

I HAVE TO FORGIVE TO BE FORGIVEN?**MATTHEW 18:21-35**

Simon Wiesenthal became famous after World War 2 for tracking down hundreds of Nazi war criminals hiding in various parts of the world, exposing their crimes against humanity and bringing them to justice. He himself was a Holocaust survivor having spent time in a concentration camp in Poland. While in that camp, he was assigned one day to clean out trash from a barn that the Nazis had turned into a hospital for wounded soldiers. Toward evening, a nurse took Wiesenthal by the hand and led him to a young SS trooper whose face was bandaged with rags so that only his eyes could be seen. He was perhaps 21 years old and in very bad condition. He grabbed Wiesenthal's hand and clutched it. He said that he had to talk to a Jew. He couldn't die before he had confessed the sins he'd committed against helpless Jews. He felt he had to be forgiven by a Jew before he died. So this young, dying soldier told Wiesenthal a horrible story of how his battalion had gunned down Jews – some of them just children – who were trying to escape from a house set on fire by the SS troopers themselves.

Wiesenthal listened to the dying man's whole story from the innocence of his teenage years to his participation in monumental evil. At the end, Wiesenthal jerked his hand away and walked out of that barn. No word of forgiveness was spoken, offered or given. Wiesenthal would not and could not forgive. But he wasn't sure if he had done the right thing. He wrote about that experience in his book, *The Sunflower*, and ended it with a question, "What would you have done?" Thirty-two eminent persons – mostly fellow Jews – contributed their answers. Most said that Wiesenthal was right; he shouldn't have forgiven the SS trooper. One respondent put it bluntly, "Let the SS trooper go to hell."

Well, what would you have done if you'd been Simon Wiesenthal? On the one hand, if you say yes to forgiving that SS trooper too quickly, chances are you don't really understand forgiveness. Real forgiveness is very hard. On the other hand, if you say no to forgiving that dying soldier, you might well find yourself on the wrong side of something Jesus said. We've been looking at a variety of things Jesus did or said that are hard. Hard to understand, or hard to accept, or maybe both. Jesus loved to tell stories or - as they're often called - parables. One story He told was about forgiveness. So, what's hard or difficult to understand about Jesus' story? It's the last two verses where Jesus said, "Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart." (Mt. 18:34-35 NLT) It sounds like Jesus is saying God's forgiveness of our sins and a relationship with Him can be forfeited if we refuse to forgive those who have injured us.

Jesus made other statements like this, too. For example, "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.... But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your

Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.” (Matthew 6:14-15, Mark 11:25 NLT) It sounds like we can earn a right relationship with God by being forgiving of others and we can lose out on a relationship with God by refusing to forgive those who have injured us in life. In fact, Jesus makes it sound like God's forgiveness of my sins is contingent on whether I will forgive those who have offended me. Elsewhere in the Bible we learn we can do nothing to ever earn or merit God's forgiveness, but Jesus seemed to contradict that belief here. Can you somehow earn, deserve, or merit salvation by being forgiving? Can you somehow lose, forfeit, or miss out on salvation by being unforgiving? Here's one important truth I want you to get out of Jesus' story.

YOU FORGIVE OTHERS BECAUSE OF GOD'S GRACE.

God bless Simon Peter! Someone has suggested you'll be able to recognize him easily when we all get to heaven because he'll be the guy with the foot-shaped mouth! But if Peter hadn't done or said some of the things recorded in the Bible, who knows what might have been left out? Peter asked Jesus a question about forgiveness. If you read between the lines, it's as if Peter asked, “Jesus, can someone do something that's unforgiveable? I remember You saying that my goodness ought to be better than the goodness of the Pharisees. Well, they say you ought to forgive someone three times, but that's all. I'll double that and throw in another one for good measure! Seven times, Lord! How about that? Is that enough forgiveness to offer another person?”

I imagine Peter was just waiting to be praised and commended by Jesus for his incredible spirituality. But Jesus says, “No, not seven times, ... but seventy times seven!” (Matthew 18:22 NLT) Can't you see Peter doing the math in his head? “Let's see now, 7 times 7 is 49 so 70 times 7 would be 490. 490! Jesus, you want me to forgive someone 490 times? No one could possibly offend me that many times! Why, that must mean there are no limits to my forgiveness!”

It's then that Jesus told the story we read. It's about a king in that part of the world – the Mideast – who was an absolute monarch even to the point of having the power of life or death over his subjects. One of his servants – probably a top official in his government – owed him an incredible amount of money. Some scholars estimate that 10,000 talents is the equivalent of some 600 million dollars. Jesus' point was this: the debt could not be paid. Nevertheless, the king wanted his money back – at least some of it. So he ordered the man and his family to be sold off as slaves to the highest bidder and all of his assets cashed out. The man pled for mercy and promised to repay the debt. This was ridiculous, because the debt was just too enormous. The king did the unthinkable. He cancelled the man's entire debt! Can you imagine the range of emotions that man must have felt? One moment he faced the destruction of his family as well as the prospect of living out his life in jail and the next moment this incredible burden was lifted off of him and he's free – absolutely free! What immense gratitude he must have felt! What mind-boggling appreciation!

