



# A PORTRAIT OF FORGIVENESS

Unlimited Forgiveness and Restoration of Believers

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# Forgiveness Without Limits

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

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**Main point:** Christians must forgive without limits because God has forgiven us of a debt we could never repay.

## Introduction:

Mao Zedong of China was wrong on so many levels, and the results in history are catastrophic. He was a Communist, an atheist, and tragically wrong in historic proportions. Here is one example. In the 1950s, Mao developed a belief that sparrows were a pest. They ate grain from the farms; and killing the sparrows of China, he thought, would result in enough surplus food for 60,000 people. He initiated a campaign to kill sparrows. The little birds were shot; their nests were destroyed; their eggs were broken. Chinese Communists succeeded in killing about every sparrow in Chinese air space. But Mao Zedong was wrong. He was operating on mistaken presuppositions. He did not realize that sparrows are natural predators to locusts. With the sparrows all gone, the locusts multiplied, devastating Chinese agriculture. It is estimated that more than 30 million Chinese died of malnourishment.

The point? Defective thinking always leads to destructive living. If people are mistaken in their beliefs, they will be misguided in their behavior. Faulty thinking leads to flawed habits, because what you think effects how you behave and how you live. Such is the case with wrong beliefs about *the forgiveness God offers in Christ*, and *the forgiveness He calls us to practice* with one another.

C.S. Lewis said it well, "Forgiveness is a beautiful word, until you have something to forgive."

Let's be straight about it. Forgiveness is hard business. It is a messy process. But how far is too far? At what point does God deem it okay to withhold forgiveness? Is unforgiveness robbing you of joy and eroding our spiritual life? Why do we even need to forgive in the first place? And if we do not forgive others completely, what does it mean for us? What does it say about us? How does God look upon an unforgiving heart?

Jesus answers these critical and relevant questions in the text before us.

## Context:

To recapitulate, Jesus has been teaching us in Matthew 18 about how the church—or the people who belong to Him—should respond to one another. Using a child as His model, Jesus taught the disciples that before they even think about rank in the kingdom, they need to make sure about who will enter it (*vv.1-3*). And true believers we *enter* the kingdom like children (*v.4*). Once we enter like a child, we are to *receive* one another like children (*vv.5-6*), *care* for and *protect* one another like children (*vv.7-9*), and *value* one another like children (*vv.10-14*).

Using a simple illustration of a shepherd's care for his sheep, Jesus invites us to think about God's individual love for us, as well as, how He delights in forgiveness and restoration (*vv.12-14*). Moving from the illustration, Jesus then lays out for us in verses 15-18 some practical steps to take to restore a brother or sister who has sinned. The goal is *restoration* not *separation*. The aim is *restorative* not *punitive*. The desire is *reconciliation* not *excommunication*. He teaches us to *deal with sin privately*—and avoid gossip (*v.15*), to *deal with sin*

*biblically*—and avoid misrepresentation (v.16), to *deal with sin perseveringly*—and avoid compromise and the possibility of favoritism or misuse (v.17a). Finally, we are to *deal with sin seriously* and *prayerfully*—and avoid pretention (v.17b) while being assured of His presence (vv.18-20).

Now Jesus tells a story to make it clear just how serious God takes this matter of forgiveness.

**The story has three scenes.** In scene 1: The King forgives his servant of an astronomical debt. In scene 2: the servant refuses to forgive a fellow servant of a comparatively small debt. In scene 3: The King revokes the forgiveness of the debt he extended to the servant who refused to forgive others. These three scenes make one point:

- If you do not forgive others from your heart, it shows that you are not forgiven.

In other words, those who are members of the kingdom of God *must act like it*. And if we do not live lives of *grace* and *forgiveness*, it shows that we do not know anything about the grace of God in our own lives.

The text divides in to these three headings to help us organize our thoughts.

First, the portable question (vv.21-22).

Second, the powerful parable (vv.23-34).

Third, the profound point (v.35).

## **Exposition:**

### **A. The portable question (vv.21-22)**

By portable I mean this is a question that you can take into any period, any country, and with any family and find that it is *relevant*. Peter's question opens the account.

#### **1. Peter's question**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

The Rabbinical tradition required that an offender be forgiven up to *three-times*. It was the ancient version of the three strikes rule that we have today. Strike one—ok. Strike two—watch it now. Strike three—that's it! There is no fourth pitch or swing in forgiveness they thought. Many people operate by this same mentality today. Fool me once...fool me twice...

But Peter wanted to supersede the norm. He thought he was raising the standard. He wanted to go above and beyond the call duty, so he doubled the standard, "*Lord how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?*"

I'm sure Peter turned around slowly and nod his head at his fellow disciples with a self-righteous grin and waited for Jesus to pat him on the back and say, "Kudos Peter, what great growth I've seen in you!" But no.

## 2. Jesus' answer

<sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

Let's do the math. 70 times 7 equals 490 times! Was Jesus saying that if your brother sins against you 490 times you must forgive him, but if he does it one more time...491, then that's it? You bring the hammer down, shut him out, give him "the hand" and withhold forgiveness because he has simply gone too far!

Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Yes, it does. First, it contradicts Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:5 that love "*does not take into account a wrong suffered...*" or as the NIV translates it, "*...it keeps no record of wrongs.*" Second, it conflicts with God's way of forgiveness from Psalm 130:3—"*If You should mark iniquities... (that is, if God would keep a record in order to punish them when the record was full), who could stand? (In order words, no creature could stop the judicial proceedings.) 'But...there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.'*"

The question of forgiveness is a relevant one. What does it really mean to forgive and what if you're in a relationship where the person close to you just keeps on hurting you? Is there a limit? Jesus answers that question directly by telling us that our forgiveness must be complete forgiveness. As His followers, our forgiveness is to be without limits. Now he tells a parable to help us to see if we dare, just how serious and important forgiveness is to God.

### B. The powerful parable (vv.23-34)

In this parable, the king represents *God*. The entrusted but indebted servant represents *us*, and the fellow slave represents *our brother or sister in Christ*. Now it was not at all unusual that a king would settle his accounts at the end of the year or at an appointed time. Having entrusted the servants with a certain amount of capital, the King had the right to expect his money back with interest from those entrusted with the responsibility.

The story unfolds in *three scenes*. Each scene highlights several vital truths that teach about the seriousness of forgiveness in the eyes of God.

#### Scene #1 (vv.23-27)

<sup>23</sup> *"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.*

<sup>24</sup> *When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.*

How much was ten thousand talents? A talent referred to a weight in coins that was roughly the equivalent of six thousand denarii. A common city worker was paid one denarii for a full day of labor. This man was said to owe ten thousand talents! That would have been more than the entire Roman taxes levied against Palestine and the all the surrounding provinces combined. Commentators calculate that the debt would be in the millions, and even billions, in our day.

What Jesus uses here is *comic overstatement*. When the people heard this statement, it was intended to be so outrageous, so impossible that they would've bust out laughing, because they knew that no one could ever owe that much. It was more than the entire government possessed.

- The point that Jesus was making by this comic overstatement is that *sin is an incalculable debt we owe to God*. In Psalm 51:4, King David said, “*Against You, You only, I have sinned.*” Every time we sin, it is like a debt. The difference is that each sin is not a cash amount we owe, but crime we commit against the High King of heaven. It is not a weakness, but wickedness. It is not an accident, but an atrocity. And unless that debt and those crimes are expunged from the record before God, we shall pay for them at the price of the eternal loss of our souls. We owe God a debt that we cannot repay. It is an unpayable debt. Martin Luther used to say, “we are all beggars before God.”

<sup>25</sup> But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.

Now keep in mind that the debt could not be repaid! No amount of *time* would be sufficient. No amount of *work* would be adequate. This is the way it is before God! We owe a debt that no amount of *time, money, works, or future obedience* can pay. Sin is a debt we owe to God.

<sup>26</sup> So the slave fell *to the ground* and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup> And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.

Wow! When the crowds heard this part of the story, they may have gasped! They may have applauded! This was indeed good news in the story.

The compassion of the King on his servant illustrates for us *the free and full forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ.*

**Notice, in the first place *the forgiveness was free.*** The servant pleaded for more time, but it was rejected. Why? TIME could not repay the debt. Some here would say, “Pastor, I just need more time to get my life straight and get ready and serious.” No time or effort can erase the debt you have before God.

The King did not demand *full payment* or even a *partial reduced discounted payment*. He *freely* forgave him. And this is what God does for us through the cross and the resurrection of Christ!

- **Romans 3:23-24**—for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;
- **Ephesians 1:7**—In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace
- **Ephesians 2:8**—for by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

**Second, the forgiveness was not only free, it was also full.** In verse 27, the king not only felt compassion on him, but he also *released* him. This is a picture of *mercy* and *grace*. He did not give the servant what he deserved. He held back punishment. That’s *mercy*. The king then gave him what he did not deserve—he released him from any obligations to repay him and set him free. That’s *grace*. That’s free and full forgiveness!

Don’t let the tragic ending of the story taint your view of the King’s compassion. It is a picture of the forgiveness that God offers to us in Christ!

Here's how it works. Our sins are as high as Mt. Everest in God's sight. Sins of *thought, desire, attitude, and action*. They have been *piling up and up and up* since the days of our youth. There was no way to repay them. We owe a mountain of debt to God! If God would allow us to live one thousand years, we could not do enough to erase the debt. We would actually incur more debt because we sin every day.

- **Ecclesiastes 7:20**—Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins.

This is why Jesus came.

- **1 John 3:5**—“You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.”
- **1 Peter 3:15**—“For Christ also died for sins, once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God.”

In order for God's forgiveness to become *ours*, we must *repent of our sins* and trust Jesus Christ as the Lord of our lives. Peter said in Acts 10:43, “Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.” Everyone—regardless of *your age, race, background, or gender*. Everyone who believes in Him, relies upon Him, trusts in Him, receives the life He offers, and respond to the call He demands...everyone who welcomes Him, receives forgiveness of sins!

