

September 13, 2026

Sermon Manuscript

Romans 12:17-21

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay,"^a says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. ^a*Deuteronomy 32:35*

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.^[a]

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 bags of gold^{*[a]} 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 "At this 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 silver coins.¹ 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 it 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 outraged 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 handed 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 or sister from your heart."

**Greek ten thousand talents; a talent was worth about 20 years of a day laborer's wages.*

On Decisional & Emotional Forgiveness (Mt 18:21-35, Gen 4, Rom 12:17-21)

Well, as you may have deduced from our scriptures and music so far, today we're thinking about forgiveness. Forgiveness is meant to be a distinctive characteristic for followers of Jesus, yet it can be so difficult. So it's something I preach on with some regularity, but there have always been some things about forgiveness that I've remained a little unsure of. For example...

- When is it necessary to actually go through the process of intentionally forgiving someone? When someone bumps into me in the hall, do I need to forgive them? Where is the line that when crossed I need to be thinking about forgiveness?
- But then, for very serious matters, where we've been deeply hurt, is it okay that it can take some time to be willing to forgive?
- And when have I forgiven? Does it mean just saying the words "I forgive them"?
- Or why is it that sometimes when I choose to forgive someone, my feelings about them don't change at all? Or maybe they do change, but then resentment or anger re-emerges at a later time? Does that mean we haven't *really* forgiven?
- Should I expect to have to re-forgive someone for the same wrong over and over? What about when they keep wronging us in the same way over and over?

For as many times as I've preached about forgiveness, these questions have loomed out there for when trying to actually *live out* forgiveness. And so, it was pretty cool when the Lord led me into study to try to clear some of this up, which I want to share with you this morning. But first, we do need to establish why Jesus calls us to forgive in the first place (the people who hurt us).

In our gospel passage today, Jesus clearly calls us into the way of forgiveness. And sort of a base definition of this forgiveness is giving up the right to seek vengeance or retaliate against those who hurt us. A Paul wrote in verse 19 of our Romans passage today: "19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for (the Lord has said), 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,'" says the Lord."

Of course, the reality is that we in our sin and the world around tend to feel that there are instances where an offender's wrong is bad enough that it shouldn't be forgiven. Countless stories we enjoy in movies and books are entirely about taking vengeance: often framing it as heroic. And, as Lewis Smedes admits, "Sometimes (hating someone feels like) the only ace we have left in our deck; (like) our contempt is our only weapon."

And yet, when our Matthew passage opens with Peter asking Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answers, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Of course, He isn't letting us off the hook for forgiving a 78th time. Rather, Jesus is drawing on the story of Lamech we heard from Genesis 4,¹ where he swears to avenge himself 77 times.² Lamech is understood to be saying there will be no limit to his vengeance. So, in contrast to Lamech, Jesus is calling Peter (and us) to unlimited forgiveness.³

So Lamech represents the earthly, sinful way of living our sin inclines us toward, where vengeance & unforgiveness is believed the best & right response to harm. And yet, Jesus has given us a way to exceed the limits of our natural, sinful state, as His grace has opened to us, He has modeled for us, and is now leading us into becoming people of forgiveness like Him.

He follows Peter's question with the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant, which first highlights God's forgiveness of us through Christ, as the master completely cancels his servant's debt of 10,000 talents. What we need to understand is that the Greek language could not *express* a single number larger than 10,000. So, this number is meant to communicate that there is no human being whose sin has not amassed an *infinite* debt⁴ to God."⁵ But in Christ, God has forgiven it all.

