

## Learning to Forgive, Part 1

Matthew 18:21-22

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Let's open our Bibles this morning to the 18th chapter of Matthew. Matthew chapter 18 has been our study now for a couple of months, and we're coming to the final section of this section in verses 21 through verse 35. And that really is one section dealing with one theme though we'll probably take it in two lessons together. Now, in this great chapter we have seen our Lord teaching on the childlikeness of the believer, and you will remember that back in verse 2 the text tells us that Jesus actually took an infant and held that infant in His arms to be used as a living illustration, an analogy, if you will, of the childlikeness of the believer. And then he began to teach elements of our childlikeness.

First, we are to enter the kingdom like children. Verse 3 says, "Except you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." And then we are to be protected like little children. Verse 6 says, "Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for him that a millstone were hanged around his neck and *that* he were drowned in the depth of the sea." And then we are to be cared for like little children. Verse 10 says, "Take heed that you do not look down on one of these little ones; for the angels are always beholding the face of my Father who is in heaven." And the Son of Man that we talked about cares for them, and the Father in verses 12-14, as well.

So we then are to enter the kingdom like children. We are to be protected like children. We are to be cared for like children. And then, in our last couple of looks at this very significant chapter, we know that we are to be disciplined like children. Verses 15 and following tell us that we are to be disciplined. When one of us sins, he or she is to be approached by the others for correction, for restoration.

Now as we come to verse 21, we will note that we are to be forgiven like children. We are to be forgiven like children. There's a great sense of tolerance with children, because we understand their weakness. We understand their ignorance. We understand their inabilities. Being childlike is indicating that we're going to fail. There are going to be times when we do the wrong things. We're still in the process of maturing, of growing up, of ordering our behavior. But when we do sin, and after discipline has been enacted, we also are to be forgiven just as children are to be forgiven.

People can rather easily hold grudges against adults, but it's somewhat abnormal to hold them against children. We tend to forgive children rather readily. Adults we have difficulty forgiving and we need, then, to remember the teaching of this passage, that believers are to be treated like children, for in the spiritual sense we are and we need the same kind of gracious continuing forgiveness that a child does.

Now, forgiveness is a great, great virtue. I really believe that it is the key to the unity of the church.

It's the key to love. It's the key to meaningful relationships. It's what constantly tears down the barriers that try through sin to be built up to separate us from one another, to wall us off, to make us bitter, and angry, and vengeful.

Forgiveness is a tremendous concept. In fact, in Proverbs 19:11 it says, "*It is a man's glory to pass over a transgression.*" In other words, if you want to see man at his best, he is at his best in his ability to forgive. In overlooking a transgression, in forgetting a sin and an evil. Ephesians 4:32 takes the thought even a step further for Christians and it says we are to be "forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven us."

Based upon the fact that we have received the forgiveness of God in Christ, we are to offer forgiveness to others. Colossians 3:13 has the same thought in these words, "forgiving one another even as Christ forgave you, so also *do ye.*" It is the glory of a man that he should forgive another, and particularly for a Christian who has been forgiven so much by God through Christ. And if, in fact, it is the best of men in terms of their character quality to forgive, and if it is that we as Christians have been forgiven everything, how eager we should be to be able to forgive others.

If you look in the Old Testament and there is an exalted perspective on forgiveness. We all remember with great sense of respect the wonderful story of Joseph who forgave his brothers in Genesis Chapter 50. I don't know if you remember how that Chapter ends, but it ends close to the end, it says in verse 20, "As for you, you thought evil against me; -" says Joseph to his brothers " - *but* God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as *it is* this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spoke kindly unto them." And they had thrown him in a pit, and sold him into slavery, and treated him as if he were dead. He forgave them everything.

And I think we all also with great respect remember the tender forgiveness and sensitivity that David exercised towards Saul. Saul, who had spent himself trying to murder David and when David could easily have thrust his sword through the sleeping Saul, he did not do that. He had a heart of forgiveness. We find that expressed in 1 Samuel 24:7. We find David again a model of forgiveness, forgiving Nabal his evil for the sake of Abigail, his pleading wife, in 1 Samuel 25. And then, of course, that very familiar text in 2 Samuel 19, where Shimei had cursed David and David's friends said, "Devastate the man. Destroy the man. Kill the man." Instead, David forgave the man.