You start by confessing the recognition of your sin-debt to God and your inability to repay it. Then you run to Jesus by faith for salvation. “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ” (Rom.6:23). This is the Gospel in one verse. The bad news—we are sinners and the payment for sin is death—separation from God. The good news—You can have eternal life. You can't earn it nor buy it—it's a free gift through Jesus Christ!

**Now what this means for us** is that if we have truly trusted Christ as Lord and Savior and received forgiveness, *we must forgive others*. This is what it means to be a Christian. It is not *optional*. We learn to *forgive* at the same place that we received forgiveness...and that is, at the cross.

- **Ephesians 4:32**—“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”
- **Colossians 3:13**—“bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”

That's scene #1—I must forgive because GOD HAS FORGIVEN ME.

## Scene 2 (vv.28-30)

What does it mean to forgive? You can read a thousand quotes from various men and women, but none is more compelling than the one offered by Frederick Buechner, in his book, *Wishful Thinking*.

To forgive someone is to say one way or the other, “You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you've done, and though we may carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend.”

What? Now is that kind of forgiveness really possible? Yes, it is! Test this definition against the forgiveness that God has given to us in Christ.

- Have we done something unspeakable to God?
- Does He have the right to call it quits between us?
- Do His holy principles demand no less?
- Does He forget what we've done?
- Does He carry the scars for the rest of His life?
- Did He choose not to let it stand between us?
- Does He still want us for His friends?

In the second scene of this parable, Jesus teaches us **two principles that make real forgiveness possible.**

<sup>28</sup> But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began* to choke *him*, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' <sup>29</sup> So his fellow slave fell *to the ground* and *began* to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' <sup>30</sup> But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.

**Principle #1** is this: *the wrong you may have suffered from others is significant.*

The first servant leaves the presence of the King debt-free and released from any further obligations, but then he ran across someone who *legitimately* owed him a hundred denarii. Remember, we said that a denarius is what the common city worker would get paid for a full day of labor. So, this man owes about three months' worth of pay. Now although that is pocket change to what the first servant owed before, *it was still significant.* Can you give up three months' of pay with no problem? It was *significant.* The wrong you may have suffered from others is significant. It is not meaningless.

The first servant had *a right* to collect the debt, but he should have never INSISTED on it and neither should we as Christians. Why? Because of...

**Principle #2:** *The wrong we have suffered from others is insignificant in comparison to the debt we have been forgiven by God.*

The first servant owed an *unpayable debt.* The fellow servant owed a *payable, manageable debt.* The first servant was *completely forgiven.* His fellow servant owed far less than we owed and were forgiven for.

**What is the point?** The sins that others commit against us are minute compared to the sins we have committed against God.

*Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe;  
Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow.*

In light of what the Lord has done for us on Calvary's tree and by His resurrection *life and love*, we must resolve today *to completely forgive those who have wronged us in any way.*

A traveler through Burma crossed a river that was about five and a half feet deep. The waters came to his neck but he had no fear because his feet could touch the bottom. He needed to get from one side to the other to continue his journey, so he forded the river. But when he emerged on the other side, he

found his body covered with small blood-sucking leeches. His first impulse was to pull them off, but his guide warned against it, explaining that to do so would leave part of the leeches buried in the skin and cause serious infection.

Instead, the native prepared a *warm bath* for the man and added some herbs that caused the leeches to voluntarily drop off.

My friend, ***unforgiven injuries*** are like leeches that drain you of *spiritual life*. You might be determined to pull them off you, and to move on, but when you do it that way, the head rips off and the emotional poison works its way into your soul.

There is only one healthy and safe way to deal with the blood-sucking leeches of unforgiveness—*bath yourself in God's mercy and love; remind yourself of how much you have been forgiven for; count your blessing, name the one, by one*. It will empower you to *forgive* those who have sinned against you.

John MacArthur once wrote,

"People who come for counseling generally fit into one or both of two categories. There are some who need understand *how God's forgiveness is extended to sinners*; and there are others *who need to learn to be forgiving*. In other words, some are struggling with their own *guilt*; others have a sinful propensity to *blame others* and *withhold forgiveness for wrongs done*. Many struggle with both *guilt* and *blame*."<sup>1</sup>

- Are you struggling with *guilt* that needs to receive forgiveness?
- Are you struggling with *bitterness* in your life that needs to extend forgiveness?
- Are you struggling with both *guilt* and *bitterness*?

Dear friends, would you come up close and listen to the words and wisdom of Christ and address it today? Why? Because what we discover in this final scene is it too costly and terrifying to ignore.

Scene #1—I must forgive because GOD HAS FORGIVEN ME.

Scene #2—I must forgive because NO OFFENSE IS BEYOND WHAT GOD HAS FORGIVEN ME.

### **Scene #3 (vv.31-34)**

<sup>31</sup>So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. <sup>32</sup>Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup>And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.

There are two reasons *why unforgiveness always costs too much*.

**First, because unforgiveness is wickedness.** We cannot read too much into each part of the story, but the fellow slaves that saw what happened were grieved at the actions of the unmerciful servant. And the same is true in the church. The words Jesus used are, "*deeply grieved*" which means distressed.

