

INTRODUCTION

People often speak about a certain kind of gift as a “gift that keeps on giving.” It’s used often, but do you know its origin? In 1924, Victor Talking Machines trademarked that phrase to promote the sale of their talking machines, later called phonographs. This was before cassettes tapes, and CDs. By giving a phonograph as a gift, it would keep on giving enjoyment as the owners could hear music for years. Today I’m not going to talk about a gift that keeps on giving, I’m going to talk about a gift that keeps on FORGIVING—and that gift is God’s grace.

We love to talk about how God has forgiven us, but we sometimes choke on the idea of forgiving others. A pastor friend of mine tells the story of driving along as his two sons fought in the backseat. He looked in the rearview mirror just in time to see the foot of his 10-year-old connect squarely with the jaw of the 7-year-old, who started screaming in pain. The pastor pulled the car off the road and got his older son out and said, “Why did you do that to your brother?” He said, “Because he keeps hitting me and won’t stop.” The father said, “Son, why can’t you just forgive him?” His son said, “Dad, why should I forgive him when I know he’s going to keep on hitting me?” The pastor said that was a question he had often been asked by adults, and he still didn’t have a good answer. The world’s answer is simple: Payback time! But as Christians, we’re told to turn the other cheek; we’re told to forgive. But sometimes forgiveness is very difficult when we know the person who needs our forgiveness is going to keep on hitting us.

In this passage Jesus shares a powerful parable about forgiveness.

Matthew 18:21-35. “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?’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven [or “seven times seventy”] times. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is a like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, 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. The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.”

Wow, isn’t this a great story of forgiveness? Let’s talk about that today. But wait a minute, there’s more. I wish the story ended here. It would be much more pleasant. But I suppose we should read the rest of the story!

“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. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ But he refused. Instead he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘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 handed 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 your heart."

Actually, Peter's question demonstrated his attempt to be magnanimous. The Old Testament standard was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth—no forgiveness. But the rabbis had adjusted that standard to say that a good Jew would forgive someone three times, but no more. If someone stomped on your toe once, forgive them. They stomped a second and third time, forgive them. But when they stomp the fourth time: Pow! Right in the kisser!

So Peter offered to double that standard of three and add one for good measure. Seven times, Lord? Jesus answered by saying that forgiveness isn't about counting; it's about character. There should be no limits to forgiveness. Then Jesus tells the parable to illustrate this truth.

In order to keep the characters straight; I've made up some names. The King, of course, represents God. One day He will demand a full accounting for the debts all people owe Him as their Creator. One servant arrives; whom we'll call Hardhearted Harry. The royal auditors have been doing their job so the king rolls out a long scroll revealing Harry owes an astronomical amount of money. The word Jesus used could mean \$10 million or \$10 trillion, because it was a word to describe an amount beyond belief. Harry fell on his knees and said, "Please give me some time, and I'll pay you back." The kindly king knew it was a lie, but he took the scroll and wrote the word "FORGIVEN" across the endless column of numbers. Now if I had been telling this parable, I would have ended the story there because everyone lived happily ever after. But Jesus often added uncomfortable twists to conclude His parables.

In the next scene, Harry leaves the king and happen across a fellow servant; we'll call him Debtor Dan. Hardhearted Harry grabs poor Dan by the neck and says, "Hey Dan, you'd better pay me that \$20 you owe me." Dan does the same thing Harry did with the king. He fell to his knees and begged him saying, "Be patient with me and I'll pay you back." But Hardhearted Harry refused. He had Dan thrown into prison. The other servants saw what happened and asked one another, "What's up with that?" When they told the king, he summoned Harry and said, "You wicked, lowlife snake. I cancelled your astronomical debt, so shouldn't you have cancelled Dan's tiny debt?" Before Harry could respond, the king handed Harry over to be tormented until he could pay back the debt, which was never. And then Jesus adds the moral to the story: "This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother, from your heart." Ouch!

I want to make three general applications of this parable, and then I want to give you some practical steps on HOW to forgive someone.

