

Following Jesus

Dr. Tim Keller

Forgiveness

Luke 17:3-19

³So watch yourselves. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times come back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” ⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.

⁷Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? ⁸Would he not rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? ⁹Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

¹¹Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance ¹³and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” ¹⁴When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.

¹⁵One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

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“To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.”

C.S. LEWIS

The Weight of Glory, “On Forgiveness”

The middle chapters of Luke’s gospel are dominated by Jesus’ teaching on what it means to be a disciple. Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem – on his way to the Cross – and he teaches his disciples what it means to follow him, what it means to be disciples (and teaches us, of course).

In Luke 17 we come to the place where Jesus explains to his disciples that one of the things it means to be a disciple of Jesus is to begin a lifestyle of habitual, perpetual forgiveness. Of course, his teaching is so startling and so radical his disciples say, “Increase our faith.” When you’re with the Lord of glory, there are only so many ways you can contradict him, so you have to be a little indirect about it, I guess.

What are they saying? They’re saying, “You haven’t given us enough faith for this. This is

beyond us. This is beyond our ability. You haven’t given us enough faith.” Jesus’ point in this is to say, “Oh yes I have. You already have it if you would know it.” So, we are going to look at a forgiving spirit: *Why do we need it, what is it, and how do we get it?* It’s all in this passage.

Why Do We Need It?

Let’s not run by this very first sentence too fast, which is very easy to do. “*So watch yourselves.*” From here Jesus goes on to talk about forgiveness, what to do when someone wrongs you. This is very interesting. When someone wrongs you or hurts you in some way, automatically we pay great attention to the wrongdoer. Jesus says, “*When someone does something wrong to you, that’s when you need to be looking especially closely at yourself.*”

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It's extremely important to look at yourself.

When someone does something wrong to you, someone hurts you, someone mistreats you, someone abuses you, someone rejects you, someone snubs you, someone does something wrong to you, most important, Jesus says, is to immediately look at yourself. **Watch how you respond.** I know that's not the way we operate, but Jesus says it is the right way.

The premise behind this warning is that it's incredibly easy to be blind to an unforgiving spirit, to not see it in yourself.

Another way to put it (a little more detailed way) is Hebrews 12:15, where the writer says, "See to it that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled." Look at the image there. Anger, an unforgiven wrong in your life, is a root that works in a subterranean way.

The image is sort of like this. You go to a corner of a field that belongs to you, and you say, "I don't want this tree here anymore," so you cut down the tree and you pull out the stump and you say, "That's that." But that's *not* that, because some time later you come back to that corner of the field and, to your surprise, you find there's a young tree that has sprung up again. Why? Because there were roots left under the surface, hidden from your sight.

What is the point? The Bible says you never admit how mad you really are at the people who have wronged you. You don't admit how much is remaining in your heart. Even if you admit you were pretty mad at what they did, you won't admit *how mad*. (*There are a lot of people reading this who have already written this off.*)

You see the subject, you see the theme, and you've already said, "Well yeah, forgiveness. That's an important subject, but it's not really my problem right now. I don't have a problem with it. People have wronged me, but I've gotten over it. It's not a problem for me. Now I wish old so-and-so were here tonight. Maybe I should take some

notes for him or her and then call them up and talk to them about this. But it's not my problem."

Jesus says, "Watch yourself."

What Jesus is saying, what the Bible is saying, is because it always tends to stay under the surface how mad we still are, how controlled we still are by the things that have been done to us, unless you are deliberate with your forgiveness, unless you're thorough with your forgiveness, it's going to affect you in a subterranean way. It's going to distort you. It's going to *defile* you, is the word. It's going to affect you. The writer to the Hebrews says, "Don't you understand an un-forgiven wrong is a root?" In what way?

Our English word *wrath* comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word that's the same Anglo-Saxon word from which we get our word *wreath*. Now why would *wrath* and *wreath* come from the same Anglo-Saxon word? The same Anglo-Saxon word means to be twisted. *Wrath* means to be distorted out of your normal shape by your anger. It's not anger that has come and gone; it's twisting you. It's distorting you.

Let me go a little further. Do you know the same word from which we get *wrath* and *wreath* we get the old word *wraith*? We don't use it much anymore, but it's an old word for ghost, a spirit that can't rest. Ghosts, according to legend, relive the past. They stay in the place where something was done to them, and they can't get over it, and they can't stop thinking about it, and they can't stop reliving it. Their future is utterly controlled by the past.

