

“Forgive”

Matthew 18:21-35

INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever tried to catch a monkey? They are quick and fast. You will never outrun one but you can catch one, if you just understand how monkeys behave

In Africa hunters will take a jar with an opening slightly larger than a monkey's hand and place some food in the jar, like rice or a banana slice. When the monkey discovers the jar it will invariably reach into the jar, grab the food and try to pull it out. However, now that it has hold of the food its hand is too big for the opening of the jar. The monkey is not really stuck because it can just drop the food and remove its hand. However, it won't let go of the food and it is easy for the hunter to throw a net over the monkey and capture it.

Aren't you glad we don't cling to things that actually end up hurting us? Or do we?

Have you ever held on to your hurt too long? Have you ever reached into the jar of hurt and resentment and grabbed on tight because for some reason they looked so enticing, only to find that they grabbed you and won't let you go? And now you're stuck and actually being hurt as your bitterness eats away at your life?

(During this time, I place my hand in jar, grab on to an object, then leave the jar on my hand)

There is a way to let go of the hurt and be freed from the pain of bitterness. Peter asked about it in a conversation with Jesus that is recorded in Matthew 18:21-35.....

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

The Question: How many times should I forgive?

Just as it is today, in Peter's time people hurt each other and people wrestled with whether or not they should forgive others when hurt.

The religious standard of the day was to forgive someone 3 times. When asking Jesus his question Peter doubles the standard or requirement and adds one more for good measure! I can't help but think Peter was expecting Jesus to be a bit impressed with the generous spirit of his friend Peter!

However, Peter had missed the point!

The Answer: Jesus responds to Peter's question by saying, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Some texts say "seventy times seven")

In other words, Jesus is saying there is to be no limit to our willingness to forgive. But how can Jesus be so extreme in his response? Doesn't he know how cruel people can be to one another? Doesn't he know how badly I have been hurt?

The Reason:

Jesus understands how cruel people can be. He also understands, in a way we cannot fully comprehend yet, his Father's forgiveness.

In the story he told, the servant who owed the king 10,000 talents is Peter, and you, and me. The king is God. In our relationship with God our debt is great, far greater than we would like to fully admit!

To understand the enormity of our debt and God's forgiveness we need to know that 10,000 talents = 50 million denarii 1 denarius = 1 day's wage

In the story, the master threatened to sell the man, his wife and his children in order to pay off the debt. The servant begged for the opportunity to pay off his debt, but think of how long that would have taken!

He would have had to work 365 days a year (1 day off every 4 years!) for 136,986 years, 3 months and 20 days in order to pay off that debt. And that assumes absolutely no money needed for life. The point is, he had a debt he could never repay! But the king took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. That is exactly what God does for us when we ask for his forgiveness of our debt of sin!

Then the forgiven one finds a fellow servant who owes him 100 denarii. That could be paid off in 3 months and 10 days. Or, the one who had just received incredible mercy could just cancel the debt. Instead, he throws the man into prison. Too often that is exactly what we do to friends, family or co-workers, even if they ask for our forgiveness!

How could he be so cruel to his fellow servant? How could we ever be so cruel to hold on to our hurt and stubbornly refuse to forgive?

Why be extravagant in our forgiveness of others? Because if we have received God's gift of forgiveness and grace we will never be asked to forgive more than we have already been forgiven.

The Reality: Why does forgiveness need to be such a big deal in our lives? We fail!

Romans 3:23 says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

We each know our own story and the particulars of our failures.
We also each need to remember what God wants to do in response to our failures.

John 3:17 says, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

God primary agenda is not judgment. God's primary desire is that we experience his forgiveness!

The apostle Paul relates that attitude of God's to our relationships in Galatians 6:1 where he writes, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." And the joy of restoration can never happen without forgiveness!!

Three Questions:

1. What is forgiveness?

"to forgive" literally means "to let go"

It means we choose to let go of focusing on the hurt we have experienced.
It means we choose to let go of our desire to retaliate and hurt in return
It means we ultimately choose to wish them a good future and God's blessing

In the midst of discussing what forgiveness is, we also need to be clear about what forgiveness is not. When we forgive....

- It does not mean we choose to pretend we never were hurt. Forgiveness looks most honestly at the hurt that was experienced.

- It does not mean we choose to approve of what the other person did to hurt us. To

forgive does not mean to condone!

