

Letting Go
Matthew 18:21–35
Sunday, September 13, 2026

Let us pray: May your word take root in us and grow. May it *live* in us, so that *we* can live in Christ. Amen.

Some of the questions that I get asked most as a pastor have to do with forgiveness. “How can I forgive this person who hurt me?” “*Should* I forgive them?” “How can I ask this person to forgive *me*?” “Does forgiving them mean that I have to let them back into my life? Because I don’t know if I can do that.” “Should I forgive them if they won’t even admit that they did anything wrong?” “How can I forgive them if I *know* they are just going to do it again?” If you have ever struggled with questions like that, then you are in good company. A lot of other people struggle with those same questions, and Jesus’ disciples struggled with them, too.

Right before the verses that we read earlier, Jesus was teaching his disciples how to handle conflict. He says that when someone sins against them, does something that hurts them, they are to go to them (not to *other people*, but to seek *them* out) in humility and love and do everything they can to resolve the problem, trusting that he is *with them* when they do. That even if all they can do is *pray* for this other person, then they should do that, but never give up on them. Well, Peter hears Jesus say all that and, probably like a lot of us, he says, “Okay, but to what extent? If someone sins against me, *how many times* should I forgive them? Seven? That’s a lot of times to forgive someone.” And Jesus answers, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” You can also translate the Greek there as “seventy *times* seven,” and it is not clear which is intended.

So, do we forgive someone *seven* times, *seventy-seven* times, or *four hundred and ninety* times? There has to be a *limit*, right? At a certain point we have to realize that this person is not going to change, and

so we just need to walk away. But Jesus' point here is not the numbers. When we focus on the numbers, we're simply looking for the place where we're allowed to *stop* forgiving. We're looking for a way out. I think that in order to understand what Jesus is saying, we first need to ask the question, "What does it *mean* to forgive someone?" What does forgiveness *look like*?

There is a TV show on Netflix called *Black Mirror*. It is a science fiction show, kind of like *The Twilight Zone*, where each episode is its own stand-alone story. And it mostly deals with the perils of technology; what technology is doing to our world and to us. There is one episode where they have developed a chip that people have implanted in their heads. It's called *Grain* because it looks like a grain of rice. And what this chip does is to allow people to record everything that has happened in their life and replay the memories either in their own eyes or projected onto a screen. It's like DVR on your TV, where you can record shows and watch them any time, except it's your *life*.

In some ways, it is *amazing*. To be able to go back and replay memories of your parents who died years ago. To replay memories of your children when they were young. You never forget what someone's voice sounds like. You never forget where you left your keys. You never forget anything that has happened. If you meet someone for the first time, but then you forget their name a little later, you just go back and replay it so you can remember. If you have a traumatic memory, you can simply delete it, like it never happened. There are all these great uses for it. Imagine being able to relive the best moments of your life any time you want to. But also the *worst*.

In this episode, there is a man named Liam. When it starts off, he is in a job interview that doesn't go well. So as he leaves, he is replaying everything that happened, trying to read into this person's words or that person's facial expressions. He is at a dinner party later, and people are showing each other their memories up on a screen. "Watch this...can you *believe* this person did this?!" And when he mentions

his job interview, the other people start saying, “Put it up on the screen! Show us! Let’s watch it together. We’ll critique you!”

There is one woman at the dinner party who *doesn’t* have a *Grain*. And everyone is just *fascinated* with her. They’re all saying, “What’s it like? Is it terrible not being able to remember anything or trust that your memories are accurate?” And she says, “I actually *like* it.” She is very peaceful and relaxed and free.

After the party, Liam is having an argument with his wife about something that happened at the party. He thinks she isn’t being totally honest with him about a former boyfriend who was at the party. And as they are arguing, they go back and replay memories on the screen to prove that they were right. “You did *this*. You said *that*. See?” After his wife goes to bed, Liam stays up all night replaying memories from the party. He is analyzing every single little detail. A look that his wife gave him versus one she gave the old boyfriend. *Why did she laugh when he said this?* He starts *obsessing* over it. It ends up destroying his family and his life because he *just can’t let go of it*.

The first time I saw that episode, I thought, “That is the perfect illustration of forgiveness.” We don’t have chips in our heads that allow us to replay everything, but we don’t really *need* them, do we? We do a pretty good job of that on our own. Reliving this thing that someone did to hurt me or something that I did wrong. Rehashing an argument or a conversation and thinking about what we *should* have said or done and what we would do *next time*. Living in our memories and holding on to the conflict and the things that cause us pain.