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness

I believe we can take from this that forgiveness is not just a private thing or a personal thing, but a corporate thing. When we forgive it blesses others, and when we fail to forgive it affects, not only our lives, but the body as well.

When the King got the news, what did He do? How did He respond? He called him a wicked slave. And when we fail to forgive it is the evidence of a wicked heart.

Don't misunderstand me. When others hurt you and sin against you, the pain, the scars, and the hurt may last for a while, but the willingness to forgive is not an option in light of what the Lord has forgiven you for. The King said,

<sup>33</sup> Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?'

- You may have the right to demand legal fairness.
- You may have the right to expect an apology.
- You may have the right to hurt and feel the pain of the transgression.

But we have no right to demand *moral justice*...because we have been forgiven of so great a debt of sin before a holy God!

After the Civil War, General Robert E. Lee met a woman in Virginia who angrily showed him a tree on her property that had been damaged by Yankee artillery. Lee's advice was straightforward:

"Cut it down, dear lady, and forget it."

Let me offer the same advice. There are some trees in your life that remind you of the wrong you have suffered because of what others have done to you. In the name of One who died on a tree because of the wrongs you have done, "CUT IT DOWN...dear brother or sister." Stop watering the bitterness. Stop memorializing the wounds. It reveals a wicked heart that does not know what it means to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

**Second, unforgiveness is torture.** Verse 34 says,

<sup>34</sup> And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him.

Now the main point of the parable is found in the next verse, but the fact that the king had this unmerciful servant imprisoned and tortured, teaches us a lesson and that is, unforgiveness is like torture.

Dr. Warren Wiersbe put it this way, "The world's worst prison is the prison of an unforgiving heart. If we refuse to forgive others, then we are only imprisoning ourselves and causing our own torment."

We have looked at the portable question and the powerful parable. Now we conclude with the main point.

### C. The profitable point (v.35)

<sup>35</sup> My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

The words "***each of you***" tells us that this parable did not apply to Peter alone, but to all of His disciples. Mark it down, underline it, highlight it, put a star by it, BIG, PLAIN, and STRAIGHT.

God's mercy is turned into anger when we refuse to forgive. This does not mean that one can lose their salvation, but it does suggest that if you have an unforgiving heart, it may be a sign of one of two realities:

1. You entertain a false assurance of salvation.
2. If you are saved, you have strayed from the heart of God and forgotten your "*purification from...[your] former sins*" (2 Pet.1:9). You have lost sight of what it means to be a Christian and what the Christian life is all about.

If we do not live lives of grace, it shows that we do not know anything about God's grace in our lives, for those who are members of the kingdom of Christ act like it.

### Conclusion:

There is a story that Leonardo da Vinci had a violent quarrel with a fellow painter not long before he started his work on the famous "Last Supper" painting. He was so enraged and bitter at this fellow that he painted the face of this man whom he had a quarrel with, as the face of Judas. It was his way of taking revenge. He thought to himself, "I will scorn him wherever this painted is seen."

But as he came to finish the painting, the last face to paint was the face of Christ. He could not seem to make progress, something was holding him back. He could not seem to get the right light, the right angles, the right countenance, the right vision of what He perceived Christ to look like, despite his best efforts.

He finally concluded after hours and hours struggling that the problem was that he painted his enemy as the face of Judas. So, he cleared out the face of Judas and commenced again on the face of Christ—and with success, as the centuries have shown.

The same is true for you and me. We cannot see Christ and His holy, beautiful features in the pages of His Word, while harboring bitterness, resentment, and unforgiveness in our hearts.

Today, the word is clear. Act on the words of Jesus, who said,

*"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."*

# The Neglected Side of Forgiveness

Text: 2 Corinthians 2:1-11

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**Main point:** Forgiveness affects *the one who forgives, the one who is forgiven, and the entire church.*

## Introduction:

Let me read a letter from a young pastor to his mentor. This is a true letter.

My Dear Jim,

I'm through. Yesterday, I handed in my resignation, to take effect at once. This morning I began work for The Land Company. I'll not return to the pastorate. I think I can see into your heart as you read these words and behold not a little disappointment, if not disgust. I don't blame you at all, for I'm somewhat disgusted with myself.

Do you recall the days in seminary when we talked of the future and painted pictures of what we were to do for the Kingdom of God? We saw the boundless need for unselfish Christian service, and longed to be out among men doing our part toward the world's redemption. I'll never forget that last talk on the night before graduation. You were off to the foreign field, and I was off to pastor my church. We had brave dreams of usefulness, and you have realized yours. As I look back across 25 years, I can see some lives that I have helped, and some things which I have been permitted to do that are worthwhile. But sitting here tonight, I am more than half convinced that God never intended me to be a minister. If He did, I'm not big enough and brave enough to pay the price. And even if it leads you to write me down a coward, I'm gonna tell you why I've quit.

