

Forgiveness

by David Guzik

God's forgiveness is unconditional, and we should forgive others in the same way, without expecting a change in behavior or repentance.

Duration: 52:26

Scripture: Hosea 11:9, Matthew 18:21, Luke 17:3

Topics: "Divine Forgiveness", "Christian Ethics"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the parable of the unforgiving servant from the Bible. He emphasizes the importance of being generous with forgiveness, as God has forgiven us so much. The preacher highlights the differences between the way God forgives and the way humans forgive, such as God's ability to hold back anger for a long time. He also warns against two dangerous misapplications of forgiveness: community forgiveness, where forgiveness is granted without proper accountability, and personal relationships, where forgiveness should be practiced but not at the expense of justice.

Transcript

Tonight, I want to talk to you about forgiveness. And to me, this is a very important Bible study that I'm teaching tonight. It's important for me for personal reasons, because this is something that I have kind of struggled to understand and get a grip on biblically over the years.

Not so much the matter of God's forgiveness towards us, although I think I've had some illumination on that in recent months, but more so on what our attitude is to be when it comes to forgiving those who wrong us. This whole issue of forgiveness in the Christian life is very big. If you are a Christian and you haven't been hurt, perhaps even deeply hurt, by another Christian and struggle with the issues of forgiveness in your life, then you probably haven't been a Christian for very long, because it's just part of the Christian life, dealing with these issues of forgiveness towards other people.

I think this is something that I've been thinking about and working through and trying to come to some understanding of, and I'll be the first one to admit, and I'll start off my discussion tonight by saying that I might not totally be there. God may have much more to show me about this whole issue of forgiveness, but I think he's really shined a spotlight upon a couple of things that have sort of changed and influenced what I've thought before. Let me start out by just mouthing a few sentences and see how it strikes you.

If somebody were to say, I won't forgive them because they haven't repented, or I won't forgive them because their repentance wasn't sincere. A lot of Christians talk that way today, and when they talk that way, these aren't bad Christians saying that. These aren't people who are secret pagans and hate Jesus.

These are generally people who love the Lord and endeavor to live their life by the scriptures. And when they say that, they believe that they have solid scriptural ground for saying so. Look at it here, Luke chapter 17, beginning at verse 3, where he says, Take heed to yourselves, if your brother sins against you, rebuke him.

And if he repents, forgive him. When we read that, it's very easy to place an emphasis right there on those words, if he repents. And so it seems that Jesus is being very clear here.

Somebody sins against you, it's your job to go up and rebuke them, and then it's your job to sort of measure or gauge their repentance or lack of it, and then if you think that they've repented sincerely, then you forgive them. A lot of the Christians who feel this way, they're tired of feeling walked over, and they want to make a stand, they want to draw a boundary line, they want to say, I'm not going to forgive them because they haven't repented, and they say that, and they think that, and they feel it, and when they feel it, they feel completely justified in the thought. And this is a lot of times how the logic goes, saying, listen, I'm just forgiving the way that God forgives.

I mean, after all, when we invite people to come to Jesus and have their sins forgiven, we never say, don't worry about repentance, don't worry about confessing your sin, just come to Jesus any old way and he'll forgive your sin. We would never say that in the presentation of the gospel, would we? We'd say, come to Jesus and find forgiveness, repent, confess, and Jesus will forgive your sins. And they say, listen, God doesn't forgive people without repentance.

And so we shouldn't either. After all, doesn't Ephesians chapter 4 verse 32 say, forgive one another just as God and Christ forgave you. So therefore, if God doesn't forgive without repentance, then we shouldn't forgive without repentance either, and it seems that that's exactly what Jesus was talking about in Luke chapter 17 verse 3. Now, as I've said before, this is something that I've struggled with for many years now.

I don't mean struggle in the sense that it's some great debate on which my own faith is hinged on, not at all. But I've struggled to get an understanding of what the scriptures say, because I've been somewhat sympathetic towards that position that I've just explained to you. I thought that, well, listen, you can't be free with forgiveness.

And this is sort of how my logic went, my thinking and my teaching on this line of thinking ran kind of like this. First of all, point number one, God does not forgive us apart from repentance. Number two, our forgiveness is to be patterned after God's forgiveness.

And point number three, are we supposed to be more forgiving than God? Now, based on those three points and the way I say them, it's made me think, listen, you should withhold forgiveness from people unless they repent. But two things have really helped change my thinking on this. As I look at this now, and if I were to say those three points again, I would say, number one, God doesn't forgive us apart from repentance.

