

“Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:21-35 & Romans 13:8-10 & 12

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Forgiveness begins by realizing we are constantly being forgiven by God. Our forgiveness enables us to forgive ourselves and others. Forgiveness set us free to rejoice with abundant loving, peaceful life. God is grace. Grace is the unconditional love of God. Grace is unlimited forgiveness freely given to us by God. Grace is not grace, not free, if one has to do anything to receive grace.

We are constantly in need of forgiveness. Even if you are what the world considers a good, law-abiding citizen, you are still committing a multitude of sins every second of your life. We are to love God and all people. A sin of omission is failing to love another person. Being unaware of another person is failing to love. Being indifferent to someone is failing to love. Not helping someone in need is failing to love. Withholding forgiveness is failing to love. We are to glorify God in all that we are and do. Any moment in which one diminishes others, ourselves, or creation is failing to glorify God. We are to be filled with God’s joy and rejoice. Anytime you do not feel joy, you are sinning. We are to be filled with God’s peace. Anytime you are anxious, worry, live in the past, or live in the future, you are sinning. We are to be grateful. Everything, even who we are, life, is all a gift from God. Anytime we feel we have earned something, we are sinning.

Perhaps you are a super Christian excelling in love, joy, peace, gratitude, and glorifying God. You are still constantly sinning through corporate sin. If anyone, anywhere in the world does not have food, shelter, clothing, and health care then all of us are sinning. If anyone is discriminated against, denied equal opportunity, or not valued as a beloved sibling of God then all of us are sinning. Anytime a wall is built or a glass ceiling exists, we all are sinning. Anytime someone is without education, or a meaningful career, we all are sinning. Anytime we fail to share, using more resources than others, we are all sinning. Anytime we fail to care for creation, animals, plants, we all are sinning. Anytime we fail to acknowledge that we are contributing to an increased frequency and intensity in fires, storms, floods, drought, and natural disasters by our abuse of the planet, we all are sinning. Anytime there is discord between countries, groups, or people, we all are sinning. Anytime anyone feels less than a beloved, valued, cherished, wonderful, gifted, child of God, we all are sinning.

Our ability to forgive increases as we grow in our perception of how much God is constantly forgiving us. Forgiveness is a choice, decision, process, journey and lifestyle. Helmut Thielicke wrote, “We should not be concerned primarily to be ‘just’ to our neighbor, but rather to love and support them. And this we can do only if we are ready to forgive. And I can be ready to forgive only if I have learned that God has forgiven my sins and given me another chance.”

Thomas Merton wrote, “Hatred is the sign and the expression of loneliness, of unworthiness, of insufficiency. And in so far as each one of us is lonely, is unworthy, each one hates themselves. Some of us are aware of this self-hatred, and because of it we reproach ourselves and punish ourselves needlessly. Punishment cannot cure the feeling that we are unworthy. There is nothing we can do about it as long as we feel that we are isolated, insufficient, helpless, alone. Others, who are less conscious of their own self-hatred, realize it in a different form by projecting it on to others. There is a proud and self-confident hate, strong and cruel, which enjoys the pleasure of hating, for it is directed outward to the unworthiness of another. But this strong and happy hate does not realize that like all hate, it destroys and consumes the self that hates, and not the object that is hated. Hate in any form is self-destructive, and even when it triumphs physically it triumphs in its own spiritual ruin. It is easier to serve the hate-gods because they thrive on the worship of collective fanaticism. To serve the hate-gods, one has only to be blinded by collective passion. To serve the God of Love one must be free, one must face the terrible responsibility of the decision to love in spite of all unworthiness whether in oneself or in one’s neighbor. It is the rankling, tormenting sense of unworthiness that lies at the root of all hate. The person who is able to hate strongly and with a quiet conscience is one who is complacently blind to all unworthiness in themselves and serenely capable of seeing all his own wrongs in someone else.” A lack of forgiveness fuels hate.

Scripture proclaims, **Matthew 18:21-35** “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” “No, not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but seventy times seven! “Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who

owed him millions of dollars. He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. “But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. “But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. “His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. “When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. “That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.”

Jesus makes it crystal clear that there is to be no limit on forgiveness. It is never appropriate to withhold forgiveness of another or yourself. God is gracious with us. We are to be gracious to others and ourselves. The spirit of forgiveness should be so pervasive in us that we lose count of how many times we forgive. Forgiveness should flow freely and abundantly. We are to offer unlimited forgiveness. The Greek word for forgiveness means to “wipe” something out, as with an eraser. Such abundant forgiveness by God calls us to a corresponding extravagant forgiveness of others.

The parable reminds us that God has forgiven us profusely. God's grace is extravagantly abundant, endless, limitless, with no strings attached. Our ability to forgive is rooted in God's forgiveness of us. We are commanded to have mercy, compassion and love for those who owe us, those who hurt us, those who have wronged us. We are commanded to have mercy, compassion, and love for ourselves.

God's forgiveness is excessive, precious, and exponentially powerful. Even millions of instances of sin, guilt, and debt are counted as nothing compared to the freedom of the forgiven sinner. Forgiveness engulfs all the wages of sin. Forgiveness is more than relational it is reciprocal, reliant, and cosmic. God's forgiveness surpasses both our deserving and our comprehension of forgiveness.

In the book, *Tuesday's with Morrie*, Morrie stresses that it is vital to forgive oneself, just as it is vital to forgive others. “Forgive everyone, everything.”