Forgiveness is a glory of a man. It is the highest human virtue. You show me an honorable man, you show me a man with real character, and I'll show you a man who can forgive. You show me a man who carries a bitterness deep down in his soul and I'll show you a man without character. You show me a person who cannot release some vengeful, bitter, antagonistic, hateful attitude towards somebody, and I'll show you a man who knows not either the glory of a man nor understands the forgiveness of God to him.

It is the best of a man to forgive - listen to this - because it is the heart of God to forgive, and when man forgives he radiates that which is true of the image of God. Forgiveness is so basic to God's heart that it certainly should be basic to the heart of God's children. Coming at it another way, you might as well learn to forgive because people are going to need it. And may I add, so are you. Children of all people need forgiveness and we are children. We're weak. We're ignorant. We're selfish. We're prone to disobey, and we need forgiveness frequently. We are such children.

Now, our Lord has just concluded a section on disciplining sinners. And he follows it up masterfully with a section on forgiving them. You remember in 2 Corinthians chapter 2 there was a man in the Corinthian assembly who had sinned. And this particular man had been disciplined by the assembly of believers. And Paul says to them in 2 Corinthians 2:6, "Sufficient to such a man *is* this punishment, which *was inflicted* by the majority." In other words, you've sufficiently punished the man. You've sufficiently made the point. You've done what needed to be done in terms of bringing to bear or rebuke on his sin. "So now rather - " in verse 7 " - you need to forgive him, and comfort him, lest such a one should be swallowed up with over much sorrow. Confirm - " it says in verse 8 " - your love toward him." And then he goes on to say if you don't do this - in verse 11 " - Satan's going to get an advantage of you, for we're not ignorant of his devices." And one of his devices is to generate a bitter spirit and unforgiving heart.

Now, we all need to learn to forgive because we all need to be forgiven and because God has forgiven us. It is the best of a man to forgive and it is the best, if I may say so, of God to forgive, for it is the expression of His loving nature.

So we see, then, in this passage beginning in verse 21 a transition into the matter of forgiveness. And I am not only going to talk on it this week, but I'm going to also spend next week with the same theme, because it is very important. It may even drift over to a third one. I have a lot of things that I want to say out of the text. I'm not sure how long it's going to take me to say them. And that's one of the problem in never having taught a passage prior. You don't quite know what the Lord's going to do in the process.

But let's look at an outline. First of all, in verse 21, the inquiry about forgiveness. The inquiry about forgiveness. Now after all of this discussion of discipline and how we are to confront the sinner, and rebuke the sinner, restore the sinner, and all that, Peter asked a very insightful question. "Then came Peter to him and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?"

It's a good question. See, Peter knows the tendency of men. You know why he knows it? Because he knows himself. And he knew how many times he needed to be forgiven. He also is talking out of the context of his Jewish background, where there were certain hard lines drawn in relation to forgiveness. And he is saying in this whole matter of a person sinning and being restored, "You know, the problem, Lord, is going to be, they're going to do that, and we're going to restore them, and they're going to go right out and do it again. Or they're going to do something else. I mean, how many times do we keep on forgiving them?"

He could anticipate the inability of human kind to turn their life all the way around and not sin any more. So he could see you correct this thing, and maybe it'll happen later, or something like it will happen later, and you're going to be stuck forgiving this guy over and over. How many times do we do this?

Notice the phrase, "then came Peter." They are sitting together in the house of Capernaum where our Lord is teaching with the little infant in His arms, and Peter leans forward, comes close to Jesus. Maybe there's a little time interval from the former teaching to this one. We don't know. But he steps forward, comes close to Jesus, and he really has a burning question in his mind.

And may I add just as a footnote not related to this particular text that we are greatly indebted to Peter for a lot of things? One of them is that he asked questions. God bless people who ask questions because people who ask questions of the right people get answers. And sometimes we all get to enjoy the answer. Peter asked questions. His quick tongue and his inquisitive mind did get him into trouble, but on the other hand, he elicited out of the Lord a lot of profound teaching, didn't he? Because he asked questions.

