

Forgiveness That Frees You

Matthew 18:21–35; Ephesians 4:31–32

For the last few weeks we've been talking about what makes relationships strong. Not perfect, not conflict-free, not the kind of family you'd stage just right for a photo. Strong. In week one we talked about the foundation we build our lives on. Last week we talked about conflict and what Jesus teaches us to do when relationships get strained: talk to people instead of about them, tell the truth, listen, and seek repair. The goal was never to win the argument. The goal was to repair the relationship.

Sometimes the wound isn't dramatic. Sometimes it's a family member who made an agreement, shook hands, gave their word — and then, when money or convenience entered the picture, did something different.

Nobody may have screamed. There may not have been one great explosion. But every holiday afterward feels different. Conversations get careful. People take sides quietly. And the person who was hurt carries the question: "How could you do that to me when we're family?"

Forgiveness doesn't mean saying the broken agreement was no big deal. It doesn't mean pretending trust hasn't been damaged. It may mean the next arrangement gets written down. It may mean there are new boundaries. But it also means deciding that one person's failure won't be allowed to turn your whole heart into a courtroom for the rest of your life.

But there's a question that comes after all of that. What happens when the conversation is over, but the hurt isn't — when somebody said something years ago and you can still hear it like it was yesterday, or the apology never came at all? Have you ever argued with someone who wasn't even in the

room, replaying what they said while they're at home without a thought in the world? Sometimes the event ends long before the conflict ends inside us. What feels like holding onto the hurt is often just the hurt holding onto us.

That's the space Peter is standing in when he comes to Jesus with a question. "Lord, how many times should I forgive someone who wrongs me? As many as seven times?" Peter probably thinks that's generous. What he's really asking is where the line is. How much forgiveness is enough? How many chances do I owe someone before I've done my part and I'm free to be done? Those aren't ancient questions. They're family questions. How many times do you forgive a spouse, or a parent who never apologized, or a sibling who keeps bringing up the past?

Peter wants a number. Jesus gives him a way of life. He says not seven times, but seventy-seven times — or seventy times seven, depending on how you translate it. He isn't handing Peter a bigger number to count up to. He's telling him to stop counting altogether. Forgiveness was never meant to be a spiritual spreadsheet. It isn't about reaching a quota. It's about who grace is shaping us into.

Then Jesus tells a story. A king is settling accounts with his servants, and one of them owes an amount so large it would have sounded absurd to the people listening — something like ten thousand talents. It's not a debt you pay off with a better payment plan. It's impossible. The servant could work the rest of his life and never come close. So he falls down and begs, "Be patient with me, and I'll repay it all," even though they both know that promise is more hope than reality.

Here's what the king does. He doesn't offer more time or set up installments. He cancels the debt completely. The servant walks away owing nothing. And that's the first thing this story wants us to see: grace begins with something we could never earn. We aren't loved by God because we finally get every account settled. Grace comes first — before we know what to do with it, before we understand it. God moves toward us. God forgives. God gives us a future we didn't earn.

That's what grace does. It works in us before we even know it. Grace wakes us up; grace pardons us, and grace reshapes who we are. We don't forgive to earn God's love. We forgive because God's love is already at work inside us.

But the story doesn't end there. This same servant, freshly forgiven of an impossible debt, walks outside and finds someone who owes him money. It isn't nothing — it's several months of wages, a real debt. Jesus isn't saying the hurt this second servant caused was small. But compared to what the first servant just walked away from, it's a fraction of the size. The second servant falls down and says almost the same words the first one had just used: "Be patient with me." And the first servant says no. He grabs him by the throat, demands payment, has him thrown in prison.

And there's the problem laid bare. He received mercy, but mercy never got inside him. His debt was canceled, but his heart kept the ledger open. He wanted grace for himself and justice for everyone else. If we're honest, most of us know something about that. We want people to understand our bad day, our stress, our history. But when someone hurts us, we can shrink them down to one action, one sentence, one failure. Grace feels wonderful when we're

the ones who need it. It gets a lot harder to give away. Jesus isn't saying the smaller debt didn't matter. He's saying something deeper: you cannot receive mercy as a gift and then build your whole life around resentment.

A person shaped by grace doesn't become someone who says, "Nothing matters." They become someone who no longer needs to collect every emotional debt. They become slower to assume the worst, quicker to listen, more willing to apologize, and less likely to turn another person's worst moment into their permanent identity.

But hear this clearly: grace is not permission for continued harm. The person who caused it still bears responsibility to tell the truth, own it, and make repair where possible. We'll come back to that in a moment.

That's exactly what Paul is getting at in Ephesians. He writes that we should put away all bitterness, anger, harsh words, and malice toward one another. It's quite a list, but notice where it starts: bitterness — what happens when a hurt gets stored away and rehearsed and fed. It doesn't always look dramatic. Nobody's yelling. But it leaks out anyway — in sarcasm, in distance, in bringing up the same old failure again and again. Paul isn't saying the hurt wasn't real. He's saying that if we're not careful, bitterness stops being something we carry and starts being something that shapes us.

