

“Getting Off the Hook”

Matthew 18:21-35

Series: The Forgiveness Formula Week 3. Others – the Crucible of Forgiveness

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Back in 1999 a rare sensation occurred thirty miles off Cape Cod. For the first time in 47 years, New England fishermen discovered large schools of tuna were running and biting! They were so hungry any amateur angler just needed a sharp hook and some bait. And the rewards were astounding. Rumors circulated about Japanese buyers willing to pay \$50,000 for a large blue-fin. As a result, many small, unequipped boats ignored Coast Guard warnings and headed out to sea. Yet these new fishermen soon discovered they were in over their heads. The problem was not catching a tuna—it was getting them into the boat. On September 23, the *Christi Anne*, a 19-foot boat, capsized while battling a tuna. That same day, the 27-foot boat *Basic Instinct* suffered the same fate. Worst of all, when *Official Business*, a 28-footer, hooked a 600-pound tuna, the fish simply pulled it underwater.¹

Finally, Charlie the Tuna got his revenge. Who’s sorry now?

Sometimes, when we talk about forgiveness, we call it “letting someone off the hook.” A friend, a family member, a neighbor, a coworker, an enemy hurts me. So now, in my mind and heart, I’ve got that person on the barbed hook of my anger, bitterness, and resentment. They wounded me. They owe me. They need to make it up to me. I’m justified. I’m right. They must ask for my forgiveness. And I’m not letting them off the hook until then do. Even if they apologize I’m not sure I’ll let them go. When you have someone hooked on the end of the line, it can be like wrestling with a mammoth tuna.

Here’s the sad truth: as long I wrestle with someone on the hook, as long as I refuse to forgive, I am also hooked. And like a 600 pound tuna, unforgiveness will take me under. Jesus warns us to avoid unforgiveness. After praying in the Lord’s Prayer:

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matthew 6:12)

Jesus adds:

For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)

¹Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Zondervan, 2005), pp. 59-60

When we refuse to forgive others, it blocks the flow of God's forgiveness to us. Jesus even says forgiveness and reconciliation are a higher priority than going to church:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:23-24)

Forgiveness and reconciliation are more important to God than worship and offerings. So if I don't see you in worship on Sunday it better be because you are out forgiving someone. Both passages essentially say: I can't have a close relationship with my Father in heaven if I refuse to forgive and let someone off the hook here on earth.

Now you may say, "Jesus, I'm not ready to forgive and let him/her off the hook." Forgive my Ex who cheated on me? Forgive my children who take and take from me and only give me grief and rejection in return? Forgive my parents who criticized, wounded, ignored, abused me? Forgive my boss who puts me through a living hell in order to make him look good? Forgive my teacher who punishes me for nothing, but lets the favorites get away with murder? You don't want to let him or her off the hook. Yet this wrestling match of unforgiveness is taking you under.

Maybe what we need is not a hook and finishing line but a guideline, a definition of how far we must go with forgiveness. Peter asks Jesus,

Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times? (Matthew 18:21).

Peter is a generous man. The teachers of the day believe in a "three strikes, you're out" policy. Peter more than doubles this rule. "Not seven times," Jesus replies. Peter smiles at the thought he astounded his master. "But seven times seventy," (Matthew 18:22) Jesus finished. You can almost picture the mouth of Peter hanging open. 490 times? The message is clear: with God, there is no limit to forgiveness. Well if there is no end to forgiveness, how do you begin to forgive? Where does it all start?

As we've seen so far in this series *The Forgiveness Formula*, **God is the Catalyst of Forgiveness**. Forgiveness Starts with God. Forgiveness is God's idea. In fact, the Father sent His Son into the world to shed His blood for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26: 28). Jesus tells the story of a Middle Eastern king.

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." (Matthew 18:23-26).

This servant is not a lowly slave but a high official overseeing one of the king's provinces in a vast empire. He so mismanages, perhaps even embezzles, funds he now owes what a

100,000,000 workers can earn. It is a huge debt he can never repay. The servant's offer to pay it all back is impossible. So what does the king do? Throw him and his family into jail as they did in those days? Arrange a government bailout as we do these days? Give him a copy of Dave Ramsey's Total Money Makeover? Nope. The king does the unthinkable:

The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go (Matthew 18:27).

He feels "compassion" for the guy, he tears up the debt and, instead of firing him or punishing him, he lets him go. That is grace. God forgives us our debts before we forgive our debtors. God goes first. God wants to forgive us. Through Jesus God does everything on His part to forgive us.

The second factor in *The Forgiveness Formula* is **You – The Core of Forgiveness**. Forgiveness may start in heaven but the reaction takes place here on earth in each one of us. Your life and mine are the reactor cores for God's forgiveness. On the Cross, God lets us off His hook so we can have a relationship with Him. If the king in Jesus' story can tear up that astronomically huge debt and let his servant go free, then there is nothing you've done God won't forgive. God let you off the hook. Live like someone who is off the hook. Yet *The Forgiveness Formula* is not done.