In these years, I have found not a few earnest, unselfish, consecrated Christians. I do not believe that I am especially morbid or unfair in my estimate. So, as far as I know my own heart, I'm not bitter. But through all these years, a conviction has been growing within me, that the average church member cares precious little about the Kingdom of God and its advancement, or the welfare of his fellow man. He is a Christian in order that he may save his soul from hell, and for no other reason. He does as little as he can, lives as indifferently as he dares. If he thought he could gain Heaven without even lifting his finger for others, he would jump at the chance. Never have I known more than a small minority of any church which I have served to be really interested and unselfishly devoted to God's work. It took my whole time to pull and push and urge and persuade the reluctant members of my church to undertake a little something for the Kingdom. They took a covenant to be faithful in attendance on the services of the church, and not one out of ten ever thought of attending prayer meeting. A large percentage seldom attend church in the morning, and a pitifully small number in the evening. It didn't seem to mean anything to them that they had dedicated themselves to the service of Christ.

I'm tired—tired of being the only one in the church from whom real sacrifice is expected; tired of straining and tugging to get Christian people to live like Christians; tired of planning work for my people and then being compelled to do it myself, or see it left undone; tired of dodging my creditors, when I would not need to if I had been paid what is due me; tired of the affrighting vision of a penniless old age. I'm not leaving Christ—I love Him. I'll still try to serve Him. Judge me leniently, old friend—I can't bear to lose your friendship.

Yours as of old,  
William

Very personal and sad, isn't it? When a man who is called and gifted leaves the ministry—not because of *sin*, not because of *indifference*, but because of discouragement—it is a spiritual setback for the church. And at various intervals in our lives, we all face that kind of temptation—to leave *a marriage*, to leave *a job*, to leave *a family*, and even to leave *the church*. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is facing that kind of *discouragement*, but the Apostle is not about to leave the ministry, he's going to lead the church and teach us what it means to forgive and restore a brother or sister in Christ.

2 Corinthians is the most personal of Paul's letters in the New Testament. In it, he speaks *freely* and *personally* about himself. The reason is that in Corinth he had been subjected to a great deal of personal criticism. Questions were being raised about his *sincerity*, his *integrity*, his *authority*, and his *validity* as an apostle. For this reason, he is *reluctantly* forced to defend his ministry for the purpose of upholding the Gospel and safeguarding the unity of the church.

In this section, the Apostle teaches us about **the neglected side of forgiveness**—or if I might say it positively, *the hidden blessing of forgiveness*. Church discipline is hard and difficult work. Perhaps, the most painful in the church. However, if the goal of church discipline is restoration, the question is, how do you restore someone who repents? In this section,

- First, Paul will teach us *how forgiveness affects the one who forgives* (v.5)
- Second, Paul will teach us *how forgiveness affects the one who is forgiven* (vv.6-8)
- Third, Paul teaches us *how forgiveness affects the entire church* (vv.9-11)

If, in fact, you desire extra motivation to practice forgiveness, come up close and listen. Paul will set them before us here.

### **Context:**

The Church at Corinth had more potential than any other European church. The city had been restored by Julius Caesar after being in ruins for one hundred years. It was a magnificent place. It was more open to the Gospel than other cities, and the Apostle had great success in founding the church there, making the resident Jews extremely jealous.

However, in the nearly twenty months or so that he labored in that evil city, he built deep affections for the believers there. Upon his leaving, one sin after another rocked the church like missiles in a war. They possessed all the gifts (*1 Cor.1:4-7*), but they were divided, disorderly, and worldly—chaos reigned in their worship. Sin stained the Lord's table. They fought each other, sued each other, sexually sinned with each other, and were proud all the while.

- **A principle of application** can be found at this point: and that is: *a good start is no guarantee of a strong finish* unless one is ....1) *engaged in personal discipleship* and 2) *daily applying the means of grace*.

Conditions in the Corinthian church had become so bad that Apollos would not stay or return to Corinth, though Paul urged him to do that. Additionally, false teachers had come into the Corinthian church and managed to deceive members of the church to join an open mutiny against Paul. Paul's character was being blasted, his controversy with Peter (indicated in Galatians 2) was being exploited, his name was being slandered. Doctrinal issues came up—the use of spiritual gifts was all mixed up with personality jealousies (*1 Cor.1*). They winked at incest (*1 Cor.5:1-8*), they abused their marriages and were confused about singleness (*1 Cor.7*), they ate at demon feasts (*1 Cor.8:1ff*), they failed to give as they should (*1 Cor.16:1ff*), and they questioned the resurrection (*1 Cor.15*). What a church!

One of the members of the church at Corinth caused Paul a great deal of pain. We are not sure if it is the same man Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 5—the man who was living in open fornication—or if it was another person, someone who publicly challenged Paul's apostolic authority. Paul had made a quick visit to

Corinth to deal with this problem (2 Cor.12:14; 13:1) and had written a painful letter to them about the situation, urging them deal with the sinning member according to Matthew 18. Apparently, the church did and the man repented according to 2 Corinthians 7.

But here in chapter 2, Paul gives the church instruction about why we must restore those who have repented and the hidden blessing it brings to the church.

## Outline:

Seven reasons to forgive:

### 1. To weaken pride (vv.1-5)

But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again. <sup>2</sup> For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful? <sup>3</sup> This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be *the joy* of you all. <sup>4</sup> For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you. <sup>5</sup> But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you.

