

# Can We Forgive? Part Three

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

There's a story about the Renaissance painter Leonardo da Vinci. During the time when Leonardo was working on his famous painting, *The Last Supper*, he became angry with an acquaintance of his. The two men had words, and parted from each other on very bad terms. Leonardo returned to the church on whose wall he was painting the fresco.

Leonardo would pick up a brush and try to paint, but it was no use. Leonardo could paint nothing he was happy with. Now it just so happened that he had reached the point in the project where he was doing the face of Jesus. Time and again he tried to render a passable likeness of the Lord, but he was unable to do so.

Finally, the great artist realized he had work to do, but it was not in the church he had been commissioned to decorate. Leonardo put down his brushes and palette, and sought out the man who had been the subject of his wrath. He asked the man's forgiveness. The man accepted his apology and offered an apology of his own.

It was only then that Leonardo was able to return to the church and finish painting the face of Jesus. There's a powerful message in that story. Whenever we allow our lives to be ruled by anger, we, too, cannot perceive the face of our Lord. First, we must do our part in fixing the relationship we have with another. Only then, can we fix our relationship with God.

Over the last two weeks we have talked about forgiveness. We have talked about the misbeliefs we have, the definition, the benefits, and we have heard Scripture that tells us to forgive so we can be forgiven.

This week will be talk about the first three steps to take if you choose to forgive. Next week we will take up the fourth step in forgiveness and also talk about self-forgiveness. There are many times that it is easier to forgive others than to forgive ourselves.

The text we look at this week is from the Gospel of Matthew and gives us Jesus' take on forgiveness. Peter steps forward and lays the difficulty of forgiveness there at the feet of Jesus. Now in the day of Jesus the Rabbis taught that when someone wronged you, you should forgive up to three times. Then you could stop forgiving. So maybe Peter thinks he is pushing the outer limits of forgiveness. To be on the safe side, Peter doubles the required number of times, three, and adds one more and says, 'Should I forgive him seven times, Lord?'

Jesus counters with no, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Now if you want to interpret that as seventy-seven times, that is still many times, but in Jesus' day it meant a very large number. It is similar to our children saying "a zillion" when asked how many times something has happened.

Then Jesus tells a parable. It is a story about a king and his servant. The king has loaned his servants money, and now he's decided to call in the loan. The king calls in his servant and finds the servant can't repay the loan. He owes ten thousand talents. That is probably about twelve million dollars today, or in the day of Jesus that servant would have had to work for 150,000 years to pay off the debt. So, the king in order to cut his loses, orders that the servant and his wife and his children are all to be sold into slavery, and then the king will recoup some of the loss.

The servant begins to beg for mercy. He is trying to buy some time. And then the most unexpected, unbelievable thing happens. The king doesn't just give him more time. He totally forgives the debt. He cancels it in its entirety. The loan is paid off. They are completely free.

I can imagine that the servant felt relief. He was forgiven. I know when I have committed a sin against someone and I ask for forgiveness, I feel great when they forgive me. However, the story doesn't end there. This servant goes to another servant who owes him money. He is owed 100 denari. That is about the equivalent of \$2. Imagine, He has been forgiven a debt of \$12 Million, and he is asking to be repaid \$2. When the servant can't repay him, and begs for mercy, he shows no mercy. He throws the servant into debtor's prison.

Other servants report this to the king and the king shows no more mercy. The real lesson comes in the final verse. Jesus says, 'Unless you and I forgive our brothers and sisters from the heart, we are going wind up being shown no mercy from God. Now having no mercy from God doesn't fit my image of God who is always loving and present and surrounding us with exactly what we need. But Jesus says that God will look at how we are treating our neighbor. Jesus and God have high expectations for us to show mercy to those we come in contact with.

So, assuming that we want to forgive someone, how do we forgive? In the book *The Book of Forgiving* by Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho, give us very workable steps on how to forgive. Much of this book is based on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. As you know the country of South Africa made the decision to rebuild the country after apartheid based learning the truth and forgiving the wrongs that had been done. That did not mean that people weren't brought to justice; it did mean that many of the people involved followed this path of forgiving.

The first step in forgiving is to tell your story. We all experience hurt and pain. If we live, we can't avoid hurt and pain. Now you may not have thought about this; the hurts and pain we experience damages our dignity. These hurts and pain can leave deep scars in our souls.

Maybe you have noticed that sometimes we are hesitant to tell our story. Sometimes we keep quiet because we feel what happened is our fault. We say to ourselves, "If only I hadn't said that, if only I hadn't made the person mad. It is my fault." Sometimes, we don't think other people will believe us. When we are hurt by someone in power over us, we think people will believe that person and not us. Or maybe someone close to us tells us we shouldn't have been hurt and we believe them. Sometimes we bury the story and think that we have forgotten it. If we have buried the hurt and pain, it may lay dormant, but it is not forgotten, and that hurt and pain we have buried may come out in catastrophic ways. Sometimes we don't have a safe place to tell our story. There are lots of reasons not to tell our story.

By not telling our story, we keep remembering the event that caused hurt and pain and as we remember we interpret the event. Without telling our story the hurt and pain and the loss of our dignity keep getting damaged every time we remember.