So Peter had heard about the matter of discipline and at this point he's saying, "Now look, Lord, let's say we go after this guy, and we bring him back, and we restore him, and we've even gained our brother, as it says at the end of verse 15. How many times do we do that if he sins again or sins the same sin? Does forgiveness have a limit?" Did you get that? That's really the salient question of the whole text. Does forgiveness have a limit?

Do you say to somebody, "Look, man, you have gone too far. I mean, there are some things that I can forgive, that I can't." Or, "I have forgiven you already five times for that. I mean, that's it. You have gone beyond the limit." That's what Peter's really asking. And notice he says, "How often shall my brother sin against me?" Remember what we said about that earlier? The "against me" does not mean necessarily that the sin was directly against you in the physical sense or in the sense of touching your life personally, purposely, directly, but that the sin was against you either directly or what? Or indirectly.

In other words, all sin in the assembly affects the assembly. But the idea that Peter adds the "against me" really involves you in a situation where you feel the lack of forgiveness, or you feel the hurt and the pain that wants you to say, "That's enough out of you. I'm not going to forgive that." I've heard people actually say, "I will never forgive that person for what they've done to me."

I had a man confront me not long ago and he cursed me and called me every name he could think of, and he's a man in the ministry. You'd know him if I said his name. He called me every name he could think of because he has carried vengeance in his heart for me for five years over something that he didn't like about me. Now whether or not he was right or wrong about what he didn't like isn't even an issue. What is an issue his anger, his bitterness, and his lack of forgiveness. He said to me, "I will never forget what you said." Now that's just the very antithesis, both of the glory of a man and the heart of God.

And so Peter is saying, "Look, if it does come against me and it's so close to me that I might on a human level have good reason to maintain an attitude of unforgiveness, how many times do I forgive him?" And then he adds at the end of verse 21, "Seven times?" And you know, he's waiting for congratulations. He's waiting for the Lord to say, "Marvelous, Peter. You are so magnanimous." I think many people, most people, find it hard to forgive one time, really.

Louis the XII said, "Nothing smells so sweet as the dead body of your enemy." That maybe articulated something of most people's feelings. Forgiveness is very foreign to man's nature, that's why we're all somewhat shocked when we see Jesus dying on the cross and people are spitting on Him. They've shoved a crown of thorns into His brow. They've hammered nails through His limbs. And He's hanging naked with flies and blood as a cloak before the whole watching world and He looks down and says, "Father - " what? " - forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

And that's why we're shocked in the Acts 7:60 to see Stephen crushed beneath the bloody stones off a ledge where he's been thrown as they plummet them into his body to crush out the life and he looks up and says, "Lay not this sin to their charge." And I think the profundity of Stephen's testimony affected one in particular who happened to be there holding the coats of the stoners by the name of Saul.

But God's people are to be like Christ. And God's people are to be like Stephen, especially with their fellow Christians. We are to hold nothing against a person who has wronged us, no matter how they've wronged us, and no matter how intimately we are wronged.

God has been wronged. Did you hear the Psalm I read this morning? David said in Psalm 51, "Against thee, thee only - " thee only, God " - have I sinned and done *this* evil in thy sight." And he cries out to God against whom he has sinned. And what is God's heart toward David? Forgiveness. And you've done the same. You've sinned against God. Every sin you've ever sinned in your whole life was sinned against God. It's as if you walked into His holy presence in the middle of heaven and sinned the sin in front of the throne in His face. It's defiant. Every sin you've ever sinned, you've sinned in the face of God. And He's forgiven you.

Are you better than God that you can't forgive what God forgives? And you don't even know the full evil of sin. For two reasons. One, you're not omniscient, and two, you're not so holy that you can understand its utter sinfulness. So the inquiry, "How many times do I forgive, seven times?" And Peter really thought he was being generous.

Now, that leads from the inquiry about forgiveness to the extent of forgiveness. Verse 21 again, Peter says, "Seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until - " what? " - seventy times seven." Now what did Peter have in mind when he said seven times? He was thinking he was so generous. What was he thinking about? Let me tell you something, Jewish tradition says you forgive a person three times. That's the limit.

