

SESSION 7

THE EVIDENCE OF FORGIVENESS

Leader pages on pp. 156-159

THE POINT:
GOD'S FORGIVENESS
IS REFLECTED IN OUR
WILLINGNESS TO
FORGIVE OTHERS.

MATTHEW 18:21-35

MEMORY VERSE

²¹ Then Peter approached him and asked, "Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? As many as seven times?"
²² "I tell you, not as many as seven," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven."

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²³ "For this reason, the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

²⁴ When he began to settle accounts, one who owed ten thousand talents was brought before him.

²⁵ Since he did not have the money to pay it back, his master commanded that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.

²⁶ "At this, the servant fell facedown before him and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you everything.'

²⁷ Then the master of that servant had compassion, released him, and forgave him the loan.

²⁸ "That servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him, started choking him, and said, 'Pay what you owe!'

²⁹ "At this, his fellow servant fell down and began begging him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

³⁰ But he wasn't willing. Instead, he went and threw him into prison until he could pay what was owed.

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³¹ When the other servants saw what had taken place, they were deeply distressed and went and reported to their master everything that had happened.

³² Then, after he had summoned him, his master said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.

³³ Shouldn't you also have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'

KEYWORDS

Forgive (v. 21)– The Greek term (*aphiemi*) means to send away, cancel, or pardon. It comes from a root word which has the idea of "to go."

Kingdom of heaven (v. 23)– This phrase only appears in Matthew's Gospel. It is another way of saying "kingdom of God."

A king (v. 23)–In parables concerning the kingdom of heaven, the king often represents God.

A hundred denarii (v. 28)– This was about 100 days' wages or in the Jewish calendar, about 4 months of wages.

HOW ARE BELIEVERS EXPECTED TO FORGIVE IN LIGHT OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS?

A popular trend has emerged among patrons of a national chain of coffee shops, as well as other fast-food establishments. In each instance, a patron using the drive through window will pay for the order of the person following him or her in line. Often, when the next person reaches the window, that patron is moved by the prior patron's generosity and follows suit. The pattern continues as long as people are willing to pay the generosity they received forward to someone else. The idea is that receiving generosity can inspire people to become generous givers in turn.

Receiving forgiveness can and should follow a similar pattern for believers. The forgiveness that God offers is much more valuable than the cost of a food or drink order, and yet He offers us forgiveness willingly. The question becomes whether we will choose to "pay it forward" in forgiving others. In this lesson, we will consider a parable that Jesus tells to illustrate the importance of offering forgiveness to other people. Our response to being wronged shows others our true character. The extending of forgiveness, as well as the failure to extend it, can have great consequences, as we will see.

Without Regard to Number

// Matthew 18:21-22

In the verses preceding the lesson passage, Jesus has laid out the process believers should follow when dealing with fellow believers who have harmed them. The verses address church discipline, a sometimes necessary aspect of living among fellow imperfect human beings. It should be noted that the section is located between the parable of the lost sheep (Matt. 18:10-14) and Jesus's discussion of forgiveness, underscoring the point that restoration of fellowship is the ideal.

After hearing the process for church discipline, Peter asks how many times he must forgive someone who sins against him. Jesus does not dispute Peter's assumption about being treated wrongly. Peter likely thinks he is being generous by offering to forgive seven times. He actually is on the right path since he understands the need and expectation to forgive at all. Jesus, of course, seeks to broaden Peter's understanding and so reveals something important about the extent of forgiveness.



THE POINT: GOD'S FORGIVENESS IS REFLECTED IN OUR WILLINGNESS TO FORGIVE OTHERS.