Well, yes and no. And I'll explain what I mean by that later. Number two, our forgiveness is to be patterned after God's.

Absolutely. Kind of. I'll explain why more later.

And then the next thing, are we supposed to be more forgiving than God himself? And the answer to that question is, absolutely we are. And I'll explain why later. So hold on with me.

But I want you to know about these two things that helped change my thinking. Now, again, I think Christians should be quick to forgive and quick to reconcile with a couple notable exceptions that I'm going to mention at the end of our time together. But let me explain to you the two things that changed my thinking.

The first one was a sermon by Charles Haddon Spurgeon. The second one was an article in a book by Gale Irwin. Let me first of all, share with you what Charles Spurgeon taught me about forgiveness.

Turn in your Bible to Hosea, chapter 11, verse 9. As you may know, on Wednesday nights, we've been making our way through the minor prophets, and it's been wonderful for me. I hope people have had a good time listening to the word of God on Wednesday nights, because I've had a wonderful time teaching it. These are books of the Bible that I don't know as well as other books of the Bible, and it's wonderful to discover so many gems in them.

Well, in the course of my preparation for teaching on Hosea, and this would have been a Wednesday night several weeks ago that I would have taught through this passage in Hosea, in my preparation for it, I read a sermon by Charles Spurgeon on Hosea, chapter 11, verse 9. And this was the text and the sermon was titled God and not man. What does it mean? Well, let's read the text, Hosea, chapter 11, verse 9. I will not execute the fierceness of my anger. I will not again destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not man, the holy one in your midst, and I will not come with terror.

Now, let's just kind of understand basically what the prophet Hosea is saying there. He's speaking, of course, for God as the prophet of God. And the Lord is telling his people that he will not bring the fierceness of his anger.

He will not destroy Ephraim, which is another word for the northern kingdom of Israel. Now, why? Why will God forbear in judgment? Why will God forgive instead of bring judgment? Why? For I am God and not man. And hence the title of Charles Spurgeon's sermon, God and not man, what does it mean? And in that sermon, he makes an examination of the grace and the mercy and the long suffering of God and how it is so unlike the grace and the mercy and the long suffering that you find among men.

You see, in that sermon, Spurgeon showed how the forgiveness and the compassion and the long suffering of God that he shows towards his people, it seems unbelievable to us. We can't even grasp it because sometimes in our mind, we just get the feeling that God is a super man. Do you understand what I mean by that? That he's just like us in the way that he thinks, in the way that he feels.

He's just better than any other man. Well, no, God is far, far greater than a super man. He is God and not man.

His love and his forgiveness are of a different order altogether. And in the midst of this sermon, Charles Spurgeon went down a list. He does this beautifully in his preaching.

He went down a list that explained many of the differences between the way God forgives and the way that man forgives. Now, for example, he said, man cannot hold back his anger very long. But God does.

How long does it take you before you just absolutely blow up? Some of you may be very, very patient people. And that guy who's driving in the car in front of you and cutting you off, he may have to cut you off four or five times before you absolutely explode and make a very unchristian like gesture to that man and all of these things. You know, that may be you.

You may be very patient. It may take four or five stupid moves by that driver in front of you before you do that. We may compliment you.

We may say, you, you are slow to anger. But it's nothing compared to the way that God holds back his anger. How much have we sinned against him? And he hasn't destroyed us.

You know, if you don't think that we deserve the absolute judgment of God upon us right now, then you're not very much in touch of how much of a sinner you are, because we all are. We all have offended God that greatly. Think of how patient and longsuffering God is with those who offend against him.

You can't even compare it to the patience and longsuffering of even the most patient and longsuffering person among men. Secondly, Spurgeon pointed out that man cannot bear with others when he's tired, stressed or annoyed. But God bears with us long, even though we sorely provoke him.

I don't know if it's proper to apply this word to God. If it's not proper, then excuse me. I'm just trying to communicate an idea, not get into the technical aspects of declaring theological truth here.

But God certainly has a right to feel very annoyed with us, doesn't he? And you know how when a person is annoying you and annoying you and annoying you, eventually you just want to blow up. When we're on the airplane flight from Kulangata to Sydney, my son and I, we got on the plane and then someone late got on the plane. It was a nine-year-old girl, an Australian little girl, traveling by herself.

And she was very quiet and everything. And she got on there until my son took out his Game Boy. And that started this girl on conversation.

And she chatted it up with my son the whole time. And this little girl was annoying. Now, I have a lot of respect for my son because he was the perfect gentleman.

