

SESSION 5

Forgive Your Neighbor



QUESTION 1:

What qualities do you look for in a doctor?

THE POINT

Love leads us to forgive.

THE PASSAGE

Matthew 18:21-35

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

How do you know you have a good doctor? It's not just tied to his medical school or training. A good doctor applies that knowledge well. A good doctor knows what questions to ask, discerns what symptoms mean, and prescribes the right treatment. But we tend to value one more important thing in our medical doctors: they tell us what we need to know with compassion.

Hearing a medical diagnosis can be among the most anxious moments of our lives. Often, we'd rather just avoid hearing it altogether, yet we know a good doctor tactfully tells us what we may not want to hear but urgently need to hear. A good doctor gently explains the problem and gives us the diagnosis so he can prescribe the cure.

Jesus is more than a good doctor; He's the Great Physician. He sees what makes our hearts sick. His diagnoses are always accurate. And He provides the effective cure: Himself. With this study from Matthew 18, we'll consider a debilitating ailment of the soul: unforgiveness. Unforgiveness robs us of the life we're meant to live: a life of joy, peace, and love for God and others.

Matthew 18:21-22

21 Then Peter approached him and asked, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?”

22 “I tell you, not as many as seven,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven.

I think a lot of us can relate to Peter. He would blurt out what most of us are thinking. The disciples had just heard Jesus’s prescription for conflict resolution among fellow Christians (Matt 18:15-20). Jesus told His disciples to first go to directly the other person with the goal of restoring the relationship. Just that first step in the Lord’s plan for conflict resolution would dramatically change our families and churches if we followed it. But instead, we often allow resentment, bitterness, and unforgiveness to fester. We may even say to ourselves, “OK, I’ll forgive—this time.”

Peter asked a question: How often would he have to forgive? By throwing out the number seven he was conveying generosity. This was far beyond what the Jewish religious tradition required. The Pharisees taught that you weren’t required to forgive someone more than three times.¹ So by suggesting “as many as seven times,” Peter took piety to the next level and asked if he needed to forgive someone more than double what the religious leaders prescribed.

Others may have been impressed with Peter’s generosity, but Jesus wasn’t. His response to Peter was that he should forgive someone “seventy times seven!” That wasn’t just excessive; it was impossible! Jesus wasn’t saying that we should forgive someone up to 490 times and then stop. He was telling Peter—and us—that we are to be free in our forgiveness and over-the-top generous in showing mercy. We’re to forgive so often that we lose count of how many times someone has offended or sinned against us. In

other words, don't keep track. Just forgive. Our lives should be characterized by forgiving others.

For us to understand what forgiveness is, it's important to understand what forgiveness is *not*.

- ▶ Forgiveness is neither downplaying nor dismissing the offense. Some people think they need to rationalize or minimize other people's sins and the pain they caused. But that denies or suppresses the truth, and the apostle John declared, "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).
- ▶ Forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Reconciliation is a worthy goal, but it takes two people to reconcile, and you are not responsible for someone else's actions. In fact, in some cases, the safe and wise thing to do is to separate yourself from the offender.
- ▶ Forgiveness is not necessarily a substitute for taking other measures that are appropriate, such as pressing charges for a criminal offense or establishing measures of accountability. Beginning in verse 23, Jesus taught a parable that defines forgiveness as releasing someone from a debt. It means you no longer demand that the offender repay what you lost. But like all debts, they don't just disappear; instead, the one who was sinned against chooses to absolve the debt.

When we think of owing someone a debt, we usually think of money. Jesus used financial debt to convey the point in His parable, but the debts we owe and the debts owed to us take many forms; such as faithfulness, kindness, respect, and gratitude (Rom. 13:8).

Unforgiveness is demanding that those in our debt pay us what they owe; yet, the longer we hold onto that debt, the more that debt holds onto us. We rehearse the offense and relive the emotions.

Soon, we become bitter, even taking out our unforgiveness on other people. Left unchecked, the cancer of unforgiveness will continue to spread, choking out the love of God in our hearts. If you and I would be spiritually whole and at peace with other, we must let unforgiveness go. We must forgive.

