

“Forgiven and Forgiving”
Matthew 6:12
April 28, 2002
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Last November I told you the story of Marietta Jaeger.

When Marietta’s seven-year-old daughter was kidnapped from their tent during a camping trip in Montana, her initial reaction was one of rage:

She wrote: “I was seething with hate, ravaged with a desire for revenge.

I said to my husband and I meant it with every fiber of my being “Even if Susie was brought back alive and well this minute, I could kill that man for what he has done to my family.” (from Seventy Times Seven)

Have you ever been deeply hurt?

- Abandoned?
- Someone you loved killed?
- A spouse unfaithful?
- Your income or business or retirement stolen?
- A child or best friend betrayed your trust?
- Repeatedly slandered?

Most of us have had enemies, acquaintances, friends and even loved ones who have hurt us, hurt us deeply; who have sinned against us greatly.

Some offenses against us we shrug off as inconsequential.

But others cut too deeply to dismiss and we find that even when we try to forget about them, they keep coming back to mind and hurting all over again.

The world says, and even something in us says, “Keep score and get even” or at least “Beware.”

But Jesus says, “Forgive.”

Knowing how seemingly impossible forgiveness sometimes is, the Apostle Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive someone who sins against us?

Peter magnanimously suggested an answer to his own question by indicating that he might be willing to forgive seven times.

But Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times!"

Then to drive home the point of how and why we are to live with an attitude of forgiveness toward others, Jesus tells a story.

Please stand as I read from the Sacred Scriptures:

Matthew 18:23-35

"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 you 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."

It is the last sentence, Jesus' commentary on his own story, which led me to this text.

Remember that Jesus told the story because Peter asked how many times we should forgive someone who sins against us.

And his answer, in the story and after the story, I think is much more significant and profound than Peter expected.

Regarding forgiveness, **what two issues does Jesus tie together?**

He inextricably links God's forgiveness of us with our forgiveness of others.

This is not the only time Jesus does this.

In Luke 6:37 we hear him saying, "Forgive and you will be forgiven."

In Mark 11:25 we read, "If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

And in our continuing study of and wrestling with the Sermon on the Mount, in the section we call "The Lord's Prayer" we find the same striking idea:

Matthew 6:9-15

"This, then, is how you should pray:

" `Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil one. '

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Again, what two issues does Jesus tie together? –
Our forgiveness of others and God’s forgiveness of us!

**“Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.”**

The implications of this are disturbing to us.

Does Jesus mean that we have to forgive others **before** the
Father can forgive us?

Is Jesus saying that God’s forgiveness of us is
dependent on our forgiving those who have sinned
against us?

Doesn’t the Bible teach that we don’t earn
forgiveness?

I think the best way to answer these and similar questions is to go
back and think carefully about what Jesus said we are to pray.

When Jesus speaks of forgiveness **where does he start?**

He starts with **our** relationship with God:

“Father forgive us our debts.”

Most of you know that the word “debts” speaks of our obligations to
God.

Karl Barth said it this way: “We are God’s debtors. We owe him,
not something, whether it be little or much, but, quite simply, we
owe him (everything); we owe him ourselves, since we are his
creatures, sustained and nourished by his goodness.” (Barth Prayer
According to the Catechisms of The Reformation Philadelphia, Westminster, 1952 p65)

Another more common way to think of “debts” is as sins or in older
language “trespasses”.

We have sinned against God.

The Bible teaches that as creatures created by God and loved by
God, we have an obligation to God.

Anything short of full obedience and allegiance to God is sin.

Outside of church, the word “sin” sounds strange today – almost embarrassing!

Who speaks this way any longer except preachers?

Tongue in cheek I ask, “Haven’t we learned enough about the human psyche to know that people don’t sin today, they are simply maladjusted or they are in error or they do something with negative consequences?”

We don’t speak of “sin” because “sin” is believed to be an obsolete category for describing human behavior.

Well if sin disappears then so too does guilt.

Guilt then changes from objective guilt (being guilty for doing a sinful thing) to a guilt complex (a feeling of guilt).

If that is true then we don’t need the forgiveness of sins, we need to help in overcoming the psychological complex.

But God teaches that we **are** sinful and we **are** guilty.

We have violated the holy standards of God, we have not lived in obedience and loyalty to him, we have rejected his overtures of love **and** we have violated each other.

The Bible indicates that the reason why we **feel** guilty, is because we **are** guilty!”

Most of the people of the world, as evidenced by the religions of the world, spend a great deal of time attempting to deal with their sense of guilt.

And even among the so-called “enlightened” secular people of the world, those who reject religion, countless hours and millions of dollars are spent in psychotherapy and other means attempting to get beyond the feelings of anger, resentment, and guilt that people have mostly because of broken relationships.

We may not call it “forgiveness” but forgiveness is what people long for.

The first time the conjunction “and” is used in The Lord’s Prayer is between the request for bread and the request for forgiveness.

You won't find it in the NIV but in the New American Standard and in the Greek from which the translations come, the word "and" sits between the two requests:

"Give us today our daily bread (AND) forgive us our debts..."

Forgiveness is as daily and as necessary as bread.

When we preachers talk about sin, we are not just trying to get people to feel guilty so that they will turn to the church or the preacher to get help.

We are not just creating a market for our ecclesiastical wares.

We believe what God says and we see it in ourselves and in all the people around us – we have sinned against God and each other and we are guilty.

That's why forgiveness is so necessary.

Without forgiveness we would have no relationship with God or others – we would live estranged from God and all others.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are essential human needs – as necessary as bread.

And forgiveness, when granted, is an awesome experience!

God's forgiveness of us is miraculous. We are do desperately in need of it!

"The wonder and glory of Divine forgiveness lies in the measure of its necessity." (Oudersluys in Kuiper p109)

Jesus makes this point clearly in the story we read earlier:

The servant owed the king 10,000 talents.

Jesus' used 10,000 talents to make it clear that it was more than could ever be repaid.

Recognizing his predicament, the servant pleaded for mercy instead of justice.

This was no half-hearted plea. He knew he was in trouble.

The king was compassionate and was deeply moved to pity.

The king was the lord of the slave and had the RIGHT to do with the slave as he pleased – the lord was under no obligation.

The slave asked for patience, but the king, knowing the impossibility of ever repaying the debt, instead forgave the debt.

It was an act of pure grace.

Many of us treat forgiveness as if it was required of God when we make up for the sins we've committed.

By analogy we might say, "He forgot her birthday and so he brought flowers to ask forgiveness."

She measures his sincerity by the contrition in his voice and the value of the gift and decides that he has done enough to make up for what he did and thus is worthy of being forgiven.

That's not forgiveness that's compensation.

Forgiveness is in a totally different category.

Forgiveness is undeserved!

Jesus knows WE can never sufficiently compensate for our sin.

He knows we are hopelessly in debt.

That's why forgiveness is part of what we call the gospel – good news.

Jesus came to forgive.

The words, life, and death of Jesus meet in forgiveness – it is what he was about here on earth!

His forgiveness is foundational, critical, and absolutely necessary!

The miracle of the gospel is that we can be forgiven – no longer under the weight of the guilt of our sin and no longer liable for the penalty for our sin.

We can be forgiven!!!

And **the basis** of that forgiveness is nothing less than Jesus' death for us.

He took the penalty for our sin on himself.

The cross makes clear the true cost of forgiveness.

On this side of the cross, historically speaking, we understand something which the apostles could not have yet understood – that God’s own death was necessary for forgiveness to be granted.

On the cross our sin was condemned and conquered:

*“We may not know, we cannot tell
What pains he had to bear;
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there.
He died that we might be forgiven
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by his precious blood.”* (found in Oudersluys in Kuiper 112)

The church is the community of the forgiven!

It is our message!

Forgiveness is the remedy for the world’s ills.

It is the remedy for the world’s relationship with God and with each other.

“Father, forgive us our debts...”

It is imperative that we understand and experience the first half of the request about forgiveness before we attempt to understand the second half.

One man said, “No one can rightly claim to be Christian unless he has received the forgiveness of sins.” (Oudersluys in H.J. Kuiper 106)

AND it is the awesome experience of God’s forgiveness of us that makes the experience of the rest of the prayer possible:

“As we also have forgiven our debtors.”

This takes us back to our earlier questions:

Is Jesus saying that unless I forgive others God won’t forgive me?

Let’s read his own commentary on that part of the prayer:

Matthew 6:14-15 “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

That is pointed language.

Is Jesus saying that we earn our forgiveness from God by our forgiveness of others?

It would be relatively easy to conclude that if it were not for the vast majority of Scripture that make it abundantly clear that we do not and cannot earn our relationship with God.

God’s forgiveness of us is pure grace not compensation.

But the language Jesus uses is strong because God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are inextricably linked as cause and effect.

I don’t mean, as I have already explained, that our forgiveness of others causes the effect of God forgiving us.

But I do mean that the cause of God’s forgiveness of us creates the likelihood of our forgiveness of others.

Bob Guelich writes, “As the parable (of the ungrateful servant) indicates, (our forgiveness of others) does not form the prerequisite for experiencing God’s forgiveness. Rather the genuine experience of God’s...forgiveness of (our) immense debt conditions (our) ability to forgive others. (Guelich 298)

Greatly forgiven people forgive greatly.

Unforgiven people don’t forgive.

Forgiveness, properly understood in all its cost and glory, stirs us to gratitude and a forgiving spirit.

Oudersluys wrote, “The wonder of Divine forgiveness lies in what it can do to the forgiven soul, and in what it can make the forgiven soul do.”

(Oudersluys in Kuiper 110)

But it is not only that.

God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are linked in another way.

We are not ready to ask for and receive God's forgiveness until we are sufficiently broken of our own pride to be forgiving of others who sin against us.

When I cannot or will not forgive someone else, when I harbor resentment, when I refuse to be reconciled, when I intentionally replay the memories over and over again, I am too proud to sincerely request or receive God's forgiveness of me.