You know, he didn't tell her to leave him alone. He answered her questions. I mean, briefly, I mean, he's a 10-year-old boy.

But I mean, he was very kind. He was nice. But boy, you know, when we got off, he was like, oh boy, Dad, you know, I'm that girl, you know, and all of this.

I give compliments to my son right there. He bore with somebody who was annoying to him. But friends, it's nothing compared to how we provoke God.

And he bears with us so long and so patiently, you can't even compare it. Here's a third way that Spurgeon talks about. He points out that man will not reconcile if the person who offended him is a person of bad character.

But God reaches out to bad people to woo them to themselves. I mean, think about it. When does God reach out to us to draw us back to himself? Does he wait until we fix ourself up, until we repent and turn over a new leaf? And then God says, OK, well, now I'll start drawing you back to me.

No way. God does it when we are in total rebellion against him, when we are just plain bad people. That's how great the love of God is.

Next. And this one is very telling. Spurgeon said that man is often only willing to be reconciled if the offending party craves forgiveness and makes the first move.

Isn't that how we are? We stand back and say, OK, fine, I'll be reconciled with them. I'll be reconciled with my brother. Fine.

All right. As soon as he comes to me and repents, I'll be reconciled with him. But he's got to want it.

He's got to want that forgiveness. He's got to want that repentance because I'm not going to reach out to them. You know, come on.

He knows where I'm at. Anytime. That's how we are.

But God always makes the first move towards us always. There's one thing I can tell about every person's relationship with God here. Now, everyone, if you have your own relationship with God, some of you are sort of on the uprise in your relation and you're growing and you can feel it.

Isn't that a great feeling in your Christian life when you feel like you're growing? Now, sometimes you are growing in the Lord and you don't really feel like it. But man, it's great when you feel like it. And others of you here tonight, you're sort of on the decline and you feel that, too.

And it feels kind of stinky. Maybe that's why you're here tonight at church. You know, you're here hoping God will speak to you in some way and help you get out of that decline that you're on.

But I want you to understand that God always makes the first move towards us. I may not know anything else about your relationship with God, but I do know this, that God came to you before you ever came to him. He initiated forgiveness.

He initiated reconciliation. He didn't stand back with his arms folded and say, well, whenever they want to come to me, I'm here. If God were to do that, every single one of us would go to hell because we don't come to him unless he draws us first.

Next, again, this is great, Spurgeon says, man is often only willing to be reconciled if the offending party will never again do the wrong. But God forgives our sin, knowing that we will sin again, often in exactly the same way. How many times have you sinned, you've repented before God, you've confessed it, and then later on you've done exactly the same sin and confessed it and repented again before God.

Do you think God knew that you were going to repeat that sin? Of course he knew. Then why did he ever forgive you in the first place? Because that's how generous God is with his forgiveness. Now, how many of us would do the same thing? Somebody comes and they slug you in the jaw.

Whoa, wow, you're just reeling. And they come to you and they say, I'm so sorry. Will you forgive me? And in a flash of spiritual insight, God shows you that over the next year, they're going to do that to you three more times.

Are you going to forgive them? You'll say, no way am I going to forgive you. Not a chance. I'm not going to forgive you until you vow that you will never do it again.

And if you ever do do it again, then my forgiveness is revoked. Forget it. You're gone.

God knows that we're going to sin again, sometimes in the very area that we've asked forgiveness for a previous time. And yet he still forgives us. That is the greatness of God's forgiveness.

Then again, Spurgeon says that man, when he does reconcile, does not lift the former offender to the place of high status and partnership. But God's forgiveness is so complete and so glorious that he grants adoption to those former offenders. Somebody has hurt you deeply, really, really deeply.

And it's all you can do to just say those words. I forgive you. Well, why don't you say, hey, come on over and spend the weekend over at my house.

And here, let me shower you with gifts. Let me give you a new car. Let me put you in a new place of status.

Let me give you all these things. He said, what are you nuts? Look, man, I'm doing good just to forgive them. But do you realize what God does for us? Not only does he cancel our debt of sin, but he showers us with gifts.

He showers us with blessings. He says, come into this beautiful, warm relationship with me. It's so beyond man's forgiveness.

It shows us the point that Hosea was speaking about, that it's of God and not of man to forgive in this great way. Next. Man, when he is wronged, he does not bear all the penalty for the wrong that was done, but God bore all the penalty that we did against him.

Now, think about that one for a moment, folks. When we offended God, when we sinned against him, you know what he did to get us back together with him? He said, I'll take all the blame. Put all the punishment on me.

