

getting along. They are the first to see when their parents aren't willing to forgive each other. And they probably won't tell you, but it hurts them deeply. We can be so blind to the bitterness in our hearts, but the bitterness in your heart is eating away at the people you most love. Who here doesn't know a parent or a friend or a coworker whose bitterness clouds everything they say? Is that you?

God knows. He can see deep into our hearts. He can see the deepest grudges that we carry. At the end of Jesus' parable, the king called the man back in and said, "*You wicked servant, 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 turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart." Bitterness and faith are incompatible. A heart which refuses to forgive is not a heart in which Jesus lives. Hell awaits unforgiving hearts.

But look at what God has done for you! You don't deserve God's forgiveness. You've sinned way too many times, and you're going to sin again. We have hurt God more deeply than we can ever imagine. But look at what God has done for you! God has had compassion on you, and he has completely forgiven that debt of your sins. And how can you know for sure? Because even as he hung on his cross, Jesus prayed, "*Father, forgive them,*" and then he cried out, "*It is finished.*" It is done. It is paid. Forgiveness is not based on the size of the debt or the worthiness of the person. Forgiveness is based completely on Jesus and what he has already done for you. So *be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

He will give you the strength. Does the name Gary Ridgway mean anything to you? He was also known as the Green River murderer—the worst serial killer in United States history. He killed forty-eight women, and as he stood on trial, stone-faced, he admitted to killing every single one. Guilty. Guilty. Guilty... After the charges were read, the families of the victims one by one yelled and screamed and cursed this man for what he had done, but Gary Ridgway didn't even flinch. Until finally an old man—the father of one of the victims—stood up and said, "Mr. Ridgway. There are people here who hate you. I am not one of them. You have made it difficult to live up to what I believe and that is what God says to do, and that's to forgive. You are forgiven, sir." The stone-faced Green River murderer broke down and wept uncontrollably.

That's what's been done for you! Every sin is an unpayable debt. No one can take back their hand. No one can take back their words. No one can pay for any sin. Except Jesus. And he did. For you and for them. So when that voice inside you says, "I can't. I can't. I can't!" Hear Jesus say, "I can, and I did." You don't have to carry grudges in your heart. Whether it's the bully on the playground or the boss at work or the spouse who lives in your own house, remember what's been done for you. Don't look at what they've done. Focus on what Jesus did for you. And then forgive. Forgive. And forgive some more. Amen.

Matthew 18:21-35
Rev. Nathan Nass

Pentecost 17
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²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶ "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. ²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' ³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. 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. ³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Don't You Know What's Been Done for You?

I want to tell you a story I heard about a Christian man over in the Middle East. There were some religious fanatics in his town, and when they learned who this man was and what he believed, they arrested him. When he refused to reject his beliefs, these fanatics decided to do the worst they could to this innocent Christian man. Instead of even beheading him, they decided to crucify him. Isn't it hard to believe that people would ever do such a thing! It makes your blood boil just to think about it. They put nails through his hands and put him up on a cross to absolutely humiliate him. And as he hung there, these terrorists mocked him for his faith.

Have you heard some of these terrible stories out of the Middle East? Well, the most shocking part of what happened to this Christian man is what he said right before he died. He looked at those men who had pounded nails through his hands, and he said something almost unbelievable, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." You know that man—Jesus. In a world filled still today with hate and violence, Jesus wants to talk to you today about forgiveness. And when the man who was able to for-

give his torturers as he hung on a cross talks about forgiveness, it's good for us to listen!

Peter had heard Jesus talk about forgiveness many times before, but there was something Jesus never seemed to mention: A limit. I mean, there's got to be a limit on forgiveness, right? There are just some people that you can't forgive. Every one of us has grudges against somebody, right? So Peter asked Jesus, "*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?*" There's got to be a limit on forgiveness! Peter felt gracious to go up to seven. The Jewish leaders of his day said the magic number was three. Three strikes and you're out goes back a long way! But Peter was willing to go even further—up to seven times.

