

Series: Finding Freedom in Forgiveness
Part VI: When Do We Forgive?
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Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with 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 hundred denarii. 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 with 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 greatly distressed 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 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 turned 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 from your heart." -- Matthew 18:21-35, NIV

A while back when our kids were much younger, one of our daughters was playing soccer. It was a league in which there was no official score, so they did not count how many goals were scored or which team had the most wins (which I was in all in favor of at that age.) During one particular game, our team was not playing that well. You know how it is – some days your team plays well and some days it does not. This was one of those not-so-good games. While no one kept score officially, if someone had, we would be losing badly. About halfway through the game one of the girls on the other team, who just happened to be their best player and who had scored most of their goals, yelled over to her Mom after scoring yet another goal. She yelled loudly enough so that everyone couldn't help but hear, "Hey Mom, we're winning twelve to nothing!" And her Mom sort of laughed and yelled back, "Actually, it's thirteen to nothing, but who's counting?" (Obviously, she was!)

Now I came close to going over and saying something to the Mom. All sorts of things went through my mind -- most of which would not have been helpful or Christlike. I ended up holding my tongue, but if she had made one more obnoxious comment, I was going to say something about being sensitive to the other kids on the field who were trying just as hard as her daughter. In so many things in life, it is all about keeping score. But is that the way it is when it comes to forgiveness? *When* or *how often* do we have to forgive? That's what we want to look at today, and it is the very question Peter asks Jesus.

Peter, who was never shy about saying anything, comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" And then Peter offers his own answer, "Up

to seven times?" Now "seven times" was probably in response to the rabbinic teaching of the day that said you had to forgive someone three times, but no more were required. Seven times seems pretty generous compared to that – two times as many plus one. But Jesus says, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Some translations say "seventy times seven" – the Greek can be read either way.) Did Jesus simply increase the number, but still stay with the idea that when a person wrongs us the seventy-eighth time, then that's it? I don't think that's what Jesus is saying here. It's not about keeping score when it comes to forgiveness. That is not how God's math of grace works. And to make this point, Jesus tells a rather challenging parable.

It is about a king whose servant owes him a large sum of money. So suggest that this is not just a poor servant, but more like someone who collected taxes or tribute from other nations, and now the king wants the money. But the amount of the money – "ten thousand talents" – was absurd. It was much more than all of the nations in the area put together ever owed. It would be like saying this man owed the national debt. It is a huge number Jesus uses to make a point.

It is like when your kids are young and they start saying who loves Mommy more. One says, "I love her one thousand." The other says, "I love her one million." The first says, "I love her infinity." The other says, "I love her infinity times infinity." This number was meant to represent a number no one could ever pay back.

The servant is threatened with being thrown in debtor's prison, along with his family. But he falls to his knees and begs for mercy -- saying he will find some way to pay back the king. (What is he going to do – get a second job to pay back the equivalent of the national debt?) But the king has mercy on him, forgives his debt, and lets him go.

However, as soon as the servant leaves, he sees someone who owes him a rather modest amount of money in comparison. He grabs him by the neck and begins to choke him. The other man says almost word for word what the servant had just said when he begged for mercy, but the servant throws him in prison anyway. Others see this and tell the king who calls him back in, confronts him with what he has done, and throws him back in prison. And the parable ends with some very harsh words that make us cringe about this being what God will do to us if we don't forgive as we have been forgiven. (I almost thought about preaching on only the first two verses and skipping the parable altogether or at least leaving out the last line, but there it is.)

Now let me say I don't think this parable is meant to focus on this last threat. Like any parable, the focus is on the surprise, which in this case took place when the servant failed to show the mercy most would think he would show. And I don't think God is the kind of God who is out to "get us" when we don't get it right. God's grace and love don't seem to be about that.

What I do think is going on here is a depiction of what happens to us when we have been set free from the prison of our sin by God's grace, and we choose not to live into that freedom. In this story, the servant had been forgiven his "infinite" debt and set free, rather than having to live in prison. Yet, when he is set free, he has a hard time living the way he should, so he goes back to his old ways of living. In the end, he ends up back in his own prison of unforgiveness and ungrace.

It reminds me of those who spend time in prison and get out, but find that, for a number of reasons, they can't live with the freedom they have been given. Often they commit another crime in order to go back to prison, simply because that is what they know. Christian writer C.S. Lewis once said, "A familiar captivity is frequently more desirable than an unfamiliar freedom." The servant is given his freedom and a choice, but he chooses to live in a way that only returns him to a world without forgiveness and mercy.

It was Viktor Frankl who survived the Nazi concentration camps who said: "The last human freedom is to determine our response In the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person a prisoner became was the result of an inner decision and not the result of the camp influence alone." (From *The Pastor as Minor Poet* by M. Craig Barnes: 39) We can't blame our lack of forgiveness on others – it is our choice.

The journal *Spirituality and Health* once had on its front cover the picture of three U.S. ex-servicemen, standing in front of the Vietnam War memorial in Washington, D.C. One asks, "Have you forgiven those who held you prisoner of war?" The other responds, "I will never forgive them." His friend says, "Then it seems they still have you in prison, don't they?"

So, *when or how often* do we choose to break out of that prison? Lewis Smedes, whom we have quoted often in this series, says that *we forgive as often as it is needed*. In other words, it is not about keeping score. Smedes puts it this way: "Forgiving is not like pulling up our bait after we have caught our limit of fish. Nor is it like the judge who lets thugs off the first two times, but on a third offense, locks them up for keeps. Numbers are not in the forgiving calculus." (From *The Art of Forgiving* by Lewis Smedes: 158) So, how often do we forgive? Smedes adds, "Use the gift [of forgiveness] as often as it takes to set you free from a miserable past you cannot shake." Forgiveness is not a number – it is a process that lasts our whole life long.

Which leads us to something else we need to say about the "timing" of forgiveness – the *when* and *how often* of forgiveness. That is simply to acknowledge that *there is a timing factor when it comes to forgiveness*. In other words, there is a right time to forgive. Smedes even suggests that in some cases, it may be too soon to forgive. Now the smaller things we need to get over and be done with, of course. But for the really big hurts – we may need some time to forgive and to find reconciliation – if that is even possible.

In my own life, I can remember a time years ago when I was playing in a Christian band. Another Presbyterian minister had started the band. I spent a number of years with that group, recording a couple of records, and playing concerts up and down the East Coast on weekends. All of us who were in the band held jobs or served as pastors in churches.

Over time, the other Presbyterian minister in the band became one of my closest friends – kind of like soul mates. We read the same books, liked the same music – and we were both Presbyterian ministers. But after a few years, he had some personal issues that he needed to take care of, so we supported him as best we knew how. We thought the band might be over because he was the one who had supplied all of the sound equipment, the truck and the lights. It was his vision for the band. But he said that while he needed to take a break from the band, he wanted us to go on and keep

playing. He would meet with us from time to time to encourage us, so we agreed to keep going. However, I can remember the very day when Pam and I came home from visiting friends on the West Coast, and there was a registered letter in our mail. We opened it. It was from this friend written in all sorts of legalese, telling us in very threatening language that we had to return all of the band equipment by a certain date or else. It was a huge shock. This was my close friend. Why didn't he just pick up the phone and say, "I need the equipment back and the band has to end?" We would have said, "Ok, it's yours anyway." But that wasn't what happened.

I saw him the next day at a church meeting. He came up to me all smiling, as if nothing had happened. I just looked at him and asked him what was going on. His demeanor changed and he got very serious. And then the conversation just kind of stopped. It was a number of months before he called and said he wanted to reconcile. And what I said to him was this, "Right now, I did not know what reconciliation looked like, and I need some time." And that was it. About a year later, we got together for lunch to talk about it. He explained the outside circumstances that he said made him do that. I told him that all he needed to do was call me. I forgave him, but our friendship was never the same -- in part because I did not trust him anymore. And our lives went different ways. From time to time, I have looked back at that action and wondered if I did the right thing. I forgave, but we never really reconciled. After our lunch meeting, I don't think he really wanted to either. But I understand when Smedes says that sometimes there is a timing issue when it comes to when we forgive and how we reconcile. Particularly if the wound has been deep, we may need some time to get to the place where we can genuinely forgive.

Now Smedes suggests that there is such a thing as a kind of "too quick" forgiveness which we may do simply to get past the pain as fast as possible. Smedes says he worries about "fast forgivers" because often it does not seem to take into account the seriousness of what has happened. Smedes suggests that we may need time to think about what has happened, evaluate whether it was an accident or not, talk to a friend or counselor about it, feel deeply the emotions we have, and then pray honestly to God about our pain and anger – all before we jump too quickly to forgiveness. *Sometimes we need to wait.*

But then Smedes offers the opposite word of caution – but *don't wait too long*. We need to forgive for ourselves. We may need some time to honestly come to terms and even learn and grow from what has happened to us – but eventually forgiveness is what will set us free from what has imprisoned us.

Maybe the key word here is *patience*. Have patience with yourself -- especially if you have been seriously wounded by another. Don't delay it because you refuse to forgive, but give yourself space to work through it at the right time – not too soon, but don't wait too long either. Because when we forgive, we are choosing not to be a victim, but to experience and pass on the same forgiveness that God has shown to each one of us.

Writer Phillip Yancey tells the story of a friend of his named George whose marriage was going through some very difficult times. Yancey writes:

One night George passed a breaking point. He pounded the table and the floor. "I hate you!" he screamed at his wife. "I won't take it anymore! I've had enough! I won't go on! I won't let it happen! No! No! No!" Several months later my friend woke up in the middle of the night and heard strange sounds coming from the room where his two-year-old son slept. He padded down the hall, stood for a moment outside his son's door, and shivers ran through his flesh. He could not draw a breath. In a soft voice, the two-year-old was repeating word for word with precise inflection the argument between his mother and father. "I hate you I won't take it anymore No! No! No!" George realized that in some awful way he had just bequeathed his pain and anger and unforgiveness to the next generation. (From *Want's So Amazing About Grace?:* 120)

Friends, what do we want to pass on to the next generation? What do we want to pass on to those around us? Unforgiveness and ungrace? The good news -- the amazing news -- is that God has forgiven each one of us of the sins we have committed that are so great, we probably don't even know all that we have done to hurt others. But God has forgiven you and me. We can then choose to show the same forgiveness to others again and again, as often as it is needed, at just the right time. And in doing that we pass it on -- not unforgiveness -- but mercy and grace.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.