Jesus explains to Peter that he ought to forgive not just seven times, "but seventy times seven" (v. 22). Some Bible translations say the number indicated is actually 77. Either way, the focus is on a continual pattern of forgiveness. With the number seven being a number of completion or wholeness in the Bible, the concept that Jesus proposes is one of compounded wholeness. This is a higher standard of forgiveness: one that ultimately cannot be measured. Jesus is not saying that Peter can stop forgiving someone after reaching a predetermined cutoff point, but rather that by engaging in a pattern of forgiveness, Peter would lose count of how many times he had extended forgiveness. This mindset contrasts with that of Lamech in Genesis. Lamech, a descendant of Cain, had said, "For I killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is to be avenged seven times over, then for Lamech it will be seventy-seven times" (Gen. 4:23b-24). While Lamech was motivated by seeking retribution for offenses done to him, Jesus instructs Peter and all believers to live differently. This reverses the cycle of harm and retribution that often plagues society.

Believers are not meant to be keeping tally of the number of times forgiveness is extended. The apostle Paul picks up on this idea in what has been called the "love chapter" of 1 Corinthians 13. In describing how love operates in the lives of believers, Paul says, "Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs" (1 Cor. 13:4-5). God does not keep track of how often He forgives His people. Living lives marked by patterns of love and forgiveness reflect the grace that believers have received from God and are, in turn, expected to show one another.

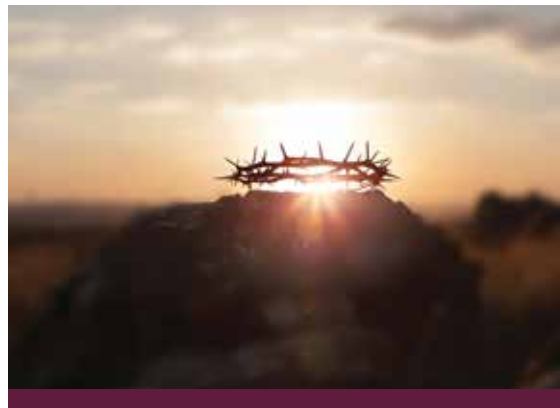
HOW CAN YOU PREVENT YOURSELF FROM KEEPING A COUNT OF HOW OFTEN YOU HAVE FORGIVEN SOMEONE?

Without Regard to Size

// Matthew 18:23-30

To reinforce His point about the importance of forgiveness, Jesus tells a parable. Parables do not need to describe actual events to be useful. The principles and lessons they provide are what truly matter. When Jesus says what the kingdom of heaven is like, He is giving insight into how God does things. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught His followers to pray for God's kingdom to come, His will to be done on earth, and for God to "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:10,12). In this parable, Jesus makes clear what willingness and unwillingness to forgive look like.

Jesus's parable uses large amounts of money to illustrate how precious and valuable that forgiveness is. A talent is estimated to be worth an average laborer's wages for approximately 20 years in



DIGGING DEEPER KINGDOM PRINCIPLES

A parable is sometimes described as being an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Perhaps a more precise way of putting it is that parables illustrate what the kingdom of heaven is like. The way that God reigns is unlike the reign of earthly rulers. Instead of being marked by domination and control, God's way of running things is marked by love and compassion, particularly for those on the margins of society. This is a complete reversal of the world as we know it. Because of this, Jesus's parables often contain an element that upends conventional thinking. When the lessons of the parables are understood and applied, they can lead to a transformed society. But it begins with believers having a transformed way of thinking. Forgiving others instead of seeking to punish them is one example.

How does forgiveness demonstrated by believers reflect the principles of the kingdom of heaven?

Jesus's day, so 10,000 talents is an astronomical amount that is unable to be calculated. Trying to pin down a number misses Jesus's point. Like Jesus's instruction regarding how often to forgive, the numerical value is mentioned to describe an amount that is actually incalculable. Even if forgiveness could be reduced to a number, the value of peace and reconciliation brought about by forgiveness cannot be measured.