And you can see why they said that. Let me take you back in your Bible to Amos, and if you can't find Amos, don't worry about it. Just listen. Amos 1:3, "Thus saith the Lord; for three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away its *punishment*." Verse 6, "Thus saith the Lord; for three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not turn away its *punishment*." Verse 9, "Thus saith the Lord; for three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not turn away its *punishment*." Verse 11, "Thus saith the Lord; for three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not turn away its *punishment*." Verse 13, "Thus saith the Lord, for three transgressions of the children of Ammon, and for four, I will not turn away its *punishment*."

Now, you find a similar statement made in Job 33:29. And so the Jews concluded, then, that the three times you could be forgiven. When you did it the fourth time, you got the blast of God's divine judgment. So they said that this - and of course they misinterpreted the passage - that this justified the limit of three times for forgiveness. They said this. If three transgressions fills up the measure of God's forgiveness, men can't go beyond God. So after three times, that's it.

And you read things like Rabbi Joseph ben Hanina who said, "He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times." Or Rabbi Joseph ben Jehuda who said, "If a man commits an offense once, they forgive him. If he commits an offense the second time, they forgive

him. If he commits an offense the third time, they forgive him. The fourth they do not forgive him.”

So doubtless when Peter said he thought seven times, he was really going beyond his own tradition and he was being generous. He probably thought he would be commended, and he no doubt had some kind of a smirk of self-congratulation on his face, thinking how generous he had been. And I might add that in his favor, his three years with Jesus had had some impact on him. He had no doubt picked up the merciful, generous, gracious, kind, forgiving spirit of Jesus. And that's why he knew that Jesus would go far beyond at least twice and one again, the tradition of his own people. So he did see that Jesus would certainly love and forgive in a way beyond the narrow kind of limit of Judaism. He had, in the sense, advanced beyond the men of his own nation, and the Lord was about to lead him even further so that he would understand fully what grace is.

And that's why the Lord says in verse 22, “seventy times seven.” Now, that would take his breath away. I mean, it would just literally dumbfound the man, because it's so out of proportion with the magnanimity that he had designed in his own mind when he said “seven.” The number is so large that you just would lose count. I mean you don't really count up 490 times. It's questionable whether that would even happen.

Now, there's nothing really binding. You don't keep a book and say, “All right, that's 491. You know, you're finished.” Jesus just picks up on Peter's numeral and multiplies it by ten, and by seven again. He just plays with the number that Peter suggested, and he's really saying there's no limit to it.

There's kind of an interesting comparison that as I was studying this, I read in Genesis 4:24, where it talks about vengeance being brought 77 times. And here it says the Lord says forgiveness is seventy times seven. So whatever base there would be even for legitimate vengeance, there's an infinitely greater one for gracious forgiveness.

Our Lord is really calling for an indefinite number. And just to show you that, let me have you turn in your Bible to a passage that is - if you think this is mind-boggling, look at this one. Luke 17:4. And this is Luke's insights into basically the same event.

Back in verse 3, “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespasses against thee, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.” In other words, when he repents, you give him the full forgiveness. “And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.”

And again he just plays off this same number and if we combine Luke with Matthew, what we've got is, am I to forgive him seven times? No, forgive him seventy times seven if he sins seven times a day. In other words, it's just hyperbole. The point is it's unlimited forgiveness. John Wesley said, “If this be Christianity, where do Christians live?” A fair question. No limit and no boundary to forgiveness. Very serious matter.

Look at James 2:13 for a moment. It says, “For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shown no mercy.” Did you get that? He shall have judgment without mercy from God that hath shown no mercy. Very important truth. We are called to mercy.

Back in Matthew 5:7, do you remember the wonderful beatitude? “Blessed *are* the merciful: for they

shall obtain mercy.” We’ll see more about that in a few moments. Now the thought here is this. The extent of forgiveness is unending, limitless. If it were 490 times a day, a person should be forgiven. So don’t parade your vengeance, and don’t parade your bitterness, and your anger, and your unforgiving spirit, as if it were a virtue. It is the very opposite of a virtue. It is not even the glory of humans, let alone a manifestation of the heart of one who has in him the Spirit of God.