The people who developed these words knew what they were talking about. In other words, if you have wrath and you don't put into that wrath a lot of deliberate forgiveness, your wrath will turn you into a wraith, slowly but surely into a restless spirit, into someone who's controlled by the past, someone who's haunted, someone who really, really is constantly reliving the past and is controlled by the past. Wrath, if you are not forgiving, will turn you into a wraith. Very slowly, but surely.

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You know what I'm talking about. For example, if somebody has done something wrong to you and you haven't really been able to forgive, at the very least you get a low-level spiritual fever called *self-pity*. Then beyond that it becomes cynicism, cynicism about people, cynicism about life, joylessness – and it can get worse. It all depends on the nature of things.

If you cannot forgive your parents for the things they've done, it distorts you. It twists you. It changes you. It distorts your whole attitude toward authority figures, and it may distort quite a bit of your relationship to your children. If you can't forgive the person who broke up with you, it's going to affect your entire relationship with the opposite sex. It's going to affect your entire relationship with relationships.

Watch yourselves. When someone does something wrong, watch yourselves, because an unforgiven wrong is a root. It's in your life, and it's working its way slowly to your heart, as long as it's in there, as long as it's not forgiven. Slowly the evil that was done to you will make you into its own image if you stay bitter, if you stay resentful, even if it's really pretty far under the surface. That's why we need it.

We live in a world of snubs. You're going to get snubbed and you're going to get mistreated all the time. You're going to actually occasionally get some out-and-out abuse and injustice. How are you going to keep it from changing you, turning you into a wraith, controlling your future by its past?

How are you going to keep from being twisted by it? You'd better learn how to forgive. That's why we need it.

What Does It Mean to Forgive?

What is a forgiving spirit? How do you forgive? Now there's much more to it than what I can tell you tonight, or much more to it than what's in this one passage, but there's a lot in it. There are three things we learn.

1. Forgiveness is *identifying with the wrongdoer*,
2. Forgiveness is *inwardly paying the debt of the wrongdoer*, and then
3. Forgiveness is *seeking good for the wrongdoer*. Identifying with him or her, inwardly paying the debt of him or her, and then seeking the good for him or her.

What does that mean? Let's take a look.

Identifying with the wrongdoer.

We have to see something very important. Notice that Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you..." He doesn't say, "If that guy who used to be your brother..." Now that he has sinned against you he's not your brother anymore unless he repents. Then he'll be your brother." That's not what he says. You do have to always keep what Jesus says in one text in the context with what he says other places.

For example, you mustn't get from this particular passage the idea that Jesus is saying you only have to forgive other believers in Jesus, brothers and sisters. In Mark 11:25, for example (and Luke certainly knew this, because Luke was working off Mark, among other sources), Jesus says, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him..." So it's not just brother or sister, it's also neighbor, but let's not miss the point.

Jesus' first point here is that a brother who sins against you is still a brother. A sister who sins against you is still a sister. A neighbor who sins against you is still a neighbor. You're still one.

Now why is that important to point out?

Oh, it's very important, because one of the first things that happens that makes forgiveness so hard is, as soon as someone wrongs you, you immediately focus on the discontinuities between you and that person, the dissimilarities.

A cartoonist, if they want to really make you look stupid (this is one of the reasons why it's good not to be famous), create caricatures, and if they don't like you, what they do is they take something about your face that's a little weird, like

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maybe your eyes are a little too close together, maybe your nose is a little bit on the big side, maybe your ears are a little bit kind of big, and they exaggerate it.

In the cartoon they take something that is a little bit wrong about you and they make it so big and so unignorable that you look stupid. That's exactly what your heart automatically does when someone wrongs you. You think of them strictly and completely, one-dimensionally, in terms of that one thing they've done.

If they lied to you, then they're just a liar. When *you* tell a lie, that's different. You're complex. You *do* bad things, but there are also good things about you. You're a mixture. See, when someone does wrong, there's a part of your heart – a little self-justification engine – that grabs everything, every place where someone has done something wrong, and says, "I would never do that. I would never do something like that."

Now that might be true, because people have different temperaments. For example, you might have a cowardly temperament. Therefore, if somebody said something to you very overtly, very publicly, and embarrassed you, you'd say, "I would never do that to anybody." No, your sins are different. You see, your heart jumps on these things and says, "I would never do that. I would never do anything like that."

Jesus says you're basically the same. If you do that, if you let your heart do that, you're going to be twisted. What you have to remember is this. Miroslav Volf in his little book *A Spacious Heart* has a famous and classic little statement about this. He says, "Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans and exclude myself from the community of sinners."