The third factor in forgiveness is **Others – The Crucible of Forgiveness**. In the past, scientists performed experiments in a crucible they might heat over a flame. The crucible is the place where a chemical formula or reaction is tested. The presence of God's forgiveness in our lives is tested in the crucible of our relationships with others. Since God let us off His hook, are we willing to let others off our hooks? Are we willing to forgive? Forgiving others seems so straightforward. Webster's dictionary defines the verb "forgive" as:

To cease to feel resentment against on account of wrong committed: give up claim to requital from or retribution upon (an offender).²

I see three actions in that one sentence. When I forgive I give up

1. Feeling Resentful for what you did.
2. Wanting Repayment for what you did.
3. Seeking Revenge for what you did.

Notice that forgetting is not mentioned. Forgetting may be a necessary part of our healing but it is not the same as forgiving. Learning how to forgive runs all through the Bible.

² "forgive" Webster's Third International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1966) p. 891.

The forgiven government official in Jesus' parable walks out of the palace into the sunlight entirely free. In his wildest dreams he never expected such an outcome. No debt, no punishment, no loss of family or property, still employed. You might imagine he'd be in a pretty optimistic forgiving mood. You'd be wrong. In the next sentence he faces a crucible which tests his ability to forgive.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 'His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' 'But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt (Matthew 18:28-30).

The man just forgiven a hundred million dollars goes out and chokes a colleague who owes him a hundred dollars. The debtor begs for patience and offers to pay it back using the same words which, a few minutes before, came from the mouth of the man who is choking him. Yet the first man will have none of it. He throws the debtor into prison until he can pay it back which, of course, he can't since he's in prison. It does not take the grapevine long to report this hypocrisy to the king's ears.

When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. 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 handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. (Matthew 18:31-34)

The man is thrown into prison and I wonder if, as he passed the man who owed him a pittance leaving jail, he had a moment to think how foolish it was not to forgive.

The injustice of this scene makes us want to cry out...until we realize we are the choker not the one being choked. When someone sins against us the debt feels so enormous. We can't think about anything else. We stew over it. We stress about it. It keeps us up at night. We may plot our revenge. We may even imagine choking them. Yet God, our King, has forgiven us a debt far greater than any debt owed us by another. Jesus ends the parable with this warning,

This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart. (Matthew 18:35)

I don't think Jesus means our Heavenly Father will physically imprison and torture us. Rather, I believe the Lord is saying so long as we keep someone on the hook we are the ones still in prison, we are the ones tortured by what was done. Unforgiveness is taking us under.

So how do we forgive others? Maybe we should begin by stating what forgiveness is NOT.

- Forgiveness is not denying the hurt. It is feeling the hurt and releasing it.
- Forgiveness is not stuffing your anger. It is resolving your anger by releasing the offense to God.
- Forgiveness is not forgetting. We cannot forget what happened. When we forgive we learn to let go of resentment.
- Forgiveness is not saying what they did is alright. It is the willingness to let go of repayment or revenge.
- Forgiveness does not restore a relationship although it may be the first step toward reconciliation.
- Forgiveness is not being a doormat – that would make Jesus the greatest doormat of all.
- Forgiveness is not a feeling. It is a choice. An act of the will which often requires the supernatural power of God.³

Here are some helpful guidelines called The Four Stages of Forgiveness which come from Hope for the Heart.

1. Face the Offense. Don't minimize the offense. Don't excuse offensive behavior.

2. Feel the Offense. Don't deny your pain. Don't carry false guilt for hating what happened. God is against sin too.

3. Forgive the Offender. Remember how God has canceled your debt and set you free. Paul says

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13).

4. Find Oneness – If Appropriate. This is possible only if the offender accepts responsibility and seeks forgiveness. Without this reconciliation is not possible. Set appropriate boundaries and don't rush reconciliation. Change takes time.

Is there someone that you refuse to forgive? Jesus tells us when we compare the debt others owe us to the debt God's forgiven us, their sin starts to shrink down to size. If you have given your life to Christ and received his forgiveness, if he has paid your debt, there is no debt that anyone owes you, no sin that any have committed against you that can compare. This does not happen instantly. We need to learn to let go.

³ Several of these come from "Forgiveness" Hope for the Heart: Biblical Counseling Library c. 2007-2009.

Jesus commands us to forgive whether they deserve it or not, whether they accept it or not, whether it changes them or not. Make no mistake: forgiveness does not give permission to someone to continue committing the sin or to live an irresponsible life. It means inside you do not hold a grudge, you do not harbor hate against that person. You release them from their debt to you. That may even mean forgiving someone who is dead. In such cases I recommend writing a letter to that person or to God and grant them your full pardon. It may happen at once or of a long time, but eventually you find forgiveness to be the doorway to freedom. You'll get off the hook.

