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Title: *Asking for a Friend - Do I Have to Forgive?*

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35

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Let's pray together. God, as we're gathered here at Orchard Hill this weekend, I pray that you would speak to each of us. If I've prepared things that don't reflect your word in content and tone, I pray you would keep me from saying those things. And if there are things that I haven't prepared that would be beneficial in this moment for those who are gathered, I pray you would prompt me to speak those things and that I would follow your lead in that moment. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Several weeks ago, we started a series that we've called *Asking for a Friend*. And what we're doing is we're looking at seven instances in the Gospel of Matthew, where Peter interacted with Jesus, and he didn't always ask a question. Sometimes he said something that was a little impetuous, sometimes he countered something or came on a little strong about something, and sometimes he asked a question. And the reason we've called it *Asking for a Friend* is in each instance he basically said something that probably other people would have wanted to say but didn't think was maybe culturally appropriate to say.

And a lot of the questions that underlie these instances are questions that maybe you and I might have even in our day if we could ask God a question. And today we come to a question that probably if you've been church, you know the answer to, and even if you haven't been around church, you have a sense of what the answer should be.

And that is, how often do I have to forgive? How much do I have to forgive somebody who isn't really acting in a way that's consistent with how I think they should act? It's what Peter asked, and the reason that this is a question that we still have is the feeling of being wronged is almost universal. You don't have to live that long to have somebody do something that in your life becomes hard for you because they mistreated you.

They can start young when you have an instance in middle school where you belong at a certain lunch table, and somebody says something to you or about you that makes that lunch table hard for you. And then it can happen in your dorm room. It can happen in the bedroom, it can happen in a boardroom where we're in different settings and different things happen that we say, that's not the way I should be treated.

And so that feeling of you being wronged is almost universal, but the particulars are unique. It could be that we had parents who couldn't orient their lives well enough to drive our life to be okay as a kid. Or it could be a sibling who turned their back on us. Or it could be somebody who was supposed to be there to protect us, that hurt us. And the degree and severity vary. And so, we have all of these different experiences.

Peter comes in, he says this question to Jesus, Matthew 18, verse 21. Here's what he says, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" And then he adds this. He answers his own question, and his suggestion is, "Up to seven times?" In all likelihood, Peter thought that he was being most generous. He thought that he was saying seven times seems like a good limit. It's the number of completion. So, if I forgive somebody seven times, on the eighth time, perhaps I don't have to forgive them. And Jesus responds with this well-known response. He says, no, you don't have to forgive seven times, but 70 times seven, or some translations say 77 times.

And the point isn't the exact number. It's not that Jesus is saying to keep a tally until you get to 490 or to 78. What he's doing is he's saying, I want you to know that forgiveness is to be unlimited. In fact, I think Jesus doesn't just pull this number from thin air, but he actually is referencing something that takes place in the Old Testament. This is in Genesis four. This is Lamech, and this is what he said to his two wives, and is the beginning of polygamy. He said this to Adah and Zillah. "Listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times."

Now, you don't have to have two wives to have that not be a good marriage working. But if you say to your spouse, listen, you cross me, and Cain who died and was avenged seven times, I'm going to avenge you 77 times, you're probably not going to have a good, happy marriage. Because forgiveness is not something that is just an ethereal concept, but it's something that impacts us every day of our lives.

And I doubt that you will have a good friendship, a good sibling relationship, a good relationship with your parents or your children or your spouse or your future spouse or your business partner if you don't learn how to forgive. And what Jesus was doing was he was saying in the Old Testament and what Lamech said and probably what's common is to take vengeance and to say, if you do me wrong, I do you wrong. And Jesus is taking this, and he's reversing it, and he's saying, I have something else. I have a different way that I want you to live, a way that's going to be better. And that is when you practice the way of forgiveness.