In other words, what he's saying is the first thing you have to do if you're going to have any hope of forgiving, if you're going to have any hope of getting rid of the roots, if you're going to have any hope of getting through this life not being distorted and twisted, is when you see somebody who has done something wrong to you, you have to immediately think about your

similarities. You need to say, "I'm stupid; they're stupid. I'm a mixture of good and bad; they're a mixture of good and bad. I'm weak; they're weak."

Don't exclude yourself from their community. Don't exclude them from yours. Forgiveness flounders when you exclude the enemy from the community of humans ("Oh, that person is so awful; I would never do anything like that") and when you exclude yourself from the community of sinners. Same thing. So the first thing is identify with the wrongdoer. Hard enough? Well, the second thing is harder.

You must inwardly pay the debt of the wrongdoer yourself rather than make him pay it.

The word *forgive* is a word that is used in economic terms. It's a word that means to forgive a debt, but it's also a word the New Testament writers and Jesus use. They take it out of the economic realm and use it for all wrongs.

Now why would that be? I think an insight that would answer that question comes from an interesting book called *The Ethics of Memory* by a professor of philosophy at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Avishai Margalit. He has a chapter in there called "Forgiving and Forgetting" in which he makes an important distinction.

To paraphrase, he says, "Forgiveness is not living in disregard of past wrongs. Rather, forgiveness emerges from a decision to overcome resentment and vengefulness, mastering the anger and humiliation, those most poisonous of attitudes and states of mind." Forgiveness is not living in disregard of past wrongs. It is a decision to overcome resentment and vengefulness. Listen to what he's saying. It's very interesting.

Here's one of the reasons why we put in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," why it's useful to use the economic metaphor in our relationships to people who have wronged us. He's saying if someone has wronged you, there might be a literal debt. There might be a literal, legal wrong to be redressed legally or there may not, but there's always an *internal* debt, an emotional debt. That means when someone has

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wronged you, you sense they owe you, and the currency is pain.

Let me take a moment here, because I want to make this case and show you that you *do* know this, and you *do* operate like this. We all do. When someone wrongs us, there's a sense that there's a debt, they owe us, and the currency is pain. We feel like they owe us suffering. So we immediately go after them (this is the natural thing our hearts do) to try to make them pay the debt.

Now there are a lot of ways of doing it. The direct way is just go yell and scream at them and make them feel horrible, or try to ruin them professionally, or be incredibly cold to them, or totally withdraw our friendship from them. There are less direct ways. One of the less direct ways of trying to make them pay and hurt them is destroy their reputation through gossip and slander under the guise of warning people about them.

The most indirect way is when you see them, inside you root for their pain. For example, you say things like, "What they did to me ... If they keep doing that it's going to blow up in their face. I can't wait." You root for their pain. You put little pins in them in your mind. It doesn't matter whether *you* do it or *they* do it. You have a sense that they owe you and they owe you the same currency you received: pain. You want to see them squirm. You want to see them unhappy.

What's interesting is as it happens, if you *do* see them unhappy, if you're able to make them pay (or someone else does; it doesn't matter), if you see them suffer, you feel better. Let's be honest now. That sense that they owe you starts to go down and starts to recede. In fact, it can go over. If they haven't wronged you much, if they hurt you a little bit and you want to see them hurt at least a little bit and then something terrible goes wrong in their life and they're in enormous pain, you immediately sense the debt is gone. In other words, when someone wrongs you, there is an emotional debt of pain. There's an inward debt of pain.

Margalit is saying whatever the external debt, whatever there is out there, whether there's a

wrong to redress in court or whatever, there's an internal debt, a desire for vengeance, a desire to see them hurt, a desire to see them suffer. You're pulling for it, and you're trying to help it happen. If you get it, if they start to get hurt and all that, you start to feel better. Right? *Why?* Because the debt is being paid down. They're paying the debt down. In a certain sense you get relief, but it'll twist you. It'll twist you so badly.

You know the man who says, "My father always made me go to church, and I hated it, so now I don't let *my* sons go to church. He wanted his grandsons to go to church, but they're not. I've beaten him." Oh really? The man has become a wraith. He's haunted. He's reliving his past. He's being controlled by what was done to him. He's actually being controlled.

Someone says, "You know, the XYZ kind of family was in this neighborhood, and they hurt us so badly. Now I hate XYZ kinds of people. I'm keeping them out. I've beaten them." Oh really? No, no, no. If you make *them* pay down the debt of pain, it twists you. What's your alternative? *You* pay it. "What do you mean 'you pay it'?" *You* pay down the debt. That's what Margalit is saying.

