

My favorite magic expression as a kid was to say, "Sorry!" I was like a "get of jail free" card. Yet, if I say, "I'll forgive, but I can't forget" is that really forgiveness? And should I forgive if someone won't say they are sorry or how much they have hurt me? Forgiveness is so important to faith; yet difficult to do well. We all want to be forgiven but often find it difficult to forgive. What does forgiveness mean for you, and how well do you forgive?

To understand forgiveness, we have to understand "debt," for sin creates a cost that must be repaid. When we borrow, someone buys our debt, and we agree to pay it back. It is the same with sin. If I "forgive" it means that I buy the debt. I pay the price. I fill the gap. I tear down the wall. If someone forgives me, then they have paid a price to do the same.

But Jesus did something unique. He paid the price for everyone's sin. Embracing earthly death, he announced we are set free from a debt we could never repay. This is the greatest "forgiven debt" the world has ever seen – done for us for no other reason than love. Jesus daily says, "I forgive you!" And that gift is waiting, whether we accept it, ask for it, or appreciate the price that was pain on our behalf. We call that gift "grace."

I have spent so many hours with people who are burdened with mistakes that they can't change and emotional debts to others that they feel can never be overcome. Always the statement is the same, "I don't deserve to be forgiven." And even though we are promised that God's forgiveness is a given, it goes against the grain of our earthly experience.

Frederick Buechner says this: *"This seems to explain what Jesus means when he says to God, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' Jesus is not saying that God's forgiveness is conditional upon our forgiving others. In the first place, forgiveness that's conditional isn't really forgiveness at all, just fair warning; and in the second place, our unforgiveness is among those things about us that we need to have God forgive us most. What Jesus apparently is saying is that the pride that keeps us from forgiving is the same pride that keeps us from accepting forgiveness, and will God please help us do something about it.*

*When somebody you've wronged forgives you, you're spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you're spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence."*¹

Jesus sought to teach his disciples how to forgive – completely, freely, and over and over again. He said if someone sins against me, I should go to her and begin a conversation so that a damaged relationship can be restored. The emphasis in forgiveness is not necessarily on what is "fair" or whose "fault" it might be, but rather on re-establishing or rebuilding a lost relationship.

While we want to make sure someone deserves our willingness to forgive, Jesus says, if "you are willing to love, you must forgive the debt and restore the relationship!" Peter asked; "What if I forgive, and that person sins again, how often must I forgive? Seven times?" (That seemed pretty generous, didn't it?) Jesus astonished Peter by upping the ante; seventy seven times! Those numbers weren't just picked out of mid-air!

1 Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking*

Seven was a perfect number -- a number of wholeness and completion. Seven days in creation, seven days in a week. Seven means, "It is finished! It is perfect! It is God-pleasing! Peter thought he was giving the perfect answer. Jesus said, "That is only a good beginning!" Seventy-seven is unimaginable (almost infinite, more perfect than perfect.) Jesus' response was literally, "keep on forgiving forever and ever." And the story he told drove home the point.

A servant was forgiven the equivalent of a \$7 million debt but refused to let go of a \$12 debt from another. The implications are obvious. His master had been unbelievably generous to allow his servant to even amass a debt that large. And the offer of "forgiveness" was even more incredible than his initial generosity. *Such is the love of God* who gives us more than we deserve or could ever imagine ... watches as we pile up incredible debts through selfishness and sin ... and then offers, without cost, the free gift of forgiveness through Jesus Christ!

The servant was delivered from an eternity in debtor's prison. (For one can't leave a debtor's prison until the debt is paid.) His debt was so enormous, it could never have been paid – and so the master paid the price. *Yet in response, the servant REFUSED to forgive a paltry, ridiculously insignificant debt* to another. His life was restored yet his response was to take advantage of a friend! He had been forgiven but quickly forgot – Jesus calls to forgive AND to forget – just as Jesus has done for us!

Jesus says, "When you say, "I forgive, walk away, and never visit the scene of the crime again!" Many fear that offering forgiveness is a sign of weakness. That forgiving and forgetting might simply encourage another to a lifetime of reckless living without any responsibility. And it is possible that this will happen. It is like turning the other cheek, when someone is pounding on you. The only guarantee in life is God's love.

Love Story was a big movie when I was in college and had one of the dumbest movie lines of all time: "love means never having to say you are sorry." That statement assumes that if you are in love, nothing else matters. Jesus teaches that *when you are in love, everything matters*. The story of Joseph in the Old Testament drives home that same point ... Joseph was willing to forget, and so his forgiveness was complete grace!

Forgiveness doesn't mean that one hasn't been wronged, but that one who knows what it is like to be loved, shares great love. We call that "grace." It is undeserved, and unexpected, but it is Jesus' gift to us and ours to one another. It is the antidote to sin! The power of such love is that what was lost is found and repaired. To Peter, he said, "seven is a good start, but it is only a start." To us he says, "You know that \$12 million that you owe -- I am going to forget about it -- go and live in peace. And by the way, having been set free, learn to forgive your neighbor's \$12 debt against you."

The toughest thing about true love is that it isn't deserved. That is why it is called "love." Our challenge is to learn from and live in that love, rather than choosing to wring someone's neck every time they do the slightest little thing to offend. "Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Sound familiar? How would you like that to be the criteria for determining whether or not you are a part of God's family?

This great prayer request becomes another challenge, a loving call to discipleship -- leading us into a daily quest for *forgiving AND forgetting ... as often and as fully as we are able!* Forgiveness

is like flipping on the light switch -- the current is already there, but for the light to overpower darkness, someone must flip the switch! So it is with forgiving. And when you don't look back, you are learning to forgive AND forget.

In first grade I rode a bus. One day I got on the bus when school ended and suddenly noticed my dad speaking to me as he stood by the window of the bus. He had walked from home with my little brother, pushing my sister in a stroller and said, "Tim, why don't you get off the bus and walk home with us?" He had taken off work and thought this was a great surprise. But I was more afraid of speaking to the bus driver than aware of my father's love. I pretended to talk to the driver and then told Dad, "He won't give me my ticket back." And I stayed on the bus, rode home, and my family walked.

50 years later, I still carried the guilt of that day. One day I told my Dad how badly I had always felt about what I did. His response? "I can't even remember that happening!" That is 77 times of forgiving! It is forgiving and forgetting. It is the love of Jesus Christ, in the flesh. *Any more questions about forgiveness?* Learn from Jesus! Learn from a loving father! Forgive and forget; and learn how good it is to live in peace!