? Up to and including drawing a line and saying enough is enough!

Is this easy to do? Absolutely not! But tough love in the faith is necessary both at church and in the home. **We all need accountability w/ a little bite** – or else we'd ignore it.

Now don't miss this next part b/c this is a passage that's often lifted out of context and misapplied.

*Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.*

This text doesn't mean I have the power to bind Satan and stake my earthly claim for me and God. Nor does it mean that God is guaranteed to show up when I get together w/ a couple of my Christian buddies to pray. The context is about God's promise to be w/ us should we have to engage in confronting a brother/sister in sin.

What Jesus was saying is that in such instances of required confrontation – we have the authority, support, and presence of God to confront the issue at hand.

Jesus was saying that what we do as a church in His name, in alignment w/ His Word, and under His authority, is a direct reflection of what He does in heaven.

So if someone comes to the church and says, "I'm living in sin and I'm unrepentant – I will not turn to Christ," then we can say to that person w/ authority, "You are living outside the will of God and your sin is not forgiven."

Now it's not that their sin is unforgiven b/c we said so – but b/c Christ has said so in His Word – and we as the church are a reflection of His truth.

Similarly, if someone comes to the church and says, “I’ve sinned against God and I’m turning from my sin to Christ desiring forgiveness,” then we can say to that person w/ full confidence, “God has forgiven you, and you’re free from it.” Not b/c we said we said so but b/c Christ has said he is free.

## II The ATTITUDE of Forgiveness

In *Philippians 2*, Christians are called to have in them the same attitude that was in Christ – an attitude of forgiveness.

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.* Ephesians 4:32

Upon engaging Jesus in this exchange, our favorite big mouthed disciple – Peter, asked Jesus an obvious question – how many times are we to forgive our brother who sins? Of course, Jesus responds to Pete’s question w/ a parable...

In what can only be labeled as an *extreme illustration*, Jesus tells the story of a man who owed upwards of what would over a billion dollars today – an amount of money this servant could never repay. And yet the king, out of sheer compassion for the servant, forgave the entire debt.

**This is a picture of God's extravagant grace to each of us.** We have a debt of sin we can never repay, and yet God, who is rich in mercy, has offered to every person a pardon for their indebted by the way of the cross.

*In Him (Jesus) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sin according to His riches of grace.* Eph. 1:7

We're reminded that the origin of forgiveness is found in God. Once we've been forgiven, we can forgive b/c God has first forgiven us. But if we can't forgive – it's most likely b/c we've not yet experienced God's forgiveness.

This is the heart of this parable. On the heels of being forgiven – this ungrateful servant, although he was forgiven so much, couldn't seem to be patient w/ his brother who owed him so little – resulting in the king rescinding his pardon and severely punishing the unforgiving servant.

Before we breakdown this text, let me explain what Jesus did not say. He didn't say – if you can't forgive after having been forgiven by God – you're going to lose your salvation. The focus on this passage is that it's nearly impossible to have been forgiven by God and not be a forgiver. And if you can't forgive something after having been forgiven – then something is wrong in your spiritual life.

So Peter asked – How often should I forgive a brother? Not 3-4, but 7 times?” Jesus responds, “No, not 7...but 70 x 7. In other words – **a Christ-follower never stop forgiving.**

In that day, it was common for a rabbi to teach that a person only had to forgive a brother for repeated sin about 3-4 times – after which there was no more forgiveness. So you can be certain Peter thought his suggestion of 7 times was big stuff. **Yet lest we forget, the disciples had just finished having the discussion about who was the greatest.**

Let me say something here about forgiveness that we learn from God. Just b/c forgiveness has been provided and is available – does not necessitate its disbursement. In other words, while Jesus’ death has provided salvation to all people, it doesn’t mean that all people will be rescued.

In the same manner, we can’t give forgiveness to anyone who’s not interested in setting the record straight. Like Christ, we must be prepared to forgive when the other party is ready to make things right, but forgiveness cannot be forced. It is to be present and available – but never contrived.

What we discover in Jesus’ response is that there’s no limit to God’s grace and forgiveness from God or God’s people.

*If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand? But w/ you there is forgiveness. Psalm 130:3-4*

Christian, if you've been wronged, offended, or deliberately hurt; the Bible isn't saying it's *easy* or even *natural* to forgive. The Bible is saying it is *Christian* to forgive.

The Christian, we're never more like Christ than when we forgive. In fact, we really have no other option; not b/c we have to forgive, but b/c we're compelled to forgive.

Let us go to Calvary to learn how we may be forgiven, and then let us linger there that we might learn to forgive .