We can decide who to tell the story to and when to tell the story. We don't have to tell the story to everyone we meet or broadcast the event on social media. We do need to decide that there is a safe place and a safe person who can hear our story. Forgiveness can't happen unless we tell our story.

To be free from these hurts and pains we need to tell our story. If you have ever noticed when a tragedy happens, therapists are brought in so that the people involved can talk to someone. The reason we tell the story of what has happened is because by telling the story we get our dignity back. The event loosens its grips on us. You can decide who to tell the story to and when to tell the story. Forgiveness can't happen unless you tell your story.

When we tell our stories we are saying, "This horrible thing has happened. I can't go back and change it, but I refuse to stay in the past forever." Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past. Let me repeat that. Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past.

And telling your story doesn't mean that you tell the story one time and you are finished. Forgiveness shares a characteristic with grief. You need to tell your story many times because each time you tell your story it has a little less of a hold on you.

The second step is to name the hurt. This is the step where you move beyond the facts of what happened and express your feelings. We need to give voice to the pain so that healing can begin.

Now sometimes it may seem easier or safer to simply dismiss a hurt, stuff it down, rationalize that we shouldn't feel this way, or pretend it didn't happen. The problem is that the hurt and the pain will not go away unless we name the hurt. Whatever feeling you have is ok. No feeling is wrong.

I've heard people say, "If I don't mention it, I don't have to deal with it." Pain and hurt are like grief and loss. We always have to deal with the pain and hurt before we can be healed and become whole again. When we have named our hurts, we move out of pretending that the event never happened or that we don't want to remember the event. In other words, we move out of denial. Denial protects us from remembering the pain and the hurt.

Now some might think there is no difference between telling the story and naming the hurt. After all, when we tell our story we say that we were hurt. This step asks that you go below saying that you were hurt. What were your emotions? Were you fearful? Did you feel betrayed? Were you hurt because you were angry at what happened to you? Did you feel abandoned or rejected? Were you sad and felt like you had not control over the situation? There are many feelings that are below hurt and pain and this step asked you to go deep and look at the feelings you are experiencing. And remember that no feeling is wrong.

Many times, the hurt we feel is what we have felt in the past. I told you the first week about my childhood and my family of origin. In that family, I felt abandoned. I didn't have words to express that feeling until I became an adult. That early hurt influenced how I interpreted

behavior in my relationships. When someone would cancel a lunch date even with a good reason, I would feel abandoned. It was after therapy that I started understanding my own feelings and could separate old wounds and hurts from what was happening in the present. You may have to go very deep to know the hurts you are feeling.

The third step is to keep progressing to the point of forgiveness. When we make the decision to forgive, we can't do it alone. Our forgiving is ultimately a gift of grace from God. God prompts us to receive this divine gift. It is not easy to forgive, and it is with God's help that we can forgive.

The methods of this step of forgiveness can vary. Prayer is an important part of any variation in this step. For some people prayer is not only important, but the heart of the practice of forgiveness. Praying for forgiveness is not about changing what has happened, or changing the other person. Our prayer is about opening our heart and changing our interpretation of the event. My prayer for one person who had hurt me was, "God, I know you love this person. Please help me see something you love about this person." This prayer was to open my heart to experiencing something other than the hurt I had felt. (I had to pray this prayer for several months before I began to experience a softening of my heart.)

This step is the place we usually stay in for weeks, or months, or years. Michael Barry's experience was that once a person found an insight that spoke to them, forgiveness followed quickly. My experience is that the majority of people do a lot of praying, a lot of reflecting, and a lot of experiencing their feelings before their hearts are open and forgiveness can be given.

In this step it may be necessary to go back to telling our story and naming our emotions. As in grief and loss, sometimes the most important activity in the forgiveness process is to tell our story many times. Telling the story and feeling the hurt doesn't happen one time and the process is complete. The reason this is called a process is because it takes repetitive action for a few times or for many times.

I want to share my method of how I found forgiveness with my parents. First, I prayed many days and months and years. I prayed for understanding. As I prayed those many months, I noticed that my anger began to turn to sadness. I was sad that my dad was a victim of the disease of alcoholism. Alcoholism is as much of a disease as cancer. I was sad that my dad could not get help with the disease. I was sad for my mother. I was sad because she had a love-hate relationship with my dad and rather than confront my dad directly, it was easier to take that out her anger on me, a child. I was sad because if she had lived a generation later, she might have gotten help through counseling. In my sadness I realized that I had begun to have compassion for my parents. I realized that they were doing the best job they could do. I had begun the long process of forgiving and healing.

And once we have forgiven, we have a new story to tell. The facts of the hurt we experienced haven't changed, but our interpretation has changed. The story will almost always now include something about the story of the person who hurt us. We can tell the new story because we have released the pain of the hurt of the past.

It took me years to feel that I had forgiven my parents. Sometimes I would think I had forgiven them only to discover that I was still angry. When I felt angry, I would begin again with prayers.

Forgiveness takes strength and courage and we receive strength and courage from God. I invite you to open your heart and begin the process of forgiveness today.

Amen.