And this remarkable gift the master has given to the servant then makes the parable shocking when this servant next *refuses* to forgive someone else's debt to him. Now, the amount his fellow servant owed was not just a few pennies, but the point is made: this is how ludicrous it is when we are unwilling to pursue forgiveness of those who harm us in even the most devastating or wicked ways. If God has forgiven us an unpayable debt, then He can require us to do the same. Jesus taught us to pray, "forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." And with the warning of judgment this parable ends with, we need to interpret it in tension with other scriptures of grace, but it certainly indicates that when we refuse to seek to forgive, we aren't really behaving like followers of Jesus, but still in that lower way of living He's trying to save us from. #

But Jesus calls us to forgiveness not just out of appreciation for His grace to us, or even as just a gift to those who have hurt us, but also as a gift to ourselves.. And this is because unforgiveness hurts us more than anyone else. There have actually been many studies connecting resentment and

¹ Genesis 4:23-24: ²³ Lamech said to his wives, "Adah and Zillah, listen to me! You wives of Lamech, hear my words! I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for hurting me. ²⁴ If Cain is to be avenged seven times as much, then Lamech seventy-seven times!"

² For more on meanings of seven and seventy and seventy seven, see Lucas Gregorio Mondada

³ <https://aarondowns.substack.com/p/reversing-lamechs-vengeance>

⁴ Frederick Bruner note how a hint the servant doesn't grasp the extent of his debt is in his ludicrous offer to repay it. But he also notes that the servant gets more than he asks for: remission instead of time to repay.

⁵ Frederick Bruner, Matthew Commentary volume 2, page 237

rumination on wrongs with poorer health, including heart rate and blood pressure.⁶ But unforgiveness also never delivers the relief we might hope it would. Vengeance only multiplies the wrongs, but fully forgiving takes away the power that the wrong done to us has over our lives. Forgiveness is freedom.###

Okay, well now that we've gone through the WHY of forgiveness, I want to move toward the questions I asked at the outset.

So how do we determine what actually needs to be forgiven? Well, Christian theologian and ethicist Lewis Smedes says the need to forgive requires first being hurt by someone; whether it's "parents who are sure they know what's good for you, oblivious friends, stressed-out caretakers, children who disappoint, bosses who have their own agenda, or simply people with a mean streak," being hurt or offended is "part of being human." But Smedes does contend that not every hurt necessarily needs to be forgiven. For example:

- When we feel annoyed by people being late or telling a boring story or looking at their phone instead of the light turning green, we *might not* need to forgive.
- Or when someone else has that success or gets that job promotion we wanted.
- Or when we feel slighted by someone ignoring us or we feel excluded...

Spiritual maturity may have given us a level of tolerance and graciousness and humility that forgiveness isn't needed. Then again, any of these *could* necessitate forgiveness if it hits a wound we have, or some of us may have nursed on the teat of *unforgiveness* and take offense at almost everything. And if that's the case, low level stuff may be a good place to start.

But Smedes classifies what definitely *does* require forgiveness into two levels of hurt: disloyalty and betrayal.

- ❖ Disloyalty is when we feel someone has abandoned us or let us down. A friend fails to follow through on a promise; a parent fails to show up when we receive that award; when Peter denied he ever knew the Lord.
- ❖ Betrayal goes a little deeper. These are wrongs done out of evil intent: your sibling puts you down in front of others; your friend gossips what you told them in confidence; a parent abuses you; your spouse has an affair; when Judas turned the Lord over to His enemies.

Of course, even in these two categories, there's certainly a huge variance in the level of seriousness of the offense. And Christian psychologist Everett Worthington has highlighted this with what he calls Nickel wounds and \$500 wounds, with levels in between. He says...

- A Nickel wound is when someone takes the parking space you were waiting for. It's irritating, but relatively trivial. Though we need to address nickel wounds, or they can accumulate into a larger problem.
- A Five-dollar wound is like when someone embarrasses you by saying something hurtful, but then quickly recognizes it and tries to make amends.
 - There are also what Worthington calls Counterfeit Money wounds, where someone hasn't really wronged us, but we perceive that they have. Whether our perception of reality is correct or not, what is important is that if we experience unforgiving emotions then we need to pursue forgiveness in our hearts.
- Beyond a \$5 wound is a \$50 wound: one that leaves a lasting impression on our life: perhaps a breakup of a dating relationship or a harsh word spoken that really stuck to us.
- But the \$500 wounds are the ones that irrevocably change our lives: like being abused; a divorce; suicide or murder of a loved one. Devastating things.