And then Jesus tells the story. You heard it read, and the story is about a king, and he says, the kingdom of heaven is like, which is a phrase that is important here, simply because a lot of times people will think the Kingdom of God is just future, or they'll think the Kingdom of God is corporate. But there's a sense in which here the Kingdom of God shows itself when people live with a spirit of forgiveness. And so, he says, the kingdom of heaven is like this. He says it's like a king. And he says the king wanted to settle accounts. And so, as he's settling his accounts, he comes across somebody who owes him.

And what it says here is 10,000 bags of gold. This is the NIV, verse 24, and it says this was brought to him. Now, I don't know about you, but 10,000 bags of gold just sounds like a lot of money. But here's what the footnote at the bottom of my page says, and some old translations say 10,000 talents instead of a bag of gold.

The NIV, I think, updated the bag of gold because talent isn't something that you think of as something. But here's what the footnote says 10,000 talents, a talent was worth about 20 years of a day laborers wage. So, at a typical wage, you would have to work 20 years to get one of these 10,000 bags. Just to put that in perspective. Think about how much money you earn in a year. Multiply it by 20 and then multiply it by 10,000. So, if I did my math correctly, that's 200,000 years of your work that it would take you to pay off this debt. In other words, no matter how well you've done, it'd be hard to pay that back because you probably don't have 200,000 years of money in the bank. That's what's going on here.

And so, the king ordered that this man and his wife and his children and all that they had would be sold to repay the debt. And the servant fell on his knees before him. Verse 26. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."

And then this man goes out and he finds somebody, and the text says, who owed him a hundred silver coins. And again, the older translations say denarii. And the footnote in my Bible again, says 100 denarii. Denarius was the usual daily wage of a day laborer. So about three months' worth of somebody's work because of what this guy was owed. So, he owed 200,000 years' worth of money. Here's somebody who owes him three months and he says, you pay me. And when the person didn't pay him, he said, I'm going to throw you into the debtor's prison.

This is the story and some of the servants of the king say, do you know what this guy did who was just forgiven this incredible debt? He demanded that this person pay him back. Verse 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. 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. "

And listen to this verse, verse 35. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Jesus says, if you don't forgive, then you will not experience forgiveness. Now, a lot of times what we do, we, meaning people who read their Bible and think about these things, what we do is we tend to take our system of thinking and we put it onto a text like this and say, this text can't possibly mean what it appears to me.

And the reason we say that is because we say, well, salvation isn't by works, and if we don't forgive, that's a sin. That's like doing something that's a work. And therefore, that can't possibly mean that we don't experience forgiveness so, this doesn't mean what it appears to me. And the reason I say that is sometimes what we need to do is to take a step back from our framework, read the text of the Bible, and let it speak to us.

Because Jesus' point here is to say, if you don't forgive, understand that your lack of forgiveness has an impact on how I will treat you. Now, I do think that this synthesizes with what I just said about saying that we can't forfeit our future salvation and that we aren't saved by works. I think what Jesus is ultimately saying is if you don't understand the grace that's been given you, then you won't give forgiveness, and therefore you won't experience forgiveness.

But don't miss Jesus' warning here, because this is a significant spirit issue for each of us. When somebody wronged us, what do we do with that wrong? Now, I was thinking about this because the 20,000 bags of gold and 100 denarii can seem remote. Think about it this way. Imagine that you're going out shopping and you're driving your car that's a 20-year-old beat-up, dilapidated, end-of-its-life car. And so, you go out to shop and I presume if you drive that car, you're going to Walmart. And so that's where you go to shop.

And so, you're going there, and you pull into the Walmart parking lot. You're there and in comes somebody who probably normally shops, I presume at Whole Foods, but they have the \$100,000 brand new car and they pull up next to you. And as your two cars are sitting there, you decide it's time to leave. And as you back out, you crunch their car a little bit with your old car. The person hops out and says, oh, man, that's messed up, and then he or she just simply says, it's okay. You just go your way. I don't want to hassle with your insurance or your car or anything. You just go.