In the parable, the servant has no way of repaying the debt and the king knows this. The king initially orders harsh punishments until the servant can repay him. Selling families into enslavement is common in the time and place during which Jesus tells this parable. In context, the reference serves to let Jesus's hearers know how serious the servant's debt is. The servant pleads for patience, saying he will pay back everything that he owes. The king is abundantly generous in response to the servant's plea. He knows the servant actually cannot pay the debt, so he ends up having compassion on the man and letting him go. There are no further debt and no further requirements for the servant to fulfill.

One would expect the servant to appreciate the magnitude of the gift he has been given and pay it forward in his interactions with others. But as the parable shows, that is not the case. He encounters a fellow servant who owes him a debt but refuses to extend the forgiveness he has received. The hundred denarii his fellow servant owes him is a much smaller amount than the one he has been forgiven. It adds up to a laborer's earnings over a few months. This is not trivial but is nowhere near the amount of the debt he owed. His unwillingness to forgive is unreasonable considering what he has received. One may wonder how the unforgiving servant has so quickly forgotten the compassion and forgiveness he has received.

HOW DOES THIS PASSAGE HELP YOU APPROACH THINGS THAT SEEM TOO BIG FOR YOU TO FORGIVE?

From Your Heart // Matthew 18:31-35

The actions of the unforgiving servant do not go unnoticed. Other servants witness the events

and report them to the king. The king calls the unforgiving servant out on his behavior and reminds the servant of the forgiveness he has just received. The king turns him over for punishment, and Jesus says that His hearers will face the same treatment from God if they do not forgive from their hearts. Failing to forgive is failing to live by the principles of the kingdom of heaven and shows a lack of appreciation for the forgiveness that God offers.



Jesus makes it plain that God is aware of whether believers are willing to forgive. The lives of believers are to be models of reciprocal forgiveness. Giving and receiving forgiveness are to be done from the heart. In Matthew 6:14-15 Jesus says, "for if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will forgive you as well. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your offenses." However, God does not call believers to do anything that God has not done. Thus, God models how to forgive others in His treatment of humanity. God also enables believers to forgive by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit bears fruit that assist in this forgiveness, including love, peace, and patience (Gal. 5:22-23).

The need to forgive from the heart is important. In the Bible, the heart refers to the center of one's being, including the will. People choose how they will behave in their hearts. This is why the Bible gives special attention to what goes on in one's heart. Loving God with all of one's heart is commanded in the Old Testament (Deut. 6:5).

THE POINT:

GOD'S FORGIVENESS IS REFLECTED IN OUR WILLINGNESS TO FORGIVE OTHERS.

In the New Testament, Jesus identifies this as being the greatest commandment and links it with loving one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:37-40). What is done from the heart reveals a person's true character and motivations. Forgiveness from the heart releases the offender from any desire for revenge on the part of the one who has been offended, leaving that matter up to God.

The parable does not give any reasons for the actions of the unforgiving servant, but those actions do not demonstrate evidence of a heart transformed by forgiveness. Lack of forgiveness could mean not having actually accepted God's forgiveness or it could mean not appreciating the forgiveness one has received. In either case, the full benefits of forgiveness, including peace and reconciliation are not received if one does not pay it forward and forgive others. Believers should want to avoid the consequences, whatever they may be, of failing to forgive others. In the parable, the servant's lack of forgiveness ends up harming him. Similarly, people often experience consequences when failing to forgive. These consequences may include a lack of joy or broken fellowship with others.

WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS THAT YOU HAVE FORGIVEN SOMEONE FROM YOUR HEART?

DID YOU KNOW?

Forgiveness can be a touchy subject, especially when serious harms have been committed. When discussing the truth that we need to forgive others, the effects of those harms should not be minimized, as it can make the conversation more difficult. However, as believers our responses to the issues we face, including experiencing harms, are to be in light of the salvation and forgiveness that God has given to us. God expects us to forgive others and enables us to do so through the power of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that the process of forgiving will always be quick and painless, but it does mean that God will be with us each step of the way. While the memory of what happened may not be erased, God can cause the pain to fade and allow fellowship to be restored.