In November, 1984 thirteen-year-old Candace Derksen of Winnipeg, Manitoba was missing. Seven weeks later her body was found in an abandoned shack near her home. For twenty-two years the killer was not found. This made it especially hard for her parents Wilma and Cliff. A multitude of imagined scenarios filled their minds - a stoned teen, a close friend, a serial killer. Yet Wilma and Cliff Derksen did the unthinkable – they forgave their daughter's killer.

As soon as Candace's body was found we knew that we would need to forgive in order to survive as a family. We knew it would be a difficult journey, but choosing to forgive was half the battle.

While the grief was still raw, a friend asked Wilma, "If you could let yourself go, what would satisfy justice for you? Would it be the execution of the killer?" "No," Wilma replied. And then she was shocked to hear herself say, "Ten child murderers would have to die. And I would pull the trigger." In her mind's eye she saw the ten hooded figures against a brick wall and herself pulling the trigger ten times. The feeling was delicious. But then the camera of her imagination continued to roll.

I saw the hooded figures fall. I saw their blood. I saw the hoods fall off, revealing their faces, vulnerable in death. I looked up and saw the faces of their mothers, mourning the loss of their children. Their loss was the same as mine. I also saw one man who had no one to mourn his death. He never had any love. I had just snuffed out his last chance.

By exploring my anger I was one step closer to wholeness. Justice requires that we hold people accountable for their actions. But, for Christians, above the bottom line of justice, there comes love and forgiveness.

Jesus knows that there would only be more emptiness if we tried to fill our loss with vengeance. Jesus shows us a better way to put value and meaning into our suffering. Believing this, we planted little seeds of hope in our tragedy. We started a fund to build a swimming pool in Candace's honor at a camp, we started a Child Find organization in Winnipeg. We helped others going through the same loss. Nothing can replace Candace. But when I compare the feeling of pulling the trigger to that wonderful, deep joy of seeing the swimming pool, finding a missing child, and knowing that our story has helped others, there is no comparison."

Through the grace and power of Jesus, Wilma and Cliff found a way to forgive.

Now they are helping others get off the hook.

There are two sides to this coin. If you are the offender, then you must be the first to seek reconciliation. Jesus teaches (Matthew 5:23-24) that even if you are in the middle of worship and you are convicted of a sin you committed against your brother, go, seek forgiveness and be reconciled. It is best to do it face to face. But if that is impossible, then a letter or phone call will do. What if they refuse to accept your apology? What if things get worse? You cannot be responsible for their feelings and actions, only yours. But I promise that in forgiveness, there is a release

On the other side of the coin, what if you are the offended? Jesus commands us to forgive whether they deserve it or not, whether they accept it or not, whether it changes them or not. Make no mistake, forgiveness does not give permission to someone to continue committing the sin or to live an irresponsible life. It means that inside you do not hold a grudge, you do not harbor hate against that person. You have released them from their debt to you. That may even mean forgiving someone who is dead. I often find people laboring under the heavy weight of bitterness toward a parent who is long gone. In such cases I recommend writing a letter to that person or to God and grant them your full pardon. It may happen at once or of a long time, but eventually you find forgiveness to be the doorway to freedom. You will become a new creation. If you cannot forgive someone for their sake, then forgive them for your sake, for Christ's sake.

So what about the truly awful crimes some people commit? Surely the hundred dollars the one man owed the other cannot begin to compare to the sins of a truly evil person. Keeping in mind that forgiveness does not pretend it didn't happen, does not say it's alright, and does not automatically restore a relationship, there are some hurts and sins which we can only forgive if God Gives the Forgiveness through us. Some forgiveness is not possible on human power alone. It requires the miraculous forgiving power of God working within us.

By the grace of God, Gary was able to forgive and Shannon will never forget it.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.[a]

23 “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold[b] was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

26 “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ 27 The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

28 “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.[c] He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

29 “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

30 “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32 “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Footnotes:

a. Matthew 18:22 Or seventy times seven

b. Matthew 18:24 Greek ten thousand talents; a talent was worth about 20 years of a day laborer's wages.

c. Matthew 18:28 Greek a hundred denarii; a denarius was the usual daily wage of a day laborer (see 20:2).

It does not take the grapevine long to report this hypocrisy to the king's ears. They drag the first servant back to the throne room where he receives the full fury of his lord. "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me; shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" The man is thrown into prison and I wonder if, as he passed the man who owed him a pittance leaving jail, he had a moment to think how foolish it was not to forgive. Jesus ends the parable with this warning, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Amen.