But then the unthinkable occurred. This lucky man left the king's presence and ran into another man who owed him 100 denarii. Again, some scholars estimate this was less than \$10,000. That's not exactly pocket change; nevertheless, it represented a debt that could be repaid. This man who has just received unbelievable mercy at the hands of the king grabbed the other guy by the throat and said, "Pay up! I want my money right now!" The second man pled for understanding and extra time, too. But the man who had just been forgiven a debt he could never repay would have none of it. "Absolutely not! After all, I've got my rights. You can just rot in jail until you pay me back every last cent!" And, so, off to jail went the second man.

Some folk observed both scenarios and were offended by the injustice of what they'd witnessed. They told the king. The king summoned his ungrateful servant back to the palace. The ungrateful servant was raked over the coals and sent off to life in prison. "Hooray!" we all say. "Serves him right, that ungrateful slob! That'll teach him! He got what he deserved, didn't he?" And just at the moment when we're feeling all morally superior, Jesus turns and says to you, "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart." (Matthew 18:35 NLT) Now, if that shocks you, disturbs you, or leaves you feeling less sanctimonious, chances are you've really heard Jesus' story. Jesus gets you all wrapped up in the story, makes you feel all the appropriate emotions, and then turns it back on you – just like that!

What's the message? Only forgiven people can truly forgive. If a person can't forgive others it indicates that he or she has never received God's forgiveness personally. You owed God a debt that could not be paid. That's why Jesus died on the cross – to pay your debt of sin against a holy God. You may have said, "Oh, please, God, don't send me to hell for all eternity. Give me one more chance. I'll try and do good things. I'll try to be a better person." But making it right with God by your own effort or goodness won't work. Even if you had a 1,000 lifetimes, you couldn't make yourself right before an absolutely perfect God. Realizing that, what did you do? You threw yourself upon God's mercy and grace. And – surprise upon surprise – you found yourself forgiven of everything, born again into God's family and adopted as His child forever. But, then, what happens when someone hurts you deeply, offends you greatly, or sticks an emotional knife into you and turns the blade? Is it all about justice, fairness and preserving your rights, then? One message of the parable is surely this: "Be careful about wanting justice for yourself against someone else. God just might demand justice be done in His relationship with you!"

Followers of Jesus forgive those who have offended them because they themselves have been forgiven by God. They realize that however badly they may have been treated, it's no comparison to how they have treated God. We're willing and able to forgive others not because the bad thing done to us was trivial, but simply because what God in Christ has done for us leaves us no alternative.

We forgive others precisely because we've been overwhelmed by God's forgiveness of us. We don't really have any other choice.

But, let's be quick to admit that some followers of Jesus don't operate like this at all. Some of the harshest, most unforgiving, bitter, small-hearted people on the planet consider themselves to be Christians. Why do churches split? Or, why do people stomp off in anger vowing never to return? I guarantee you that 98.9% of the time it is not a dispute over doctrine, but instead it's all about a stubborn unwillingness to forgive some offense real or imagined. Jesus' statement is pretty strong here. Who are the folk God will not accept? Is it just terrible, godless, and unrepentant sinners? Well, be sure you add to that group people who can't and won't forgive others. Inability to forgive others indicates a person has not yet received God's forgiveness personally.

So was Jesus really implying here that you can get into heaven because you forgive others? Or, was He suggesting that you can lose your salvation because you fail to forgive others? After all, He did say elsewhere, "If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.... But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too." (Matthew 6:14-15, Mark 11:25 NLT) Personally, I don't think Jesus was saying you earn yourself a place in heaven by being a forgiving person any more than He's saying you lose your spot if you're unforgiving. In my opinion, Jesus was describing a person who is His follower. If you're truly born again by the Holy Spirit, you will forgive others. And if the Holy Spirit doesn't live inside of you, you probably won't.

If you've truly received and experienced God's grace, you will extend His grace to others. That's what followers of Jesus do. It may very well be the most difficult thing you will ever do, but you will do it because you follow Jesus. It may very well take you a long time to truly forgive someone who's betrayed you, or humiliated you, or abused you, but you will do it because Jesus is your Lord and King. You forgive because of grace. And just because true forgiveness is never easy, it will demand grace to forgive others. That's the second truth I want you to get from Jesus' story. Yes, you forgive because of grace, but, also:

YOU FORGIVE OTHERS BY GOD'S GRACE.