Then Paul gives the alternative: be kind and tenderhearted toward one another, forgiving each other the way God in Christ has forgiven you. Notice the order again. It isn't forgive so God will finally love you. It's because you've already received grace, let that grace start changing how you live.

Now here's where we need to slow down and be careful, because forgiveness has sometimes been talked about in church in ways that cause

real harm. Forgiveness is not pretending nothing happened. It is not saying abuse was okay. It does not erase consequences, and it does not mean forcing yourself to trust someone who hasn't shown any evidence they're trustworthy.

And forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Forgiveness can begin with one person. Reconciliation takes two, and it requires truth, changed behavior, and trust rebuilt slowly over time. There are relationships where forgiveness happens and renewed contact never does. There are situations where the faithful choice is not to go back. A boundary is not the same thing as bitterness — sometimes a boundary is wisdom. And if there is violence, coercion, or ongoing manipulation in the picture, safety comes first, always. Forgiveness is never permission for continued harm.

So what is forgiveness, if it's none of those things? Here's one way to say it: forgiveness is releasing the debt without denying the damage. It doesn't say the wound didn't matter — it says the wound doesn't get the final word. That doesn't erase consequences. It means giving up the need to personally make someone pay for the rest of your life, and that's a very different thing.

Maybe you've carried something for years because letting go of the anger felt like losing. If I stop being angry, they win. If I forgive, then what they did doesn't matter anymore. If I release it, I'm letting them off the hook. But forgiveness was never really about letting the other person off the hook. It's about deciding you don't want to spend the rest of your life chained to the hook right alongside them.

And here's something worth saying out loud: forgiveness may be a decision before it's a feeling. You can sincerely choose to forgive and still feel

angry tomorrow. You might still grieve. You might still remember, and something might still catch you off guard and bring the old ache back. That doesn't mean you failed. Sometimes forgiveness is one moment. More often it's a decision you make again next week, and again next month. Bringing the wound back to God over and over isn't failure. It might just be how healing actually works.

It comes down to a few honest, practical steps. Start by naming the wound, plainly: this is what happened, and this is how it affected me. Then tell the truth about the cost — did it damage trust, change the relationship, or leave you afraid or angry? Next, separate forgiveness from trust. Trust is rebuilt through consistent behavior over time, and you can forgive someone today while still saying, I need time, I need to see change before things go back to how they were. Then release revenge — that can be as simple as a prayer: God, I give up my right to make this person pay emotionally. I place the account in your hands. And finally, choose your next faithful step. It might be a conversation, counseling, a boundary, some distance, or simply continued prayer. The goal was never to pretend everything is fine. The goal is freedom.

Here is one small practice for families this week. Choose one ordinary moment — perhaps around the dinner table, in the car, or before bedtime — and make room for a simple three-part conversation.

First: “Is there anything I did this week that hurt you?”

Second: “Is there anything you need from me to help make it right?”

Third: “How can we begin again?”

That may feel awkward at first. But imagine what children learn when they hear a parent say, “I was wrong. I am sorry.” Imagine what spouses learn

when they refuse to save up old wounds as ammunition for the next disagreement. Imagine siblings learning that conflict is not the end of belonging.

This isn't about creating a perfect family. It's about becoming a family where people can tell the truth, ask forgiveness, offer grace, and take the next faithful step toward repair.

I want to give you a moment this morning to sit quietly with something. Not necessarily the biggest wound of your life. Just ask yourself: what am I tired of carrying? Maybe it's an old argument, resentment toward someone in your family, or anger at a person who never gave you the apology you deserved. Maybe it's anger at yourself. Whatever it is, what's one account you've been carrying that God might be inviting you to finally place in God's hands? You don't have to pretend it didn't matter. You don't have to rebuild trust today. But maybe you can start by saying, this does not get to own me forever. That's why forgiveness is freeing — not because the past changes, but because it no longer gets unlimited authority over your future.

Peter wanted to know how many times he had to forgive someone. Jesus wanted Peter to become the kind of person who no longer lived by the ledger at all. Maybe that's the invitation for us too — not to forget, not to excuse, but to release. So if there's something you've been carrying, maybe this week your prayer is simple: God, you know what happened, and you know what it cost me. I'm not calling what happened good, and I'm not denying my pain. But I don't want bitterness to become who I am. Help me release what I cannot change, and help me trust that your grace is stronger than what happened to me.

Because forgiveness doesn't change the past. But by the grace of God, it can keep the past from controlling the future. Strong families aren't families who never hurt each other. They're families learning what to do with the hurt when it happens. And by grace, we can learn to let go of what we were never meant to carry forever.

Let's pray.

Gracious God, you know what we carry—

the old hurt,

the disappointment,

the words we cannot forget,

the apology that never came.

We do not ask you to make us pretend that what happened did not matter.

We ask you to keep it from ruling us.

Where bitterness has taken root, bring healing.

Where trust has been broken, give wisdom.

Where repair is possible, give courage.

Where boundaries are needed, give clarity and peace.

Help us release what we cannot change,

entrust justice to you,

and take the next faithful step.

Shape us by the grace we have received,

so that mercy becomes more than something we believe—

let it become the way we live.

In Jesus' name. Amen.