Paul's explanation about why he changed his travel plans (1:15-17) gives us a great example of what we must learn to do when dealing with the difficult process of church discipline.

**First, Paul showed sensitivity and patience.** Paul had already made a painful visit to deal with the situation, and in seeking to deal with it, he was openly insulted by someone and the Corinthians did not even defend him (2:5-8, 10; 7:12). The false teachers were accusing Paul of changing his travel plans because he was unreliable and fickle or weak in his commitment to God. However, Paul was sensitive to avoid provoking unnecessary conflict, so he decided to send Titus and give the Corinthians time to repent (7:6-7).

This is how it should be as we are dealing with the painful process of church discipline. If the goal is restoration, then the issues we are dealing with have nothing to do with our own personal agendas, but the health and joy of the individual and the church. This does not mean we place *church unity above the truth*, but what this means is that we must *avoid unnecessary confrontation* and balance it with *patience*.

Every loving parent knows there is a difference between *hurting* your child with corrective discipline versus *harming* your child with painful abuse. And "sometimes, those who love us most must hurt us in order to keep us from harming ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

What Paul was saying in essence is, "I decided not to make another visit because if by merely showing up, I would put you in an embarrassingly painful position...that would not make me happy or you. I did not write to cause you harm, but only to help you because I love you." We see his sensitivity and patience.

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<sup>2</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Be Encouraged*, p.29

**Secondly, Paul showed love and affection.** In verse 4, his pen is filled with tears of love and affection.

<sup>4</sup> For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.

The "**affliction**" and "**anguish of heart**" and "**tears**" describe *the wounds of a true friend*. Solomon wrote in Proverbs 27:6, "*Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful*" Who is the friend who will be a real blessing to my soul? Is it the one who laughs at all my jokes and who flatters me when I am vain? No, I am a sinner who is prone to stray and leave the God I love! A friend is one who will watch over me and correct me (*privately and publicly*) to help follow the Lord. A true friend is one who *risks* being wounded themselves, rather than spare loving rebuke.

Dear brothers and sisters, reject the thought that *a considerate, prayerful, kind rebuke will destroy a friendship*. To the contrary, it *cements friendship*.

When we forgive *it weakens our own pride* and tills the soil of our hearts making them more *sensitive and patient, loving and affectionate*. This is what forgiveness does for us. To the person who says, "I have forgiven them," let me ask you, *have you become more sensitive and patient? More loving and affectionate?*"

## 2. To demonstrate mercy (v.6)

<sup>6</sup> Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which *was inflicted* by the majority,

The word "**punishment**" (epitimia) is only used here in the New Testament. It refers to an official disciplinary action by the majority, and in this case, the church. The steps had been taken according to Matthew 18 and this individual had been excommunicated from the church, but as we discover in chapter 7, it worked. He repented. Now Paul says, "enough...show him mercy and restore him to the fellowship." The punishment that had already been inflicted on the sinning brother was sufficient and it accomplished its goal.

Now Galatians 6:1 was to be applied,

*"Brethren, even if anyone is caught (overtaken—passive) in any trespass (that is, deviation from the path of truth and righteousness), you who are spiritual, restore such a one in spirit of gentleness: each one looking to yourself (plural), so that you (singular) too will not be tempted."*

In John Bunyan's book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, there is a scene in the fifth stage of Christian's journey that is very instructive. When Christian meets Faithful, the two of them begin to converse, sharing their accounts of their pilgrimage. Then Faithful recounted getting pummeled on the journey.

So as soon as the man overtook me, it was but a word and a blow; for down he knocked me, and laid me for dead. But when I was a little come to myself again I asked him wherefore he served me so. He said because of my secret inclining to Adam the First. And with that he struck me another deadly blow on the breast, and beat me down backward; so I lay at his foot as dead as before. So when I came to myself again I cried mercy; but he said, I know not how to show mercy; and with that he knocked me down again. He had doubtless made an end of me, but that one came by and bid him forbear.

Christian asks: Who was that that bid him forbear? Faithful answers: I did not know him at first, but as he went by, I perceived the holes in His hands and His side; then I concluded that he was our Lord!

Oh, dear friends, when we fail to forgive a person, we are like Moses or a legalistic Pharisee who beats one down again and again, but when we forgive, we are like Christ. James 2:13, put it this way,

- *"For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment."*

If you refuse to act kind and forgive, you can hardly expect to be treated kind and forgiven by God. God's kind mercy wins over harsh judgment every time.

### 3. To restore joy (v.7)

<sup>7</sup> so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort *him*, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

Let's make sure at this point we have a biblical understanding of forgiveness, then what it means to comfort and what it prevents.

**First, what does it mean to forgive?** If we take God's view of forgiveness, then we can say that forgiveness is a promise—a promise to not hold a person's sins against them (*Is.43:25; 44:22; Jer.31:34*), to cast them behind our back (*Is.38:17*), to bury them in the depths of the sea (*Mic.7:19*), and to choose not to bring them up so as to punish them. Forgiveness is a promise to do that when the person acknowledges their sin. Forgiveness is a heart attitude. It is offered freely, fully, and completely. It is without limits. We are never more like God than when we forgive (*Neh.9:17; Ps.99:8; Dan.9:9; Mic.7:18*).