And so, as you're about to leave, you notice that there's a little ding on your door that you didn't think was there before. Now you didn't think, but you can't really tell because your car has lots of dings but it looks like somebody had just opened the car door on the other side and dinged your door. You pull your car back in and get out and say who did this to me? I want whoever did this to me to pay me for the repair on my door. That's a little bit of the story, except not even close, because Jesus' story is much grander than this. And what Jesus is saying, if you're that person, understand that you're not understanding forgiveness.

So, let's ask and answer three questions about this text. The first question is this, and that is what is forgiveness? And I think this text answers the question. Verse 27 gives us two words that are used in the original language for forgiveness, and the NIV one is not translated as clearly. But in the ESV that's a little more of a literal rendition of the text. You see the word cancel and the word forgive.

Here's what we read, in the NIV. "The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go." The NIV says, "let him go." The ESV says not "cancel" but "released" there. And the first word for cancel or release is a word that literally just means to let go, to open your hands, so to speak. And then the word for "forgive," which is the same word that's used in verse 35 here, translated as "let them go" is translated in various ways in the 143 times that it's translated in our New Testament. It's translated as go away, omit, expire, forgive, and pardon. And so, what this is simply communicating is this, and that is to forgive a debt is to say, I'm opening my hands, I'm letting go, and I'm no longer demanding payment.

Now, maybe the car analogy isn't a good analogy because I don't think that this is telling us we shouldn't collect on insurance or demand that somebody pay us when they smash our car. But if somebody puts a ding in your car door, and it's not worthy of the insurance, there's still a payment. Either you say you pay me, or you say I'll live with the ding, or I'll pay to replace the ding or have it fixed. But somebody pays.

And what forgiveness is, is saying, I'm not going to demand that you pay me. I'm not going to continue to demand payment. And what this means relationally is a couple of things. What it means is that we stop bringing up the offense to the person and to other people. Some of us will understand that we don't bring up the offense to the person, but what we'll do is we'll talk about it with other people. We'll constantly tell other people how somebody has wronged us, and we'll bring it up in a way that just distances us enough that we have a little bit of culpability of deniability when somebody says you're talking about that person.

But to forgive means that we don't continue to demand payment by bringing it up and making sure that people know how we were wronged. It means that we don't dwell upon it, and it doesn't constantly enter our minds. And it means probably this, and that is that we can wish well or good for the person. One of the ways you know that you've really forgiven is when somebody who's hurt you has something going on in their life, and instead of internally wishing that something bad would happen to them, you would say, I want something good to happen to them. You see, that's not demanding payment.

Now, the truth of this is when you and I have been hurt, especially if it's a significant hurt, it's unlikely that we can just forgive one time and say, there, I forgave, and I'm done. I did the whole work. Because what happens is every time the urge to demand payment comes up, we have to cancel the debt again. We have to say, I'm not going to continue to demand that you pay me back for what it is that happened. And if you've had some big hurts in life, you might have things that remind you that bring up the event or the instances of the hurt. And you will need to say, I am going to choose not to demand payment once again. So that's the first question. What is forgiveness? It means not demanding payment.

Secondly, why should we forgive? And here's what again, I think the text points to. Verse 35 says, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or

sister from your heart." One reason to forgive is that if we don't forgive, it means that there's no forgiveness for us. A second reason is that we've come to understand the generosity, the lavish grace that's been given to us by God, through Jesus Christ, to be forgiven the debt that we could never pay. And so, we decide to say, as a result of that, I want to express generosity to others.

You see, part of not wanting to forgive is believing that we are in a position to be able to demand from somebody else judgment. But when we realize the depth to which God has forgiven us, if we're people who've come to Jesus, then we realize that there's nothing that we can hold against others. And then I would just add this. This is from Hebrews 12:15. When we don't forgive, it's possible that we develop what Hebrews 12:15 calls a root of bitterness.

Do you know what happens with a root? A root goes down, out of sight in one place, and it bears fruit in another. And what a root of bitterness does is, it produces in us, in you, in me, the sense in which we say, okay, I didn't forgive this person. You know, it was my ex. It was my former business partner. It was a friend, or it was somebody I gave an opportunity to. And then they turned on me. It was this kind of a thing.

