

## FORGIVE AND BE SET FREE

Holding a grudge  
doesn't make you strong;  
*IT MAKES YOU BITTER.*

Forgiving  
doesn't make you weak;  
*IT SETS YOU FREE.*

### *Scripture:*

### **Psalm 103:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. <sup>2</sup>Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits— <sup>3</sup>who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, <sup>4</sup>who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, <sup>5</sup>who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

<sup>6</sup>The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. <sup>7</sup>He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. <sup>8</sup>The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. <sup>9</sup>He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. <sup>10</sup>He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. <sup>11</sup>For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; <sup>12</sup>as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. <sup>13</sup>As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

### **Matthew 18:21-35**

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup>"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup>When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup>and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' (One talent in today's comparison with gold is worth one and a quarter million dollars. So he owes ten-thousand times that amount.) <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' (Six-thousand denarii equals one talent. He was just forgiven ten-thousand talents.) <sup>29</sup>Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup>But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup>So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

**This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!**



## **FORGIVE AND BE SET FREE**

Once upon a time a minister decided to use a parable about four worms to illustrate how sins hurt us. She said, "Four worms were placed into four separate jars. The first worm was put into a container of alcohol. The second worm was put into a container of cigarette smoke. The third worm was put into a container of chocolate syrup. And the fourth worm was put into a container of good clean soil.

At the conclusion of the sermon, the Minister reported the following results:

The first worm in alcohol . . .Dead.

The second worm in cigarette smoke . . .Dead.

Third worm in chocolate syrup . . .Dead.

The fourth worm in good clean soil. It was alive, of course.

So "What did you learn from this demonstration?"

Well, Maxine, who was sitting in the back row of the church, raised her hand enthusiastically and said, "As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"

## **FORGIVE OR HOLD A GRUDGE**

I imagine the minister forgave Maxine for ruining the lesson that day; but maybe not. Maybe that minister held a grudge against Maxine and decided she was just never going to talk to her again. How do you think that would work in a church over time? What would holding a grudge against someone in the church family do to the whole church family? Do you think other people would know and feel the silent or maybe not so silent hostility between them?

**Grudges, hostilities, long lasting hurts happen in all communities, not just in churches. Any club or regular social gathering has to deal with tribalism and cliques that form. But that doesn't mean it is healthy or what God intends for us to do in relationship with one another.**

## **UNDERSTANDING AND EMPATHY**

So today, Jesus continues his teaching on how to get along. He basically says, "To get along you

must forgive a zillion times, and mean it from your heart."

The kind of forgiveness Jesus is teaching is not a cheap easy forgiveness. It is about deep forgiveness that includes understanding and empathy. For deep healing to result, forgiveness must be real and sincere.

I have a girlfriend who had an alcoholic father who experienced this kind of forgiveness. He beat all nine of his kids during the week and then went to Catholic mass on Sunday where he was treated like a pillar of the church. So the kids didn't think anyone would believe them if they reported the abuse. (They also refused to go to church as they got older because they considered it hypocrisy for their father to pretend he was such a Godly man.)

My friend explained to me what the abuse was like. One time when she was six years old, she was outside in the front yard of their home and a fancy red car went by. She just gave the driver a friendly wave, and suddenly she felt her father kick her so hard she flew up in the air. Instead of her Dad explaining to her that it wasn't safe to wave to strangers passing by, he kicked her so hard she saw stars and couldn't sit down for many days because her tailbone hurt so badly.

Now looking back, she realizes he was drunk, and maybe her waving at the strange car scared him.

She forgave him over time for his mental derangement and alcoholic illness. But she never forgot that pain and how cruel he was to all of them when he was drinking.

My friend was an ICU nurse by the time her Dad became very ill and was about to pass. She went to his bedside and helped him stay comfortable and go peacefully. I admired her ability to do that when none of the rest of the family (including her mother) could show mercy at his time of death.

I know my friend still carries the emotional scars of being traumatized many times as a child. She is mistrusting of most men, she reacts negatively to sudden loud noises or surprises and she never drinks a drop of alcohol to ward against becoming like her Dad.

Cathy attends a United Church of Christ where she embraced the love of Christ and the concept of forgiveness as a healing power.

She was able to see beyond her father's faults and sins by looking back to his childhood and the abuse he himself suffered at the hands of his own

father. Cathy was able to forgive because she stopped blaming herself for the abuse and understood that her father was mentally ill and had a disease that made him incapable of caring for his children as a father should.

### **FORGIVE THEM FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO**

Author Scott Hoezee who wrote a book about forgiveness says that “Matthew 18 reminds us of a core Christian conviction: Forgiveness is something we live, something we embody, every moment. ... The very foundation on which our identity as Christians is built is nothing less than the death and resurrection of Jesus and the flood of gracious forgiveness which that grand sacrifice unleashed.”

