

# Keeping Forgiveness in Focus

by Josh Blackmer

Forgiveness is hard. It is easier to focus on the hurt that the offender caused to us or others. It is easy to focus on the pain until it sickens us and brings us to the dark places of hatred and contempt. It is there that we feel helpless and paralyzed by the venom upon which we have been feeding. How do we learn to forgive and come out from under the weight of all the hurt that has been done to us? We must change our focus.

Peter asked Jesus the question, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (Matt. 18:21). The religious elite of the day stopped at three. Peter added four. Perhaps trying out this concept of love his Master taught. Jesus shows him that it is bigger than that by saying, "seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:22). This doesn't mean 490 times but rather as much as it takes.

The parable of the unmerciful servant is told to help us change our focus. God is portrayed as a king that was settling debts with his servants. One in particular owed an amount that he could never repay. The command was given to sell the servant, his family and all his possessions to repay the debt. However, the king showed mercy at the request of the slave. The slave then went out and threw a fellow slave in prison over a debt that was nothing in comparison to that which he had owed. When the King found out about it he said to the slave, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?" (Matt. 18:32-33). Jesus then lays out the lesson very plainly. "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matt. 18:35).

You may still be wondering, "How do we do that with all the hurt?" The wicked servant was focused on what others "owed him." What they should do to get back in good standing with you. That breeds more pain. Our focus should be on how great a debt we have been forgiven.

This parable puts these passages into perspective. "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you" (Matt. 6:14). "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). Please understand that you can forgive someone but still be in a situation of rebuilding trust. You don't have to put that person in a situation where they can hurt or stumble again. If someone has "sinned against you" there is a responsibility we have to work towards reconciliation (Matt. 18:15-17). Forgiveness is still hard. Thankfully, we can see it exemplified in God's love for us.

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