And what happens is you don't realize it, but it springs fruit somewhere else. Somebody you don't forgive in your past can impact your marriage. Somebody you don't forgive today can impact your future working relationship. Because your lack of ability to trust somebody can be because you haven't dealt with past hurts. And so, the reason to forgive is in part because of how much God has forgiven us, but in part because forgiveness is the only path to freedom for you and for me.

There are some people who write about these things, think about these things, and say that forgiveness in the Bible is always when it comes from God is something that we ask for. Therefore, you and I don't need to forgive somebody who doesn't ask for forgiveness. Maybe you've heard this. And so, the idea is, okay, I have to forgive as somebody asked for forgiveness. But if nobody asks for forgiveness or if somebody doesn't ask for forgiveness, then I don't need to forgive them.

Now, I don't want to spend a lot of time on this other than to simply say this, and that is if I were to grant that, and I don't by the way, I'm not sure that that's how you should understand what Scripture says, but if I were to grant that argument, let me just ask you, why would you want to not forgive a person? Because what you're doing, in essence, is you're saying, I'm choosing not to forgive, because somehow, I think that keeping this lack of forgiveness alive is not letting them get away with it. But the truth is, usually when a person hurts us deeply, they will rarely acknowledge it because they won't think they did anything. And even if they do, they probably won't apologize in a way that's satisfactory to us.

And so, what we'll do is we'll go through life saying, well, I'm okay to hold this grudge or this one. And what we do is we expose ourselves potentially to verse 35 of Matthew 18, where Jesus says, if you don't forgive from your heart, if you're wrong about it, then you don't experience forgiveness. It means that we're not understanding the grace that's been given to us, and we're taking a chance on a root of bitterness that goes down into our soul in such a way that it comes up in other places. And we're still letting the person who hurt us have sway over us because we're allowing that person to create bitterness inside of us.

So, my question is just why would you want to, even if you feel like that's a biblically legitimate thing to say, why would you not want to forgive? And I think part of what happens is that we actually confuse the idea of forgiveness with the idea of boundaries or the idea of consequences. And here's what I mean when I say that sometimes what we do is assume that to forgive somebody means that there are no consequences for what they do or there are no boundaries in the future.

If you were to have your kids be babysat by somebody and as you came home, you recognized that the babysitter was upset with your kids because your kids weren't acting the way they thought they should. And they were shaking your kid by the ankles, you know, a little child, and they're shaking them by the ankles, saying stop, listen to me, and you walked in. What would you do? I mean some of you say we'll grab a baseball bat, or you said call the police or I'd do something.

But let's just assume for a moment that they put your kids down and everything's okay. Biblically, you are called to forgive that person, but you never have to have them babysit again. Do you see the difference? Sometimes what we do is think forgiveness means everything is as it was before. Forgiveness does not mean that you have full access to my life. Forgiveness means I don't demand that you pay for a past action. It doesn't mean I give you access to future action. And I think what happens when somebody says, I don't have to forgive, what they're doing is they're confusing reconciliation or restitution or restoration of the relationship with forgiveness.

I think biblically you need to still forgive, not make them pay for the past. But I don't think that means that you need to give them full access to your future. Now, some people would say, well, it's not really forgiveness if you don't give complete restoration. I think that that's misunderstanding biblical thinking on this issue because you are not called to invite somebody who's been destructive and abusive and hurtful in your life to have full access to you. But you are called for your own good to say I'm opening my hands and releasing this because I don't want to carry this around any longer. I heard somebody once say that to not forgive is a little bit like drinking poison and hoping that the other person pays. And that's a little bit of what that is. So why do we forgive? Because if we don't, it hurts us, and it ignores the grace of God. What is forgiveness to say? I'm not demanding payment.

