

HELP! _____

I CAN'T FORGIVE

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CONTENTS

Introduction	4
1 Admit Your Hesitancy	10
2 Remember Your Story	24
3 Guard Your Heart	35
4 Fear Your Lord	44
Conclusion: Enact Your Forgiveness	52
Personal Application Projects	61
Where Can I Get More Help?	63

INTRODUCTION

Can you relate to this? The caller on the Christian radio program goes on for what seems like eternity, listing the many ways her father wronged her, years earlier. The husband of an unfaithful, albeit remorseful, wife confides with tears to his counselor that it is impossible to ever trust his wife and open his heart to her again. The pastor in the wake of a church split wonders how on earth he will ever find the strength to apply what he has for years preached on forgiveness.

Not a Solo but a Choir

What is the common refrain from this chorus of pained voices? “Help! We can’t forgive!” We must admit that the struggle to forgive someone who has wronged us is universal. Indeed, the fight to forgive is “common to man” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The factory default mode of every person is to be “unmerciful” (Romans 1:31). Sadly, this gravity of grudges is common in Christian circles as well. Jay Adams sees this clearly and writes with great honesty,

*Forgiveness is the oil that keeps the machinery of the Christian home and church running smoothly. **In a world where even those who have been declared perfect in Christ sin, there is much to forgive.** Christians who must work together closely find themselves denting each others' fenders, now and then taking out a taillight or two, and at times even having head-on collisions. Under such conditions, forgiveness is what keeps things from breaking down completely [emphasis added].¹*

Non-Forgivers Pay a High Price

If you are struggling with forgiving someone in your life, you are not alone ... even in the family

¹ Jay Adams, *From Forgiveness to Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God's Way* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 1994), 7.

of God, where believers are clearly encouraged to exist together in a culture of forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). Yet you must not allow the frequency of this struggle to be your excuse for being a non-forgiver. When Christians don't forgive, *it costs too much*. Just take a moment and consider what non-forgivers leave in their wake:

- » *Changed relationships*. They are never quite the same again, if left unreconciled. Proverbs is clear: "A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a citadel" (18:19).
- » *Destroyed friendships*. This goes one step further. Instead of merely changing the *feel* of a relationship, non-forgivers will often *cease to maintain* the relationship at all. It totally disappears from the map! There is no effort at contact, no concern for well-being, and no regret from the absence. You can count on it: "He who conceals a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends" (Proverbs 17:9).
- » *Ministry casualties*. Sometimes the carnage of bitterness results in the break of a ministry partnership. How ironic: ministries *united* around the gospel *divide*! Paul and Barnabas

were not immune to this (Acts 15:36–41). The two ministry-minded women Euodia and Syntyche were not immune to this (Philippians 4:2–3). Neither are we.

- » *Personal isolation.* Getting burned one too many times can find us running to a quiet room and a dark corner. You don't want to be around people anymore because they may hurt you again. Your *trust* in others is gone. You look with suspicion at people in your past, mistrust people in your present, and are cynical about people in the future. Just remember, though, that being alone is never safe (Proverbs 18:1).
- » *Withered fruit.* If you choose to be a non-forgiver, you will also pay the high price of stalling your growth into Christlikeness. Every believer enjoys the indwelling presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9–11; 2 Corinthians 3:18). The Spirit leaves an incredible footprint in each believer's life—"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). However, a non-forgiver stands *against* what the Spirit is working toward in his or her life.
- » *Untamed tongues.* You might be the *nicest*

person in the church lobby on Sunday, but if you refuse to forgive someone, you are the *most violent* person in the church lobby. Jesus said that violence starts in the heart with hatred (Matthew 5:21–22). Gossip and slander are birthed in bitterness.

- » *Unattractive witness.* All of the above yield in non-forgivers fruit that is inconsistent with the gospel's work in their lives as believers. This was Paul's concern as he deployed a church member to reconcile the two ladies in the Philippian church. He wrote, "I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life" (Philippians 4:3).

Read through the list again: changed relationships, destroyed friendships, ministry casualties, personal isolation, withered fruit, untamed tongues, and unattractive witness. This is serious stuff! It's serious enough to do something about it. Life is too short. The gospel is too powerful. God's glory is too important to be content with anything less than forgiveness.

Get Packed

This is why I want to invite you to take a trip with me. With our traction strong in the text of Matthew 18, I want us to walk the “Pathway to Forgiveness” with Jesus. There are five stops on our journey:

- » Stop 1: Admit your hesitancy
- » Stop 2: Remember your story
- » Stop 3: Guard your heart
- » Stop 4: Fear your Lord
- » Stop 5: Enact your forgiveness

I don't know who has wronged you. I don't know how far you must go to forgive someone. But I do know the way you will travel to get there. It's the same pathway our Lord outlined for his disciple Peter. It is timeless. It is sufficient. It is freeing. Here's my promise to you: if you complete this journey, you will find fresh resolve and abundant grace to be the forgiving disciple that Jesus Christ desires.