QUESTION 2:

What are some obstacles that hinder us from forgiving others?

Matthew 18:23-27

23 “For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

24 When he began to settle accounts, one who owed ten thousand talents was brought before him.

25 Since he did not have the money to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.

26 “At this, the servant fell facedown before him and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything.’

27 Then the master of that servant had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.

Jesus elaborated on His answer to Peter with a parable about a king and a servant. The servant “owed ten thousand talents” to his king. A single talent represented twenty years of work.² Therefore, this man owed 200,000 years’ worth of money! In our modern dollars, this man’s debt was in the billions!

So, imagine how irrational the servant’s response must have sounded to Peter: “Be patient with me, and I will repay you everything.” He faced an unfathomable debt, and yet his solution was to try to pay it back. Notice the king didn’t agree to his servant’s terms. He simply forgave his servant and canceled the entire debt!

Just like this servant, we owe a debt to God that is impossible to pay. And just as the servant went before the king in Jesus’s parable, we will have to settle our account before a holy and righteous God—unless Someone settles it for us.

When God forgives us, He doesn't ignore our sins. He doesn't pretend everything is fine or fudge the numbers on His cosmic ledger sheet. No, when God forgives, He absorbs our debt Himself. When Jesus—God in the flesh—died for our sins on the cross, He paid the debt of sin for all who come to Him for mercy (Col. 2:13-14). Our unfathomable debt is erased by an unfathomable great love.

But God didn't stop there. When we are united to Christ through faith in Him, He doesn't just forgive us; He adopts us. He brings us into His family! Since God has made us His family, His Spirit is continually making us like Himself. We are to be like God. Since we are truly forgiven by God, we are to be like Him, and we demonstrate our new identity by forgiving others.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught about what it means to live as citizens of the kingdom of God. He began this sermon with several statements of blessings (Matt. 5:3-12). These “Beatitudes” build upon each other. The one who recognizes his spiritual poverty (v. 3) will mourn over his sinful state (v. 4), submit himself entirely to God in humble meekness (v. 5), and long for true righteousness (v. 6). The one who has received God's righteousness knows that, because of his spiritual poverty, he has been forgiven only because of God's mercy. Because he has been saved from sins by God's grace, he has no occasion for spiritual pride. When we receive God's mercy, we will be merciful to others. We demonstrate that God has forgiven us by our forgiveness toward others. But the converse of this is also true. The one who is unmerciful has not known the mercy of God. He demonstrates that he is unforgiven and still dead in his sins.³

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was even more explicit. “For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses” (6:14-15). Jesus wasn't making forgiveness a work we do to earn our own forgiveness; rather, Jesus was describing the state of our hearts. Forgiving others isn't a *condition* of salvation; it's a *confirmation* of salvation.

QUESTION 3:

How is debt a good analogy for sin?

Matthew 18:28-35

28 “That servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, ‘Pay what you owe!’

29 “At this, his fellow servant fell down and began begging him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

30 But he wasn’t willing. Instead, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed.

31 When the other servants saw what had taken place, they were deeply distressed and went and reported to their master everything that had happened.

32 Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.

33 Shouldn’t you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’

34 And because he was angry, his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay everything that was owed.

35 So also my heavenly Father will do to you unless every one of you forgives his brother or sister from your heart.”

The servant in Jesus’s parable proved that he hadn’t received the king’s mercy. After the king forgave his debt, the servant tracked down a coworker who owed him a hundred day’s wages—a minuscule fraction of what he had owed the king. The servant attacked his fellow servant, demanding he repay him in full immediately. His coworker responded with the same plea for mercy that the servant cried out to the king. But the servant’s heart was cold and calloused, and he threw his coworker in jail. When the

king found out, he was livid and punished the servant in full. The servant had not embraced the king's forgiveness, and therefore, his debt remained. Jail would remain his home "until he could pay everything that was owed."

If we have unforgiveness in our hearts, this will be our fate as well. The one who refuses to forgive demonstrates that, despite all the Bible verses or theology he may know, he doesn't really know God. Choosing forgiveness is the only appropriate response to God's forgiveness toward us. Choosing unforgiveness proves we don't know God and have not embraced His forgiveness.

