

The Art of Forgiveness

Rev. David W. Edwards

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Text: Matthew 18:15-35

There's an ancient adage, so old that its origin is lost to history, that says, "Once bitten, twice shy." The earliest I can find refers to a fable about a dog and a wolf, but even without explanation, I think you pretty well know what it means. If you are once bitten by a snake, you will be reluctant to ever handle a snake again. Children who have once been bitten by a dog, develop a fear of dogs. They don't want to risk getting bitten again. I think God created us with such memories as a way of preserving our lives. If we taste something bitter, we don't want to taste it a second time. If something makes us sick, we don't eat it ever again. Marsha's mom ate something many years ago that had coconut in it. Whatever it was, it made her ill. She thought it was the coconut and proclaimed that she was allergic to coconut. She wasn't, as we found out, but if she knew something had coconut in it, she refused to eat it. If something harms us, we avoid it from that time on. We remember what hurt us. We also remember who hurt us. But the people who hurt us present us, particular as social creatures, and especially as Christians, with a problem.

You see, in society, we often have to live with, or near, people who have hurt us in some way. We have to do business with them. We have to share the streets with them. We sometimes have to sit at the same table with them. Family members hurt us, at least emotionally, sometimes. Co-workers hurt us, perhaps by gossip or lies. We may feel cheated at a particular business, even though they are the best source for something we need. We need a way to continue to deal with difficult people, and sometimes to maintain a relationship with someone who has hurt us or embarrassed us.

As Christians, sometimes those people who hurt us are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Sometimes, they are fellow believers, whom Christ has called us to love and set us an example as to how to love them. Remember John 13:34-35, which I urge you to memorize: *A new command, not suggestion, not encouragement, command. A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must, not should, not could, not ought, you must. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* "They will know we are Christians by our love" for one another.

Then the apostle Paul gives us a strong lesson in what that love looks like - 1 Corinthians 13:4 — *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.* You can go on, but for the purposes of this morning's message, I need to stop there: it keeps no record. In other words, it forgets. Oh, but, Preacher, you say, how can I forget when someone has hurt me? How can I forgive and forget? Once bitten, twice shy. How can I forget? I suspect that's the most difficult part of this whole forgiveness thing. But let's go to our text, and to Jesus' words.

The first part of this is about dealing with conflict in the body of Christ. Jesus was probably speaking more generally into his society, but as the King of a new kingdom, he was also speaking about the way citizens of his kingdom should live. So this is for the Body of Christ, the church.

If your brother sins ... That, I think, constitutes what we consider sin, but also those things that are sins against persons, against us, and against the relationships we share. Let me just state at the outset that Jesus is laying down a vital principle: keep it simple and keep it private. Involve as few people as possible. *If your brother sins, go and point out his fault, just between the two of you.* He has offended you; you are the only party that needs to be involved. Just between the two of you. This does not need to go on a prayer list. You don't need to solicit sympathy. You don't need to start telling people how So-and-so hurt you. It's nobody's business. Go alone. Have coffee together. Own your offense. I was hurt when you said ... Give them an opportunity to apologize and repent. And if they listen and respond, the affair is over and done – and still nobody else needs to know about it. Bury the hatchet, as they say, and leave it behind. Now you are friends again.

But, if the individual rejects your plea, now you may take a second step. And notice that every step is aimed at reconciliation, aimed at restoring the relationship. Second step: take someone you both trust, a neutral party, as a witness. Jesus reminds them of the old law that requires two witnesses to establish a crime. This is not someone you've recruited to help you gang up on the one who's offended you. You are not going to brow-beat them into a confession. You do the same thing you did at first, but now with someone who can testify that you tried to mend the relationship. And if they respond affirmatively, the issue is resolved, and you can move forward as friends again. And nobody else needs to hear about it, from any of the involved parties.

But, if step two fails, there is a step three, and this is the hardest of all. Now you involve the *ekklesia*. It's translated "church", but remember that *ekklesia* also referred to the town council, or to a panel of judges. This does not mean, however, that you stand up in the congregation and publicly point fingers of accusation and anger. It means that you take it to the elders of the church. You and your witness and the offender, and you try what you did in step one, but this time in front of the elders. And if they repent, you have won your friend back. And again, no one else needs to know. It's nobody's business but your own. It's not everybody's business. It's not fodder for gossip and it need not go on the prayer list.

What if step three fails? Jesus says you then *treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector*. That is, you treat them as a sinner in need of a Savior, in need of redemption. Many churches and denominations have misinterpreted this and misused it to mean that you kick them out, shun them, excommunicate them, reject them and have nothing more to do with them. How did Jesus respond to tax collectors – like Matthew? Sinners need a savior. They need bridges built, not walls. They need prayer and love. They need to be invited into fellowship, not kicked out of it. Paul wrote to Timothy, *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst* (1 Tim. 1:15). How do we treat pagans and tax collectors? With invitations, with prayers, with love, with the kind of fellowship that leads to repentance and salvation. If step three fails, treat that fallen brother as if had not yet come to Christ. Open doors, offer grace.