So let's begin our trip. Forgiving an offender in your life will be our final destination. Matthew 18 will serve as our GPS. Bring coffee.

1

Admit Your Hesitancy

It was another busy day of ministry. His reputation was spreading. Yet Christ's disciples were taking advantage of his growing popularity not for the sake of his kingdom but rather for their own little kingdoms. By the time we catch up with them in Matthew 18, they are crunched into a small home in Capernaum, probably Peter's home again (see Mark 1:29; 9:33). Their topic of discussion is not the grandeur of Jesus, the needs of the multitudes, the lessons they have been learning as disciples, or the plan to reach the world with the news of the King. Instead, it is summarized in a question they put to Jesus:

*Who then is greatest in the kingdom
of heaven?*

(18:1)

They are riding his coattails to greatness and power.

Jesus Kicks His Disciples

Christ loved them and loves us enough to save us from our own lust for winning and supremacy. He alone wins, and he alone is supreme (Colossians 1:15-18). Whenever we find ourselves wanting to grab what Christ alone enjoys, we are in danger. On this particular day in Capernaum, Jesus sets out to save his disciples from their own agendas of greatness. To do so, he reaches for the last person in the room that these guys would consider to be great:

And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me."

(18:2-5)

Mark adds a detail in his account (Mark 9:36):

Taking a child, He set him before

them, and taking him in His arms...
[emphasis added].

Jammed into a room full of ambitious, glory-seeking disciples, Jesus looks past them all to a young child, calls him to himself, takes him into his arms, points to him and says, in essence, “If you want to be *great*, be a childlike disciple like this one I’m holding.” He then goes on to explain how precious all childlike disciples (of all ages) are in his sight. Specifically, he is very protective of them, and warns the disciples against leading them into sin (vv. 6–11). Whenever any of his childlike disciples do stray into sin, he personally pursues them to restore them (vv. 12–14). Most often he reaches for them through the loving means of his church (vv. 15–20). The disciples want greatness? What could be greater than contentedly living under the care of the Great Shepherd ... like a child?

Of course, it is Peter who speaks up first in the living room that day. His mouth is always in motion just a few moments before his thinking! He has been tracking closely with the Lord’s words, especially the teaching about Christ’s concern over believers who sin against one another (v. 15). He asks Jesus,

Lord, how often shall my brother sin
against me and I forgive him? Up to
seven times?

(v. 21)

Peter's question is incredible and very revealing. In this one question, Peter gives expression to every believer's major obstacle to granting forgiveness to those who have sinned against them to any degree. We can make two observations about Peter's words. Track carefully with me: Do you see yourself here?

First, Peter was being *generous* with his question. "Why seven times?" you may wonder. We need to give Peter a little credit here. He had already been taught by Jesus to be forgiving.

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

(6:14-15)

In reaching for the number seven, Peter was actually more than doubling the "going rate" of his day. The Jewish rabbis at that time believed

that God required someone to forgive an offender only three times (based on Amos 1-2). Peter was being quite generous, sincerely thinking that he was obeying Jesus' teaching. But before you take Peter's measurement for a new halo, let me point out one more detail.

Second, Peter was being *hesitant* with his question. Even though he used a larger number than those around him, don't miss the fact that he *was still keeping count*. Today, we would say that he played the game while watching the scoreboard. He still wanted limits in place as to how many times a person could sin against him. He knew nothing about what Paul would one day write:

Love ... does not take into account a wrong suffered.

(1 Corinthians 13:4-5)

Christlike love doesn't fixate on the scoreboard in friendships, marriages, families, or ministries.

The Risks of Forgiveness

The first stop on your Pathway to Forgiveness is to admit that you too are hesitant to forgive.

We all are—it's our default setting. While as a Christian you are saved from the penalty of being “unmerciful” (Romans 1:31), you still feel its gravity in your heart. Why? Honesty here will determine the success of the rest of your journey. There are basically four common fears that lobby against your forgiving someone when he or she asks you to do so.

THE FEAR OF INSINCERITY

This fear cries out, “How can I know this person is sincere?” Perhaps the offender in your life has a long pattern of wronging you in a particular manner. Perhaps you have been hurt by others too deeply too often, even after they had asked your forgiveness multiple times. Perhaps the offender is faking a remorseful spirit. How *do* you know that the offender is sincere? The fact is, you *don't* know. Proverbs is painfully honest:

*A plan in the heart of a man is like
deep water.*

(20:5; see also Psalm 64:6)

The good news, though, is that you don't have to answer for *the offender's sincerity*; you only have to

answer for *your obedience*.²

THE FEAR OF VULNERABILITY

This fear reasons, “If I get soft, I’ll get hurt.” Is this a possibility? Yes. Is this a *bad* thing? No, because it will place you in good company with others whose obedience left them vulnerable to further hurts. Jesus had already taught this to Peter earlier:

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy ... Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

(Matthew 5:7, 11-12)

Being a merciful person does make you an easy target who stands out from the rest, but you will stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the likes of Jeremiah, David, Jesus, and Paul!