Hurts at all of these different levels can happen in almost any setting: in romantic relationships, our family of origin, in the workplace, in the Church, in healthcare settings, from the justice system, and virtually any other setting. # I'm wondering if the Holy Spirit has been bringing anything to mind as I talk about this?

Of course, what may be coming to mind may feel like something you could never possibly forgive. And I understand.

Though it may be of *some* help for us to understand what forgiveness does *not* require:

⁶ See for example <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30669877/> and <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30632797/>

- Forgiveness is never forgetting the wrong. We almost never forget serious hurts or offenses.
- Forgiveness does not minimize the seriousness of the wrong or somehow turn it right.
- Forgiveness does not rule out accountability for the offender from the legal system or certainly before God.
- And forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. In fact, it doesn't even require that the offender repent. Whereas reconciliation requires a minimum of repentance by the offender and trust to be re-earned.

But what about all those other questions I raised at the outset? Does forgiveness mean just saying "I forgive"? What about when we think we've forgiven someone, but still feel really negatively toward them? And should we expect to need to re-forgive the same offense over and over throughout our life? For these questions, a distinction that Worthington makes between what he calls Decisional Forgiveness and Emotional Forgiveness. Decisional Forgiveness and Emotional Forgiveness: let me explain the difference:

- With Decisional Forgiveness we are choosing not to retaliate or avenge the wrong. So it is not just saying the words "I forgive you," it concerns how I intend to behave toward the offender. And Worthington observes that this - Decisional Forgiveness - is what Jesus *require* of us - or commands that we do, as His followers - like in Matthew 18. So Decisional Forgiveness changes our behavior - or if the person is no longer alive or around, it is a determination that we *would not* treat them vengefully if they *were* still around - but Decisional Forgiveness is not the forgiveness that heals our hearts.
- That is what Worthington calls Emotional Forgiveness. Emotional Forgiveness is indicated by a transformation of how I feel toward the offender, where *feelings* of resentment, bitterness, & hostility toward them begin to be replaced with more positive emotions, such as sympathy, empathy, & Jesus' love toward them. And Worthington contends that Emotional Forgiveness is not something God requires of us like Decisional Forgiveness, but He most certainly desires it for us and we should desire it for ourselves: because it's where real freedom is found.

So, Worthington offers a process whereby we can reach toward both Decisional Forgiveness and Emotional Forgiveness, which he represents by the acronym REACH, r-e-a-c-h, which I want to go through just briefly.

R

First, forgiveness - even just Decisional Forgiveness - requires that we **Recall the Hurt**. We cannot forgive anything until we concretely identify what the hurt is. And it's really essential that we invite the Lord into this, to give us discernment to assess what hurt us as accurately as possible.

E

Second, is seeking to cultivate **Empathy**. By the way, there is a difference between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is just feeling sorry for someone. But (compassionate) empathy is when we seek to feel the transgressor's feelings, by trying to identify with the pressures that made the person hurt us, so that we might have compassion for them in that. The reality is that hurt people hurt people. "People who hurt or offend us often do so because they have been conditioned by their (own past wounding experiences)."

Now, for the wrongdoers who do the worst of the worst - murder, abusers, and so on - empathizing with them may feel impossible. But we can at least aim for *sympathy* for how horribly damaged someone must be to be compelled to do these things.

Cultivating empathy can be enormously helpful in the journey toward Emotional Forgiveness, but also just Decisional Forgiveness (especially with those high dollar offenses). But we can feel bad for or even empathize with the perpetrator and still not be ready to forgive.

A

But to move us even further toward that is offering the **Altruistic Gift of Forgiveness**. Altruism just means doing something for the sake of another. And to get here, Worthington invites us to consider times when others have gifted forgiveness to us. Of course, the greatest of these is what today's parable fleshed out: how God has granted us forgiveness we never deserved. But if that still feels a little abstract, it can be helpful when we have ever harmed or offended someone we love and they later forgave us?

If we think about the guilt we felt and then consider how we felt when we were forgiven, might we be willing to give a selfless gift of forgiveness to those who have hurt us?⁷ But this is not meant to coerce us into forgiving - that doesn't work - but rather to give us a sense of gratitude that desires to gift to others what has been gifted to us.

