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Forgive One Another

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Forgive One Another

“Watch yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to you saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” - Luke 17:3-5

Most of us are probably like the apostles in the Luke passage above. In hearing that we must forgive someone for the same thing seven times in a day (really this means an infinite number of times) the apostles and many of us respond, “Lord, increase our faith!” In other words, “What are you, crazy??? That’s impossible!” True. Forgiveness doesn’t make a lot of sense.

With these words Jesus set a high standard. His life set an even higher standard. While hanging from nails pounded through his body, in physical agony, betrayed and humiliated, Jesus looked at those responsible and prayed, “ “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

So what did his executioners do to merit forgiveness? Was there a sudden change of heart, tearful apologies, demonstrated difference in life choices? They didn’t deserve to be forgiven. And that’s the funny thing about forgiveness, it isn’t and can’t be deserved. So when each of us hears the good news of the gospel that says “You, _____ (fill in your name), are forgiven. Everything you’ve ever done, are doing, or will do is forgiven.” It has nothing to do with your worthiness of being forgiven.

Jesus is pointed in his **application** of this truth: we do not have a corner on the forgiveness market. As we have been forgiven so we should forgive—extravagantly, without waiting for change in the other, forgiveness as a gift, not as a response, but initiated by the offended.¹

Lord, increase our faith.

Then Peter came to him and said, “Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother who sins against me? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times! “For this reason, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves. As he began settling his accounts, a man who owed 10,000 talents was brought to him. Because he was not

able to repay it, the lord ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, children, and whatever he possessed, and repayment to be made. Then the slave threw himself to the ground before him, saying, 'Be patient with me, and I will repay you everything.' The lord had compassion on that slave and released him, and forgave him the debt. After he went out, that same slave found one of his fellow slaves who owed him 100 silver coins. So he grabbed him by the throat and started to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe me!' Then his fellow slave threw himself down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will repay you.' But he refused. Instead, he went out and threw him in prison until he repaid the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were very upset and went and told their lord everything that had taken place. Then his lord called the first slave and said to him, 'Evil slave! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me! 33 Should you not have shown mercy to your fellow slave, just as I showed it to you?' And in anger his lord turned him over to the prison guards to torture him until he repaid all he owed. So also my heavenly Father will do to you, if each of you does not forgive your brother from your heart." - Matthew 18:21-25

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven." - Luke 6:37

"Instead, be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you." - Ephesians 4:32

"bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if someone happens to have a complaint against anyone else. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also forgive others." - Colossians 3:13

How then do we forgive so generously? Is forgiveness an intellectual act? Do the emotions associated with being hurt or sinned against simply disappear if we decide to forgive?

Forgiving another person can lead us toward emotional healing, increase our experience of peace and contentment, and lessen our anger and pain. "But emotional healing is not the main purpose of forgiveness...the heart of forgiveness is a generous release of a genuine debt...that's a gift we give not so much to ourselves but to the one who has wronged us."²

So forgiveness is an action of love, done for the sake of another. It is an action that is prompted when we receive God's forgiveness for our own sins and motivated by God's crazy love in us that allows us to love our enemies (even if they remain our enemies).

Some Challenges

Think of someone who has wronged you. Use the prompts below as one possible way to pursue forgiving them. Repeat throughout the rest of your life.

1. **Realistic Assessment**³ On your own, name what was done that was sinful or hurtful. Name who was affected. Name what the affect was (emotional, physical, spiritual, financial, social, etc. consequences). Strive to avoid exaggeration, "always" or "never" statements, or lumping unrelated experiences together.
2. **Remember Your Own Forgiveness**⁴ The basis for this crazy act of forgiving doesn't lie in the other person or in you. We are only ever grateful servants being gracious toward others with the grace we have already received. "This step is the equalizer, leveling in you any sense of superiority over the sinner, to whom you are more similar that to the righteous God."⁵
3. **Sacrifice Your Rights in Prayer**⁶ The world tells us we have a right to revenge. Justice tells us we have a right to expect restitution, or at the very least that the offender should remorsefully apologize. Our stubbornness tells us we have a right to expect the offender to initiate reconciliation. But Jesus' example turns this on its head. We are not left with the option to hold on to our rights. Instead we give up our rights in prayer. Talk to God about what you've named. Tell Him you let go of your rights for fairness and revenge. It is God who works in your heart the miracle of genuinely releasing another from their debt. It is here that we encounter the scandal that forgiveness is not ultimately about gaining something (healing, peace, etc.) for ourselves. Forgiveness is instead a gift to the debtor, given to benefit them. It seeks to overcome evil, not continue it, as is clear in Romans 12:20-21: "Rather, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing this you will be heaping burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."⁷
4. **Speak the Sin and the Forgiveness**⁸ Now with the work you've done above in mind, if at all possible, make a time to talk with the person who wronged you. Tell them two things. Say what happened and what the effect was, and tell them you

have forgiven them. You have released the desire for revenge or to make them hurt, this act of speaking is done for their sake, that their relationship with God be restored and they would be changed, grown, and transformed to be more like Jesus.

5. Demonstrate the Sincerity of Your Forgiveness⁹ This conversation could indeed produce true, sincere repentance and joyful acceptance of your forgiveness in the other person. More often, though, interactions might feel awkward as the person doubts the depth of your forgiveness and wrestles with lingering guilt. It is also possible, that after this conversation, despite your best efforts, the other person would get defensive and reject your forgiveness.

Regardless of their reaction, if the person you've forgiven is someone with whom you have ongoing interactions, your next job is to assure them that the gift of forgiveness you gave them really was free—through treating them with respect and warmth (not trying to subtly punish them with coldness), serving them humbly (reinforcing that you don't think they owe you anything), and even verbally affirming them (not giving guilt the silence it needs to fester).

Endnotes

1. Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 168.
2. *Ibid.*, 169.
3. Walter Wangerin, *As for Me and My House* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 96-104
4. *Ibid.*, 98.
5. *Ibid.*, 98.
6. *Ibid.*, 99-100.
7. Volf, 160-162
8. Wangerin, 100-102.
9. *Ibid.*, 102-103.