

We aim to reconcile people unto God through Christ

SERMON TITLE:	BE LIKE CHRIST – THE BEAUTY OF FORGIVENESS
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Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness is a word we both love and hate. When we think of what God does with or sin when we confess it we realize the tremendous grace of God. When God forgives our sins it's like He presses the delete button on His Heavenly computer. And when He forgives us He doesn't send our sins to a temporary recycle bin just in case He needs to remind us of them. They're totally removed from the hard drive! That's what we love about the word forgiveness.

But there's a facet of forgiveness that's more difficult for us to deal with. And that facet arises when God asks us to forgive those that trespass against us.

(Illustration) It reminds me of the story of the man that loved dogs. He went in front of his house and began pouring a walkway to the street. As he was nearly finished a dog trounced right through the middle of the wet cement. Since he was a dog lover he overlooked the dog's inability to recognize wet cement so he calmly re-smoothed the walkway. Knowing it could happen again he placed rope along each side of the walkway. But a few minutes later the dog pounced over the rope and again splashed through the cement. His patience dwindled but he didn't retaliate; he just chased off the dog with some harsh words. Again, he smoothed out the concrete and incredibly enough, the dog sneaked behind him and leaped flat-belly into the middle of the walkway. The man stormed into the house, snatched his gun, when outside and shot the dog! His neighbour witnessed everything that happened and rushed over to his friend and said: "I thought you loved dogs." The man responded, "I do love dogs. But that's in the abstract. I hate dogs in the concrete."

I wonder if we treat forgiveness the same way. Do we dislike forgiveness when God asks us, in a concrete fashion, to forgive others?

The reason we struggle so much with forgiving others is because it runs contrary to our human nature! When someone offends us there's a natural tendency to resent and often retaliate! That's the sin nature taking over; and forgiveness is contrary to the sin nature. That's why Shakespeare said "to err is human but to forgive is divine."

It's much easier to bear a grudge than implement the law of grace and forgive someone. It's much easier to brood and make people sweat than to release the offense and implement mercy.

God possesses attributes that we'll never be able to imitate. He's described as being omnipotent, omniscient, sovereign, and transcendent and we can never be like that.

But there are some attributes of God that we can share. God is love and we can allow this virtue to flow through us. He is merciful, longsuffering, and kind and He wants us to demonstrate these qualities. And then God is forgiving and He certainly wants us to follow that!

There are reasons God commanded us to extend forgiveness. Believe it or not, God isn't trying to persecute us; He's trying to bless us!

1. Here is the most important reason the Bible commands us to forgive: God is prevented from forgiving us when we refuse to forgive others.

Jesus said: *"if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. (15) But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

2. But there is another reason God wants you to forgive. People that don't forgive others are plagued with misery. Unforgiveness prevents spiritual rest; hinders worship; and impedes prayers. You simply won't be able to shake a constant inner chewing if you bear grudges and refuse to forgive!

(Illustration) The story is told of Ron Cotton being imprisoned in 1984 for two rapes he didn't commit. The court sentenced him to fifty-four years. He was filled with anger and hatred toward prosecutors, police, and his accusers. But he was born again in 1987 and began to change. He realized a commitment to Christ meant he should release his bitterness, so he forgave everyone involved. In 1998 he won a new trial and the DNA evidence convinced the court of his innocence. But he had already won his freedom in 1987. His soul was freed the moment he forgave.

3. A third reason we should forgive is because unforgiveness can cause physical sickness.

James 5:16 says

"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

Did you know that modern medicine has discovered that a bitter spirit can seriously affect our health? Doctors tell us that unforgiveness disturbs the nervous system, hinders the digestive process, and heats the blood in the heart so that the entire body is first overheated and then falls into depression. That's not to mention how unforgiveness sours our character and distracts from our work.

But here's the beauty of forgiving others: When you forgive God allows you to radiate His divine nature. You become more like your Creator; you become more Christ-like.

I love the way Jesus took the opportunity to teach the beauty of forgiveness to His apostles. Peter and the apostles gathered around Him and asked:

Matt 18:21

"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

I think Peter may have sincerely thought he had it figured out when he calculated the number of times we should forgive. But Jesus shocked them with His answer.

The Rabbis taught that forgiving someone three times was sufficient. Nothing in the Jewish Talmud required people to forgive more than that. Knowing that, Peter doubled that number and then added one extra! He figured he was really impressing Jesus. But Jesus answered: *"not seven times, but seventy times seven."* That's 490 times! The point Jesus made was: 'Don't count, Peter, just forgive!'