**Second, once we forgive the offender, we are to comfort him.** When we sin, it steals our joy. When David was confessing his sin with Bathsheba, you recall what he said in Psalm 51:12:

*"Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; then my tongue will sing of Your righteousness."*

When we confess and agree with God that sin is sin and repent of it, then God restores the joy. And one of the ways that God restores joy to a person who has gone through church discipline is through the restoration that brothers and sisters in the church family bring. The word "**comfort**" (*parakaleo*) means "to come alongside," "to strengthen," or "to encourage." We are to come alongside the repentant believer in a "spirit of gentleness" (*Gal.6:1*). Why?

**Third, because of the danger they face of being "overwhelmed with excessive sorrow."** The word "**overwhelmed**" is translated in various ways in the New Testament. Sometimes it is translated as "*swallowed*" (*2 Cor.5:4; Matt.23:24*), and in other places it is translated "*drowned*" (*Heb.11:29*) or "*devoured*" (*1 Pet.5:8*). Imagine a man or women cast out in the middle of the ocean. They may be able to "dog-paddle" for a little while, but there will come a time when leg cramps grip the muscles, hopelessness fills the mind, and down, down, down they will go—this is the picture! *God does not want believers to be totally consumed by the grief caused by their sin. "The sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret leading to salvation" (2 Cor.7:10).*

In other words, after sorrow has done its convicting work, then it is to be replaced by joy—and we are to be helpers to restore that joy by encouraging the brother or sister who has repented. For God desires that His people be filled with joy (*John 15:11; 16:24; 17:13; 2 John 12; Gal.5:22*).

The message of comfort is really the message of the Gospel in the Old Testament. Listen as God tells Isaiah to encourage Jerusalem and give her hope in Isaiah 40:1-2,

- "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.  
    <sup>2</sup> "Speak kindly to Jerusalem;  
    And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,  
    That her iniquity has been removed,  
    That she has received of the LORD'S hand  
    Double for all her sins."

#### 4. To affirm love (v.8)

<sup>8</sup> Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm *your* love for him.

**What does it mean to affirm?** In its only other usage in the New Testament, The Greek word, *kuroo*, speaks of a formal ratifying of a covenant (*Gal.3:15*). It's like signing a contract. You might talk with the car dealer about the price, the down payment, the features, and the terms of the deal in buying, but it is not a done deal until you sign the contract. That's the word picture. Just as they had officially and publicly disciplined the offender, now they were to officially and publicly restore him to the fellowship. By doing so they would display their collective—as well as individual—affection for him.

**What they were to affirm was their "love" for him.** Not a fluffy, frothy, sentimental love, but a commitment of love. *Agape* is the word that is used. They were to make the choice, not only to forgive, but to restore joy and affirm love. And when the world sees the church lovingly dealing with sin as well as restoring the offender when they repent, they will know that we are followers of Jesus.

- **John 13:34-35**—<sup>34</sup> A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."
- **Ephesians 5:1-2**—Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; <sup>2</sup> and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God <sup>[b]</sup>as a fragrant aroma.

If you let your eyes drop to verse 14 of Corinthians chapter 2, you will see Paul giving thanks to God and using this metaphor of a "sweet aroma..."

- **2 Corinthians 2:14**—<sup>14</sup> But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.

Paul has in mind the great military triumphs of Rome. This was a special tribute that Rome gave to their conquering generals. It was their equivalent of the American "ticker-tape parade." If a commander-in-chief won a complete victory over the enemy on foreign soil, and if he killed at least five thousand soldiers and gained new territory for the Emperor, then that commander-in-chief was entitled to a Roman Triumph.

The procession would include the commander riding in a golden chariot, surrounded by his officers. The parade would also include a display of the spoils of battle, as well as the captive enemy soldiers. The Roman priests would also be in the parade, carrying burning incense to pay tribute to the victorious army.

Garlands of fragrant flowers would be thrown in the streets. And the fragrance from the crushed petals, along with the incense would emit a sweet aroma so that citizens throughout the province would know that Rome won a great victory.

Now Paul says that as believers, *"God always leads us in His triumph in Christ."* Paul did not see himself as the general leading the army, but as one of those who had been conquered by Christ. Christ was the commander who had conquered his heart by grace. And those whose hearts are conquered by grace will forgive and love.

And the lesson is that when Christ's people forgive—demonstrate mercy, restore, and affirm love—there is a *sweet aroma*: a godly, Gospel, divine influence that emits from our lives. We manifest the sweet saving knowledge of the Gospel in every place we go.

This is where our witness will be strong, influential, and powerful. The world can gather in buildings, sing songs, and even do charitable works, but what will make us stand apart is this LOVE. Isn't this what you desire to see in the church?

## 5. To prove obedience (v.9)

<sup>9</sup> For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things.

**The principle is true:** "a faith that is not tested cannot be trusted." And God wants His people's to be tried and true. Tested and found to be authentic, genuine, and real.

This is one of the reasons God tests us. It is not that He may know something about us, but rather, that we might see something about ourselves. God has always tested His people to reveal what was in their hearts.

