



# Learning Forgiveness: A Lenten Study

## SESSION 5

| Scripture reading: Matthew 18:23–35

### The Call to Forgive

We know we are bidden to forgive one another as God, in Christ, has forgiven us. It is difficult to miss all the references in the Gospels to this basic expression of the Christian calling. We find it at the heart of the Lord's Prayer: "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" (Luke 11:4). It is embedded in Jesus' teaching on judging others in Luke's Gospel: "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (6:37). Jesus uses hyperbole to respond to Peter's question about how many times he should forgive a church member who sins against him. Peter assumes that seven times would be generous, but Jesus explodes his calculus: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (Matt. 18:22)—sometimes translated "seventy times seven," a number yet more unimaginable to Peter. Paul also urges forgiveness as a basic Christian virtue: "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col. 3:13).

But nowhere do we find a more arresting depiction of the reason for forgiving our fellows as in Jesus' "Parable of the Unforgiving Servant" (Matt. 18:23–35). It would be striking enough, and much easier to swallow, without the final two verses. The king is the figure of God in this cautionary tale, and each of us is invited to see ourselves in the unforgiving servant. It is critical to understand the monetary sums in this story, or the point will have far less force to modern readers than it had for Jesus' hearers. A denarius was the customary daily wage for a common laborer, making the smaller debt worth about three



The sense in most New Testament teachings is that forgiving others is imperative not optional. Jesus is not merely inviting or suggesting forgiveness.

and a half months of labor. A talent was worth more than fifteen years of ordinary wages; ten thousand talents would represent a debt beyond 150,000 years of common labor, an astronomical sum by any standard! Jesus' point is that we owe God vastly more than what anyone could possibly owe us. His parable strongly implies that God has already forgiven us this unbearable debt and expects us in turn to forgive the far smaller debts of others. Moreover, Jesus is uncomfortably direct about the destructive consequences of failing to forgive others.

The sense in most New Testament teachings is that forgiving others is imperative not optional. Jesus is not merely inviting or suggesting forgiveness. Spiritually speaking we are obliged to forgive one another. But this is easier said than done, as illustrated by another story from early desert wisdom:

Certain of the brethren said to Abba Anthony: We would like you to tell us some word, by which we may be saved. Then the elder said: You have heard the Scriptures, they ought to be enough for you. But they said: We want to hear something also from you, Father. The elder answered them: You have heard the Lord

say: If a man strikes you on the left cheek, show him also the other one. They said to him: This we cannot do. He said to them: If you can't turn the other cheek, at least take it patiently on one of them. They replied: We can't do that either. He said: If you cannot even do that, at least do not go striking others more than you would want them to strike you. They said: We cannot do this either. Then the elder said to his disciple: Go cook up some food for these brethren, for they are very weak. Finally he said to them: If you cannot even do this, how can I help you? All I can do is pray.<sup>1</sup>

Surely this humorous story elicits some chuckles or groans of recognition in us. Our weakness is rooted in both human emotion and our reasoned sense of justice as "fair play." This week we will look more closely at human emotion as a roadblock to forgiveness. Next week we will examine our notions of justice in relation to forgiveness, and consider various forms of justice.

Normal human feelings can easily block our acting on the knowledge that forgiveness is imperative for Christ-followers. Such feelings can abort even our desire to forgive. In my own experience, I would distinguish between two basic types of emotional response: (1) I should but I don't want to; (2) I can't yet.

## When I Don't Want to Forgive

In this first instance, there is a distinct element of satisfaction in feeling resentment when such resentment may be easily justified. And feeling wounded or offended is generally sufficient justification. These feelings are often based in ego needs. There is little question that we enjoy a certain amount of complaining to others how unjustly we have been treated. It can be a good exercise in self-examination to ask how much of what we feel is legitimate, and how much makes a juicy-good story of victimhood to elicit sympathy from others.

Let me illustrate with my own recent job loss. About a year ago, I was told that the organization for which I'd worked for nearly thirteen years was cutting my position due to economic constraints. The news came as a terrible shock. I had thought my work central and valuable enough to warrant more effort to keep me on staff. At one level, I felt aggrieved and victimized. It seemed the work I had done was devalued, and I felt the sting of realizing I was far from indispensable to the organization. These were simply blows to my ego. I could eas-

ily have wallowed in the seductions of feeling unjustly dismissed, knowing that many of my colleagues were shocked and dismayed by what had happened to me. Their sympathy at times fueled my sense of entitlement to resentment.