² True repentance will bring forth fruit in time (2 Corinthians 7:10-11). If the offender is a believer, the church may be needed to prod him or her toward fruit (Matthew 18:15-20).

THE FEAR OF CHANGE

The fact is, you may have gotten comfortable *not liking* the offender. You have figured out a way to “do life” without intersecting with this person, looking him or her in the eye, or being concerned for his or her well-being. In your comfort, you have resisted the idea of forgiveness because it will require that something comfortable become uncomfortable. But you must remember that Christ has Christlikeness as his agenda for your life (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18). The change he requires of you is *freeing* you to live out love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control toward the very person who has wounded you (Galatians 5:22–23). Wow! That’s *grace*.

THE FEAR OF EXPOSURE

It is possible that you either participated in the sin with the offender or reacted in sin to the offender. Beginning the transaction of forgiveness would bring to light the repentance that is required on your part for your words, actions, and attitudes. Up to this point, most people in your life who know of the wrong deed believe it was totally the offender’s fault. Proverbs 18:17 is brutally honest:

*The first to plead his case seems right,
until another comes and examines him.*

The fact also remains that you could be wrong in your understanding of the offense as well.

*Do not go out hastily to argue your case;
otherwise, what will you do in the end,
when your neighbor humiliates you?*

(Proverbs 25:8)

Matthew Henry wrote long ago, “There is a proneness in our corrupt nature to stint ourselves in that which is good, and to be afraid of doing too much in religion, particularly of forgiving too much, though we have so much forgiven us.”³

These four fears paralyze countless believers to hold back in forgiving. Yet I suggest that all these fears have one common denominator: *pride*. Somehow, somewhere, we find a way to make an offense all about *us*. So we keep count. When we move from Peter’s question in Matthew 18:21 to Jesus’ reply in verse 22, we not only change *speakers*; we also change *worldviews*.

³ Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 5 (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, [n.d.]), 263.

The Requirement of Christ

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you,
up to seven times, but up to seventy
times seven.”

(Matthew 18:22)

With these words and numbers Jesus is emphatically stating that his childlike disciples are not to keep count at all! His point is not that we should count up to 490 individual offenses by every possible offender. That would be impossible and ridiculous! Rather, it is that we put the calculator away and stop staring at the scoreboard. *He is indicating that it is possible to live on a higher plane than bitterness.*

At this point it is helpful to look at a very important parallel passage found in Luke 17:3-4, where Jesus teaches his disciples,

Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, “I repent,” forgive him.

See his point? Jesus is teaching us that when it comes to others sinning against us, it is not to be a matter of *points* (i.e., keeping score). Rather, it is to be a matter of *posture*—being ready to forgive whenever the transaction of forgiveness presents itself to us, even if it is the same sin seven times in one day. The disciples clearly got the point, as evidenced by their response in the very next verse:

Increase our faith!

(v. 5)

It takes faith to be vulnerable, but the place of vulnerability is the safest place to be.

The Importance of Good Posture

What can we know about this posture of standing ready to forgive that Jesus prescribes for his disciples? A fourfold description will help you understand what he means.

1. *It Is COMMANDED*

Jesus' words are not a suggestion.

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that

your Father who is in heaven will also
forgive you your transgressions.

(Mark 11:25)

Our stance is to be ready to forgive instead of
ready to take revenge.

Do not say, “Thus I shall do to him as he
has done to me; I will render to the man
according to his work.”

(Proverbs 24:29)

And this command to forgive is given by a forgiving
God, a fact that Jesus highlights when he says,

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

(Luke 6:36)

2. *IT MUST BE CONSTANT*

Specifically, being ready to forgive is what you
carry into offenses, not what you *work up* after an
offense. It is the posture of your heart before the
offense even happens. Proverbs 19:11 states,

A man’s discretion makes him slow to
anger, and it is his glory to overlook

a transgression.

(See also 16:32)

In the event that someone sins against you, you are armed and ready to retaliate with *good* (Romans 12:21).

3. *IT MUST BE CULTIVATED*

The reality is that this stance *must* be developed in the life of every believer, and it can *only* be grown in the soil of trials and offenses. James writes,

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

(James 1:2-4; see also Romans 5:3-4)

It's worth the pain and vulnerability because the mature fruit will be amazing (Galatians 5:22-23).

4. *IT IS CHRISTLIKE*

The One who was more wronged than anyone else said these words from his cross:

Father, forgive them; for they do not
know what they are doing.

(Luke 23:34)

Though the crowd he was looking at were not regenerated in that moment at the cross but only later at Pentecost, Christ's heart posture was clear. Stephen (Acts 7:60) and Paul (2 Timothy 4:16) also sounded like their Lord during their ultimate trials. We have to ask a very serious question: Is it possible to grow in Christlikeness *at all* if we do not have a posture that is ready to forgive?

This first stop on our journey is a difficult one. Yet it is a necessary one. It explains to us why we have never gotten past this point before in forgiving others. It becomes our opportunity to deal with our own hearts and repent. And then the journey continues.