This is the very point Jesus made in *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*. Jesus described two servants that owed their master money. One servant owed mere pocket-change, while the other owed 10,000 talents. Jesus just said "10,000 talents" without regard to whether He meant silver or gold. Since He was illustrating an inconceivable deficit He probably meant the gold.

10,000 talents of gold equates to 9,000,000 ounces. Gold today sells for about R7000 an ounce. That means 10,000 talents of gold equals approximately 63trillion rand! An astronomical debt that's impossible for anybody to pay!

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

John 3:16 NKJV

Consider these two debts another way. One man owed about R140. Something that could easily be carried in his pocket. You don't even feel the weight of a R20 note in your wallet. But 10,000 talents of gold would involve 17,200 people carrying thirty 13.6 kg of gold each.

When God asks men to forgive each other, it amounts to about a R140 offense. But when God forgives men of their offenses toward Him, it equates to an R63 trillion offense. Since God so freely forgives us of our infinite debt, we should seek to reflect His image and forgive our debtors.

There will always be offenses in life. We're going to get insulted, betrayed, and persecuted. Nobody lives without absorbing the shock of offenses. And the person that never feels the throb of annoyance or the hot flash of anger is dead! God made us emotional creatures!

It's alright to get mad. It's not alright to let *"the sun go down upon your wrath!"*

It's alright to be hurt and disappointed because someone betrayed you. It's not alright to let that hurt and disappointment settle into your heart and fester into a *"root of bitterness"* and resentment.

It's alright to be the object of scorn because Jesus said: *"It's inevitable that offenses will come."* It's not alright to retaliate. Romans 12:19 says: *"Do not take revenge . . . but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."*

The Bible says, *"Give no place to the devil."* If you let animosity, resentment, or anger find a resting place in your heart, you're giving *"place to the devil."*

Maybe during this sermon somebody has been replaying a really crushing offense that's seemed impossible to release. You would like to settle it but you don't know how. I want to tell you a principle of forgiveness. Forgiveness is like many other principles in the Bible. It takes the love and power of the Holy Spirit working within you to make forgiveness possible. Think about it like this:

- You couldn't get saved without God's intervention.
- You can't get healed without His power.
- You can't manifest the fruit of the Spirit without the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said: *"without me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5).

And just as you can't be saved, healed, or manifest the fruit of the Spirit without God's power, you can't forgive without Him. It takes the Holy Spirit to enact each of God's commands—including forgiveness!

That's why Jesus said in Matthew 18:35 that we should *"forgive your brother from your heart."* And that's why real unpolled forgiveness comes from the depths of your heart—something that only God's power can help you do! *And when you truly forgive it reflects a genuine work of grace within your life.*

Forgive and Forget?

Do you know what we really struggle with about the forgiveness process? Whenever we honestly try to extend forgiveness to our offenders and think the issue is resolved, it somehow has a way of popping up its head later — maybe even months or years later. The episode gets mentally replayed again and again.

You see, what we need to understand about forgiveness is this: Nobody but God can "forgive and forget!" It doesn't mean you're haven't forgiven somebody just because your memory is stirred about the situation. It means you should simply reaffirm your commitment to forgive and move on. (That's where forgiving seventy times seven comes into play.)

(Illustration) In 1974 ten-year old Chris Carrier was kidnapped and burned with cigarettes, stabbed, shot in the head, and abandoned. Amazingly, he recovered and only suffers from blindness in his left eye. Twenty-two years

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later David McAllister, a seventy-seven year-old, confessed to the crime from a nursing home. Chris became a Christian at age thirteen and later entered the ministry. Until he was saved he had recurring nightmares and couldn't sleep through the night. But Chris found peace the moment of his conversion. That's why he ministered to his abductor everyday in the nursing home in the final days of his life.

Chris said: "it would be selfish not to share that same peace with David McAllister."

Do you see what forgiveness does? *It reflects a genuine work of grace within our lives.*

Conclusion

Before I finish this message, let me give you a couple of tips on how to avoid an unforgiving spirit.

1. One, don't be easily offended.

So what if Aunt Maude didn't call when you were sick. Maybe Aunt Maude didn't know you were sick! And if she knew, maybe she had problems you were unaware of.

Maybe nobody noticed your new hairstyle. Just be thankful you have hair!

Maybe nobody checked on you when you were absent.

There are 1001 reasons to get offended in life. You can avoid offenses when you concentrate more on God's Word than you concentrate on offenses. Psalm 119:165 says: "*Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.*"

2. You can avoid an unforgiving spirit by realizing how important forgiveness is to the Christian Faith.

Remember, it's the crowning jewel of your faith and *it reflects a genuine work of grace in your life.*