- It does not mean forgiveness eliminates consequences. Sometimes relationships cannot be mended. Sometimes there needs to be distance for the sake of protection. Forgiveness and consequences are not necessarily in conflict with one another.

Also, we cannot control how the other will respond to our choice to forgive. Romans 12:18 says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Due to the choices others make, sometimes it is not possible and if the other defiantly refuses restoration that is their responsibility, not yours.

2. How do we forgive? (Lewis Smedes)

As I think about and have experienced the challenges of forgiving others I think the one experience in life most similar to the process of forgiving is the process of grieving. There is loss and pain, they both take place over time and they are usually messy!

So how do we forgive?

- We forgive slowly

A young British boy was hurt badly by a teacher who bullied him. Over the years he felt he just could not forgive the teacher. However, near the end of his life he wrote this letter to a friend...

"Dear Mary,

Do you know, only a few weeks ago I realized suddenly that I had at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my childhood. I'd been trying to do it for years; and like you, each time I thought I'd done it, I found, after a week or so it all had to be attempted over again. But this time I feel sure it is the real thing...

Yours, Jack (C.S. Lewis)

- We forgive with partial understanding

We often are challenged to forgive not yet knowing why they did what they did or even the full impact of how they have hurt us. We don't know how they think or feel about what they have done, and we maybe never will know. But we forgive.

- We forgive with anger left over

Leighton Ford was an evangelist, author and father. His son Sandy died as a young adult and Leighton wrote powerfully about his experience of grief. He said that many times he would start the day feeling strong and hopeful that the pain

was leaving but then he would hear a song, or see a picture or smell something that reminded him of his son and the pain would hit him anew like a Mack truck. He called these “ambushes.”

We often will experience a similar thing while forgiving one who has hurt us. We will be making progress but then something will vividly remind us of our hurt and we will be ambushed by anger. This does not mean we are failing as forgivers. It means we have been hurt deeply and it will take time to fully heal.

- We forgive a little at a time

Oftentimes when we have been hurt it has occurred bit by bit by bit over a long period of time. In response, our forgiveness will probably also be bit by bit by bit over a long period of time. That is okay. We are human and we need time

Further complicating the process, sometimes we are challenged to forgive someone who has never apologized and probably never will. Or, they apologize but then they continue to hurt us with their choices and behavior. Progress comes slowly and we wonder if it will ever actually end.

- We forgive freely, or not at all

I was in kindergarten. We had recently moved to California and Darren was assigned to be my friend. You know how goes sometimes. For some reason, Darren and I repeatedly got into fights during recess and one day we ended up in the principal’s office. He looked really strong and he showed us his paddle, which he told us he would use on our rear ends if he ever had to see us again in his office. He told us each to apologize and forgive each other and then slammed his wooden paddle on his wooden desk to add a special exclamation point to the end of our conversation. In my mind I wasn’t sorry for what I had done and I had no intention of forgiving Darren but I said the words because I was scared to death of the principal.

God does tell us to forgive. So also do friends and family. But true forgiveness, the kind that lasts, the kind that brings reconciliation, occurs only when we freely choose to give that gift.

3. What about forgiving yourself?

I am not going to ask for a show of hands, but I imagine that for many of you the hardest person for you to forgive is yourself. You know your failures, you have seen the impact of those failures on those you love and you simply don’t feel worthy of being forgiven.

But that is the point...none of us have earned the right to be forgiven. Forgiveness is always a gift, freely chosen by one who wants the love to be stronger than the hurt.

God has freely chosen to give us that gift and I imagine some of us need to give ourselves that gift. Today, let go of the hurt of your sins and mistakes and forgive yourself.

CONCLUSION:

Did you notice the impact of my holding on tightly?

1. Ever though I gripped the object tight I never did get to enjoy it
2. Many times as I tried to focus and do something else that is important I was distracted, and you probably were too.
3. At times I forgot I was holding the object and the jar and yet you could always see it.
4. If I would have kept clinging, after the service if I wanted to greet you personally and give you a hug or shake your hand the jar would have made that difficult, wouldn't it?

It is so nice to let go!

In conclusion, let's consider Jesus' hands?

Phil. 2:5-8 "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!"

He let go and he died on a cross with hands wide open. He did it because he loves us more than we have hurt him and he wants us to live in the freedom and joy of his forgiveness. Receive his gift, with open hands and then pass it on wherever it may be needed!