These processes - of R, E, & A - can help us reach not only to the place of Decisional Forgiveness, if we aren't there yet, but also bring us the healing of Emotional Forgiveness, where our feelings toward that person will also begin to change from anger or disgust or fear to feelings of compassion, love, and even affection. I'm gonna bet that for all of us there have been occasions where we have Decisionally Forgiven someone, and perhaps even Emotionally, but then have had some of those old negative feelings toward the person come up that cause us to doubt whether we ever truly forgave at all. And that is what the final two processes can really help with: C & H.

C

While we may have believed there are wrongs we need to forgive over and over, Worthington insists that we only have to *Decisionally Forgive* one time for any offense. Again, Decisional Forgiveness is just giving up our right to get revenge or punish the person. But what can help to mitigate us doubting later on that we really forgave is to **Concretely Signify our Forgiveness** when we give it. This is doing something we can point to later that says, "see there, I really did forgive!" Of course, when we are able to actually tell someone we forgive them - and it is safe & appropriate to do so, this is the most powerful concrete action we can point to. But when that isn't possible, we might write down our forgiveness in some way - such as through a letter to the offender that we may never send, through journaling, even writing a poem or a song about it. Or we may mark the forgiveness by telling someone else we have forgiven the person: whether telling God, saying it aloud to ourself, or perhaps most powerfully telling another person, where a trusting confidant or clergy person.

H

There can be many triggers to feeling doubt we have forgiven someone, including if someone else hurts us in a similar way; if the *same person* hurts us again; recalling the memory of that hurt; or just being around that person. Or we may have sorta had to forgive a person for just being who they are, wicked in certain ways that we may only be able to insulate ourselves from so much. Worthington explains that if this causes us to lapse into hurt or resentment or hatred or even feel tempted to retaliate, just these *feelings* or the temptation do not nullify (our) Decisional Forgiveness. Rather, they just indicate that our present thoughts, emotions, or behavior are becoming inconsistent with the commitment we made, and a signal that we need to take efforts to hold onto our decision to forgive rather than abandoning it to retaliate. And a few ways we can do this are...

- By reminding ourselves that feeling pain over a remembered hurt is not unforgiveness.
- By refusing to indulge rumination by surrendering the resentment to God and setting our minds instead on the things of God
- Seek reassurance by re-visiting the source of our concrete sign of forgiveness

⁷ Worthington: "If the person is not ready to forgive, or if he or she is willing to forgive only part of the transgression, then we typically invite the person to take two actions. First, he or she should consider what the barriers are to forgiving fully. Does the offended person want a full apology? restitution? to see the transgressor humiliated? Is the offended person holding out for something that he or she knows is highly likely never to take place? Sometimes an honest examination of the barriers to full forgiveness can help the person hurdle those barriers. Second, if the person still really wants to forgive, we invite him or her to reconsider the steps of empathy, sympathy, compassion and love."

And, if we do all of that but still doubt we have forgiven, maybe it's an indication that while we did forgive some things the person did, we have failed to identify all the ways they hurt us, and need to return back to step R.

Well, I'm out of time, so would you pray with me?

God, thank you for your gift of forgiveness. Grow in us the desire to forgive. Show us what you would have us forgive. Build in us empathy toward those who have wronged. Expand in us a longing to pass on the gift of forgiveness that has been granted us so many times. And help us to fend off the devil's attempts to have us doubt we have forgiven or to lead us to abandon forgiveness through taking back up vengeance or holding that sin against them once again.

In the Name of the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit. Amen.

BONUS on Reconciliation (not covered in sermon)

Worthington contrasts Forgiveness with Reconciliation:

	Forgiveness	Reconciliation
Who?	One person	Two or more people
What?	Gift granted	Earned, not granted
How?	Emotional replacement	Behavioral replacement
Where?	Within your body	Within your relationship
How to?	Pyramid Model to REACH Forgiveness	Bridge to reconciliation

Worthington's Bridge to Reconciliation:

