

## **Introduction**

Some years back, a mother and father, whose 17 year-old son had been murdered, were on a television show. Their son's killer, who was in prison, was also on the show by way of satellite hookup. He admitted that he didn't know the son but had randomly killed him. He was now sorry though, he said, and asked the parents, publicly, on television, to forgive him. Let me ask you a question. Should they forgive him? Yes, they should and Matthew 18:21-35 explains why. It's because, when it comes to forgiveness, it's **"the same to you."**

## **Wronged**

Peter prompts what Jesus teaches here by asking Him a question in verse 21: **"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?"** We all know to what the words **"sin against me"** refer. It's a person wronging us. He or she does something that harms us. A jealous co-worker of hers slandered a Christian I knew. She spread the vicious rumor that she was sleeping with her boyfriend, which she wasn't. The co-worker sinned against the Christian. She wronged her.

All of us have been there and done that haven't we. All of us have been wronged in many ways big and small and will be many times again before we die. A teacher gives us an unfair grade. A bully picks on us. A parent abuses us. A snob looks down on us. A brother in Jesus slanders us. An employer berates us. And on it goes.

And that's what this text is all about. Jesus responds to Peter's question by telling him a parable. This parable teaches Peter and us what we should and shouldn't do when people wrong us.

## **What We Shouldn't Do**

It teaches us what we shouldn't do.

Interpreting a parable requires that we do two things. First,

identify its points of reference, its details that stand for something else. Second, determine what those points of reference stand for.

Let's identify five points of reference in this parable and what they stand for: (1) the king – stands for God; (2) the first slave – stands for you or I; (3) the second slave – stands for someone you or I know; (4) the first slave's debt to the king - stands for you or I sinning against God; and (5) the second slave's debt to the first slave - stands for someone you or I know wronging us.

With those points of reference in mind, notice what the first slave does to the second. He seizes him, chokes him, demands that he repay him, and then throws him in debtor's prison when he can't. That action too is a point of reference that stands for this. We make someone who wrongs us pay for doing so. We deal with him on the basis of the wrong he did and make him suffer. We can do that in various ways: attack his reputation with gossip or slander, give him the cold shoulder, undermine his efforts, show him anger, give him a tongue lashing, physically assault him, and more.

The Christian I mentioned earlier illustrates what I mean. She made her co-worker pay for slandering her. She angrily told her off, gossiped about her, and never spoke to her again.

Let's face it. Most of us do the same when people wrong us. We deal with them on the basis of what they did. They harmed us. So, we harm them right back. That's what we do - but we shouldn't.

### **What We Should Do**

We should do what the king does instead. According to verse 27, he **"felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt."** The king **"feels"** for the first slave as we say it and doesn't make him pay his debt. He deals with him in fact as if he isn't even a debtor.

The king's action is a point of reference that stands for this – forgiving wrongdoers. That's what we should do when people wrong us. We should forgive them. That means two things. First, we feel

compassion and sympathy for them. We wish them well not ill. Second, we don't make them pay. We deal with them in fact as if they hadn't wronged us. That doesn't mean that we quit hurting, or that we pretend the wrong they did doesn't matter, or even that things are going to be just like they were before. It does mean we invite them back into the circle of our fellowship and do good to them.

I knew a Christian whose husband committed adultery. He confessed it to her though and asked her to forgive him and she did. She told me one day: **"I'm deeply hurt and it's going to be a long time before I can trust him again. But I'll do everything I can to make our marriage work."** And she did. Unlike many other similarly positioned wives, she didn't try to make him feel guilty about what he did. She didn't use what he did as a device to manipulate and control him. She let him back into the circle of her fellowship instead. She cared about him and continued doing the good for him that she had always done.

### **The Consequence**

That then is what we shouldn't and should do when people wrong us. We shouldn't make them pay. We should forgive them instead. But why should we? It's for several reasons, one of which this parable reveals.

Notice what the king does. He discovers that the first slave didn't forgive the second slave's debt to him. So, correspondingly, he doesn't forgive the first slave's debt to him.

The king's and first slave's actions are points of reference that Jesus interprets in verse 35. They teach us an absolute principle that God will not compromise. It's what I call **"the same to you"** principle. If we don't forgive others for wronging us, God won't forgive us for wronging Him. He'll give us a dose of our own medicine. He'll make us pay for our wrongs (sins) to the same degree we make others pay for theirs.

That implies something. Our forgiveness is unconditional. Unlike God's, ours doesn't require that those who wrong us repent. We forgive them whether they're sorry or not. That doesn't mean that we protect

them from the consequences of what they do, or that we allow them to keep on harming us. It does mean that we don't make them pay even if they aren't sorry for what they did. This teaching is, I know, a hard pill for us to swallow. But it's true.