1. GOD OFFERS TO FORGIVE A DEBT TOO LARGE FOR ME TO EVER REPAY

Harry owed the king a debt so large he could never repay it. Did you notice in the parable Harry got on his knees and begged, but he never said, "Forgive me?" He said, "Give me more time and I'll pay you off." The king knew this was impossible, so Jesus said the king "had pity" on the servant. It's a word that literally meant the king was moved with compassion. It was the nature of the king to forgive, not to punish, so he offered forgiveness for which Harry never asked.

The only reason God offers us forgiveness is because of His love for us, not because we deserve it or we earn it. He offered forgiveness at Calvary before we even had enough sense to ask him for it. Do you realize what an act of love and compassion it is for God to offer to forgive our sins?

How often do you sin? Don't answer out loud. Remember, sin is not only doing the wrong thing, it's also failing to do the right thing. So imagine you're a fairly righteous person and you only sin eight times a day; that's about one sin every two hours you're awake. That's almost 3,000 sins a year. If you started willfully sinning when you were about six years old and kept it up until age 77 that's a sum of over 200,000 sins. What if God were to roll out a scroll with all 200,000 of those sins and say, "Here's your sin bill, what are you going to do about it?"

I'm not just making up this scenario; the Bible addresses this very picture. We read in Psalm 130:3 "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"

Did you notice Hardhearted Harry first said, "Give me time, Master and I'll pay you back."? What a joke. But people do the same with God and their sin list. They say, "Lord, give me a chance. I'll clean up my act. I'll be nice to my family. I'll pay my taxes. Let's bargain about this debt, Lord." Nope, that will never work.

The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:23-24)

In the parable, when the king wrote off Harry's \$10 million debt, that meant the king had to eat that debt himself. In other words, he was \$10 million poorer. He absorbed Harry's debt. That was a costly decision for the king. And when Jesus forgives your sin debt, He literally absorbs your sin debt into His body. 1 Peter 2:24 says "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree." Salvation is free to us, but it costs God the life of His precious son. There was a huge debt, but as the song says, "Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, but He washed it white as snow."

2. I DON'T FORGIVE TO EARN GOD'S FORGIVENESS; I FORGIVE BECAUSE I HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN

Some people misread this parable and think IF they forgive others, then God will forgive them. They have the cart before the horse. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught the disciples a model prayer in which we are to pray, "And forgive us our debts, as also have forgiven our debtors." Then He said clearly in Matthew 6:15, "If you do not forgive men their sins, your Heavenly Father will not forgive your sins." But Jesus wasn't saying that we forgive others so that God WILL forgive us, because that would be EARNING salvation and salvation is a gift of grace, not something you earn. It will help to remember that the Sermon on the Mount is not telling lost people how to be saved; it is a code of conduct for everyone who is already a part of the Kingdom of God. It is written to people who have already been forgiven. You can argue about which came first the chicken or the egg, but you can't argue about which comes first—my forgiving others, or God forgiving me. I forgive *because* God has first forgiven me.

Forgiveness is not an option for a true Child of God. Paul writes, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:31-32)

Harry's problem was the same that many people still have. When it comes to God we want grace, but when it comes to the way others treat us we want justice. Jesus was giving a serious warning to those who claim to be forgiven but refuse to forgive others; they are deceiving themselves. Hard-hearted Harry doesn't represent a Christian who was once forgiven and then lost his salvation when he refused to forgive Dan. He represents someone who was offered forgiveness, but refused to allow forgiveness to humble them and change their heart into a heart that forgives others. God cannot and will not forgive anyone who has a hard, unrepentant heart. And we reveal the true nature of our hearts by how we treat others.

3. UNFORGIVENESS TORMENTS ME IN A PRISON OF BITTERNESS

Hard-hearted Harry was thrown into prison for his own unforgiveness. Before you criticize the king, remember, Harry had been given a get-out-of-jail-free card by the king. But when he saw Dan he said, "Go directly to jail, do not pass go, do not collect \$200." In that moment of unforgiveness, Harry tore up his get-out-jail-free-card. He really put himself in the hands of the tormentors. He wanted to punish Dan, and ended up punishing himself. And that's what a spirit of bitterness and unforgiveness still does, it torments you.

