

Why Should I Forgive, Anyhow?  
Life's Tough Questions, Part 5a  
Matthew 18: 21 – 22  
June 28, 2009

Countless times over the years, I have observed people wrestle with the subject of forgiveness. I have decided I need to preach on the question of forgiveness in two parts: Today, the question is, “Why in the world should I forgive him/her anyway?” Next Sunday, the question will be, “How do I ever possibly forgive him/ her?”

Sometimes the transgression is so outrageous, such as Bernie Madoff and his Ponzi scheme; sometimes it is a complete betrayal of trust, such as the governor of South Carolina; sometimes it is an utterly ungrateful breach of decency, like the CIA employee and his wife who bit the hand that fed them by spying on behalf of Cuba for decades.

But the truth is that we are faced daily with offenses against us and our property – most of which are actually rather personal and unnoticed by the world at large. That doesn't make the offenses any less painful to you or me; instead, that seems to cause you or me to feel the pain of the offense more intensely! Yet Jesus commands us to forgive habitually. He commands us to forgive our enemies, to go the extra mile to demonstrate forgiveness, and so on...

The most extreme statement Jesus made about the subject of forgiveness is found in Matthew Chapter 18, verses 21 and following. Peter, the volatile, headstrong “speak quickly and regret later” disciple comes to Jesus with a perplexing question: “How often should I forgive my brother?” The unspoken follow – up question was, “When am I free to stop forgiving my brother and begin punishing him for his transgression?”

Jesus' answer must have left Peter bug-eyed and mouth agape. Why I'm not sure Peter could count to 490, much less have the personal discipline to keep his anger in check for that long! The point Jesus was making about forgiveness is that, in the Kingdom of God, forgiveness is the rule, not the exception. For anyone who sets out to forgive by the numbers, by the time they have approached the – say – #100 act of forgiving they likely have forgotten what the offense was in the first place!

And yet the basic question most of us must have answered is, “Why should I even consider forgiving that person for what he or she has done?” And as long as we are hung up on that question, real and genuine forgiveness is unlikely, maybe impossible. Here are five reasons why it is not only necessary but desirable to forgive that person:

**1. Forgiveness acknowledges there was a wrong committed (Matthew 18: 21).**

A. Some people are quick to discount the idea of forgiveness by pretending nothing significant has happened.

1, “It's no big deal,” they say; “Oh, don't worry about it.” This sort of minimizing of what happened seems preferable to a painful conversation, so we choose to avoid the scene of the offense by averting our eyes and redirecting the conversation.

B. Actually, that's not true at all. When a wrong has been done, it must be confronted in order to clean the emotional wound left by the hurt.

1. When you confront the idea of forgiveness, that very act puts you in a place where you acknowledge a wrong has been done – something bad enough to need forgiven.

## **2. Forgiveness changes your status from victim to victor (Matthew 5: 39 – 41).**

A. When someone does something hurtful to us, we are the victim of their meanness and their thoughtlessness. Often, we feel powerless to change our victim status. That is a particularly unpleasant feeling.

B. But when we choose to forgive, we are no longer powerless, no longer the one merely being acted upon.

1. Rather we boldly stand and say, “You will not dictate the way I respond; you will not define who I am – a weak, vulnerable victim.”

C. See Jesus' words in Matthew 5: 39 – 41.

1. The forgiving nature of those words and responses takes the power of the victimizer away from the victim.

**2. “To our most bitter opponents we say: we will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering.” – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

3. As Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement endured the authorities' clubs and water cannons without resorting to violence themselves, the dark evil of racism was exposed to the light. There was enormous power in refusing to respond in kind to violence as many expected them to do.

4. So too is the example of a gentle, forgiving spirit in the face of meanness and hostile behavior today in your life.

## **3. Forgiveness makes sense to anyone who has needed, does need, or will need forgiveness (Matthew 18: 35).**

A. We like to focus on the immediate situation and dwell on the wrong done to us.

1. In our mind, we devise harsh, self-righteous responses to the one who has hurt us.

2. But if we step back and look objectively, there have been times when we often were the one who has done wrong to others.

B. We'd best consider the parable Jesus told in Matthew 18: 23 – 35. The irony of the situation stings when I put myself in the place of the servant who seeks vengeance upon his opponent. Yes, I must confess my attitude toward forgiveness is often different depending on whether I am the one in need of forgiveness or the one in need of seeking forgiveness.

1. Consider for a moment the fearsome reality of verse 35. He echoes the words of the Lord's Prayer (better called the Model Prayer) in Matthew 6: 12 – “*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*”

2. God has no tolerance for the person who is quick to receive forgiveness from God but is then unwilling to forgive the one who wrongs him.

C. Jesus makes it clear, by first giving a command and then reinforcing the

command with a real-life story, that forgiveness is a core principle of the Kingdom.

#### **4. Forgiveness is the only road to freedom (Matthew 18: 23 – 35).**

A. Yes, forgiveness is risky. It is a gamble. But it clearly beats the other option – harboring the hurt and bitterness.

1. The question is not whether forgiving is dangerous, but only is it a safer bet. It always comes down to this: Is the risk worth taking?

B. The answer emphatically is, “Yes!”

1. “Whoever opts for revenge should dig two graves” – Chinese Proverb

2. “...not forgiving someone is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.” – Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*

C. Forgiveness is the only road to freedom. The other road always leads to self-destruction.

#### **5. Forgiveness is not Jesus’ suggestion (Matthew 18: 35).**

A. Matthew 18: 35 and many other passages make it clear that forgiveness is Jesus’ command.

1. As a citizen of the Kingdom and a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, I must take seriously the commands my commander gives me.

B. Also, there is a very important detail I want to point out in Jesus’ teaching in the parable He gives here:

2. In forgiving someone, I more closely mimic the character of my Heavenly Father. I am never more like my Father in heaven than when I am extending forgiveness to someone who has transgressed against me.

I close with a story: Two friends were walking through the desert. At some point in their journey they had an argument, and one friend slapped the other in the face. The offended friend was hurt, but simply wrote in the sand without speaking, “Today my friend slapped me in the face.”

They kept walking until they came to an oasis where they decided to take baths. The friend who had been slapped by his friend in the face got stuck in the muck, and soon began drowning. His friend pulled him to safety. After he recovered, he wrote on a rock, “Today my friend saved me from drowning.”

His friend asked him, “After I slapped you, you wrote in the sand and now, after I saved you from drowning, you wrote on a rock. Why?”

His friend replied, “When someone hurts me I write it down in sand where winds of forgiveness can erase it; but when someone does something good for me I engrave it on a rock where no wind can ever erase it.”

Learn to write your hurts in the sand, and your blessings in stone!

Let’s pray!