So the inquiry about forgiveness leads to Jesus’ statement about the extent of forgiveness. Now I want to talk for a few moments about the effect of forgiveness, the effect. And to do that, I want to draw you to Matthew Chapter 6. We’re going to leave our passage there for a moment and go back to Matthew Chapter 6, because I need to bring into this particular passage the lesson in Chapter 6.

Now, we are called to forgive, and I’m going to give you several reasons why, and I went through these back in our study of the disciple’s prayer in Matthew 6. First of all, we are called to forgive because of the example of Jesus Christ, Ephesians 4:32. For we have been forgiven by God for Christ’s sake, and so we ought to forgive each other. So we are called to forgive because Christ gave us that example.

Secondly, we are called to forgive because it is the best of man as I said, Proverbs 19:11. Thirdly, we are called to forgive because it is the character of saints to do that. That’s part of Christian virtue. Fourthly, we are called to forgive in order to free our conscience from the root of bitterness that Hebrews talks about.

Fifthly, we are to forgive in order to deliver ourselves from Satan. Second Corinthians 2 says he’ll get an advantage of us if we don’t do that. And sixthly, we are to forgive in order to deliver ourselves from the divine chastening. And did you get that? Those are very important things.

We must forgive because that’s the example of Christ. We must forgive because that’s the glory of man. We must forgive because that’s the character of saints. We must forgive because it frees our conscience from a root of bitterness. We must forgive because it delivers us from Satan’s advantage. We must forgive because it frees us from the chastening of God. And one more, we must forgive or else we will not be forgiven. Did you get that? We must forgive or else we will not be forgiven ourselves.

James 2:13, I just read it to you. “The one who shows no mercy will receive none.” Look at 6:12 of Matthew. “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” And then the commentary on that is in verse 14. “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” Now listen, that is a monumental statement about forgiveness. Because if you don’t forgive, you don’t receive forgiveness.

Now you say, “Is he talking to Christians?” Yes. This is a believer’s prayer. If you’re not a believer, you’re not even in this prayer, because you can’t say in verse 9, the very address of the prayer which is what? “Our Father.” You say, “In what sense, then, can a Christian have unforgiven sin?” If you don’t forgive someone else as a Christian, two things take place. Number one, you cannot know the forgiveness of God in terms of communion, fellowship, joy, all that ought to be there between you and the Lord. And secondly, you will know his chastening, because God, when there’s an outstanding sin account, and He has not parentally forgiven that, is going to bring to bear on your life

certain chastening to refine that unrefined area.

Do you understand? So there's two sides. When you don't forgive someone else, you don't experience the full joy of your salvation, and secondly, you will experience divine pressure and chastening. So you examine your life. Are you looking at your life and saying, "I don't see the kind of joy I ought to see in my life? I don't have the kind of fulfillment spiritually. I don't seem to have the power of God in my life." On the other hand, it seems as though I'm always being chastened. I'm always struggling. There's always hassles in my life. I've examined my life. I don't know any moral sins. I don't know this or that.

Then you backtrack and find out if, in fact, there isn't somewhere in your heart something for which you have never forgiven a person. Some grudge you hold, some bitterness there, because if you can't forgive, you'll never experience the forgiveness of God, and that's what this is saying. And though you'll die and go to heaven because transactionally your sins are paid for in Christ, they're forgiven on the books. You can't experience the fullness of that because you won't forgive.

Now this is not some isolated truth. You saw it in James 2:13. You hear it again in the disciple's prayer. And in case you're still unconvinced, listen to Mark 11:25. "And when you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any: that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your trespasses." There it is again, same thing, Mark 11:25-26. So it's a very important truth.

In Matthew 6:12 we ought to note something. "Forgive us our debts - " the Greek says " - as we forgave our debtors." That's very important, because it puts our forgiveness before God's forgiveness. You forgive us, God, as we forgave. When we take care of forgiveness, then God keeps the channel of His own blessed forgiveness flowing.