Listen to several other voices on the matter:

"One's relationship with others indicates the extent to which one has indeed experienced God's forgiveness, one's "capacity" rather than one "deserts". (Guelich 298)

"The spirit open to receive love is of necessity open to bestow love".
(Morris The Gospel According to Matthew p147)

"What Jesus apparently is saying is the pride which keeps us from forgiving is the same pride which keeps us from accepting forgiveness, and will God please help us do something about it."
(Fredrich Beuchner Wishful Thinking p28)

"If we harbor within our hearts grudges and enmities, petty jealousies and hatreds against (others), these attitudes become spiritual obstacles to the entrance of God's love and forgiveness...We cannot be sons (or daughters) if we are not willing to be brothers (and sisters)." (Oudersluys in Kuiper 114 and 119)

"To fail to forgive others is to demonstrate that one has not felt the saving touch of God." (Morris 149)

To ask God to forgive us when we are not willing to forgive others only shows our insincerity –

We are not ready to receive forgiveness unless we are ready to grant it.

That is precisely what Jesus so dramatically describes in his parable of the ungrateful servant.

The servant who had been the recipient of great grace – the forgiveness of an impossible debt - finds a fellow-servant (another like himself) who owes him a few measly bucks and demands that he pay him.

The fellow-servant fell down before the servant and promised to repay all.

(In this second man's case, such repayment was possible in contrast to the first servant's total inability to do so no matter how long he lived and worked.)

But the forgiven servant's response is exactly the opposite of the king's.

It says the forgiven servant "refused".

This was a matter of his will – a continuing, steadfast unwillingness.

And the penalty from which he was saved was exactly the penalty he laid on his fellow.

This is the picture of an unforgiving man – it is the height of ingratitude.

The King hears of this, calls him in, and reminds him of the hugeness of the debt he had been forgiven.

The servant had been the recipient of grace.

The king states the obvious in a question –

"Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"

The king then throws him in prison and the evil servant was to remain there until the debt was repaid – which means he would never get out!

Listen again to Jesus strong words at the end of the story in Matthew 18:35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Yes, that is strong, but remember the question Jesus asks through the king:

“Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”

It is God's mercy toward us that we show toward those who have sinned against us.

It is grace, undeserved favor that we show toward those who have hurt us so deeply.

And we do so because we have been shown mercy, we have been granted grace, we have been loved.

Marietta Jaeger, whose seven-year-old daughter was kidnapped from their tent, soon realized that no amount of anger could bring her daughter back.

She wasn't ready to forgive her daughter's kidnapper but she wrestled with God.

She finally surrendered and deep down inside she sensed that forgiving the man was the only way she could ever cope with her loss.

She began praying for the kidnapper over the months that followed and her prayers became easier and easier.

Exactly one year, to the minute, after the abduction, she received a phone call – it was the kidnapper.

The man's voice was smug and taunting and so Marietta was surprised at the genuine feeling of compassion she had for him.

It was yet months later before the man was apprehended and Suzie's body was found.

Marietta writes, “By then, I had finally come to learn that Jesus did not come to hurt but to reconcile.”

(Seventy Times Seven by Johann Arnold 48-49)

That much of the story I told you last fall.

But there's more.

When Marietta was asked how God taught her to forgive she told of a pastor from the Balkans who came to visit and she told his story.

When the communists took over Yugoslavia, soldiers came to his town and told his father, the mayor, to tell the people to stop going to their church.

The mayor refused to stop and this flagrant disobedience by the leading citizen brought down the wrath of the communists.

They persuaded a cousin to set up an ambush and the soldiers raided a family gathering machine-gunning to death the pastor's father and ten of his brothers and sisters.

The man visiting Marietta, along with one of his older brothers and an 11-year-old brother managed to escape and hid for months.

Six months later friends convinced him that hiding out was not good for the 11-year-old and he allowed his little brother to go home, believing that certainly such a young boy would be safe.

On the day he returned to his village the boy went to the cemetery but soldiers were waiting and they killed him.

The man himself was eventually captured and sent to a camp where he was tortured.

He escaped months later and made his way to Canada and then to Montana.

Twenty five years later, (having himself experienced the forgiveness of God), he decided he had to go back to Yugoslavia, find his cousin who had betrayed them and forgive him.

He had forgiven him in his heart but he felt he needed to stand face-to-face and express that forgiveness.

At first the cousin hid but eventually they met and that forgiveness was extended.

Marietta said that as a result of that man's experience, "God was working on me.

I was already feeling a call to be willing to forgive.

I could look at this man and see that it was possible.

He was a beacon for me, showing me that you could have that change of heart and God would be faithful to you.” (In Boers Lord Teach us to Pray 122)

By the grace of God alone, operating in us and through us, we can be forgiven and we can forgive.

“Father forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.”
Will we ask, will we receive, and will we forgive?

Jesus says this is serious business.
Who do you need to forgive?

I have written and spoken, even this past year, of how we work through the process of truly forgiving someone.
You are welcome to those articles just by asking.

But it starts with a prayer:

“Father, forgive us our debts!”
“Father, forgive me for my debt, my sin, of unforgiveness!”

Do you need to start now?