Thankfully, I was aware early on that these feelings were ego-derived and ego-driven. When I was honest with myself, a much larger picture held sway. God was simply closing a door I had seriously pondered walking through myself for more than two years. My soul was no longer fully engaged with the position I had held for more than a decade. I had known it was time to move on but not had the courage to walk away from a good salary with benefits in a weakening economy. In this larger picture, the Holy Spirit was pushing me out of my comfortable nest and into a freedom I had been craving for years. That the decision was made for me rather than by my own choice was simply part of the embarrassment I had to come to terms with. Additionally, I was well aware of the financial stress our organization was under and knew my position would not have been cut if my boss had seen a good alternative. There was no animosity behind the decision, rather much agonizing and regret.

As long as I focused on "what they did to me" I placed myself in the victim stance where resentment felt justified. But the moment I lifted my eyes to the divine initiative that I could see clearly behind surface facts, I no longer felt aggrieved but relieved! That put me in a posture where forgiveness scarcely seemed relevant. Painful as it was to be torn away from a community of colleagues, and as anxiety-provoking as the loss of steady income was, I could thank my boss for cutting the strings of organizational constraint and setting me loose to explore my calling afresh.

Perhaps my experience can raise questions of the larger perspective from which we choose to see and respond to life's circumstances. How do we see a situation when we step away from our egos? How broad or high is our perspective, and what might God's perception be? What new possibilities lie within the pain of the moment? What new life sleeps inside this form of death, waiting to be wakened? Our capacity to explore such questions will depend in part on the nature of the offense, the depth of the wound experienced, and the level of our own emotional and spiritual maturity.



We begin to see that rage, grief, and lust for retaliation can easily trap us in a self-imposed prison of hate that corrodes our soul's energy and peace.

## When I Can't Yet Forgive

There are times when our truthful response to the call to forgive is, "I can't yet." If my job loss had created a serious financial crisis for our family, I might well have needed more time to acknowledge and absorb the larger positive picture. And had I not known my soul was already seeking another horizon, forgiveness would no doubt have proved more of a challenge. "I can't yet" is a perfectly honest and reasonable response and may even be the healthiest response under some circumstances.

In situations, for example, where persons have experienced repeated abuse—physical or emotional—the abuser can be forgiven too quickly to have any benefit either to the abuser or the abused. Abusers routinely show remorse and ask for forgiveness, only to repeat their behavior the next time their need for control is threatened. Forgiveness then becomes a meaningless ritual, providing little more than psychological cover for abusers to continue their destructive behavior. They learn to assume that the abused will forgive them so they can resume the cycle of violence from a "clean slate." Receiving forgiveness glibly, their attitude echoes Voltaire's reputed comment: "The world is admirably arranged; God likes to forgive and I like to sin!"

Serious offenses against the humanity of a person involving physical or psychological trauma cannot be forgiven quickly. When we are deeply wounded by betrayal or violence, it will take time—perhaps a long time—before sufficient inner healing prepares the soil of our hearts to nurture the fruit of forgiveness. When a loss is irreversible, where trust has been shattered and the heart battered, when fear is intense and grief overwhelming, we should not expect ourselves to leap easily to forgiveness. In most cases there will be layers of psychological excavation, inner healing, and the hard work of spiritual practice before forgiveness can be authentic for us.

## Stories of Forgiveness

On the other hand, there are countless stories of deeply traumatized people who found it within their hearts to extend forgiveness to brutal offenders. There was Kelly, whose fiancé revealed shortly before their wedding that he had been dishonest with her about his past and consequently could not marry her. She was crushed. Yet thirty years later, still single, she was well beyond bitterness and self-pity. Though he never showed remorse, Kelly fully forgave him and found fulfillment in serving others. Then there was Chris. At age ten he was kidnapped, stabbed, and shot by a man who was angry with Chris's father. Twenty-two years later, Chris encountered his attacker, who was in a local nursing home—frail, blind, and in ruined health. On learning the identity of his visitor, the ailing man expressed his deep regret at what he had done to Chris as a child. Chris responded by offering both forgiveness and friendship until the day the old man died.