There I am on the cross taking all the punishment, all the blame, all the punishment, all the guilt that you deserve. I'll take it. You can account me as if I am the guilty one.

Let's just come back together in relationship. That's love. Does man love like that when it comes to forgiveness? Oh, it's so hard for us to do.

How could we ever do that? You see how great the forgiveness of God is. Next, man, when he attempts reconciliation, will not continue if he's rejected. But God keeps reaching out to man, even when man rejects him again and again.

How many times did God reach out to you to try to bring you to himself and you slapped his reached out hand away? No, God, not now, not now, not now. Now, if anybody were to do that to us, we would just say, well, forget it. I mean, I've reached out to him a couple of times.

I should be applauded for that. They keep slapping my hand away. We'll forget it.

Let them just go now. God says, no, no, I'll reach out to you again and again and again. Next, man will not restore an offender without a period of probation.

Isn't that how we are? You sin against me. OK, fine. You repent, you come back.

OK, great. But either officially or unofficially, you're on probation now. That's not how it is with God.

God doesn't have any probation before him. He says, come in, come into my courts, come into my presence. Let's get back together in close relationship again.

Man will not love, adopt, honor and associate with the one who has wronged him. We feel that we should be complimented when we merely tolerate those who sin against us, don't we? We think we deserve a pat on the back for that. We tell you when God brings us back into forgiveness and reconciliation, he doesn't just tolerate us.

He gives us a full embrace. Oh, come back. Come back.

Welcome back. That's God's forgiveness. And then finally, man will not trust someone who has formally wronged him.

But God puts his trust in us and he invites us to work with him as co-laborers, even though we're forgiven by him. Now, as I thought through all these points, you've got to admit, that's pretty impressive thinking through that passage of scripture by Charles Spurgeon. As I thought through these points, I began to see that what God said in 11.9, Hosea 11.9, is amazingly true.

He is God and not man, especially when it comes to forgiveness. If any human being here tonight thinks that they do things the way God does when it comes to forgiveness, let me just be straight with you. You are self-deceived.

You're far too confident in your own self. Now, you may do good in one or two of those areas that I described, but you do them all? I don't think so. I don't think anybody does, because if we did, then we would be God and not man.

Now, again, think through just one of Spurgeon's contrasts between man and God in the matter of forgiveness. He said again, man, when wronged, does not bear all the penalty for the wrong done. Now, in that regard, how many of us would really deal with somebody who wronged us in that way? But in our reconciliation with God, he took the initiative.

He humbled himself. He bore all the penalty for the wrong done. He said, put the guilt on me.

I'll stand in the place of the guilty, and I will accept being treated as if I were the one who did the wrong. Friends, that's a sacrificial attitude, and it's completely absent in people who withhold forgiveness. Now, you can't stand back with your arms folded and say, I'm not going to forgive them until they repent and say you're being like God.

That's not the way that God forgives. Not at all. I also want you to see that this text shows us that God's forgiveness does not follow a strict, I will not forgive you unless you repent pattern.

Now, it's true, and it's important to say that in general, repentance and contrition are part of man's response to God's initiative. I mean, when you see somebody that God is working on and drawing on himself, you're going to see repentance and contrition in that person. That's something that's worked in us by God himself.

Repentance is a gift from God. But listen and follow with me carefully. God does not require that we confess and repent of every sin that we have committed before we are forgiven and restored.

I'm going to say that again, because it's a bombshell to some of you. God does not require that we confess and repent of every sin that we commit before we're forgiven and restored. Let me put it to you this way.

What did Jesus say was the essence of the law towards God? He said, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength and love your neighbors yourself. But let's just take the first aspect of that. Loving the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.

Okay. Has anybody here failed in that today? In some way, you failed to love God with all of your heart, with all of your mind, with all of your soul and with all of your strength. Just maybe in one of those.

Maybe in heart, soul and mind, you love God with all of that today, but strength was a little bit failing. What you see, you failed that. That means you sin today.

Now, did you confess that sin to God? Say, well, you know, I didn't even think I did it until you started talking about it right now. Well, isn't that just the point? How much sin do we commit, especially when it comes down to sins of omission? How much sin do we commit that we're not even immediately aware of that we commit? And do you think God is up there in heaven, tallying every sin that you commit and waiting for a corresponding confession and repentance for that particular sin? Friends, there's not enough time in the day for us to confess and repent of all the sin we do. Now, it's true that there has to be a general confession and repentance of sin, right? We're not denying that.