He says make a distinction between going after justice on the outside ... He says, "Do what you want to do, but on the inside you must destroy that debt of pain by paying it yourself."

You say, "How can I do that?" By the way, somebody has to pay for it. If someone owes you \$100, either they're going to pay you, or if they never come through, you'll pay. You'll absorb it. It's one or the other. The debt doesn't really go away. A debt cannot go away. Either one side is going to pay it or you're going to pay it. They pay it or you pay it. In this case, you pay it.

What do I mean? Here's how to do it. When you want to scream at them and shout at them and run them down, you don't. "Boy, that hurt, but I didn't." When you want to run them down to somebody else, you want to gossip and slander and slice their reputation to pieces, but you don't. "Oh, that hurt ..." but you didn't make them pay.

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Most of all, when you see them prospering and in your heart you want to replay the tapes of what they did and you want so much to say, “That’s not what they deserve; they deserve this and this and this” and you want to run them down in your own heart, but instead you pray for them. You pray for their awakening. You pray for their wisdom. You pray for them to wake up and see what they’re doing. You pray for their good. “*Oh, that hurt.*”

What’s going on? Why does it hurt? Because it’s costly to refrain from these things. It’s not what your heart wants. It’s costly. You are paying. But look at what happens. Sooner or later (sooner if it’s not a very big wrong, later if it’s a really major thing they did to you), because you’re not putting any fuel on the fire of your anger, you will find your anger will start to go down and you’ll be free.

If someone wrongs you, you’re going to suffer. There’s going to be pain. There are two ways to go: make *them* pay or *you* pay. Either way, it hurts. But if you pay, you’ll be free, a free man, a free woman. You won’t be twisted. They won’t be controlling you. You won’t be a wraith. You won’t be having to relive it, walk the halls, which is what ghosts have to do. You’ll be free. So why not? It can be done.

When Jesus says, “If a person sins against you seven times in a day, you forgive them seven times a day....” One of the reasons why I’m sure the disciples were shocked at this, and why you and I are shocked at this, is that when you and I think of forgiveness, we think completely in subjective terms. We think it means getting over your anger and being passive.

“Can you forgive?”

“No, I’m still really pretty angry. I can’t forgive.”

Then a month later: “Can you forgive?”

“No, I’m really still pretty angry.”

Of course, because you’ve been running them down to them, running them down to other people, running them down in your own heart. You haven’t been paying the price. You’ve been

making *them* pay the price. It’s going to be very slow, a very long time before the anger starts to go down, and by then it’ll become a root that turned you hard. It has twisted you.

What you *can* do is say, “Right this minute, I determine, I make a decision, to grant forgiveness, to pay the debt myself inwardly, to refuse to make them pay. I will eat the debt.” If you do, it’ll hurt like crazy, but it’ll make you free.

You seek the good for the wrongdoer.

If you do the first two steps, here’s a test. Then you will be free to try to help the wrongdoer for his good. See, notice what Jesus says here when he says, “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” Right away that seems like a bit of a contradiction, because in Mark 11, it says, “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him....” On the spot.

Here it seems to say you don’t have to forgive him unless he repents. Which is it? The answer, of course, is you don’t pit them against each other (and Luke, I’m sure, knew about both).

Here’s what’s going on. If, and only if, you have paid the debt inwardly, if, and only if, you have deeply and profoundly forgiven them, only then when you go to talk to them will you not be trying to punish them and hurt them and make them pay the debt, but you’ll actually be seeking to get the relationship back.

This is the test. If you’ve done the first two, if you’ve identified with the wrongdoer and you’ve paid the inward debt of the wrongdoer, then when you move out toward the wrongdoer (and you *will* move out toward the wrongdoer for his or her good), you actually are going to make some progress. You’re going to be able to get the relationship back in many cases.

I’ve had people say to me many times over the years, “I don’t want to forgive them; I want justice.”

Don’t you dare put those together like that. I want you to know that only *if* you deeply forgive inwardly will you ever get justice ... in two ways.

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This is what Margalit is saying, and this is what I'm going to say too. Why?

First, if you don't deeply forgive, then when you go to talk to that person, you're not really trying to restore the relationship. You're really not after their good. You're trying to hurt them. You're after vengeance. You're not really after justice; you're going to go beyond justice, because vengeance always goes beyond justice.

If they took two of your fingers off, you're going to take both their hands and one of their eyes. Vengeance always goes beyond justice.

