

“Forgiveness Sets Us Free”

Matthew 18:21-35

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Prayer for Understanding God never let our reason distort your truth. Holy Spirit inspire us and reveal your will to each of us. Amen

Forgiveness sets one free. Johns Hopkins Medicine reports that, “the act of forgiveness reaps huge rewards for your health, lowering the risk of heart attack, reducing pain, blood pressure and levels of anxiety, depression and stress.” Someone who continues hurtful behavior, even when they know they are hurting you and they have the ability to stop their hurtful behavior, does not deserve forgiveness. However, choosing to forgive them in your mind and heart benefits you.

Disclaimer: Forgiveness is not staying in an abusive situation. If you are being abused, get help, get out, get to safety and surround yourself with loving people who care for you.

For five years, I was in a relationship where someone hurt me weekly. My inability to forgive tortured me. I did not manage the hurt well. It took me three years to seek professional help. My failure to process the hurt damaged my other relationships, fatigued me, diminished my joy, and negativity impacted my life. My thinking I was helpless caused me to behave small and take less risks. My viewing myself as a victim diminished my agency. I began thinking that eternal forces are responsible for shaping my life when in reality I have power to change my life. I failed to acknowledge my part in the damaged relationship, projecting blame as a defensive mechanism, instead of being accountable and cleaning up the mess. I failed to confront the person, to specifically name how their behavior was hurting me. As time went on, I struggled to perceive the good they were doing because it was overshadowed by my snowballing list of grievances, some legit, and some were likely never intended, rather my imagination gone outraged that their every action was done to hurt me. I have discovered that many times something that I thought was done to harm me was not the intent of the other person. Many people are self-centered and are not even aware of the impact of their words and actions on others. I understand now that I had unrealistically high expectations for this relationship. It took me five years, spiritual direction, therapy, coaching, processing, and self-work to forgive. My forgiveness lifted a crushing burden from me and set me free to healthy living. Reflecting now, I am able to share insights, learnings, and growth from this hurtful experience. However, in the midst of the ongoing hurt, I failed to perceive my role, my options and the steps to healing. It was as if I was thrown into a pit with a ladder with this person burying me. Instead of climbing out, I wallowed in my predicament. Forgiving them allowed me to climb the ladder out of the pit. I am still processing, learning, and growing from that awful season. My forgiveness of them is greatly enhancing my life.

The good news of Matthew: **Matthew 18:21-35 NLT** “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 could not 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 would not 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. Should not 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 is what God will do to you if you refuse to forgive your siblings from your heart.”

I do not believe that God ever tortures us, tests us, or sends anything other than goodness to us. However, God does uphold free will, therefore our actions often result in us harming and torturing ourselves. I do not believe God ever labels anyone as “evil”. God despises evil behavior and loves every person. God’s grace is working to imprison every evil action to set free every person.

Jesus’ parable illustrates that we are able to forgive others, because God continuously forgives us. When trying to forgive another, reflect on God’s forgiveness of you. This is one of the reasons why every week in worship we have a Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Forgiveness so that we know we are freely forgiven which helps us forgive others. When trying to forgive yourself, meditate on God’s forgiveness of you.

Back in October 2006, a gunman took hostages in a one-room Amish schoolhouse. In an act of horrifying violence, he shot ten children, killing five, and then he committed suicide. The Amish community responded by offering forgiveness to the murderer and his family. Instead of lashing out in anger, they showed mercy and love. Four years later, a group of scholars wrote about the incident. One of their main conclusions was that our secular culture is not likely to produce people who can respond as the Amish did. These scholars saw that the Amish ability to forgive was grounded in the fact that “at the heart of their faith was a man dying for his enemies.” The Amish followed Jesus who gave his life and forgave his tormentors in an act of love and spiritual strength. In the Amish world, “this self-sacrificing figure was seen, sung, believed, rehearsed, and celebrated constantly.” Forgiveness was understood to be “the greatest gift and virtue.”

Peter asked Jesus is there any limit to our forgiveness of another. Jesus’ answer seventy times seven means endless forgiveness of everyone. Our grace and mercy should be boundless. It means complete, unlimited abandonment of keeping score and getting even.

Forgiveness is giving up your right to pay back the person who hurt you. This directly opposes how many think. Sometimes when we are mistreated, we are urged to get revenge or to withdraw from the conflict. Many have been misled by a culture that nourishes revenge and mocks grace. Examples are people criticizing each other online. Some individuals feel offended and quickly pursue revenge, wanting to balance the scales. Often, people misunderstand the motives of others and jump to incorrect conclusions. Forgiveness is at the heart of a follower of Jesus. Forgiveness gives life. Forgiveness makes life glorious.