And it is true that when God convicts a believer of sin and says shining the spotlight on some certain area of sin in your life and saying, listen, I want you to deal with this here, then you better confess and repent it. But the idea that if we don't specifically confess and repent of a particular sin, God will not forgive it. Then, friends, we're all going to hell.

Because we do not have, again, we don't have enough minutes in the day to know every way that we have fallen short of loving the Lord, our God, with all of our heart, with all of our soul, with all of our mind, with all of our strength, to know each and every way that we have failed to do that and to confess it and repent of it before God. So what does God do? In his love and his mercy, he overlooks that. And he deals with us on specific places at specific points.

And that's where we have to listen to what the Holy Spirit's doing. So, friends, you see, this is why God's forgiveness towards us is far greater, far greater than the repentance and the confession that we give him. Let me say that again.

It's not like if we give God, I'll use a crude picture here, if we give God 10 pounds of repentance, he'll give us 10 pounds of forgiveness. You see, because the bottom line is I need a lot more than 10 pounds of forgiveness, don't I? In the way that the proportions work out, we give God about 10 ounces of forgiveness and he gives us about 10 tons of, excuse me, we give him about 10 ounces of repentance and he gives us about 10 tons of forgiveness. His forgiveness far, far outstretches our repentance or confession.

And so, friends, if we're going to forgive like God forgives, we're not going to stand back with our arms folded and say, well, you haven't confessed and repented. No forgiveness from me. Is that how God really acts towards us? I don't think so.

See, Spurgeon's sermon opened my eyes to an aspect of God's word that I hadn't really grabbed a hold of before. I used to wonder if God expects me to be more forgiving than he is. But now I see that what

passes for forgiveness among men is nothing like the amazing forgiveness of God.

It's like apples and oranges. You can really hardly compare the forgiveness that we have amongst ourselves with the forgiveness that God has. You know, in that sermon, Charles Spurgeon said, he said, suppose that someone has grievously offended you and that he asked your forgiveness.

Do you not think that you would probably say to him, well, yes, I forgive you, but I cannot forget it. Ah, dear friends, that is a sort of forgiveness with one leg chopped off. It's a lame forgiveness and it is not worth much.

Spurgeon says, you better start trying the best you can to forgive the way God does. You're never going to reach it. You're never going to be as holy as God is.

You're never going to be as loving as God is. You're never going to be as righteous as God is. And you're never going to be as forgiving as God is.

But that's your standard. And it's an amazing standard when we really look at it. Well, that's what Charles Spurgeon taught.

Let me tell you what Gail Irwin taught me about forgiveness. Recently reading a chapter from his book, Handbook for Servants, a great, great book. Anyway, turn in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 18.

We're going to start at verse 21. You see, reading through Gail's most recent book, especially a chapter in there titled Forgiveness, by the way, if you're really interested and if you can't or don't want to buy the book, you can go right to his website, look under past articles and you'll find the article on his website titled Forgiveness. And if you don't know how to get to Gail's website, it's www.servant.org. Or you can just go to our website, Calvary Chapel of Simi Valley, and we have a link to his website on our recommended links.

Gail's gift for communication really helped me to see some familiar ground with better perspective. So let me read this passage to you. And it's going to take us just a little bit to read this.

So hang on. Matthew chapter 18, beginning at verse 21. Then Peter came to him and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to 70 times seven.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wants to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold with his wife and children, all that he had and that payment be made.

The servant, therefore, fell down before him, saying, Master, have patience with me and I will pay you all. Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat saying, pay me what you owe.

So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, have patience with me and I will pay you all. And he would not, but went and threw him into prison so he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw that what had been done, they were very grieved and came and told the master all

that had been done.

Then his master, after he had said, called him, said to him, you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had had pity on you? And his master was angry and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So my heavenly father will also do to you if each of you from his heart does not forgive his brother his trespasses.

Now, this is familiar ground for a lot of us. We know this parable. We've heard it before.

But you see, what I want you to see is the simple, clear point of the parable. God has forgiven us so much that we should be very generous with forgiveness to other people. I mean, does anybody doubt that that's what this parable is about? God has been very forgiving towards us.

Therefore, we should be generous with forgiveness towards others. Now, thinking about this all helped bring something else to light to me about the difference between God's forgiveness and our forgiveness towards others. We have absolutely no right to stand in the place that God does when he is wronged.

We have absolutely no right to demand a confession of sin and to demand repentance the way God does. And you know why? Because we're not God. You see, God has never sinned.