Biblical Truth: "And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ" (Eph. 4:32).

How would you encourage a believer finding it difficult to forgive someone else?

LIVE IT

Is there anyone in your life that you need to forgive?

Because God has forgiven us of so much, we can freely offer forgiveness to other people. Make a list of some of the people in your life you find most difficult to forgive. Take one step this week to offer them forgiveness. Understand that forgiveness is not necessarily about going back to how things were in the past but is about moving forward. Choose to forgive others as God has forgiven you in Christ.

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- **Confess.** Acknowledge any unwillingness to forgive you may have. You may have sincere reasons for not wanting to forgive a person or group. Be honest with God about what you are feeling.
- **Commit.** Do not hold onto grudges, be a forgiving person. Understand that each time you forgive, it becomes easier to forgive again in the future.
- **Connect.** Someone you may know needs encouragement to forgive. They may need a gentle nudge to release another person from an offense. Consider how you can provide that nudge.

DAILY READINGS

1. LET IT GO // PHILIPPIANS 1:6

Recently, a man revealed that he'd been cheating on his wife for nearly a decade. The wife was understandably heartbroken. She wondered how he could look at her every day and lie right to her face. The betrayal cut deep, but rather than walk away, she chose to stay. How does one move past hard situations like this and trust again? Forgiveness and faith. In cases where someone has done the unthinkable, Jesus Himself will work through us to give us supernatural strength and resolve. But it starts with a willingness to let go. Given that Jesus has forgiven us for our sins against Him, there is no just cause why we can't forgive each other.

There's no wound too deep that Jesus can't heal if we will first forgive.

2. THE REVISIT // HEBREWS 13:5

Have you ever thought you were over something until someone triggered the memory of it, and you realized quickly that you were not? Unhealed wounds have a way of sneaking up on us. It's important in those moments to make the intentional decision to deal with it before God, but that's hard because more than anything, we remember how it made us feel, and sometimes it's just too hard to revisit that space. We have to remember that unchecked unforgiveness can eventually sour into hatred. To avoid that, we have to allow Him to visit us in that space. Though it's hard, He reminds us that He won't leave us. Where others failed, He never will.

God will never abandon us. He will carry us to the other side.

3. AN ACT OF HONOR // JOHN 10:10

We all know the story of Joseph. His father favored him above his brothers, and if that wasn't enough, God gave him a dream of him ruling over them. So, out of jealousy, his brothers sold him into slavery. If there was ever a reason not to forgive, this

was it. However, Joseph honored God, and God exalted him in the kingdom, but this would never have happened had he chosen unforgiveness. Forgiveness is an act of honor before God. It is laying our will on the altar of sacrifice. We honor God when we choose Him above ourselves. He wants to bless us lavishly, but we disqualify ourselves when we don't forgive.

Unforgiveness can open the door for Satan to steal God's blessings. Don't let him.

4. TRAINING GROUND // LUKE 23:34

Possibly the greatest sin to ever occur was the sin against God Himself in the killing of Jesus on the Cross. Yet, even in that, Jesus was still prayerful, saying, "Father, forgive them...." (Luke 23:34). That would have been enough to show us His heart, but a few verses later, we see Him concerned with one of the men next to him also dying on a cross. Jesus's body was in the worst physical pain anyone could have ever endured, and yet He still cared for others, taking no thought for Himself. His example offers us no excuse for selfishness. Just as He pointed others to the Father, so must we. We can't do that in unforgiveness.

We can't focus on Jesus if we're busy training our eyes on ourselves.

5. OUR WHY // JOHN 3:16

Everywhere we look, war, crime, and violence seem to be in abundance. It's happening so frequently that some have begun to settle into a state of crisis fatigue. The world needs Jesus now more than ever. But, that's why we're here. In the midst of sin and darkness, we are empowered to show the world that forgiveness and life are possible. Though it might seem like the world itself is metaphorically "going to hell in a handbasket," we can stand strong in Jesus's authority and resist the darkness. Too many people are dying in their sins because they don't know Jesus. We can't be so focused on ourselves that we do nothing about it.

