

The Psychology of Forgiveness: According to Jesus

1. Warm-up question: When you were a kid, did you ever get caught in that act of doing something really bad? What happened? And how did you feel in that moment?
2. It's not just kids who do bad things. We all do. A Columbia University study concluded that the average person is carrying 13 secrets, five of which they've never told a soul.
 - a. Jeff asked us to imagine our five greatest secret regrets being flashed up on the screen in front of the congregation. If that were to happen, how would you feel? What word comes to mind to capture how you'd feel?
 - b. Looking back across life, we've all done things we're ashamed of that we wish we could take back. We're not going to ask any of us to reveal one of our five greatest secrets. But is there something you've done that you really wish you could take back that you'd be comfortable sharing?
 - c. The Bible says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23. Some churches specialize in harping on sin and using guilt to manipulate. As a result, we sometimes shy away from the subject. But the Bible does teach the importance of having a healthy appreciation of our sin. What do you think that looks like? What's the difference between a healthy and unhealthy appreciation of our sin?
3. Stories like the ones we discussed above remind us of our own desperate need for forgiveness and of how sweet it is to be forgiven. In her book "Wounded by People," Anne Graham Lotz tells about a time when she was 16 and wrecked the family car. To her utter amazement, her father (Billy Graham) responded by telling her how much he loved her, assuring her that the car could be fixed, and then said, "You're going to be a better driver because of this." And that was the end of it; she was forgiven. Oh, the feeling!
 - a. In your own life, when have you felt the incredible relief and joy of being forgiven by someone? Tell us what happened and how it felt.
 - b. Archbishop Desmond Tutu's favorite Bible verse was Romans 5:8, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Tutu said, "[That verse] sums up the Gospel wonderfully. We think we have to impress God so that God could love us. But God says, 'No, you're loved already, even at your worst.'" Do you believe that in your heart of hearts – that God desperately loves you even when you're at your worst? Explain your answer.
4. This week's parable is all about being forgiven and forgiving. So let's read Matthew 18:23-35, as printed on p. 3.

- a. The first servant in this story represents you and me. The King represents God. Ten thousand talents in the ancient world was equivalent to \$3.7 billion in our modern economy. Why do you think Jesus chose such an astronomical number for the first servant's debt load? What point was Jesus trying to make?
 - b. The Bible says, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." I John 1:9. In your heart of hearts, do you believe you are completely forgiven for even your five greatest secret sins? If you find it hard to believe, why is that? If you believe it, why is that?
 - c. In the second half of Jesus' parable, the tables get turned on the first servant. After being forgiven his debt, he encounters a fellow servant who owes him one hundred denarii, that modern equivalent of \$6,800. That a significant sum, but pales in comparison to \$3.7 billion. Why do you think Jesus chose that number for the second servant's debt? What point was Jesus trying to make?
5. Forgiving people who hurt us is really hard. The greater the offense, the harder it is to forgive.
- a. In your own life, who has hurt you most? How did that affect you? Do you feel you've been able to forgive them? (It's ok if you haven't, cause this is hard.)
 - b. At this moment in your life, who's someone you're struggling to forgive? What happened?
 - c. Jesus uses a very provocative word at the end of his story to describe what happens when we don't forgive. The word is "torture." Carrying bitterness inside us is literally torture. Jesus compares it to being in debtor's prison. Ron McManus says, "Bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." What do you think McManus means? In your own life, when you've allowed bitterness to take root, how has that affected you?
 - d. Have you ever struggled to forgive yourself? Or even God? Tell us about it.
 - e. In verse 35, Jesus suggests that God won't forgive us if we don't forgive others. Should we take that literally? What do you think verse 35 means?
6. Jeff offered several suggestions for how we can grow our capacity to forgive. Take a look at his list on p. 3.
- a. Which one of these suggestions most speaks to you? Which would you take issue with?
 - b. What would you add to Jeff's list? What has helped you become better at forgiving?

Matthew 18:23-35

²³ 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." ²⁹Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

Suggestions for How To Get Better at Forgiving

1. Forgiving begins with you saying, "God, I really want to forgive so and so. Please help me."
2. The second step is to communicate your forgiveness to the offender if it feels appropriate to do so. (If not appropriate, just keep the decision in your heart.)
3. Remember that forgiving is a process we have to wade through, so . . .
 - a. When you catch yourself thinking bitter thoughts about that person, interrupt that thought with a prayer for their healing and wellbeing.
 - b. Keep reminding yourself that we are all broken and that you too have been forgiven of an astronomical debt. When we realize how much mercy we need, it's easier to show it to others.
 - c. Keep working the process, for however long it takes, until you get that deep internal sense that you are truly free.