If you can forgive, Jesus says, they are forgiven in heaven. If you convict them, they are convicted, bound, in heaven. Why is that? Because you have slammed the doors of grace in their face. You will have built a wall and shut them out. It is better to release them than to bind them. And that's particularly true if the Body of Christ is in agreement with the wall, with shutting them out.

Peter, who knew what Jesus was talking about, wanted a way out. There's got to be some limit on forgiveness. So he asked Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother. Now, I know that some people have done the math and concluded that there is, after all, a limit. Seven times seven, in some translations; seventy times seven in others; seventy-seven in the NIV. So 49, or 490, or just 77. Then we're done and we can write them off.

No. In Jewish numerology, seven is God's number. God created in six days and rested on the seventh. Jews are commanded to rest on the seventh day as a holy day, and to mourn for seven days following a death. Seven is thus the perfect number, reflecting God's perfection. The ancients considered that there were seven heavenly bodies. So, for Jesus' purposes, forgiveness of seven times, or seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven times, essentially means forgiveness without limit. Stop counting. Love keeps no record. *As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

To hammer the lesson home, Jesus tells a story. I want you to notice that this is a kingdom story. Jesus begins, *"The kingdom of heaven is like ..."* That means this is an illustration of the way God works. This is the way God approaches the issue of forgiveness. So when we pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we are approving and applying God's way of doing things to ourselves. If this is the kingdom way, the way things are done in heaven, then this is what we want for ourselves. We are acknowledging that this is the way forgiveness ought to be done; the way we ought to forgive.

A king decided it was time to settle accounts, to call in mortgages and debts. So, he calls in debtors one by one and settles their debts. One man comes in owing an incredible sum. My study Bible (NIV) says he owes *ten thousand bags of gold*; your translation may say *ten thousand talents*. A talent was roughly the wages one would earn for 20 years of labor. The average US income today is \$63,795. Times 20 is \$1,275,900. And this man owes ten thousand times that amount, roughly the equivalent of \$12.76 billion dollars, if my math is correct. We are astonished at that amount of debt, and the man simply cannot pay it. The penalty then was indentured servitude, and the king orders the man and his family into slavery until the debt can be repaid – which would be never. The man falls on his knees and begs the king for mercy. The king is compassionate and forgives the debt. That is forgiveness on a massive scale, wouldn't you say?

Relieved the man goes out to go about his business, but happens upon a neighbor who owes him *a hundred silver coins, or a hundred denarii*. A denarius was a day's wage, about \$245 and change according to today's average. So, a hundred denarii would be about \$24,500, using today's averages, and a minuscule percentage (0.0000019148) of what the man had owed to the king. He grabs the man by the throat, shakes him, and demands immediate repayment. When the man couldn't pay the debt, the first man had him thrown into debtors prison.

The news got back to the king, of course. Remember this is a kingdom parable, so the king in this story is God. The king found out what the man had done, called him in and reinstated the debt. *“‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because 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.”*

Jesus’ next words are a chilling warning to us: *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”* The warning is that unless we forgive, we cannot expect to be forgiven. Theologians may object to this, but Jesus words tell us that our forgiveness from God can be withdrawn. That’s a frightening thought. But it tells us how seriously God takes sin, and how seriously God takes forgiveness. It is no light matter. But we’ve already been warned, if you recall.

Go back to the Disciple’s Prayer in Matthew 6. We pray this every Sunday, and you’ve no doubt heard hundreds of sermons on what is called The Lord’s Prayer. I want you to read verse 12 - all of it, and then verses 14 and 15. Verse 12, part of the prayer, is *“forgive us our debts (or our sins) as we forgive our debtors (or, those who sin against us).”* Forgive us as we forgive – that is, in the same way. Forgive us in the same way that we forgive. But then Jesus says, *“For if (notice the “if”) you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”* If you do not forgive, neither will you be forgiven. Notice that this is the only petition in the prayer that Jesus comments on afterward. That’s how seriously Jesus takes forgiveness. We cannot be in fellowship with God with an unforgiving spirit. We cannot be at peace with God if we are holding grudges.

When Jesus sent out the disciples, he gave them the power to heal and deliver, and said, *“Freely you have received, freely give”* (Mt 10:8b). That applies to forgiveness and reconciliation as well as to healing. *“Bitterness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will die.”*¹ Holding grudges poisons the soul, imprisons the spirit, and distances one from God. Forgiveness has little to do with the other person, but it will set you free and draw you closer to your heavenly Father. Forgiveness is often difficult because the other person may not repent, or may never acknowledge their fault. But love still forgives and love keeps no records. We hung him on a cross and he prayed for our forgiveness. *“As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”*

¹ Attributed to St. Augustine. Nelson Mandela: “Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”