When someone says, "I don't want to forgive; I want justice...." Unless you forgive, you won't be going after justice, unless deep inside you are completely free of a need to bash and punish, you are completely free from the roots.

Second, unless you forgive you probably won't get it. If you go to somebody and say to them, "Look, I have to talk to you about what has happened. You've done this to me, and it hurt our relationship, but I really want you to wake up. I really want you to see what you're doing, because it's not going to be good for you if you keep on acting like this. It's certainly not going to be good for the people around you," there's a chance the person might actually wake up. There's a chance the person might say, "You're right." There's a chance that the just thing might happen.

If instead you go and talk to them and you haven't deeply forgiven them, then you're going to go like this and say, "I can't believe you did that to me. How dare you do something like that to me? I never want to see you again!"

Oh, that's really going to help quite a bit. That's not what Jesus is talking about here a bit. Unless you have utterly forgiven inside, you'll never get justice.

Let me just say **if you go after vengeance, that's selfish. It's not about truth. It's not about love. It's not about Jesus. It's about you. Vengeance is all about you.**

You might say, "I'm after truth," you might say, "I'm after justice," but it's really all about you. You're just trying to make them pay the debt.

I want you to know that withdrawal is also all about you. Many people (and I'm one of them), when they're wronged, they say, "I don't want to deal with that person. I just don't want to talk to them. I don't want to have anything to do with them. Don't rock the boat. Don't speak up. Don't even get into it."

Withdrawal can be every bit as much an expression of an unforgiving heart. You despise them. Do you know what Jesus is saying? He has been saying this to me for years. "Tim Keller, when someone wrongs you, you hate them inside, and on the outside you say nothing. I call you to be a disciple and do the very opposite. I call you to utterly forgive them on the inside so you want nothing but their good, and then talk to them." Oh my gosh. Lord, increase my faith. But there we go.

So do you want a forgiving spirit? The only way you're going to live a free life and not be changed by the evil in a world in which it's inevitable to have snubs and mistreatments and abuses and injustices and all that sort of thing is if you do these three things: identify with the wrongdoer, pay inwardly the debt of the wrongdoer (don't make him pay), and lastly, seek the good of the wrongdoer, and then you forgive him. *Okay? Get out there and do it. I hope you have a good time. I'm sure Monday is going to be very hard for you, but if you try really hard, I'm sure as you start to look at your life and you realize the problems you have and what you have to do.... Good luck. I know it's hard, but if you really try....*

No, we can't end the sermon here, can we?

What did the disciples say? The disciples look at Jesus and say, "This is impossible."

They don't say it quite like that. They actually blame him. "Increase our faith." In other words, "Jesus, you haven't given us enough faith for this. We can't do this."

Jesus says, "Yes I have."

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How Do We Get It?

Now this last thing I have to be brief on. Do you realize all the rest of this passage is an answer to the people who say, “This idea of forgiveness is beyond me. It’s impossible. We don’t have enough faith.”

Jesus says, “If you had the faith the size of a mustard seed you could do what I’m asking.” Here’s what he means. If you have any gospel faith at all, that is if you understand the gospel at all, if you understand what Jesus Christ has done for you at all, even the smallest smidgen, you have in that what you need to forgive. *How is that possible?*

First of all, Jesus tells a parable. It’s a parable that’s a little bit hard to understand for us I think. He says, “You know what? Here’s the household owner, and here are the servants. The household owner comes and says to the servants after they’ve worked hard all day.... Does he come and say to them, ‘Hey, you’ve worked for eight hours; now it’s time to kick back and eat’? No, he says, ‘I’m the owner. It’s my job to kick back and eat. You have to serve me.’ That’s what you do to servants.

What do the servants say? The servants say, ‘Of course, we’re servants. We’re not supposed to kick back. We’re supposed to serve, so we do.’ ” Now you look at that, and you say, “What is that?”

One of the reasons we have a little trouble with it is because we don’t really have a category for indentured servants. On the one hand we have the employee/employer relationship, and this is not that. On the other hand we have chattel slavery, which we know something about, unfortunately, in our history in America, but that’s not this either.

When someone in those days fell into debt, especially in the lower classes, there were only two things that could happen to you. There was NO bankruptcy, of course. You could either go to prison, or you became a servant and you had your time of service. During that time of service, you were serving. That was your job. If you had to serve for a year or two years or three years to get rid of your debt, you did it. You didn’t have eight

hours on and eight hours off; you were a servant until the time was over.