**Remember Jesus, on the cross, said, “Forgive them, father, for they know not what they do.” When you have road rage, say that to yourself. When you get impatient in the grocery line or you have to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles, or you hear someone gossip, “Forgive them for they know not what they do!” can be your new mantra.**

When you are disrespected and treated unfairly, stand up for yourself, demand justice when oppressed, but also repeat to yourself, “Forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Forgiving abuse doesn't mean you don't report it. You still must confront the sin in the situation. But if you approach the person with an attitude of restorative justice, that includes a willingness to forgive, then healing and learning and resolution may find a way forward, eventually. It may take years.

Dr. Hoezee says, “Forgiveness is not a tool you need just once in a while. Forgiveness is not like that Phillips screwdriver that you keep out in the garage and fetch now and then when a kitchen cabinet is loose. Forgiveness is more like the clothes on your back. ... Forgiveness goes with you, accompanies you, and is needed by you everywhere you go.”

### **EACH OF US NEEDS TO BE FORGIVEN**

So what does this lesson from Jesus imply?

For one thing it implies that each and every one of us needs to *be* forgiven by God, and by others, every day.

Most days we don't *feel* like we committed any huge sins. If we did something wrong we might say to ourselves, “I was just making sure I didn't get worms!”

Most days we finish the day having kept most of the Ten Commandments. If you take a self-assessment each night and go through the list: I did not commit adultery today (check); I did not embezzle money today (check); I did not get stopped for drunk driving today (check). We go to bed feeling pretty proud of ourselves. Right?

C. S. Lewis said, “Pride is the mother of all sins....”

If our egos get too self-focused to see the hurt we cause others, our sins continue pile up unchecked. Then something small can bring the whole pile of sins crashing down upon us and then we feel hopeless.

Humbling ourselves helps us become aware of our universal need for daily forgiveness and renewal, and facilitates reconciliation with God.

### **GOD'S ABIDING FORGIVENESS**

Lewis B. Smedes said, “The more keenly aware you are of your getting the gift of forgiveness every day, the more inclined you will be to distribute forgiveness to those who need to hear a healing, restorative word from *you*.”

Notice in our, Lord's Prayer, we say: “Forgive us our debts *as* we forgive our debtors.” This teaching from Jesus, in Matthew 18, is the reference used by the Presbyterian Church to explain why we say “debts” rather than sins. But the meaning of debts in this passage is the same as sins. The king forgave the servant all his sins as God forgives us all our sins. So we are to go out and forgive others their sins against us at least four-hundred-ninety times which is code for an infinite number of times.

This teaching about God's abiding forgiveness of us and of our forgiving others tells us that we *must* forgive. It is another command like: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love your neighbor as yourself. God forgiving us and our forgiving others is the formula for getting along in community.

Jesus is sharing God's power with us in this teaching on forgiveness. Forgiveness gives us the ability to heal ourselves and heal others, too. The power of forgiveness is so great that it simply *must and will* change us if we use that power on a daily basis.

Cathy's forgiveness not only helped her father on his deathbed but also healed her soul. The internal bitterness she had been carrying many years dissolved into empathy. She decided that "Life is too short to carry the burden of a heavy heart." So Cathy freed herself from the trap of bitterness through the power of forgiveness and compassion.

Life is too short to carry the burden of a heavy heart. It does not serve you or anyone else. Free yourself through the power of forgiveness and compassion.

— David Simon —

### **OFFER FORGIVENESS DAILY**

Jesus directed his disciples then and us now, to offer forgiveness daily even when we don't feel capable. We can do this because we are not alone. The forgiving king of all creation shares God's powerful grace through us and uses us to make the world a little more like the kingdom of God day by day.

Of all the lessons in forgiveness, I think this example of deep heartfelt forgiveness is one of the most incredible!

The parents in the town of Lancaster, Pennsylvania found it in their hearts to forgive the mother of the young man who shot ten Amish girls and himself in their school house.

Letting go of grudges is a deeply rooted value in Amish culture. But the Amish willingness to forgo vengeance does not undo the tragedy or pardon the wrong, but rather the forgiveness starts a first step toward a future that is more hopeful.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West\\_Nickel\\_Mines\\_School\\_shooting](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Nickel_Mines_School_shooting))

A video about the Amish forgiveness was shown to the congregation.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mother-of-amish-school-shooter-shares-amazing-story-of-forgiveness/>

An attitude of forgiveness is healthy for your body, mind and spirit. Your future is made possible by forgiveness. The forgiveness of Jesus Christ is the most powerful ever given. So go and share that healing forgiveness in all your encounters here in this community and out into the world. Amen

### **Benediction:**

**At Presbytery yesterday we had a blessing of "a pet therapy for the homeless" ministry. Linda Powers, the director of this ministry said, "To err is human, to forgive is canine!"**

**Embrace the freedom that results from the forgiveness of all your sins. Then freely go and forgive as you have been forgiven.**

**And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen**



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