Jesus is the reason we live; we introduce others to Him so they, too, can live.



The Portrait of a Bible Teacher

BEVERLY J. SONNIER

Portrait: “A painting, drawing, photograph, or engraving of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head or shoulders where the face is always dominant” (Oxford English Dictionary).

My years of travel around the world has exposed me to some of the most breath-taking, mind-boggling and memorable portraits found in museums, galleries, houses of worship and personal homes. Most often, I did not know the person I viewed or their life story, but I would find myself “imagining” their story usually before I took time to read any descriptive information provided. No surprise. While my version of their story seldom lacked imagination, it often lacked insight—a more

accurate and deeper intuitive understanding of the person in the portrait.

Art enthusiasts understand that a portrait has more depth than a picture because it tends to have a story behind it. In essence, it is a visual “storytelling” device. It says something about the person in the artistic media being seen. Portraits appear to freeze “moments in time” and preserve the expressions and emotions of the subject. A portrait is at its best when it captures the heart and soul of the subject; more than just a face of someone, but rather a visual biography of the person that invites a genuine connection. It can also show a variety of attributes of a person, including power, authority, virtue, beauty, integrity and wealth.

Several of those attributes are also qualities that help define an effective Bible teacher.

I often find myself reflecting on the faces and impact of three Bible teachers in different parts of the country who continuously poured into my teaching ministry development. Two were senior pastors; the third, a female church lay leader, Bible study/Sunday School teacher extraordinaire and accomplished middle school Teacher of the Year award recipient. While each had their own distinctively different teaching style, the language each chose to use while teaching was language common to both of us—teacher and learner, which fostered relatability and commonality between us that led to impactful engagement.

They understood that Bible teachers are not called by God to merely “teach,” but rather to be “transformational” teachers of God’s Word. Transformational teachers engage in:

- *Building relationships*
- *Teaching the Word of God with accuracy*
- *Winning learners to Jesus Christ*
- *Caring for learners spiritually*
- *Making disciples who make disciples*

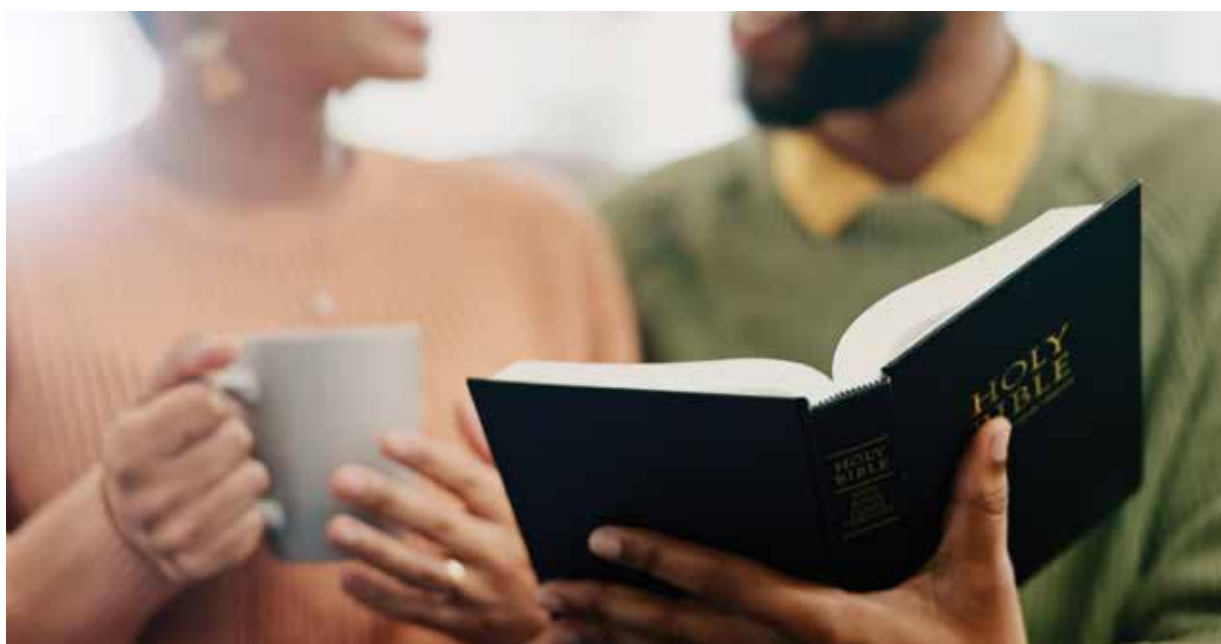
Each of these Bible teachers understood and executed their respective teaching ministry with accuracy, excellence and passion. They taught God’s Word—instead of their own, and in doing so they earned my attention, respect and admiration.