Stories like these are not as rare as we might imagine. We are resilient creatures, capable of throwing off shackles of bitterness and discovering more about ourselves and others over time. The impetus to forgive sometimes comes from sheer fatigue at carrying the burden of anger and resentment. We begin to see that rage, grief, and lust for retaliation can easily trap us in a self-imposed prison of hate that corrodes our soul's energy and peace. At some point, we discover the self-interest of renewed personal well-being in the act of forgiving our offenders. Choosing to forgive is one of the most freeing and healing choices we can make in life.

The therapeutic value of forgiving others is perhaps good enough reason to strive for this virtue. But less self-interested reasons surface in many stories we encounter. The freedom to forgive often comes from discovering the humanity of the offender, even violent offenders. Chris could see the vulnerability of his childhood attacker, a man without family or friends in his last years of life, companioned only by regret. The young man found his residual fear dissolving and his natural compassion aroused. Ron, the brother of a victim of the infamous "pickax murderer" Karla Faye Tucker, eventually discovered the human being behind this dreadful act. Karla's drug-addicted prostitute mother introduced her daughter to drugs, sex, and prostitution when Karla was very young. She was high on drugs when she committed

the murders. Only in jail did someone introduce her to the Bible and give her something to begin to live for. Ron recognized aspects of his own difficult life in Karla's, and eventually, through a remarkable transformation of his own heart, formed a prison friendship with his sister's killer. At the scene of Karla's execution, Ron was not in the witness room set up for victim's families where he could have been, but in the near-empty room for the family of the condemned.<sup>2</sup>

Stories like these can give us courage and inspiration to see that forgiveness is possible even in the direst situations. In most cases they involve a long period of struggle and healing. Help from trained third parties can often reduce the length of such struggle. Therapists and spiritual directors may help a person move through phases of anger and grief more effectively or to see a larger picture of good coming from evil. Trained mediators can also help people gain new perspective, especially where both parties in a dispute feel wounded and aggrieved as is often the case with troubled marriages. In some instances, mediators can help a crime victim encounter the offender in a way that keeps the victim safe and allows the offender to express regret. Seeking such mediation early can help reduce the period of trauma for the victim.

One remarkable story of mediation and the courage of two men to engage it fully may help illustrate the value of this kind of assistance. During a motel robbery, a young man named Wayne shot Gary, the fellow working behind the front desk, at point-blank range. Gary survived but suffered from physical and psychological scars for many years. He finally decided the only way to find healing from recurrent nightmares and post-traumatic stress was to confront his attacker. So he contacted a mediation program that arranged for a face-to-face meeting between the two men with a mediator present at the prison where Wayne was held.

Once the men were seated across a table from each other, the mediator placed them on equal footing rather than reinforcing language like "victim" and "perpetrator." He began by asking both men to look at each other and talk to each other as "human beings, man to man." Empow-

ered with trust in their basic humanity, the two men proceeded. Gary politely, but with a shaky voice, asked Wayne to explain why the robbery had gotten so violent. He also described how his life had never been the same and how his family and work had been affected by the trauma of being shot. Wayne, faced directly with the human impact of his actions, said repeatedly how sorry he was for what he had done and how it had affected Gary and his family. Each man was able to recognize and acknowledge that the other had lost much in the aftermath of this violence. Both were empowered with new understanding of the other and of themselves. Gary received Wayne's apology and thanked him for it, which helped Wayne feel accepted, inwardly freed, and taken seriously as a person. The exchange was transformative. Gary came to Wayne's parole hearing and asked for his release. Since then, they have appeared many times throughout New York State to speak of their experience.<sup>3</sup>

Did Gary forgive Wayne? The dialogue between them does not explicitly contain forgiveness. Yet because the conditions of reconciliation were met, Gary's forgiveness of Wayne was strongly implied in their interaction and subsequent relationship. Connections and distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation are well worth clarifying. In our final week we will look at this relationship and how it fits with our notions of "fair play" and justice.

## About the Writer

*Marjorie Thompson* is an author, teacher, pastor, and retreat leader in the ministry of spiritual formation.

## Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 75–76.

2. The stories of Kelly, Chris, Ron, and Karla are found in Johann Christoph Arnold's powerful book of such stories, *Why Forgive?* (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2000).

3. The dialogue between Gary and Wayne is described by Carl D. Schneider in "What It Means to Be Sorry: The Power of Apology in Mediation," *Mediation Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Spring 2000).