Now why would Jesus use this illustration when his disciples say, “We can’t do this”? He says, “You could if you remembered who you were. You have an owner, and what if he made you pay for everything? You are just servants. If you start to hate the people who have wronged you, you’re forgetting you’re servants.”

There’s another place where Jesus says the very same thing in Matthew 18, where he tells a story to try to illustrate forgiveness. He says there was a king who had a servant with a huge debt, but he forgave the servant. This servant had another servant who owes him a few bucks, and when the first servant finds the second servant, he grabs him (it’s almost comical in the parable) by the throat and starts to choke him and says, “Pay me my money!”

What is Jesus doing? Why does Jesus when he’s trying to illustrate forgiveness do this stuff with servants? The answer is he says, “**When you grab somebody else and say, ‘I’m not going to forgive you,’ you’re forgetting you’re a servant. You’re a servant acting like an owner.**” When you have a grudge, what are you saying?

First you’re saying, “I know what that person deserves.” How do *you* know? Do you know everything about their life? Do you know what they’ve been through? Only God knows.

When you have a grudge you’re saying, “I know what they deserve,” and secondly you’re saying, “And I’m going to be cold or harsh. I’m going to make them pay.” What gives you the right? Jesus is saying, “You are a servant acting like an owner. That’s the problem.”

What’s the solution?

Where are we going to get the power to do this? The answer is only if you see the Owner who became a servant. Our owner, Jesus, comes to earth. We owe him a terrible debt, but on the cross he dies, and the last words he says are, “It is finished.” It’s the Greek word *tetelestai*, which means, “I paid it.”

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What does that mean? I knew a man some time ago whose wife got very, very sick and he started taking care of her 24 hours a day. It looked really hard, and I said, “Boy, this must be tough.”

He said, “No, you don’t understand. You’re just looking at what I’m doing now, but if you see the big picture it’s easy. All of my life she has been taking care of me, she has been sacrificing for me. I’m almost glad for the opportunity to finally do something for her.”

In other words, if he thought about it, he could have just looked at what was going on in his life now and say, “I don’t even have a life. I just have to take care of her 24 hours a day,” but he said, **“If you put this little story into the big story, then it’s easy.”**

Are you having a problem forgiving somebody? Look at what Jesus did. The only way for you to get over being a servant acting like an owner is to see the beauty of the ultimate Owner who became a servant for you.

You’re never going to be able to forgive other people’s debts unless you see him infinitely suffering to pay yours. He didn’t make you pay it at all. He paid it himself continually. Jesus says, “If you just know who you are, you’ll have all the power you need.”

Last point. You know these lepers? I thought I always understood what this passage was about until I realized something interesting. The lepers are unclean. They’re not just physically ill; they were not able to come into the worshiping congregation. They were unclean. They not only needed to be healed; they needed to be cleansed spiritually. That’s the reason Jesus says, “Go to the priest, go to the temple, and when they see you’re whole, they’ll let you back into the worshiping community.”

One of them had a problem, because one of the lepers was a Samaritan. One of the things that’s interesting about Samaritans is the Samaritans had a different religion. The Samaritans had a temple in Gerizim. The great controversy between Jews and Samaritans was where was the real temple and

who were the real priests. One of the things that would have been interesting....

Joel Green, in his commentary on Luke, says that when the Samaritan leper was leaving and was told by Jesus, “Go to the priest and go to the temple and get yourself forgiven, cleansed, readmitted,” he would have asked himself, “Okay, which one? The Jewish one? Which one?” And suddenly the leper gets it.

Why does he come back? He’s grateful, I know, but why does he come back? Jesus told him to go to the temple. Jesus told him to go to the priest. Is he being disobedient? No, he gets it.

Jesus is the ultimate Priest. Jesus is the ultimate Temple. Jesus is the place you get your forgiveness. Jesus is the One. If you understand that ... Jesus says, “If you have just a smidgen of understanding of what I did for you in the gospel, you have all you need.”

Don’t let yourself be twisted. Take in what Jesus Christ has done, put your little story about what people have done to you into the big story of what he did for you, and you’ll have all the power you need. Let’s pray.

Thank you, Father, for giving us this time to think about what you have told us Jesus did for us and, therefore, what we can do, how we can live lives of habitual, perpetual forgiveness. O Father, we need that. I pray that some people here would look back and see some people they haven’t forgiven.

I pray that some of us who know we’re having problems forgiving would be encouraged, be informed, and be empowered tonight to finally dig up some of those roots and get the freedom of being Jesus’ disciples who follow the One who came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

Now go and learn what this means.