

# Forgiving the Tough Stuff!

## YOUR RECONCILING MISSION

Matthew 18:21-35; Ephesians 4:26-27

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He was there when her sister died. He forced them both to endure rats and the filth of urine and human excrement in their quarters. He offered nothing but the threat of death or beating. He was there participating week after week in unspeakable cruelties; and now years later he was there, holding out his hand to greet her after she spoke in a Christian meeting. Hatred clouded her heart as she remembered the pain he caused her. Would Corrie Ten Boom, a concentration camp survivor, in spite of all the pain, extend forgiveness to this guard? How can she or anyone else forgive the tough stuff?

This summer we focused on *your reconciling mission*: a ministry all Christians share. Although we have various abilities and a kaleidoscope of personalities and temperaments, *we all share in the work of bringing people to God and making peace with one another*. That work, reconciliation, is a supernatural process. We cannot make it happen; God must work. However, there is one thing that we can do that's critical to reconciliation: forgive. To minister reconciliation, we must forgive. Forgiveness sometimes leads to reconciliation, sometimes not. Whatever, forgiveness always brings healing and spiritual growth to the one who forgives. Categorically, without exception, forgiveness is the number one issue in every person's spiritual health. It is the number one issue for everyone. In the next few minutes, you'll find out why.

Peter once approached Jesus and asked, "*How often must you forgive a person?*" Peter knew that certain people hurt us repetitively. Rabbis knew that too. They had a three strike rule. Three strikes and then you were out of forgiveness. Peter answered his own question with a more spiritual and magnanimous number, "*Seven times?*" Jesus, however, corrected him: "*Not seven times; seven times seventy.*" Jesus explained that answer with a story.

There was a king who wanted to clean up his accounts. One man owed him 10,000 talents. A talent took 19 years to earn. The man owed not 19 years of wages, but 10,000 times that, 190,000 years of wages. The sum was 10 times the estimated gross national product of Israel. The debt, an incomprehensible figure, was beyond anyone's ability to pay. The king, knowing it was uncollectible, ordered that the man, his wife, children and all their property be sold for at least partial repayment. The debt-ridden man cried, "*Patience! Please wait, I'll pay back everything.*" The king knew repayment was impossible, but mercifully he forgave the debt.

Instead of celebrating this freedom with his family, the man became debt conscious. He went looking for a fellow servant who was in debt to him. He grabbed the colleague by the throat and demanded that he repay him a hundred denarii. A denarii was one day's wage, so the debt was a hundred days' wages. Despite asking for time and promising repayment, the colleague was thrown into a debtor's prison to pay the bill by forced labor. When the king heard about it, he was irate. Continuing the story, Jesus said:

***Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.*** (Matt 18:32-35, NIV)

Jesus taught that we have incurred an incomprehensible debt. We don't have an inkling of how much pain and destruction we've sown. It is beyond comprehension. We're as clueless as that first debtor. There's an Angolan Proverb that says:

*The one who throws the stone forgets; the one who is hit remembers forever.*

Isn't that true? We don't begin to see the devastation of our choices. But our victims do! Some of us, like the debt-ridden man, cry to God, "*Be patient! I'll repay everything.*" Maybe, we say "forgive me," but we act as if we are on the good side of God because of our righteous acts. Our religious behavior and good deeds are installments on our debt. We think they'll win us approval. We don't realize how hopeless our debt is. When you leave the communion table, are you relieved and celebrating, or are you sin conscious? Are you free, or are you paying another installment? In Holy Communion we don't repay a debt; we enjoy what has been given to us.

When we choose not to forgive someone, it's obvious we've not come to terms with our own debt. If you struggle with resentments or fight with a temper that flares, there is a

block in your understanding of God's mercy for you. Moreover, you've given the devil a foothold.

***"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.*** (Eph 4:26-27, NIV)

A foothold is a spot where the devil influences your actions and thus sows harm. A foothold grows into a stronghold over time. A stronghold is an area where the devil rules your thinking, and you thus become resistant to correction. You become defensive. People struggle to get through to you. Even God becomes your enemy because his word seems harsh and you don't feel at peace. The writer of Hebrews put it this way.

***See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*** (Heb 12:15, NIV)

Roots of resentment grow in time to dominate our lives and wound those about us. We become bitter and guilt-ridden despite God's act of forgiveness. We miss the grace. When we come to terms with God's forgiveness, we pass that same gift on to others. Although a hundred days' wages is a sizable debt, we forgive it because we've been forgiven so much more.

Are you struggling with forgiveness? Here's how to deal with the tough stuff.

**First, face the facts.** English writer C. S. Lewis wrote:

*Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin... and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice...*

**Second, face the hurt.** Only broken hearts repent, and only broken hearts forgive. If your heart isn't broken, what are you forgiving? Some people don't forgive because they don't want to feel the hurt again. I think Jamie Buckingham said it well:

*The truth will set you free-but first it will make you miserable.*

**Third, confront your hatred.** Sins against us usually give birth to sins in us. We've got to own up to our rage, resentment and vengeful thoughts toward those who hurt us.

**Fourth, release the person from the blame and burden of their actions.** Every time you're tempted to blame the offender, remind yourself that the debt and blame is gone.

**Finally, cast that burden, that hurt, that offender into God's hands through prayer.** God anticipated your pain, and planned for it. God can do something wonderful with it.

It was a pivotal day when that guard's hand was extended before Corrie Ten Boom. It was pivotal for Corrie. Would she insist he pay the denarii, or would she celebrate the talents she had been forgiven? Would the guard experience the power and release of reconciliation, or would his heart continue to ache? There was no handshake that day. Instead, there was embrace and tears. That is reconciliation, and that is your reconciling mission!