- **Exodus 16:4**—<sup>4</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My <sup>[a]</sup>instruction.
- **Deuteronomy 8:2, 16**—<sup>2</sup> You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not...<sup>16</sup> In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you <sup>[a]</sup>in the end.
- **Deuteronomy 13:3**—<sup>3</sup> you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Now Paul says that he put the Corinthian church to the test to see if they would both discipline and forgive. They did the hard work of confronting sin, but now they needed to do the equally hard work of graciously forgiving and restoring the brother who had repented.

Did the church at Corinth pass the test? Yes. (2 Cor.7:12-16)

**What is the test for us?** *To be obedient in all things.* It's easy to be obedient in *some things* like *showing up, serving, and even giving.* But what about this hard work? Partial obedience is not pleasing to God. He desires that we strive—by His grace working within us—to be *obedient in all things.* *Disciplining and reconciling. Standing firm in truth and going after others in love. Forgiving and restoring.*

## 6. To rebuild fellowship (v.10)

<sup>10</sup> But one whom you forgive anything, I *forgive* also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, *I did it* for your sakes in the presence of Christ,

Paul agreed with the church's decision to discipline the offender, but also to forgive because he repented and demonstrated humility. His primary concern was for *the fellowship to be restored*, but his motivation was because his whole life was lived, "***in the presence of Christ.***"

Paul was aware that *every thought, desire, attitude, and action was in the presence of Christ*. Later in chapter 2:17, he reminded the Corinthians that he spoke, "*in Christ in the sight of God.*" In chapter 4:2, he commended himself to every man's conscience, "*in the sight of God.*" To Timothy he wrote, "*I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom, preach the word...*" (2 Tim.4:1-2).

To live in the presence of Christ was Paul's way of saying, "in a way that honors the Lord and reflects His way." When we seek to restore we are to do so recognizing that Jesus is always present with His church by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rev.2:1). He walks among the lampstands, or the local churches. And if we are truly godly people, we want to live the whole of our lives "*in the sight of Christ.*"

When we refuse to forgive, restore, affirm, and encourage fellowship, anger smolders, resentment grows, bitterness festers, wounds are left open and are prevented from healing, and the church is filled with misery and grief instead of joy and love.

Why must we forgive?

- To weaken pride
- To demonstrate mercy
- To restore joy
- To affirm love
- To prove obedience
- To rebuild fellowship

## 7. To thwart Satan (v.11)

<sup>11</sup> so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.

Satan's name means *adversary*. Jesus tells us in John 8 that he was "*a murderer from the beginning*" (8:44). He seduced Eve and then through her tempted Adam, and their disobedience brought death to the entire world (Rom.5:12).

Satan is also called a "*liar and the father of lies*" (John 8:44). All lies come from his bare-faced lying example. But one of the great advantages that Satan already has over us is that he is an *invisible* angel. *He can see us, but we cannot see him*. Imagine if you will, that you were in a battle or a war, would you have an advantage if your enemy could not see you? If you had an army of a thousand soldiers, you could simply descend upon a city and no one would know you were coming! Invisibility is a tremendous asset in a war. But Jesus has brought "*life and immortality to light through the gospel*" (2 Tim.1:10b).

We are not to be ignorant of his *schemes, plots, strategies, or plans* (John 10:10). Although we know that the devil is evil, we forget *how evil he really is*. The Bible reveals that Satan, our invisible enemy, is *filled with all wickedness* (Eph.6:12). Another way of saying this is, *he is absolutely depraved*. Now let me explain in closing. All mankind is **totally depraved**, which means that *sin has touched every part of us*. It has touched our *minds, our hearts, our emotions, our conscience, our memory, and our will*. Every faculty of our lives has been affected. But the devil is worse than that! The devil is not totally depraved, he is *absolute depraved*! That means, *he is NOW as wicked as he can be*. That is not true of any sinner in this life, but Satan has no light in him at all! He does as much wickedness as he can, and the comfort that we have is that he can do only as much as God permits (1 John 5:18).

Yes, he is wicked—absolutely so. Yes, he is evil—and absolutely so. We as believers are not to be ignorant of his schemes or of his absolutely evil nature, but rather, *we must stand firm against his schemes and not give him an opportunity* (Eph.4:27). Two very important ways of doing that is to deal with sin God's way and to forgive and restore sinners God's way.

When an offending brother or sister is brought under church discipline according to Matthew 18 and then repents, then *the entire church family must forgive and restore the member, and the matter must never be brought up again*. If we do not, or if any person carries an unforgiving spirit, Satan will use that attitude as a beachhead for new assaults against the church.

### **Conclusion:**

- Do you have any unforgiveness in your heart against anyone?
- Have you failed on the side of helping to restore joy to a brother or sister who has repented?
- Deep in your heart, have you experienced the burden lifting and debt erasing forgiveness of God? If so, will you promise to forgive others from the heart, just as God promises to forgive you and never bring it up again. We may not be able to forget, but we can forgive.

Let's not minimize sin or overextend discipline when a brother or sister repents and desperately needs to be restored.