God is always one hundred percent in the right. God has nothing to be forgiven for. And let me say it in this.

Think about it in these terms. God has never received forgiveness. Now, when you sin against me or I sin against you, we stand in a completely different relationship, don't we? Instead of forgiven sinner crying out to a holy, perfect God, now it's forgiven sinner talking to what? Forgiven sinner.

And let me lay it down right here, friends. No matter what you do against me, no matter what, no matter how bad you attack me or anybody I love, it pales in comparison to what I've done to God and what he's forgiven me of. You see, we stand in a completely different place as forgiven sinners.

And therefore, if it were possible, we should be far quicker to forgive than God. If anybody has the right to stand up in heaven with his arms folded and say, I'm not going to forgive you until you confess each and every sin and repent of it, it's God, right? But I don't have any standing to do that towards you. Why? I don't have any standing to do it because I'm a forgiven sinner, too.

And I have to remember that I stand before that person who has offended me as someone who has offended God so greatly and I've received his great forgiveness. I need to be generous with it to other people. Now, it's also important to realize that in many of the conflicts where we feel justified in demanding confession and repentance from someone else, we've also sinned against them in some way.

Isn't that often how it is? Sometimes it's not the case. I think of the case of a poor child molested or assaulted by an adult. And in that situation, you can say, listen, dear, that was not your fault at all.

One hundred percent of the blame goes upon the person who attacked you or abused you in that way. I mean, we can say that in cases like that, but when it's a disagreement or a thing between two grownups, it's often not like that, isn't it? Often there's at least some blame on both sides, right? Now, maybe the blame is ninety nine percent on my side and one percent on your side. But you know what? Still, then it's

not like you're God and I'm the guilty sinner because God wouldn't even have the one percent.

And so there we stand, not only as forgiven sinners, but as present sinners before each other. And we should just say, listen, I forgive you. Will you please forgive me and throw it all away? That's the attitude to have.

We stand as forgiven sinners before our God. That's the attitude we should have before God and before one another. And that's just another reason why we cannot say God demands confession and repentance.

And so must I, no matter what other people do against us. We do not stand in the same place as our sinless God. And so we have an even greater obligation to forgive than God does.

Think of it in terms of Matthew, chapter seven, verses one and two, go ahead and turn back there, we're already in the Gospel of Matthew. So let's take just a little look. Matthew, chapter seven, verses one and two, judge not that you be not judged for with what judgment you judge, you will be judged.

And with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you. Now, how would you like that spiritual principle to be applied with forgiveness in your life? God says the same measure you use in forgiving others, that's the measure I'm going to use in forgiving you. And so if your attitude is I'm not going to forgive anybody unless they confess and repent of each and every sin they commit against me, God says fine, then that's how I'll be towards you.

No, no, wait a minute, wait a minute, Lord. I don't know if I want that. And God says, hey, that's the measuring you're using.

The same measure you use towards others, God says, that's what I'm going to use towards you. Suddenly, we just got a lot more forgiving in this room, didn't we? Man, bring out the steam shovel. That's that's the measure of forgiveness.

We're saying we're saying, Lord, I want to be so forgiving towards others because I want you to use that measure of forgiveness towards me. You know, this chapter on forgiveness, Gail Irwin also explores an important aspect of forgiveness. Here I'm quoting him, he says, Until we understood germs, the unwashed hands of a surgeon guaranteed death for half of his patients.

Unforgiveness on our part is like having unwashed hands in our ministry to others. We only spread disease. You know, we go, oh, Lord.

Lord, I look at my heart and I look at the places where there's unforgiveness and it's like I'm a surgeon going around operating on other people with filthy hands. Lord, cleanse. I forgive them, Lord, please forgive me, Jesus.

But the point of all this is clear, since we have been forgiven so much, we have no right to withhold forgiveness from others. We are the debtor forgiven and almost infinite debt. Will we hold on to the small debts that others owe against us? If anyone has the right to withhold forgiveness, it's God.

And he forgives more freely and more completely than anybody we know. So what possible right do we have to hold on to our unforgiveness and to spread the disease of unforgiveness to others? Now, let me address a question that legitimately bothers people. I don't think this is an illegitimate concern, but it is a question that people raise.

They say, well, listen, what if somebody's repentance isn't genuine towards me? You know how it is when you're raising children and you have little Billy and little Sally over here and little Billy and little Sally get into a big fight and Billy pushes down his sister and, you know, steps on her toe and Sally's crying, crying, crying. And she runs and she tells mommy and mommy comes over and she gets little Billy and she says, Billy, you say you're sorry. And what does Billy do? He says, sorry.