Warren Wiersbe comments of this parable by writing: "The world's darkest prison is the prison of an unforgiving heart. When we refuse to forgive others we only imprison ourselves and compound our suffering. Some of the most miserable people I've met have been those who would not forgive others. They dream about punishing the one who wronged them, and don't realize that they are only punishing themselves." (*Meet Your King*, p. 131)

The Bible warns about how bitterness can imprison you. Hebrews 12:15 says, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." Ray Stedman wrote about a mean old woman that he once had the misfortune of knowing. He wrote: "A woman in her eighties told me that, fifty years before, her aunt had said something insulting to her, and this woman had never forgiven her. Fifty years later she could recount the insult in precise detail, and as she talked about it, she felt all the same bitterness, anger, and resentment welling up within her as when it originally occurred. It was no wonder to me that, by this time, she had become a bitter, crotchety, quarrelsome, unhappy woman who could find no happiness in life whatsoever. She was still in the hands of the torturers fifty years later."

Throughout the years of being a pastor, I've had many people say, "Pastor, I WANT to forgive this person, I just don't know HOW." Or they were troubled because they weren't sure if they had actually forgiven someone or not. So I want to share with you three simple promises you make to someone when you forgive them. They are the same promises God makes to us when He forgives us.

A. When I forgive someone, I promise: I do not want to personally hurt you

The word "forgive" literally means, "to release." Harry grabbed Dan by the throat, and sometimes we do that mentally or emotionally with someone who has hurt us. When you forgive them, you let them go from the personal desire you have to punish them. Sometimes people ask, well what about someone who has committed a crime against me? You can forgive them, and still allow the law to do their God-ordained job of punishing the evildoer. But you give up your right to be the policeman, judge, jury, and executioner when someone has hurt you. You release them because you do not want to personally exact revenge.

B. When I forgive someone, I promise: I will not allow this incident to stand between us

True forgiveness wipes the slate clean and a broken relationship can be restored. That's what happens when God forgives us. But forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Forgiveness requires one who offers grace. And reconciliation requires two (grace given and accepted). It's true of God's grace. God unilaterally offers grace and forgiveness to everyone on this planet because He wants to be reconciled with every sinner. But does that mean everyone on the planet will accept His grace? Sadly, no.

In a perfect situation, someone who has hurt you will come and ask for your forgiveness. But that is not a requirement. You don't have to wait for them to come crawling to you to beg you for forgiveness, you can choose to unilaterally forgive them. Hopefully they will accept your forgiveness and your relationship will be restored.

The Bible says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends." (Romans 12:18) The Bible doesn't say you *can* live at peace with all people, that's why it says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on YOU, live at peace with everyone." Sadly, there are some people who reject your willingness to live at peace with them. So, go ahead and forgive them, and move on. Forgiving does not make what they did okay, it makes you okay.

C. When I forgive someone, I promise: I will not bring up the incident again

One husband told a friend, "When my wife and I argue, she gets historical." His friend said, "Do you mean hysterical?" The husband said, "No, she gets historical—she brings up all the mistakes I've ever made." When you forgive someone, don't keep resurrecting the incident.

Have you ever heard anyone say, "Well, I'll forgive you, but I won't forget about what you did."? Let me translate that for you: "I WON'T forgive you." As we get older we all forget things. But there are some people who have a perfect memory when it comes to recalling how people mistreated or hurt them.

It's like the story I heard about an elephant drinking at the watering hole. He saw a turtle and walked over and swatted the turtle across the watering hole with his trunk. A nearby giraffe asked, "Why did you do that?" The elephant said, "Twenty seven years ago that same turtle bit my truck and I still have the scar." The giraffe said, "Wow, you have a great memory." The elephant said, "Yes, in fact I have turtle recall."

Isn't it interesting we forget all kinds of things, but we usually have total recall when it comes to how other people mistreated us? Forgetting is passive, but forgiving is an active process in which you make a conscious choice not to remember.