Forgiveness is both a choice and a process. Sometimes we know we need to forgive someone for what they've done, but we're still working through the deep pain of betrayal or loss. God knows your heart. He'll lead you to the freedom of forgiveness by His Spirit, through His Word, and with the help of other believers.

Sometimes, our desire for justice keeps us stuck in unforgiveness. But forgiveness isn't ignoring their offense; it's trusting God to work justice on your behalf. We leave any vengeance in God's hands, knowing that one day, He will set everything right. Forgiveness means we give the unpaid debt—the balance of what the other person owes—to the Lord who will vindicate us. Look at who does the repaying. The one who did wrong to you owes you a debt, but it's God who repays. How can that be? There are two reasons:

1. **All sin is ultimately against God.** We break His laws and rebel against *His* commands. When someone sins against you, he sins against God. God alone is the righteous, rightful Judge.
2. **When we forgive, we trust the Lord to make things right.** It may not be in our way or in our timing, but God promises honor to those who humbly trust Him and walk in His ways.

We don't know in advance how God will work things out for us. That's why we follow Him by faith and not by sight! But we can choose to take Him at His word and walk in forgiveness. It takes supernatural faith to forgive, to choose a heart of tenderness *now* because we believe God will do what He promised to do *then*.

The truth is we can't afford *not* to forgive. Unforgiveness is a cancer that will ravage our hearts, infect our words, corrupt our relationships, and thwart our purpose. It's impossible to love God and love others when we're carrying this spiritual disease. God didn't create us with the ability to tolerate it and survive.

QUESTION 4:

How do bitterness and unforgiveness impact our spiritual growth?

Choosing forgiveness affects your physical health as well. Medical research has found that the act of forgiveness improves cholesterol levels, benefits the immune system, reduces pain, lowers blood pressure and stress levels, decreases anxiety and depression, and even reduces the risk of cardiac arrest.⁴ How many areas of your life have been infected by unforgiveness?

If your heart is sick with unforgiveness, you can be healed and restored to spiritual health. But only if you humbly come to the Great Physician, agree with His diagnosis, and follow His plan.

QUESTION 5:

What are the consequences of unforgiveness in our church and community?

ENGAGE

How do you respond to the hurts in life that need to be forgiven?

I am able to forgive minor offenses quickly and not harbor resentment.

I am able to forgive major offenses (over time) and not harbor resentment.

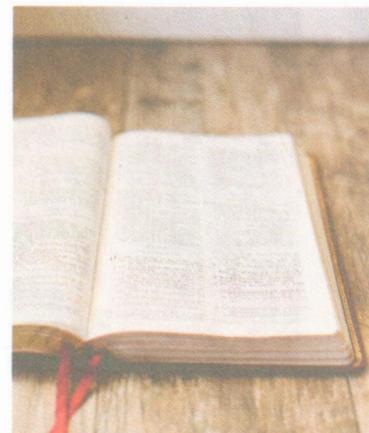
When someone hurts me, I keep it to myself and do not tell him or her.

There are some hurts I have never forgiven.

LIVE IT OUT

How will you make forgiveness a part of your life?

- ▶ **Seek God's forgiveness.** Confess any and all sin to God and ask His forgiveness. He has promised to forgive you. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).
- ▶ **Seek others' forgiveness.** To love your neighbor means forgiving, but it also may call for asking for forgiveness. If you have hurt or offended someone else, no matter how unintentionally, apologize. Seek to restore that relationship by removing the offense.
- ▶ **Offer forgiveness.** Regardless of who may have hurt you, forgive. It may just be a matter of forgiving in your heart, but you may need to tell the person who hurt you that you forgive them. Ask God for wisdom regarding the best way to approach the situation.



END NOTES

1. J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus: Lessons in Life from the Master Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1982), 62.
2. Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953-2001) 705.
3. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies on the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 88-89.
4. Forgiveness: Your Heart Depends on It," Johns Hopkins Medicine, hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it..