So you're maybe thinking of 1 John 1:9, "As we confess our sins, He's faithful and just to forgive, and keep on cleansing." You know, that's the life of the Christian who keeps confessing. God keeps forgiving and cleansing, but only when we forgive others. That puts a wall up if we don't do that.

Oswald Sanders said, "Jesus deals with us as we deal with others. He measures us by the yardstick we use on others." The prayer is not "Forgive us because we forgive others," but "forgive us even as we have forgiven others." Forgiveness, then, is basic to being forgiven.

So what is the effect of forgiveness? The effect of forgiveness is when you forgive others, what happens? God forgives you. You say, "What does it mean when God forgives me?" It means I can experience the fullness of fellowship and I take myself out of the place of chastening into the place of blessing.

By the way, "forgive us our debts," the "debts" there are spiritual debts and they refer to sin, and that's because verse 14 says "trespass," so equate the debts and the trespasses. And we know in the other record of this instruction and prayer the word "trespass" appears. So it is our sins and we are literally to hurl them away. That's what the verb means. Hurling away the sins of others against us, that ours may be hurled away.

Now go back to Matthew 5:7. "Blessed *are* the merciful: for the shall obtain mercy." That's the same

principle, isn't it? It's exactly the same principle. If you want mercy when you sin from the Lord, then you better give mercy to other people. You know something? Think of it this way. I just thought of this in terms of a concise statement. You're very like God. You're very like God when you forgive, aren't you? Very like Him. Want to be like God? Everybody says, "I want to be godly." Well, could I suggest to you that godliness may not be memorizing a thousand verses as much as it would be forgiving? I mean, there ought to be the fruit of that memorization. Godliness is forgiving, because you're very like God when you do that. That's the stuff of true spirituality.

"Blessed *are* the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy." I think that's a statement of fact about a believer. I believe that people in God's kingdom are merciful. When we studied that beatitude, we said that believing people are merciful because they've experienced mercy. So if you're not, you're actually contradicting your own nature. I mean, you're fighting against who you are in Christ. You have been forgiven. And you become a forgiver because you understand that forgiveness, but it's very possible as a Christian that you can get into a time of disobedience in your life where you fail to forgive others and you're really violating the very proof of your salvation.

If you want to tell a Christian, just look for someone who knows how to forgive because he's been forgiven. True forgiveness of the sinner from God, I think, breaks the person down. It gives him a heart of forgiveness toward others. If you're really a Christian and you've really been forgiven, then you're going to understand forgiveness. And if you don't understand that at all, it's questionable whether you've ever really experienced it. Let me take you to another passage.

Same chapter, Matthew 5:21. "You've heard that it was said by them of old." In other words, He says to the Jews, "This is your tradition." That little statement, "You have heard that it was said by them of old," which repeats itself in the chapter is an identification of their Jewish tradition. Your tradition says, "Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of judgment."

In other words, their tradition said, "Don't kill somebody because you might get put in jail." I mean, that was basically it. Very shallow. Don't kill somebody, because if you do, you might be in danger of being put in jail. There's no moral issue here, just make sure you don't get thrown in jail. So that's why you don't kill.

"But I say to you, that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause - " without it being a holy cause " - shall be in danger of judgment and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca - " that, by the way, is an untranslatable epithet of malicious verbiage. "You, whatever, brainless idiot." That kind of thing. It's more than just saying it in gest, it's saying with venom. When you say that, " - you're in danger of the council: for whosoever shall say thou fool - " you *mōros*. It's a mocking, abusive calling of someone a moronic individual. " - you'll be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar - " you're going to come worship God " - and remember that your brother has anything against you; Leave your gift before the altar, and go your way; and be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."

Why? Because you're not going to know what worship is. You can't commune with God. You can't fellowship with God until you've resolved that forgiveness attitude. It's the same thing again. First reconciliation, then worship. First we forgive, then we're forgiven. And so we need to be called to examine our own lives. Are you like God? Your heart eager to forgive? We all get wronged, directly and indirectly. Is your heart free to forgive no matter how close that wrong may be, no matter how deeply it penetrates you?