I could say that I am who I am today partially because of their great love for Jesus Christ and heartfelt love for each learner they took the time to graciously pour into.

I am a grateful recipient of all that they generously shared. As much as I learned from these great teachers, there is much more to learn from One who is greater.

The portrait of Jesus can best be described as a visual story of a master teacher. He not only taught the Word of God; He is the Word of God. Believed to be the best storyteller ever (in my opinion), He utilized a simplistic and relatable teaching “strategy” that attracted and resonated with the masses many times over during His brief ministry on earth. His transformational teaching style included some of the following key components:

- He prayed (Matt. 14:23; John 17:6-19)
- He taught with authority (Matt. 7:28-29; Mark 1:22)



- He taught with simplicity (Matt. 6:35-34; Luke 6:31)
- He asked questions (Matt. 16:13,15; John 21:16)
- He told stories/ parables (Mark 4:10-12; Luke 16:19-31)
- He used repetition (Mark 8:31; 9:31;10:33-34)
- He was never ever boring (Matt. 4:25; Mark 3:7-8; Luke 6:17)

Ephesians 4:11-12 says, “And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ.” Fundamentally, there are essential skills and characteristics required of someone “called” to serve as a Bible teacher in God’s Kingdom. These servants of God are held to a higher standard. James 3:1 tells us, “Not many should



become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment.” (CSB). The standard for a Bible teacher has already been established through Christ Jesus.

In addition to teaching with the style of Jesus, the portrait of a Bible teacher must also tell the story of a servant who:

- *Has a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:20)*
- *Models Christ-like behavior in thought, word, and actions (Matt. 5:16; Eph. 5:1-2)*
- *Maintains a strong devotional life of prayer and meditation (Deut. 6:5; Ps. 119:105)*
- *Has a teachable spirit (Prov. 9:9, 10:17; 2 Tim. 2:2)*
- *Takes responsibility to accurately interpret, teach and apply God’s Word (2 Tim. 2:15; Titus 2:1)*
- *Is accountable for what they teach, how they teach and how they connect with learners— right where they are (Jas. 3:1-2; Heb. 10:24-25)*

The test for any teaching is whether or not it aligns with the teaching of Jesus. Being a Bible teacher is one of the best and most effective ways to carry out Jesus’s directive to, “Go...make disciples” (Matt. 28:19). The impact an effective Bible teacher has on the local church and broader body of Christ is often under-estimated.

The local church is commonly considered “ground zero” for planting seeds that inspire new teacher prospects to step into their calling, demonstrate a willingness to be trained, study and be mentored by seasoned godly teachers. They then replicate the same in others, in the broader body of Christ, equipping them to “Go...make disciples.”

What story does your portrait as a Bible teacher tell? You have the capability and responsibility to help equip believers with understanding Scripture and applying it in their daily lives. Let your portrait become more than just a face. Let us be seen as a picture of Christlikeness.

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George Washington Carver