And everybody knows what Billy means. Don't we? We know little Billy means I'll say I'm sorry, but I am not sorry one bit. Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah.

Well, people can do the same thing, right? Grownups. Some find refuge in the idea saying I can withhold forgiveness because even though that offending party, even though they made some effort at repentance or apology, it wasn't sincere. And so I don't have to accept it.

Now, when people think that way, they're not bad people for thinking that way. Oftentimes they believe that they're trying to help the person who offended them. They're saying, listen, I need to help this person and I need to help bring them to a place of sincere repentance.

And the only way I can bring them to a place of sincere repentance is by refusing to give them forgiveness until they do come. And so I'm just trying to help this person. I'm not trying to hurt them.

And I can understand how somebody would have that heart. But I think it's misguided. I think two simple occasions in the life of Jesus show us how wrong this teaching is.

And let me read this to you. Matthew, chapter 18, again, verses 21 through 22. Then Peter came to him and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me? And I forgive him up to seven times.

Jesus said to him, I do not say you up to seven times, but up to 70 times seven. Now. In my mind, right around forgiveness, granting number 257, I'm starting to doubt the sincerity of their repentance.

You see what Jesus is saying here? If they come to you again and again saying, I repent, I'm sorry, forgive me, then you're supposed to do it. Or how about this one again? We read it before Luke, chapter 17, verses three through five. He says, take heed to yourselves.

If your brother sins against you, rebuke him. And if he repents, forgive him. Now look at verse four.

And if he sins against you seven times in a day and seven times in a day, returns to you saying, I repent, you shall forgive him. And the apostle said to the Lord, increase our faith. You get the point here? Seven times in a day.

Okay, so you're standing there and I come over and I stomp on your foot. You jump around like you've got the hot foot. Oh, that hurt.

I am so sorry. But I don't know what got into me. I'm sorry.

Please forgive me. All right. I forgive you.

An hour later, I come back and I do the same thing. And oh, you're jumping all around. Why did you do it to me again? I am so sorry.

Please forgive me. I repent. I'm sorry.

Third time, fourth time, fifth, about the fifth time you're saying, I'm not going to forgive this guy. I don't think he's very sorry for what he did, you know, five times in the last five hours. What does Jesus say? He says, you shall forgive him.

If he says he repents, then he repents. Period. It's not our place to judge the repentance of another person.

In Matthew 18, Jesus clearly shows that we're to forgive again and again, even if someone sins against us again and again. The point isn't that we should keep score up to four hundred and ninety or even seven times in a day. Let me read you something that Gail Irwin wrote on this point.

He says, quote, I don't think Jesus was limiting forgiveness to four hundred and ninety times a day, although that would hardly be possible. But he was saying that forgiveness is simply a lay of life, not a mathematical formula. It's impossible for someone to sin against us four hundred and ninety times in one day and then seek and receive forgiveness four hundred and ninety times.

Maybe. Maybe Jesus was telling us that our heart for forgiving should exceed someone's ability to sin against us. That's a powerful phrase.

And again, that Luke passage has the same situation. And again, it's interesting that this passage, Luke chapter 17, verse three, is often quoted by those who feel justified in withholding repentance or excuse me, withholding forgiveness. They say, look, Jesus said that we should only forgive if they repent.

Now, that's true. But Jesus also gave us no right to judge their repentance again, because if a person does something to me seven times in a day and says, I repent each time, I still don't have the right to withhold forgiveness, even if it seems obvious that they're not sincere. We are to take the smallest appearance of forgiveness as excuse me, the smallest appearance of repentance as enough.

How about this, that person who wronged you? They give you a pleasant smile. They say, well, wait a minute. I've written out a confession that they have to sign and a statement of conduct that they have to agree to abide to.

Well, no, listen, how about you just take the smallest gesture on their part? Doesn't God do that with us? Do you think God stands back and puts us through the wringer? He has every right to put us through? He doesn't. He takes the smallest gesture of repentance. It's all come back to me.

I want you back with me. You see, it's clear that this passage in Luke and I want you to turn there, Luke chapter 17, verse three, I want to read it to you again. It's such an important passage.

Luke chapter 17, beginning at verse three, he says, Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him.

And if he sins against you seven times in a day and seven times in a day, returns to you saying, I repent, you shall forgive him. And the apostles said to the Lord, increase our faith. Friends, the idea here is not that Jesus was trying to talk to the disciples about withholding forgiveness, but about granting it.