Desmond Tutu grew up under the horror of apartheid and insists that “without forgiveness there is no future.” Desmond rejected the Nuremburg Trials model of dealing with war crimes and instead offered amnesty and forgiveness for any perpetrators of violence who would come forward and publicly confess the full truth of what they had done. Desmond believed that the alternative to forgiveness is a cycle of violence.

“We should not miss the confrontational nature of this parable,” Tim Keller writes in *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?* “Jesus’ parable about forgiveness is not a feel-good story about people receiving God’s forgiveness and then eagerly spreading the love to others. Rather, it is a story about a person asking for forgiveness and then being utterly unchanged when they received forgiveness.” Tim says we are in the midst of a “forgiveness crisis”, in part because forgiveness has often been misused, especially in religious circles. At times survivors of abuse have been pressured to forgive those abusers and just move on. Or forgiveness is used to cover up the truth about the harm people have done to others. People have used forgiveness as a way of destroying the truth. The word repent means asking for forgiveness. If you do not think you have done anything wrong, you have not repented.” Tim explains that in the past he has struggled with granting forgiveness. Early in his marriage, at times he withheld forgiveness from his wife, even if she said she was sorry. Doing that, Tim said, gave him a sense of superiority but also allowed him to hold on to the sense he had been wronged. That led to struggles in their marriage, something they had to work through. Withholding forgiveness can give people a sense of power over others. If you are out to punish someone, you make it really hard for them to ask for forgiveness. One of the key aspects of forgiveness is “willing the good of the wrongdoer.” The idea is drawn from the command of Jesus that his followers love their enemies. A secret to overcoming evil is to see it as something distinct from the evildoer.”

Richard Rohr wrote: “We come to God not by doing it right, but by doing it wrong. And yet the great forgiveness is to forgive ourselves for doing it wrong. That is probably the hardest forgiveness of all: that I am not perfect, that I am not unwounded, I am not innocent. One learns one’s mystery at the price of one’s innocence. If I want to maintain an image of myself as innocent, superior, righteous, or saved, I can only do that at the cost of truth. I have to reject the mysterious side, the shadow side, the broken side, the unconscious side of almost everything. The art of letting go really is the way to heaven because when we fall down there to the

bottom, we fall on solid ground, the great foundation. On that foundation where we have nothing to prove, nothing to protect, we have met the enemy and the enemy is us. Letting go is different than denying or repressing. To let go of it, we have to admit it. We have to own it. Letting go is different than turning it against our self. Letting go is different than projecting onto others. The religious word for letting go is the word "forgiveness." The mode of weeping, of crying, is different than fixing. It is different than understanding. That is why we often cry when we forgive. When we cannot fix it, when we cannot explain it, when we cannot control it, when we cannot even understand it, we can only forgive it. Jesus said we will experience the forgiveness of God to the degree that we can be conduits of forgiveness for one another. In other words, forgiveness is of one piece. Those who give forgiveness can receive forgiveness. Those who experience forgiveness can give forgiveness. If we are in the conduit of love, if we are in the ocean of mercy, frankly, forgiveness is the only thing that makes sense."

Thomas Moore wrote: "I wonder why this hardness of heart, this clinging to unforgiveness is so often associated with religious conviction and valued as moral strength. What happened to the Gospel teaching to forgive seventy times seven times? I wonder how people can be so clear about right and wrong, so quick to judge. The capacity to forgive reveals a soul that is free of anxiety, one that is mature and equal to the complexity of human interaction. Forgiveness is release. When you forgive, you release yourself and release the other person. You allow life to go on, to bypass your exaggerated sense of virtue and your worry about being offended. As long as you sit on your power to forgive, you suppress your joy in life. Forgiveness allows life to flow."

Brene Brown wrote: "Forgiveness is not forgetting or walking away from accountability or condoning a hurtful act. Forgiveness is the process of taking back and healing our lives so we can truly live. Forgiveness is not excusing or inviting harm back into your life." To forgive you need to be willing to grieve as forgiveness requires burying old expectations and the need to be right. To fully forgive, you must face into the pain and allow certain things to die, such as the fantasy of who you thought the person was, or the dreams you had. You must mourn the loss of those expectations. It is a heavy price, which is why it is so difficult, but that grief is required to permanently let go of resentment. You can forgive someone while permanently setting boundaries or closing the door to the relationship to protect your own well-being. Decisional forgiveness is an intellectual, conscious choice to let go of the desire for revenge or retaliation. Emotional forgiveness is when your body and nervous system finally let go of the resentment. It is a physical release that takes time and cannot be rushed. Forgiving oneself is often the hardest part. Forgiving self requires us to give up the story we have created around our own guilt, moving from self-punishment to self-compassion. Forgiveness is an act of personal peace.

We can make the decision to forgive others because Jesus has forgiven us. Forgiveness sets one free. Forgiveness gives life. Forgiveness makes life glorious. Amen