William Meninger has written, “The most authentic sign we can give ourselves that we have actually begun the process of forgiveness is our prayer. This is true even if the only prayer we can say is to ask to want to forgive. In the beginning, it may be too much for us even to pray for the person who hurt us. Perhaps all we can do is pray for ourselves—to pray that for our own sake we may begin the process of forgiveness.”

Corrie Ten Boom, who was liberated from a World War II concentration camp a few days after the Allies conquered Germany, took up the arduous process of forgiveness, and eventually felt that she had discovered the only power that could heal the people of Europe. So, she went around preaching about forgiveness in Holland, France, and in Germany as well. One Sunday she preached in Munich to a crowd of people who were eager to be forgiven. After the service was over, a man walked up to Corrie and extended his hand. “Ja, Fraulein Ten Boom,” he said, “I am so glad that Jesus forgives us all our sin, just as you say.” Corrie recognized the man. He was one of the guards who had looked on, contemptuous and leering, when the women in her camp were forced to take showers. Corrie remembered. As the man reached out his hand, expecting her to take it, her own hand froze at her side. Corrie was stunned by her own response. What could she do? She thought that she had overcome the hurt and hate inside her, and had preached forgiveness to others. What if now she was confronted by a person she could not forgive? She prayed: “Jesus, I can't forgive this man. Forgive me.” Her honest admission reminds us that the work of forgiveness must begin with each of us, from where we actually are, not in some idealized state most of us could never reach. Praying, as we are struggling to fulfill this difficult command, is surely “the most authentic sign.”

Randall O'Brien has written, “Forgiving is the only way to be fair to ourselves. For only forgiveness liberates us from a painful past to a brand-new future. Not to forgive is to suffer endlessly the torment of yesterday as both present and future are hopelessly overwhelmed and devoured by the past. Only forgiveness sets us free.”

The Apostle Paul wrote, **Romans 13:8-10 and 12** “Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law. For the commandments say, “You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet.” These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God's law. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on

the shining armor of right living.” Hatred, fear, withholding forgiveness are dark deeds. Put on the radiance of joy, peace, love, and forgiveness.

Anne Lamott believes that earth is forgiveness school. Forgiveness sets the one offering forgiveness free. The one who forgives opens themselves to healing, so life and creativity can once again flourish.

Everett Worthington in *“The New Science of Forgiveness”* explains that scientific studies have found a connection between forgiveness and physical and mental health. The evidence reveals a forgiving person leads to a healthy family, community, and nation.

Scarlett Lewis lost her 6-year-old son Jesse in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. He was one of 20 children killed in that horrific attack in 2012 -- an absolute nightmare come to life. Parents such as Scarlett were devastated. At first, her anger sapped all of her energy and strength. Her rage was directed at the shooter and also at the mother who unwittingly armed him. But then she made the choice to forgive. "Forgiveness felt like I was given a big pair of scissors," she told The Forgiveness Project. These scissors helped her to cut her tie to the shooter and regain her personal power. "It started with a choice," she said, "and then became a process." At her son's funeral, she urged mourners to change their angry thoughts into loving ones. She saw this shift as a way to change the world. Forgiveness starts with a choice and then becomes a process.

Forgiving the people who hurt us can be arduous. Forgiving others is good for you. Forgiveness enables you to regain your life, just as it did for Scarlett Lewis.

Research reveals the benefits of forgiving others. Dr. Robert Enright, a developmental psychologist, designed ways to include forgiveness in therapy sessions. He developed therapies for helping elderly women to forgive the people who had wronged them in the past. He also tried to help the victims of abuse and incest to understand the people who assaulted them, without justifying what the abusers had done. He created two groups – one made up of women undergoing forgiveness therapy, and one made up of women receiving therapy for emotional wounds without a focus on forgiveness. The forgiveness therapy group showed greater improvement in emotional and psychological health than the group that did not focus on forgiveness.

Similar work is being done by Dr. Frederic Luskin, a co-founder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project. Luskin is teaching forgiveness to a variety of groups around the world, including war-ravaged populations in Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone. He is discovering that anyone – from betrayed spouses to terrorism victims – can heal themselves through the practice of forgiveness. This is true for us all. Our failure to forgive leaves us with a chemical reaction known as "the stress response." This is when "adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine enter the body," according to Luskin. "Those chemicals limit creativity, they limit problem-solving ... over time, they lead you to feel helpless and like a victim." Luskin says that when you forgive, you counteract the stress response along with its chemicals that make you feel like a helpless victim. "When you forgive," says the doctor, "you wipe all of that clean."

Jesus wants us to get healthier by making the decision to forgive, and then turning that choice into a process. Jesus is challenging us to make the forgiveness choice repeatedly until it becomes a part of who we are. Forgiveness is difficult. Seeing ourselves as sinners who have received forgiveness from our loving God is also difficult. It is much easier to hold grudges than to feel compassion toward the people who have hurt us. But Jesus knows that forgiveness is good for us – body, mind and spirit. Forgiving others is a choice that lowers stress, increases personal power and heals the world as well.

We are not going to form groups or share today. In this silence picture, a person you have not forgiven, or if you have not forgiven yourself, picture yourself. God help us to let go of the hurt. Help us forgive. Imagine Jesus lifting the hurt from you. Feel anger, hate, guilt, shame, tension, weight leaving you. Feel love, compassion, mercy flowing into you. Open yourself to God's grace and healing enabling you to soar with creative abundant life. Amen