Blooper. Blunder. Faux pas. Gaffe. Snafu. They all mean “mistake.” Sometimes we say them out loud or put them in print. Recently a friend sent me these silly newspaper headlines:

“Cold Wave Linked to Temperatures” (Ya think?)

“Red Tape Holds Up New Bridges” (There’s something stronger than duct tape?)

“New Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Test Group” (Weren't the others big enough?)

“Astronaut Takes Blame for Gas in Spacecraft” (He shouldn’t have eaten those beans!)

“Kids Make Nutritious Snacks” (Do they taste like chicken?)

“Typhoon Rips Through Cemetery; Hundreds Dead”

But what if your mistake is more than a foolish headline? What if you did something you feel is unforgiveable? At the end of last year Mikhail Kalashnikov died in Russian at the age of 94. If his last name sounds familiar there’s a reason. He was the inventor of the AK47 – the world’s most popular firearm. With 100 million spread around the world, the AK47 is the favorite weapon of revolutionaries. Just before his death, Kalashnikov wrote a letter to the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church in which he asked if he was to blame for those killed by his weapon.

The pain in my soul is unbearable. I keep asking myself the same unsolvable question: If my assault rifle took people’s lives, it means that I, Mikhail Kalashnikov am responsible for people’s deaths.

In the past he justified his weapon by blaming the politicians and revolutionaries for the war deaths. The Orthodox Church did the same. But that didn’t satisfy Mr. Kalashnikov. As the maker of the AK-47 came closer to meeting his Maker, the heavier became the weight of guilt that pressed down on him. We are not here to judge Mr. Kalashnikov. Yet it does make us wonder how the Judge of the world feels about us? Are there sins God won’t forgive? Is anything unforgiveable? Actually, Jesus says, “Yes.” Let me set the stage for you.

The disciples feared the opposition they would face from the Pharisees and the government officials. They might punish, torture, or even kill the disciples. To their surprise Jesus says, “You want something to fear? I’ll tell you who to fear.”

I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. (Luke 12:4-5)

Who does Jesus tell us to fear? God. The only thing earthly enemies can do is kill the body. God can send you to the outer darkness of hell. That's what Mr. Kalashnikov feared. That sounds pretty serious. Forever is a long time. So what is the unforgiveable sin we need to avoid? A few verses later Jesus adds,

And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. (Luke 12:10)

That doesn't match up with what we know about God. Isn't God unconditionally in love with us? Isn't God gracious? Isn't God forgiving? Yes. Just before these verses Jesus gives us one of the most compassionate pictures of God in all the Gospels.

Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. (Luke 12:6-7)

God cares for every single half-cent sparrow. God counts every single hair on top of your head. That takes a lot of time and effort to number every hair and so I decided a few years ago to give God a break in that department. That's how much I love Him. What's your excuse? Jesus uses these examples to show us that God is passionately concerned for us and unconditionally in love with us. The one who should cause us to truly tremble, Jesus says, is the very one we never need to fear. He loves us beyond measure.

Sixteen is a tough age to make a mistake that changes the course of your life. Shannon Ethridge was driving to high school one morning along a country road when she struck something. It was not a rock. Not a deer. It was Marjorie Jarstfar. Marjorie, who was riding her bicycle along the road, lost her life in that accident. Shannon was found completely at fault by the authorities. It was a matter of seconds – seconds that Shannon played over and over in her head. Consumed by intense guilt, the young girl several times considered taking her own life.

She was headed for an almost certain guilty verdict when a miracle intervened. It came through a man: Gary Jarstfar, Marjorie's husband. He forgave the 16-year-old and asked the attorney to drop all charges against her. Gary said to Shannon, "You can't let this ruin

your life. God wants to strengthen you through this. In fact, I am passing Marjorie's legacy on to you. I pray that you may follow in her godly footsteps."

Gary's act of forgiveness filled Shannon with the amazing love of God. Twenty years later, Shannon Ethridge is the bestselling author of *Every Girl's Battle* and *Every Woman's Battle*, and *Completely His: Loving Jesus Without Limits*. Her mission is to help women overcome guilt-ridden, wounded lives.

So what is this unforgiveable sin? What does it mean to "blaspheme against the Holy Spirit"? The Holy Spirit is the way we receive the gift of forgiveness Jesus won for us on the Cross. Paul writes,

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)

When we open ourselves up to God, the Holy Spirit pours that forgiveness into our lives and washes us clean. To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is not committing some sin that's on the naughty list. It's not insulting the Holy Spirit. It's not sinning one too many times. The unforgiveable sin is to reject God's gift of forgiveness offered to us by the Holy Spirit. In essence, it is to reject God altogether. I remember as a kid being confused by those motel rooms where you would open a door only to find another door. That portal was put in to make it possible for both rooms to be connected. Yet in spite of unlocking our door, the other still securely barred the way.