It's a point emphasized by the response of the disciples. What did they say when Jesus told them about this radical forgiveness that they have to grant to other people? They said, Lord, increase our faith. Now, let me ask you just a pointed question.

Do you need more faith in your life to withhold forgiveness or do you need more faith in your life to grant forgiveness? You see, Jesus's words here, they weren't about withholding forgiveness, but about granting it. Let me say this. I'm still looking for a single passage in the Bible dealing with personal relationships where the context is about withholding forgiveness instead of granting it.

Now, time is getting away from us here this evening. I want to sort of wrap up with two thoughts about not granting forgiveness. I'm convinced that Jesus's teaching about forgiveness has its most pointed application towards personal relationships.

And blessing will come when nations and institutions and churches and businesses and other organizations have that same kind of generous love. But there are two dangerous, I believe, misapplications of this principle of forgiveness. The first one I'm going to call community forgiveness.

Now, I don't know if that's a good name for this sort of recent and disturbing phenomenon, but we see it too often. Usually it pops up after some kind of tragedy, it hits a community at the hands of some disturbed criminal, you know, like a high school student goes in and shoots up a high school or some drunk man goes on a rampage and injures and kills many people. When that happens soon, you see signs popping up in the community saying, we forgive you.

I might I say, I don't think that's right. I don't think it's biblical because it's disturbing because you have some people granting for when the offender never acted against them. Listen, it's not their place to say we forgive you.

If somebody robs you, it doesn't help for me to tell the thief, I forgive you. That's something that you need to work out between you and the thief. The matter of forgiveness has to be settled between the offender and the offended.

And when the community, so to speak, rushes in to offer this kind of forgiveness, I think it only confuses the problem further. It's a bad thing. Now, there's another thing that I think we need to think of and I'll call that legal forgiveness.

That's also a bad idea. Again, let me explain what I mean. I'm defining this as the idea that if somebody commits a crime, that it's enough if their victim forgives them.

Now, I think that it's important that the offended party forgive on a personal level, but on a civic and legal level, it's important that the criminal have their crime addressed by the legal system in a way that's appropriate, not just for the immediate situation, but for the whole community. In other words, let's say the robber's on prowl around my house late at night. Now, it's perfectly appropriate for me to go downstairs with a baseball bat and bop him on the head and have him arrested.

Perfectly appropriate. And then it's totally appropriate for me to say, I forgive you. I forgive you on a personal level and then testify against the guy in court.

The two do not contradict each other because that man has a legal obligation and a legal thing before the civic community for what he's done. And my personal forgiveness for him does not take that away. The Bible says that God has established governing authorities to punish evildoers.

And my personal relationship with that man should be one of forgiveness, but it doesn't eliminate for the legitimate role of government to step in and administer justice in that situation. My forgiveness cannot and

it should not cancel out their responsibility before those authorities. Let me conclude here.

And when I say conclude, I know that I am not saying everything that there is to be said about forgiveness. There's a lot more that can be said. Well, you know, is it right to ever wait for repentance or does it mean that as soon as somebody sins against me, it doesn't matter.

I only have to ask for reconciliation or repentance. I just forgive him. Has all that.

There's a lot more that could be talked about, but time escapes us tonight. Let me just say this as a teacher of the Bible for many years, I've struggled with understanding what the Bible says about this issue of personal forgiveness. And I remember very clearly in the past when I have taught or implied that Christians should withhold forgiveness.

Almost every time to my memory, I preface those remarks with something like this. I'm still working and thinking through these things biblically, but this is where I'm at right now. I would say the same thing tonight.

I'm still thinking about these things. I'm still working through them. But I do trust that God has used good men like Charles Spurgeon, like Gail Irwin to help bring greater clarity to me in my life on this important issue.

And at the end of it all, can't we just say that we have been graciously and generously forgiven so much by God? How then can we ever withhold the gift of forgiveness from anybody else? Father, help it to sink down deeply in our hearts. You know, Lord, without hesitation, we say before you tonight. We want a big measure of forgiveness from you.

And we know you provided it at the cross. It's almost crazy, Lord. We were totally in the wrong and you were totally in the right.

And yet you came forth and you said, let me take the initiative, let me take the penalty, let me bear the blame, the suffering of my own body. That's amazing love, Lord. It's truly amazing love.

It makes us realize, Lord, that that kind of love is something that you have to do in us and through us. We can't work it up in ourselves. We need you to do that work in us.

So please do it, Lord. And glorify yourself in our midst. We pray in Jesus name.

Amen.

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