For me, just as a personal testimony, for me the deepest pains come when people speak evil against me and want to destroy my reputation. I hear about things that are just unbelievable that are supposed to be true about me. Just unbelievable. And those are the things that pain me the most deeply: Untrue criticisms, and allegations, and accusations, and I find that those become for me the test of a forgiving heart.

And I asked God to give me the grace to forgive. I don't want to carry a grudge, a bitterness for five seconds. And so eagerly when I hear that, am I anxious to offer up a prayer. Oh God, put in me the heart of forgiveness so that I may commune with You in the fullness of fellowship and joy, and not experience the chastening that comes when you don't forgive me. And may I remember that for every one who sins against me, I have multiplied times sins against you. And you have always forgiven. And at no point in time has any of my sin caused me to forfeit my eternal life. And nor should anyone else's sin cause them to forfeit my love and my mercy toward them.

And having done that, then you seek to pursue the restoration on the fellowship level that you may have joy. And having done that, you demonstrate the true heart of forgiveness by giving back to that person something of great value and it may be yourself entrusted into their care. Well, let's pray.

Our Father, we thank You that we've been able to come to Your Word this morning and expose our hearts again to its powerful truth. We all need to be forgiven. We need the people in our house to forgive us: Our wives, husbands, our kids. We need the people that work with every day to forgive us. We need the people in our Bible studies, and our church family to forgive us because we are children. We are short of perfection. We're weak, ignorant, undisciplined in so many ways, prone to disobey, self willed.

It isn't a question of which of us has sinned in need of forgiveness. It's only a question of what were our sins. For we have all sinned even since we embraced Christ. And so the church must be a forgiving assembly, a forgiving people, who eagerly give that they may eagerly receive the forgiveness of God. May we know, Lord, that full, rich, joyous fellowship. May we know the blessedness of being spared chastening because we have forgiven others.

May we demonstrate our redemption. May we be living illustrations of blessed are the merciful, for they show that they have obtained mercy. May we be to others as You are to us. Father, may we never come to worship to bring a gift with an unforgiving heart to a brother, but first deal with forgiveness, and then with worship. And when we have followed the path of discipline and gained a brother, and when we have forgiven and restored the fellowship with that brother or sister, and they sin again the same sin against us, may we forgive them again, and again, and again, without limit, as You in grace forgive us without limit.

Never is there a limit to our forgiveness for never is there a limit to Yours. And then we will be like God. Then we will be restored to His character. Then we will walk as Jesus walked, who when He was reviled, reviled not again. When He was mocked, and blasphemed, and murdered said "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." Like Stephen when he was mistreated, abused, stoned to death, all undeservedly. May we say, "Don't blame them for this."

Give us the heart of forgiveness so that every wound is instantly healed, every barrier instantly

removed, every wall instantly torn down. That not only are we aggressively reproofing and rebuking sin, but equally as aggressive and forgiving. Thank You for what You'll accomplish in and through us when we're obedient to this.

While your heads are bowed in just a closing moment, would you pray a personal prayer for just a silent moment, that God would make you a forgiving person? And now would you identify a person in your heart that's been hard for you to forgive and would you be like God and forgive? Just say, Lord - and whisper the name in silence - I forgive that person. And maybe there's more than one.

And then would you say, Lord, maybe because of some unforgiveness in my life, I have been chastened and never experienced the fullness of Your forgiveness. If it's true, I confess that sin. Point it out to me that it may be made right. And having begun with heart forgiveness, go to your brother or your sister and seek restoration and give something of value, maybe yourself.

Father, thank You for what You're accomplishing through Your Word these days. These are so important, these truths. Make us a forgiving people who carry no grudges. Let no wounds fester, but whose hearts are so filled with grace and mercy from the gracious merciful Spirit who lives there, that we have more than enough for all who offend us, so that we could forgive 490 times a day and never exhaust the heart of forgiveness, we who have been forgiven so much.

Thank You for what You're going to do in our hearts through all this day. Bring us together again tonight with great eagerness for the unfolding of Your Word to us. Make this a special day. Bless all the classes this morning. May they, too, be for Your glory and the building up of Your people. In Jesus' name, amen.

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