Well, what would the guy who was willing to forgive his enemies even as he hung on a cross say? Jesus' answer put Peter's 'gracious' offer to shame. He said, "*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*" Jesus wasn't just telling Peter to count higher—to give his neighbor 77 chances. To forgive your brother 77 times means to forgive him all the time. There's no limit on forgiveness. Because real forgiveness doesn't keep score. "*Love keeps no record of wrongs*" (1 Corinthians 13:5). It forgives. And forgives. All the time. Every time. It's like asking, "How often should I love my spouse?" Always! "How often should I forgive my brother?" Always!

But as he said those words, Jesus could see Peter was struggling. Forgiveness is not something that comes naturally to us. It needs to be learned. So Jesus told a story about a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. "*A man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*" This guy was in debt. Ten thousand talents was an extraordinary amount of money. In order to earn that much, a common person would have to work every single day for 165,000 years. What would we call that? Gazillions? A big debt!

But you know what Jesus is talking about, right? He's not talking about money. He's really talking about sin. About your and my debt to God. How big is that? We'd like to think it's not that bad, right? We can't owe God that much! Well, God says that to sin once deserves death. So how many times have you sinned? How could we even begin to count? So what do you owe God? I don't think 165,000 years' wages would be good enough! The debt of our sins in God's sight is bigger than we can possibly imagine. And if any part of you is thinking you can work off your debt to God, stop! You can't work off one sin! How foolish to think you can pay that off!

And that man couldn't either. So the king sold the man and his family into slavery.... No, he didn't! "*The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*" That is forgiveness! And what conditions did the king set? Empty your pockets? None! "Go. You're free. Forgiven. Forever." Brothers and sisters, this is what God has done for you! There is no way we could even begin to pay God back for our sins, so Jesus paid the price

himself when he died on the cross. Your debt of gazillions—and the hell that goes with it—is gone. Erased! With no conditions at all. God says to you, "Go! You're free. Forgiven. Forever." Wow!

That man had to be the happiest guy in the world, right? His heart had been pounding. He could picture his wife and children suffering in slavery. And suddenly he was forgiven. So he went out and "*found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.*" What? After all the king had done for him, he had to be ready to forgive others—anything and everything! Yet, the man went immediately and demanded repayment from a man who owed next to nothing. Don't you just want to take this man by the shoulders and say, "Don't you know what has been done for you?"

So do it. Grab that person—yourself—by the shoulders and say to yourself, "Don't you know what God has done for you!" Jesus is talking about you, and he's talking about me, isn't he? What do we do with God's forgiveness? Whom are you angry with right now? Against whom are those grudges and that bitterness directed? Whom are you not willing to forgive? When Jesus tells it in his parable, it sounds so terrible, doesn't it? How could he do that? Why didn't he forgive? But when we fail to forgive, it makes perfect sense to us, doesn't it? Sometimes it even feels good to hold an angry grudge. That shows how far my heart has drifted from Jesus.

I once knew a man named Junior. He was always lonely and depressed. He talked again and again about how people hurt him and ignored him and didn't want to be his friend. One day while I was with him, his phone rang and rang and rang, but he wouldn't answer it. So I asked, "Who is it?" He held up his cell phone. The name said, "Do not answer." I asked what that meant. He then showed me his list of contacts, and there were 75 numbers with that name "Do not answer." "These are the people," he said, "who have hurt me, and I will never answer them again when they call." I just wanted to shake him and say, "Don't you know what's been done for you?"

Who's on your list? You probably haven't done that with your phone, but I bet you feel you have a good reason not to forgive each one, right? There're always reasons not to forgive. "They don't deserve it!" Did you when God forgave you? "They are just going to sin again!" Of course they are! They are just like we are! "It's happened too many times." I'm sure glad God doesn't use that one. How quickly we forget what God's done, and we wrapped our hands around our brother's neck and refuse to forgive our neighbor, our teacher, our friend, our spouse. Let's do this again. Take yourself by the shoulders and say, "Don't you know what's been done for you?"

What makes our lack of forgiveness even worse is that others see it and are sad. In Jesus' parable, "*When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed.*" I can't help but think specifically about kids. Kids know when mom and dad aren't