The Bible never says God *forgets* our sins. He's a lot older than us, but His memory is perfect. I would think that it would be impossible for someone who is Omniscient to forget anything. Instead, the Bible says He *chooses* to remember them no more. God promises: "I am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sin no more." (Isaiah 43:25) When He forgives us, He simply chooses not to remember our sins anymore.

The great Baptist preacher from London, Charles Spurgeon, once wrote: "Forgive and let it go. When you bury a mad dog, don't leave his tail above the ground." That's what forgiveness is; you bury the deed in your subconscious and refuse to go digging for it.

If you ask Him, God will help remove that insult or injury from your memory. Amy Carmichael, missionary to China, wrote: "If I say, 'Yes, I forgive, but I cannot forget,' as though the God who twice a day washes all the sands on all the shores of all the world could not wash such memories from my mind, then I know nothing of Calvary's love."

CONCLUSION

It's so easy to talk about how someone else forgives others, but we must make it personal. Will you ask the Lord if there is anyone who you are still harboring bitterness toward? Will you make the choice today to forgive them so you can free yourself from the self-inflicted prison of resentment?

Have you noticed some DVDs contain movies where you can choose an alternate ending to the original movie? I'd like to propose an alternative ending to this parable for each of us. Because the truth is that we are all in this parable. Each of us is a hard-hearted Harry or Harriet. God has forgiven us a debt we could never pay. Jesus absorbed our sin debt on the cross. And because we have been forgiven, we cannot dare hold back forgiveness to others.

Let me re-write a new ending to this parable that reflects the positive truth Jesus is teaching.

As the king began the settlement, hard-hearted Harry, who owed him ten million dollars, was brought to him. Since Harry was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. At this Harry fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' Harry's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. Here's the alternate ending.

But when Harry went out, he saw Debtor Dan, one of his fellow servants who owed him \$20. Dan fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' But Hard-hearted Harry was now changed-hearted Harry, so like his master, Harry had pity on Dan and said, "Dan what you owe me is tiny compared to the debt I owed that was just forgiven. So, my friend, I forgive your debt." Then the master called Harry in. "You faithful servant! Good for

you! You canceled Dan's small debt just as I canceled your massive debt. Changed-hearted Harry, I want to promote you to be my chief servant."

And if the story had ended that way Jesus would have said: "This is how my Heavenly Father will bless each of you who forgive your brother from a heart that has been changed by my forgiveness."

Which of the two endings reflect your life? It all depends on whether your heart has been transformed by God's grace. Without a doubt, God's grace is the gift that keeps on forgiving.

OUTLINE

1. GOD OFFERS TO FORGIVE A DEBT TOO LARGE FOR ME TO EVER REPAY

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." *Romans 3:23-24*

2. I DON'T FORGIVE TO EARN GOD'S FORGIVENESS; I FORGIVE BECAUSE I HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." *Ephesians 4:31-32*

3. UNFORGIVENESS TORMENTS ME IN A PRISON OF BITTERNESS

"See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." *Hebrews 12:15*

When I forgive someone, I promise:

A. I do not want to personally hurt you

B. I will not allow this incident to stand between us

C. I will not bring up the incident again

"I am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sin no more." *Isaiah 43:25*

"If I say, 'Yes, I forgive, but I cannot forget,' as though the God who twice a day washes all the sands on all the shores of all the world could not wash such memories from my mind, then I know nothing of Calvary's love." — *Amy Carmichael, Missionary to China*

— MESSAGE DISCLAIMER —

These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations and/or use material that is not under copyright. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material stimulate your own Spirit-driven preparation—*it is never intended as a substitute for your own study of Scripture.*

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, it is good scholarship (not to mention the right thing to do) to cite the source. If you are teaching, you may simply preface your remarks by saying something like: **“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”** This simple citation also applies to any work you may publish, too, as I routinely publish my material in books that are protected by copyright.

This careful effort on your part may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you. I trust you will find that additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners.

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



*David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas*