

# PARABLES | The Unforgiving Servant

## Rob Rogers      January 22, 2023

---

### Introduction

A parable is a story that illustrates Truth. Parables of Jesus illuminate immovable realities about the Kingdom of God.

Even though the parables of Jesus may be familiar to you, the parables of Jesus are like peeling back the layers of an onion... there's always deeper, richer, Kingdom realities and Truth that God wants to reveal to you.

Last week, we started by looking at the parable of the Two Builders – or the Wise and Foolish Builder. What Jesus tells us is the one element that makes all the difference in making you wise or foolish – putting into practice what Jesus taught. If you do this, your life will be like the house built upon the rock – the storms will come, but you will not be shaken.

**Today**, we're going to read a parable that has so many layers... is so practical... and may be one of the most difficult teachings of Jesus to put into practice. Not because it's hard to understand, but because of how to actually live it out.

Jesus and his disciples are on their way back to Jerusalem. Jesus is instructing them on how to live at peace with one another, as they're learning how to be people of His Kingdom. He instructs them on how to handle it when another follower of Jesus hurts you, offends you, or wounds you in some way. It's inevitable that when a bunch of humans get together together doing anything... there's going to be conflict, problems, and people are going to get hurt. So how do we handle it when that happens?

---

### Seventy times seven

Then in the middle of all of that instruction, Peter interjects:

#### **Matthew 18:21**

Then Peter came up and said to Him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

- If a brother in the church community wrongs me, sins against me, hurts me in some way... how many times do I have to forgive them?

In first century Hebrew culture, it was customary to extend forgiveness to someone that offended you up to three times in a day. But if they caused a fourth offense, you had no cultural obligation to extend forgiveness to them. You could be justified in your harboring your offense or holding a grudge against that person.

Peter is doubling that number and then adding one for good measure – how about seven times, Jesus? Maybe he's thinking Jesus will say, "*Seven times? Very generous of you Peter!*"

But instead of being impressed with Peter, Jesus says this:

### **Matthew 18:22**

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but **seventy-seven** times.

- Some translations say 70 x 7... forgive him 490 times.

---

## **Settling accounts**

Jesus gives them this astronomical number of 490, and then tells a parable.

### **Matthew 18:23-30**

Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

- Most biblical historians will say that one talent was worth 20 years wages. Which means that 10,000 talents were worth 200,000 years of wages for a day laborer. This servant owed the king 200,000 years of wages — equating to \$2 billion, \$4 billion — some say \$7.4 billion.

<sup>25</sup> And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.

- This was a normal practice in that culture — justice according to first century Hebrew culture. If you were that indebted to someone, you and your family would become indentured servants until the debt was either paid off, or the debt would be passed on to your children and their children.

<sup>26</sup> So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and **I will pay you everything.**’

- It’s almost as if he’s in denial about the amount that he actually owes.

<sup>27</sup> And out of **pity** for him, the master of that servant released him and **forgave him the debt.** <sup>28</sup> But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him **a hundred denarii,**

- One denarius was one days wage. So, 100 days wages and the debt is paid — compared to 200,000 years!

***So having just been forgiven and released, owing NOTHING, he leaves, finds another servant who owes him a miniscule amount of money.***

<sup>28</sup> and seizing him, he began to **choke him,** saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup> So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, **‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’**

- Which was absolutely possible to do.

<sup>30</sup> He refused and went and put him **in prison** until he should pay the debt.

- What can this man NOT do if he's in prison — WORK.
- The first man in this story was so irrational, that he what he does is so unnecessarily punitive and harmful to the second servant — for a miniscule amount of money — in spite of how generously he'd just been treated by the king.

---

## Picture of human history

Every Monday afternoon our teachers and communicators here hold a meeting, where we talk about what the Lord is highlighting in the upcoming week's passage. Caleb James, our Young Adults leader, shared a teaching from Tim Mackie from the Bible Project about this passage. Mackie says this (*paraphrased*)...

*"This is what unforgiveness does in us... it makes us irrational, manic, senseless people – unable to be reasoned with. Unforgiveness puts us in a state of "vengeful frenzy" where we're incapable of recognizing that we've stopped being about what is right and good a long, long time ago."*<sup>1</sup>

And it's clear the first (evil) servant doesn't care about being paid back. He cares more about making the second servant pay far beyond what is actually owed — publicly shaming him. **For what? Far less than what he himself owed to the king!**

**INTERESTING:** When Jesus tells Peter at the beginning of this passage... "I want you to forgive 77 or 70 times 7" — Mackie points out that there's only one other time in scripture where those numbers appear together. It's in a poem in Genesis 4. *It's a fascinating contrast — the poem is not about forgiveness.*

A man named Lamech, living in the city of Enoch, founded by Cain, *who murdered his brother Abel*. It was an evil place. *Lamech is continually pointed to as a picture for the human condition separated from God and saturated with sin.* Lamech killed a man for offending him or hurting him in some way — and he comes home and brags about it to his wives.

### Genesis 4:23-24

I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is **sevenfold**, then Lamech's is **seventy-sevenfold.**"

- Lamech is saying, "Look at my strength, look at my power, look at my importance, and tremble in fear!"

***This is a picture of human history!*** We are continually offended, outraged, and even irrationally vengeful toward others who have wounded us, or those who don't agree with our perspective. We demand recompense at any cost.

- "It no longer matters what is right. What matters is I get what I think I deserve and if I don't, someone is going to have hell to pay!"

**Jesus takes the story of Lamech and says,  
"The same ferocity, the same intensity that Lamech had toward vengeance,  
I want you to have toward forgiveness."**

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://bibleproject.com>

## **Matthew 18:31-35**

When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> And in anger his master delivered him to **the jailers**, until he should pay all his debt.

***This is how seriously God expects us to take this issue of forgiveness.***

<sup>35</sup> So also My heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Jesus is telling us, “As my followers, as people of MY kingdom... I want you to be as ferociously committed toward forgiving one another as the world is to vengeance.”

***Or else what? Just punishment will come upon you.***

*If you do NOT forgive from your heart... if you hold onto bitterness, resentment, grudges — YOU ARE THE ONE WHO PAYS THE PRICE. You will experience torment — spiritual, emotional, mental torment. You will be consumed by the thing or the person you are refusing to forgive.*

**Unforgiveness is a prison that is locked from the inside.**

*“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.”<sup>2</sup>  
~ Lewis Smedes*

---

## **What forgiveness DOES NOT mean**

There is much to clarify because this passage has been misused and abused.

### **What Jesus is NOT saying.**

Forgiveness DOES NOT MEAN forgetting.

Forgiveness DOES NOT MEAN reconciling.

Forgiveness DOES NOT MEAN restoration of the way things were before the hurt happened.

Forgiveness DOES NOT MEAN there are no consequences for their actions.

Forgiveness DOES NOT MEAN you continually subject yourself to the harm or abuse you’ve suffered.

- God does NOT call you to be a “doormat” in the name of forgiveness.

*How can we separate Jesus’ parable from Jesus’ teaching in the verses RIGHT BEFORE THE parable — on how we are to handle conflict in the body of Christ.*

Jesus says, if someone sins against you, go to them directly. If they don’t listen — take someone else with you. They still don’t listen — take more people with you. If they STILL don’t listen, bring it before the church, (*which, in context, meant to gather the network of Christian relationships this person has with people that are FOR them and present it to them*). If their heart is still so hardened that they still will not listen — recognize that they are no longer following Jesus and treat them as a tax collector or gentile.

***Matthew 18 describes the practical step-by-step process to you work for reconciliation.*** You can’t FORCE reconciliation to happen. And if the one who harmed you will not listen, someone else, *not*

---

<sup>2</sup> Lewis B. Smedes. *Art of Forgiving*. (Random House Publishing, Aug 12, 1997)

*you*, needs to come along and call them back to following Jesus — which is how Jesus treated gentiles and tax collectors.

---

## **Forgiveness is not contingent on your feelings**

*Even if a scenario goes that badly, even if they're not sorry, or they hate you, even if they never talk to you again, or you never talk to them again — you can still forgive.*

**Your forgiving someone else is not contingent on your feelings.** Jesus does not say that you only have to forgive when you feel like it.

**PERSONAL:** A specific example of this is about someone who experienced infidelity in their marriage. Afterward, for over a decade — this person over and over and over and over again made the choice to forgive *in spite of never once FEELING like doing it.*

A thought would come up, the pain of what they had to walk through would trigger, and they would stop in the middle of that pain, and say, “No, Lord, I choose to forgive. I’m not holding against them what they did to me.” And for over a decade they wrestled through this and never once felt the forgiveness they were choosing to give.

Until one day, after about 13 years, it comes up, one more time, “Lord, no, I choose to forgive them. I’m not holding it against them.” And all of a sudden, they felt it. The weight of it fell off. The freedom of forgiveness washed over them... and they were free... after 13 years of choosing forgiveness — they finally FELT the forgiveness that they had been choosing all those years.

And maybe for you... what you need to forgive are little offenses that have accumulated over time. Or maybe for you, it is something as painful and traumatizing as infidelity, physical, or sexual abuse.

- *If that's you... according to what Jesus describes in Matthew 18 — your first priority is not to forgive. It's to get safe, to stop exposing yourself to the potential of further harm and abuse. Distance yourself from the harm by relying on the relationships within your church community.*
- *If you don't have anyone, the members of our Pastoral Care Team are safe people, who are here in your community, that will walk with you, if you're in an abusive situation right now. That's step one.*
- *Jesus doesn't expect you or call you to expose yourself to harm or abuse over and over and over again in the name of "forgiveness."*
  - Please dear God, we have to get this. Are you all hearing me?

**No matter where you are on that spectrum,  
God does call us to live differently in the world —  
to be people who forgive one another from the heart.**

### ***How in the world do we do that?***

*The only way for genuine Christian to hold a grudge, or to enact revenge, is if they've forgotten how much they've been forgiven.*

*In the parable, we're all the servant that owes 200,000 years of wages, whose debt has been forgiven.*

What we've done with God's creation, what we've done with our own lives — we've been saturated with selfishness and sin, and we've brought that destruction into God's world many different ways. God does not smite us, He doesn't condemn us, He comes down and walks among us in the person of Jesus. He takes on the full weight of sin. As we are nailing the perfect, sinless, innocent, all powerful God of the universe to a criminal's cross, He utters these words over us....

### **Luke 23:34**

*“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”*

***Even though He would be justified in enacting retribution.***

***He relinquishes His right to do so.***

***That's forgiveness.***

***Letting go of the right to retribution.***

- Some of you have refused to forgive — because you've forgotten how much you've been forgiven.
- Some of you have refused to forgive — because you haven't felt like forgiving.
- Some of you have refused to forgive — because you want that person to pay for what they've done.
- Some of you have refused to forgive — because you've equated forgiveness with reconciliation, or restoration — and that is totally different.
- Some of you have refused to forgive — because you've forgotten that God is a God of justice. True justice is not on your shoulders, but God's. God will deal with that person the way He sees fit. You can trust Him, loosen your grip — forgive and be free.

---

## **Pray for those who abuse you**

**PERSONAL:** There's an obscure little book Nancy Reese gave me a while back, called “Mondays with My Old Pastor.”<sup>3</sup>

It's about a young pastor wrestling with some of the challenges and difficulties of pastoring a church. He's considering quitting, and his wife encourages him to go visit with his old pastor (since retired). Every chapter is a different teaching, lesson, or encouragement that the younger pastor would receive. One Monday he goes to visit the older pastor, and his wife is in the living room reading through a journal — he asks her, “Do you mind sharing with me what you're reading?”

She says, “This journal is filled with a list of all the people who have wounded or harmed us in our 50+ years in pastoral ministry. We have regular discipline reading through all of the names and praying that God would bless them.”

### **Luke 6:28**

***...bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.***

***Can you imagine what might change in your life if you practiced this?***

***If you released all the resentment, the bitterness.***

***And made, not only the continual decision to forgive, but made the decision to bless.***

---

<sup>3</sup> José Luis Navajo. *Mondays with My Old Pastor*. (Thomas Nelson, 2012)

**PERSONAL:** As I read that chapter, the Holy Spirit grabbed me by the shoulders and said, “**You will do this starting right now.**” And I have. It’s a regular discipline in my life, and I’m telling you... Jesus has set me free from a weight that was far too heavy for my soul to bear. And that same freedom can come to you too, if you’ll put into practice what Jesus taught.

*“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable,  
because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”<sup>4</sup>  
~ C. S. Lewis*

**Conclusion:** If you need to forgive someone today, you might want to do so with a prayer partner — or you might want to simply pray where you are right now.

---

## Discussion Questions

1. In your own flesh, how many times do you think you could/would forgive someone?  
How does this compare to Jesus’ commandment?
2. What does unforgiveness do to you/us?
3. Have you been offended, wounded by someone? What is your current “status” with them?
4. How seriously does God expect us to take this issue of forgiveness?
5. Discuss, “Unforgiveness is a prison that is locked from the inside.”
6. What do you do if someone sins against you, you ask for forgiveness, and they will not listen?
7. Discuss, “Forgiveness is not contingent on your feelings.”
8. If you are in a “threatening” situation, what is your first priority (not forgiveness)?

## NOTES

---

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Root, Wayne Martindale. *The Quotable Lewis*. (Tyndale House Publishers, Mar 12, 2012)