A young woman came to see her pastor. She was upset because her former best friend had betrayed a confidence, causing her harm at work. She resented her, so deeply in fact that she hadn't spoken to her in over a month. **"I'm done with her,"** she said. The pastor coaxed her in return that she needed to forgive her friend, to try to make things right with her, but to no avail. She was adamant. She wouldn't forgive her.

When she finally got up to leave, the pastor suggested they pray. He prayed first and then asked her to close by saying the Lord's Prayer, which she did: **"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and . . ."**

Suddenly there was silence. The pastor told her to go on but she refused. She wouldn't say the next words, **"forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."** She got the point. She needed to repent and, for her own sake, forgive her friend, which she subsequently did.

Forgiveness is a two-way street. If we don't forgive others for wronging us, God won't forgive us for wronging Him. He'll make us pay for our wrongs to the same degree that we make others pay for theirs.

### **The Scope of Forgiveness**

Now that we know what forgiveness is, let's take a look at its scope. This parable teaches us two things in that regard.

First, forgiveness is never ending. Let's go back to Peter's question in verse 21. There's a reason he says **"seven times."** For centuries, Jewish rabbis had taught that people must forgive wrongdoers three times. So Peter takes the rabbinic standard, three, multiplies it by two, and adds one more for good measure. He's probably trying to get a commendation from Jesus for being so gracious. But Jesus doesn't

commend him. He gently chastens him instead, **“Not up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”** He doesn’t mean that literally of course – that we should forgive someone 490 times and then make him pay on the 491<sup>st</sup>. The number is His way of saying that true forgiveness never ends. We continue to forgive people no matter how many times they wrong us.

This parable teaches a second thing about the scope of forgiveness. It’s not only never-ending; it’s all encompassing as well. We see that in the amounts of money the two slaves owe. The second slave owes the first slave 100 denarii, approximately \$100 today. But the first slave owes the king 10,000 talents, approximately \$50,000,000 today. The difference is vast to make a point. We should forgive the slightest of wrongs – \$100. We should also forgive the greatest of wrongs – \$50,000,000. It’s all wrongs no matter how big or small they are.

Let’s go back to the mother and father and their son’s killer. After he asked them to forgive him, they didn’t say anything. Which prompted the interviewer to ask: **“What about it? Do you forgive him?”** To which the mother replied, **“No we don’t and never will.”**

I have two probing questions. First, does God really expect those parents to forgive him for killing their son? The answer is, **“Yes, He does.”** There’s no wrong so big we shouldn’t forgive it. Forgiveness is all encompassing. Second, suppose the parents forgive him and then, he kills their other son. Does God really expect them to forgive him a second time? The answer is, **“Yes, He does.”** We should forgive **“seventy times seven.”** Forgiveness is never ending.

### **How to Forgive**

Now, I know what some of you are probably thinking, **“That’s easy for him to say,”** and you’re right. As C.S. Lewis observed, **“Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive.”** That’s true. Forgiving is easier said than done. Nevertheless, Jesus expects us to do it.

So, we resolve to forgive. When I say “**resolve**”, I mean “**intend**.” Whenever we forgive, it’s because we intend to. The fact is it’s up to us to try and train to forgive. And in the end, that’s how Jesus will judge us - not based on how forgiving we were but how forgiving we could have been if we intended it. We intend to forgive by doing at least three things.

First, we ask the Holy Spirit to help us. Listen carefully to what I’m going to say. Forgiving is as easy or hard as the degree to which we are or are not like Jesus. Which means that the Holy Spirit Himself must create a mind and heart of forgiveness in us. So we ask Him to help us. We ask Him to make our mind clear about and our heart sympathetic to the wrongdoer.

Second, we develop a larger view of things. On one hand, we develop a larger view of our self in God’s kingdom. We see Him and our self in His hands. On the other hand, we develop a larger view of the wrongdoer himself. We do our best to see him as more than merely a person who has harmed us. We strive to recognize his humanity, his pitiful fallenness, and his place under God.

And third, we pray persistently for the wrongdoer. We identify the particulars of his person and life – what is best for him and what he needs. We then ask the Holy Spirit in thoughtful detail to do what is best and give what is needed.

Taking steps like these opens us up to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. He’s able to bring the grace and power of Jesus’ resurrection life to our minds and hearts, which in turn equips us to forgive.

## **Conclusion**

Several years ago, the *Journal of Adult Development* conducted a survey about forgiveness. I share this result in closing. 48% of those surveyed admit that they don’t and won’t forgive. I hope and pray that you and I aren’t part of that 48%. Why? It’s because of Jesus’ words in verse 35, “**the same to you.**”