And that leads me to a third question. And this question is this. And that is what if it feels like I can't forgive? Some of us who are gathered here have been hurt in some pretty deep ways. Some of us, fortunately, haven't been, but some of us have had hurts that run deep. And even this concept, you say I don't know if I can forgive the hurt that's come into my life at the hands of this person.

And all I want to do is remind you of two things here in this text. Again, the first is to remind you that failure to forgive is in many ways hurtful to you. It's hurtful to you because it calls into question your relationship with God. It produces bitterness, and it can cause other relational problems. In fact, some of the words that we use for this kind of hurt are telling. We nurse a grudge. We carry anger or resentment with us. Well, who would want to nurse something that hurts us over and over again? Who would want to carry with them a constant reminder of something that's hurtful? And so, the encouragement here, even if you say this was so egregious, I can't forgive, is to say, why would you still want that person to hold any sway in your life? Because chances are that person's moved on. They don't think about you. And if you continue to ruminate on the hurt that you suffered, you're allowing that person to still have sway in your life.

And then I just want to remind you, to remind yourself of the grace that's been given. And that's really the point of this. The King, representing ultimately God in his grace has said, even though you owed a debt, that you could never pay, I have forgiven it on the work and person of Jesus Christ if you've come to me. So, therefore, don't demand payment from somebody else, that's less.

I don't know the hurts that are represented in this room, but I know that if this room is typical, there are a lot of deep hurts. And what I'd just simply like to encourage you today to do is to understand that this text, this teaching, this parable calls us to celebrate and savor the grace of Jesus Christ to such an extent that we say, how could I not forgive with how much I've been forgiven? It's the ding in the door when you messed up somebody else's car. It's the three months versus the 200,000 years of time that it would take you to get there. 20,000 years. Now, I'm questioning my math. But why, if you get the grace of God, would you demand others pay you?

We're going to celebrate communion here today. And part of coming to communion is to remember the expanse, toughness, and wonder of the grace that God has given us. And so, when you take the bread and the wine, what you're doing is you're saying Jesus has paid the debt that I could never pay. And so today, as you take that, let it be a celebration and something that says, I want my heart to be filled and generous to the people around me.

So, in just a moment, we'll invite you to stand and sing and come. There are tables here in the front and tables in the back into the outside. And you can go to one of the tables and just simply say, I thank you, God, for your generosity to me. And we invite anyone who's a

follower of Jesus to come and partake. And then you can return to your seat and just sing and declare with the team what God has done.

And if you're here today and you say, you know, I don't know if I've really thought this way. I mean, for me, religion was always about settling the score sheet so that I have more good things to my account than bad things to my account for God. Know that the way that God looks at it is you can't balance the score sheet. All of your good, all of your deposits, will still come up short of the enormous debt. But Jesus has made a way and you can come to Jesus even today and say, Jesus, I trust what your son, what you've done, and what you have done on my behalf. And in doing so, what happens is you experience that forgiveness and that's something you can do even today, right where you are, just by acknowledging your sin and trusting in Jesus right where you are.

God, I pray today that you would help each of us to experience your grace fully. And God, I want to just ask that for each of us who's here and maybe has struggled with someone different in our lives, who we've had a hard time forgiving, that you would help us, just to even in this moment, release them once again. In fact, I just want to ask you, if you're here and this has struck a nerve with you and there's someone you've had a hard time forgiving, maybe just hold your hands open in front of you as a symbol of saying, I'm releasing, not demanding payment from that person.

And maybe you're here, and you are saying, I feel like I'm clean in terms of my relationships and what's been hard to let go of, maybe you just open your hands to say, God, I want to receive in a fresh way the beauty of what you give to me. Hands that are grasping something can't be opened to receive. And so maybe just open your hands to say, God, pour your grace into me once again today so that I can live with open hands. Because even if you're not hurting from a hurt that somebody brought into your life today, there will come a day. And the more that we drink from the fountain of the grace and goodness of God, the more we'll be able to extend that to people in our lives. God, we thank you for Jesus and the power of his story, and we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.