

# CONFRONTING UNFORGIVENESS AND BITTERNESS

## INTRODUCTION

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- One of the secret sins believers can be easily guilty of is being unwilling to forgive which leads to bitterness
- Even though it is often assumed to be more acceptable, unforgiveness is no less an offense to God than any other sin
- It is the failure to deal with forgiveness that produces bitterness
- Bitterness is the destructive result of unforgiveness...bitterness is the fruit; unforgiveness is the root

• “[Unforgiveness] cumulatively produces a deep-seated bitterness. It’s an infectious cancer in the heart, and it metastasizes. Wherever that first problem was, wherever that first offense was, it begins to grow, and it begins to grow and expand and take over more and more of your life; and bitterness becomes malignant. Thoughts become malignant. Memories become harassing memories that distort how you see life. Anger becomes out of control, and the people who are around you become the victims of that out of control metastasizing anger that comes as a result of a failure to forgive some offense some time ago. You entertain constantly thoughts for revenge. You become desperate about the fact that you wish the worst on the person that you will not forgive. Every conversation becomes another forum for your ugliness, for your hostility, for your criticism, for your defamation, for your slander; and eventually it morphs into all kinds of exaggerations and lies about the reality of that person; and you have passed on your own life a death sentence of bitterness and anger that will follow you to the grave.”<sup>1</sup>

- Unfortunately, we live in a culture that is prone toward unforgiveness
- Vengeance and retaliation often predominate in our society rather than forgiveness
- This is because of the propensity of the human heart to keep a “record of wrongs” (1 Cor 13:5)
- As result, wrongs accumulate and people in general tend to grow bitter toward those who have offended them
- Thus, as believers, we must fight the impulses of unforgiveness that well up in our hearts
- For the believer, “[a]lmost no concept is more important to the Christian faith than forgiveness. The Gospel itself is a message about God’s forgiveness, and Christ’s teaching was full of exhortations to His people to be forgiving to one another. He set an incredibly high standard, teaching us to forgive even the most stubborn offenders”<sup>2</sup>
- The assumption in Scripture is that we will offend each other
- The expectation in Scripture is that we will forgive each other
- Therefore, we must honestly evaluate ourselves and be aware of the risk of self-deception...we all want to think of ourselves as forgiving people
- But we must admit that we are all too prone to nurse offenses and withhold forgiveness
- We must regularly ask ourselves: Is there any bitterness or unforgiveness in my life toward another person?

<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/82-2/forgiveness-in-the-age-of-rage>, accessed May 15, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness, 9.

## TO FORGIVE IS TO BE LIKE GOD

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- One of the greatest attributes of God is that He is a forgiving God

**Exodus 34:6-7** ~ Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.

**Psalm 32:2** ~ How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit!

**Psalm 103:1-3** ~ Bless the LORD, O my soul, And all that is within me, bless His holy name. 2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget none of His benefits; 3 Who pardons all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases;

**Psalm 130:3-4** ~ If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? 4 But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared.

**Daniel 9:9** ~ To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him

**Micah 7:18** ~ Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in unchanging love.

**Luke 15:11-32** ~ The Parable of the Prodigal Son (or better The Parable of the Forgiving Father)

**Ephesians 1:7** ~ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace

**1 John 1:9** ~ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

- Forgiveness reflects the character of God
- Thus, we might say that we are most like God when we forgive...forgiveness is the most Godlike act a person can do...no act is more divine than forgiveness
- If we are going to be imitators of God (Eph 5:1), then we must imitate God in how He forgives those who offend Him
- On the contrary, we are never more like Satan than when we are angry, bitter and unwilling to forgive

## TO FORGIVE IS A COMMAND BELIEVERS ARE TO OBEY

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- The Scriptures repeatedly instruct believers to forgive one another

**Matthew 6:12**~ And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

**Mark 11:25**~ Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.

**Ephesians 4:32**~ Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

**Colossians 3:12-13** ~ So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

**1 Peter 3:8-9** ~ To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; 9 not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.

- Thus, refusing to forgive is a horrible sin...an act of direct disobedience against God and His Word

## **TO FAIL TO FORGIVE IS TO INCUR GOD'S DISCIPLINE**

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- The most graphic illustration of the seriousness of this “acceptable” sin is found in The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18

**Matthew 18:21-22** ~ Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

- Peter’s question comes on the heels of Christ’s teaching regarding sin within the church and church discipline
- The rabbinic tradition held that forgiving 3 times was appropriate but the 4<sup>th</sup> time would result in no forgiveness
- This comes from Amos where God pronounced judgments on wicked nations like: “Thus says the LORD, ‘For three transgressions of Damascus and for four I will not revoke its punishment’” (Amos 1:3)
- The rabbinical scholars thought that each of the hostile nations mentioned (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13) were allowed 3 offenses that God overlooked, but were judged once they committed the 4<sup>th</sup> offense
- They reasoned that if God forgives people only 3 times, it would be wrong for humans to forgive more than that; thus, they set a limit on the number of times a person could be forgiven
- So Peter thought he was being generous in suggesting 7 times of forgiveness (double the expected number and rounded up)
- But Christ showed that forgiveness has no limit...He did not teach that forgiveness should be granted 490 times, but rather that all limits on human forgiveness must be done away with

### **Scene 1: Verses 23-27**

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**Matthew 18:23-27** ~ For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26 So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ 27 “And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.

- In the parable, the day came when the slaves – perhaps those who had leased land from their master – were required to settle their debts
- One particular slave’s debt was 10,000 talents...a talent was worth 6000 denarii (a denarii was worth a day’s wage)...so 1 talent was equal to about 17 years’ wages...10,000 talents were equal to 17 years’ wages for 10,000 men, an amount worth billions of dollars in today’s economy...an essentially incalculable amount
- Likely, this man incurred the debt through embezzlement, waste, and criminal conduct
- The point is that the man has no possible way to pay it back
- Because the man had no way to cover his liabilities, his master ordered him to be sold along with his family and all his possessions, even though the profits from the sale would not even come close to paying the debt
- In an act of desperation, the man threw himself before his master and begged for mercy

- Moved by compassion, the master grants him mercy by canceling the debt in its entirety
- The point is that the man was forgiven a massive amount
- The parable is meant to describe a loving and compassionate Father, who is always willing and eager to forgive, even sinners whose debt of sin is incalculable

## Scene 2: Verses 28-31

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**Matthew 18:28-31** ~ But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' 29 So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' 30 But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. 31 So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.

- Unfortunately, the slave who had been forgiven much failed to respond in kind
- The amount he owed his master was exponentially greater than the amount owed him by one of his servants
- Although 100 days' wages was not an insignificant amount, compared to the amount he had been forgiven, it was nothing
- Yet, he demanded repayment despite the earnest pleas of his servant, pleas nearly identical to the pleas he offered previously for mercy to be extended to him
- "The scene is designed to grip and amaze us. As this servant leaves his master's presence, he should have been so overwhelmed with the profound reality of mercy as to be shouting praises to the master with tears of joy. Instead, he looks for another servant, an equal, a peer, who owed him some money... The scene is disturbing. The servant sends his peer to the torturers without one shred of mercy. The one who had received mercy now acts with strict justice, revealing a small heart and no understanding of what had been done for him."<sup>3</sup>
- Sadly, he failed to exercise the same forgiveness that had been shown to him and had the man thrown in prison
- Such is the picture of a Christian with a vengeful heart who refuses to forgive

## Scene 3: Verses 32-35

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**Matthew 18:32-35** ~ Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' 34 And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.

- When the king heard of it, he was enraged... what the master had done to the servant should have been so valued by the servant that he in turn should have exercised the same mercy requested of him
- In response, the king demanded the man be tortured and repay the original debt he was owed
- Jesus concludes the parable by stating that God would do the same to those who refuse to forgive
- This raises a number of questions:
  - Can this servant really be used to illustrate a believer, since God never tortures his children?
  - If the servant does represent a believer, does this mean that disobedient Christians can lose their salvation?

<sup>3</sup> Brian Borgman, *Feelings and Faith: Cultivating Godly Emotions in the Christian Life*, 114-115.

- Does the servant represent a professing believer who was actually never regenerate to begin with?
- When attempting to answer these questions, we must remember that, when interpreting parables, we must look for the parable's central meaning rather than read too much into every peripheral detail
- The whole point of the parable is that if Christians don't forgive others, they won't be forgiven by God (see Matthew 6:14-15)
- The servant represents a truly saved believer who refuses to forgive
- And the point is that believers who live this way will incur the discipline of the Lord in their life
- "It is sometimes necessary for a parent to deal harshly with a persistently rebellious child; and God Himself will employ harsh measures when necessary to correct a disobedient Christian. The harshness of His discipline is a measure of His love for His people and His concern for their purity...it is not true that God's discipline is always mild and friendly; often it is prompted by the severest kind of fatherly displeasure. And some of His most severe discipline is given to believers who refuse to show mercy to others."<sup>4</sup>
- Thus, believers who fail to show forgiveness will receive divine chastening without mercy
- The main point: Unforgiveness ought to be completely foreign to the Christian...believers ought to be the most forgiving people on earth, because they have been forgiven so much
- They ought to forgive freely "from the heart" (vs. 35)
- Genuine forgiveness is not given begrudgingly
- It involves a refusal to hold guilt over the person who offended us
- It requires a failure to let bitterness take root, a laying aside of anger, and a choice to not dwell on the offense that was committed
- It entails a complete letting go of any desire for vengeance or retaliation

## SHOULD WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO DON'T REPENT?

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- Clearly, Jesus wants us to forgive, but what about those who are not sorry over their sin and don't repent?
- In other words, should we forgive someone who has not asked for forgiveness?
- In answering this question, we need to understand that there are passages that instruct us to forgive other regardless of whether they have asked for forgiveness or not AND there are passages that indicate that forgiveness is based on asking for it
- On the one hand, some passages exhort us to extend forgiveness whether people are sorry or not:
 

**Mark 11:25** ~ Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.
- On the other hand, some passages indicate that forgiveness is granted upon repentance:
 

**Luke 17:3-4** ~ Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 4 And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him."
- How do we solve this apparent dilemma? → It is helpful to understand that forgiveness involves both an attitude and an action
- On the one hand, the attitude of forgiveness is cultivated in the soul...in the heart
- This is what Jesus is referring to in Mark 11...a willingness to extend forgiveness...a decision to not get bitter or angry about that person's offense...it is a choice of the heart...an attitude that is cultivated

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<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*, 110.

- On the other hand, the action of forgiveness is actually granted when someone asks for it
- This is what Jesus is referring to in Luke 17...an actual granting of forgiveness based on the person who has offended asking to be forgiven
- A person can only be granted forgiveness when they ask for it
- Thus, when we put these two things together we realize that Christians ought always be cultivating an attitude of forgiveness in the heart...but that forgiveness should not be extended into action until the offender has asked for forgiveness
- Both of these components are important for a couple reasons:

1) Believers are commanded to not harbor bitterness or resentment and to be always ready to forgive

**Ephesians 4:31-32** ~ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

- Believers must constantly fight bitterness and anger against those who offend them
- They must always be cultivating an attitude of forgiveness, ready to forgive at all times
- Failure to do so leads to sin that erodes the soul, damages their relationship with the Lord, and hinders relationships with others

2) Believers must not undercut the requirement that people who have sinned have to confess that sin

**Matthew 5:23-24**~ Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

**James 5:16**~Therefore, confess your sins to one another

- If the attitude of forgiveness flows into an action of forgiveness before that forgiveness has been sought, then the need of a sinful person to repent of their sin is undercut
- Just as true as it is that believers have a command to forgive, so those who have sinned have a command to confess and repent of their sin
- “And so we need to withhold that extension of the action of forgiveness until the person has done what God wants them to do by confessing their sin. So that is actually a way to serve them and to be kind to them and to help them honor God’s law even as we want it.”<sup>5</sup>
- This is similar to the believer’s relationship with God: God forgave believers when they repented
- “In love, true forgiveness seeks not to relieve the forgiver, but to deliver the offender from *his* burden of guilt. Out of concern for the other person, the offended party pursues the offender until the matter is settled before God and men...The kind thing is not to focus on relief for one’s self, by forgiving others whether they repent or not, but by every Biblical means to win offenders. It may seem unkind to bring matters up again and again when an offender refuses to be reconciled, but you must do so, not to irritate, but to help relieve *him* of the burden of his sin.”<sup>6</sup>

- Implications:

- Is there someone to whom you should go ask forgiveness?
- Has someone asked you for forgiveness which you withheld from them?
- Is there someone whom you have never confronted about a matter that has brought about an unreconciled relationship?

<sup>5</sup> Heath Lambert, <https://biblicalcounseling.com/2016/09/forgive-someone-whos-not-sorry-sinned-transcript/>, accessed May 16, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Adams, <http://www.nouthetic.org/blog/?p=2544>, accessed May 16, 2018