In the time remaining today let me say three things about how grace helps you in this difficult business of forgiving. I've lived some of this stuff myself, as I'm sure many of you have as well. In addition, some of what I'm sharing with you I've read about or heard from others and I want to pass along their valuable insights because it's been an encouragement to me. First of all, God's grace helps you to admit the reality of a deep, moral hurt. No one really forgives unless he or she has been hurt deeply or morally. Not every hurt needs to be forgiven. There are some hurts in life you can and should just shrug off. For example, all of us have

annoyances. People annoy you when they're late for appointments or when they cut you off on the highway. All of us have defeats. Others succeed where you fail. Someone else gets the promotion while you get overlooked. Then again, all of us get slighted. A group of people you want to notice you end up ignoring you. A person you admire never invites you into his or her inner circle. Yes, these experiences hurt, but they aren't the kind that need forgiving. Tolerance... indulgence... humility, perhaps, but not forgiveness. Reserve the hard work of forgiveness for heavier stuff. Learn how to apply a little spiritual generosity to these other kinds of situations and the people involved. Get over it.

The kind of hurt that needs forgiveness is deep and moral. It's deep, because the offence slices into the fabric of your inner being. It's moral, because what's done to you is wrong, unfair, or intolerable. You can't write off, shrug off or ignore this kind of hurt as just so much human foolishness. It cuts deep because in most cases these are acts of disloyalty or betrayal. A husband has an affair with a wife's friend. You suffer some kind of abuse at the hands of a parent or a trusted adult. You share a painful secret with a supposed friend who uses it against you. It's anytime someone who ought to be committed to you and your best interests turns out to be an enemy – that's when the hurt cuts deeply and painfully. That's what needs forgiveness. Grace will never allow you to push that kind of hurt under the surface, deny it, excuse it, justify it or pretend it didn't happen. It must be brought to God, laid out before Him, the pain of it faced with great courage and, then, by His grace, it must be forgiven.

Secondly, God's grace enables you to work hard at forgiveness. Forgiveness is hard work. It demands an act of your will over a considerable period of time. Imagine with me today a giant insect that has you in its grasp and is trying to inject its poison into your body. That insect's name is Bitterness, Resentment, Hatred. Only God's grace gives you the strength to pry that insect off of you and run away. That insect will pursue you again and again wanting to grab you and inject its poison into your heart. God's grace will enable you to keep resisting bitterness, resentment and hatred over the long haul. Or, imagine with me a long road that disappears into the horizon. The name of that road is "Forgiveness" and its length is determined by the greatness of the hurt you've suffered. By God's grace, you get on that road and you start walking towards its end. That helps me remember that forgiveness is a process. I get on Forgiveness Road and start walking. I may still have unforgiving feelings from time to time, but that's OK. God's grace will bring healing as I commit myself to walk the road of forgiveness. I happen to believe that this church – any local church – ought to be a place where you get some help in the hard work of forgiveness. You need to be around people who've been hurt like you've been hurt and who struggle with forgiveness like you do. This church is a community of the forgiven who are also working hard to practice forgiveness and learn how to forgive.

Thirdly, God's grace will result in the miracle of forgiveness. And it is a miracle! I don't believe the Bible teaches that forgiveness demands forgetting. We forget

stuff that's too trivial to remember. The miracle occurs when you remember very well what happened to you, but you still forgive. Forgiveness is not excusing the wrong done to you. You excuse someone when he or she wasn't responsible for his or her actions. Real forgiveness is letting go of bitterness even when what that person did to you remains inexcusable. That's the miracle. Forgiveness is not just smoothing things over. Some folk make careers out of smoothing things over rather than honestly dealing with stuff. The miracle of forgiveness occurs when you admit the pain, release the bitterness that's built up inside of you and hand over the whole mess to Jesus. The grace to do that comes from God alone.

Corrie ten Boom and her family secretly housed Jews in their Dutch home during World War 2. Their "illegal" activity was discovered, and Corrie and her sister, Betsie, were sent to the German death camp, Ravensbruck. There Corrie would watch many, including her sister, die. After the war she returned to Germany. It was 1947, and she'd come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. "When we confess our sins," Corrie liked to say in her messages, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, 'NO FISHING ALLOWED.'"

And that's when she saw him, working his way forward. The man had been a guard at Ravensbruck - one of the cruelest guards. All the bitter memories of that horrible place came flooding back into Corrie's mind. Now the man was in front of her, hand thrust out: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" He did not remember her, but she remembered him only too well. She was face-to-face with one of her captors and her blood seemed to freeze. "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he said. "I was a guard there. But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, will you forgive me?"

It was probably only seconds that he stood there hand held out, but to Corrie it seemed like hours as she wrestled with the most difficult thing she had ever had to do. She knew what she had to do. "Jesus, help me!" Corrie prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so woodenly, mechanically, Corrie thrust out her hand into the one stretched out to her. And as she did, an incredible thing took place. This current of spiritual energy started in her shoulder, raced down her arm and sprang into their joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood Corrie's whole being, bringing tears to her eyes. "I forgive you, brother!" she cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment they grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. That's what the Kingdom of God looks like.

Jesus' words aren't about earning or forfeiting our salvation. Instead, they're a description of how His true followers conduct themselves in this world. You will forgive others because of God's grace. You will forgive others by God's grace.