To *forgive* is to let go of that. The word that Matthew uses here for *forgive* is the Greek word *aphiemi*, and it literally means, “to let go of, or to leave.” It’s the idea that you’ve been holding onto something,

but you let go of it and leave it behind as you move on. When we *can't* do that, it can destroy our relationships and our lives. But when we *can* let go of the grudges, the things that people have said or done to hurt us, the mistakes that we have made – when we can let go of that and quit replaying it in our minds over and over again, we can find *freedom* and *peace*.

And what Jesus says is that we have to keep forgiving, keep *letting go* again and again and again until we have done it so many times that we lose count, and we can't even remember what we were holding onto in the first place.

He tells this parable about a slave who owes the king a massive amount of money that he cannot possibly pay. But the slave pleads for mercy and says that if the king is just patient with him, he will pay him back everything that he owes. The king doesn't say, "Okay, that sounds like a good deal. I'll get all my money back!" It says that the king *released him* and *forgave the debt*. He let it go and wiped it out completely. Like it never even happened. But then that slave goes out and sees someone who owes *him* money. Far *less* money than he owed the king. And it says that he seized him by the throat, but the Greek literally says that he *held on to him and choked him*. The king let go, but he held on. And it ends up destroying his life.

Now, this understanding of forgiveness raises some questions in us. We're just supposed to forgive the people who hurt us and move on like nothing happened? Forgive and forget? So many people today say, "I can *forgive*, but I can't *forget*." Then you haven't really forgiven. Forgiveness is about letting go, wiping out the debt completely. And as long as we're still holding on to this thing that someone has done to us, holding it against them, we haven't let go of it, and we haven't forgiven.

Think about the kind of forgiveness that you want from others, that you want from *God*. Do you want them to keep remembering the things that you have done, holding onto them and holding them against you? Or do you want them to let go of it completely? If that's the kind of forgiveness we *want*, then it's the kind of forgiveness we have to *extend*. *Our* forgiveness for each other is supposed to reflect *God's* forgiveness for us. And how does God forgive us?

God said through the prophet Jeremiah, "The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." *I will remember their sin no more*. That new covenant has been made in Jesus Christ, in whose death on a cross our sin has been forgiven. Not *a little* forgiven. Not *kinda* forgiven. *Completely* forgiven. The king has completely wiped out the debt of the servants. Our sin has been let go of by God. It is remembered no more. And the whole point of Jesus' parable is that that is how we should be with each other.

So I should just forgive this person, forget about what they've done, and let them hurt me again? Well, first of all, forgiveness does not depend on this other person. It depends on *you*. It is about *you* letting go of what has happened, regardless of what this other person does; you can choose not to hold onto it anymore, you can choose to move on and keep living your life. Forgiveness is about *you* choosing *freedom* and *peace*, even if they don't.

Forgiveness does *not* mean that we have to continue being in a relationship with this person who has hurt us. Sometimes it is not safe or wise to continue being physically present with this other person, so all we can do is *pray* for them. *Genuinely* pray for them. Not, "God, change their heart and make them like I think they should be," but, "God, *bless them* and give them everything they need to be whole and live the fullness of life." Because if God does *that*, that person's life will be completely transformed. *Our* ability to forgive and let go does not depend on *them*, it depends on *us*.

But also, there is a *difference* between *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*. Forgiveness is about letting go, not holding on to what this other person has done (or what *we* have done...sometimes we need to forgive *ourselves*). Reconciliation is about restoring the relationship between us, making that new and whole, so that we can continue to live life together. Forgiveness *can lead* to reconciliation. Sometimes when we let go of what this other person has done, or they let go of what *we* have done, it can bring us back together. And ultimately, that is what God *wants*. Reconciliation is the ultimate goal of forgiveness. But reconciliation is not always possible in this life.

I have told you before how I didn't have a relationship with my father for the last twelve years of his life. There came a point when I recognized that it was not safe for me or my family to be in a relationship with him. And I really struggled with forgiving him; letting go of the things that he had done to hurt me. I *thought* that I had, but then they would come back up again, and I realized that I was still holding onto them and holding them against him.

Eventually I came to a place where I was able to find *empathy* for him and *understand* why he was the way he was and why he did what he did. And when that happened, I was able to forgive him – *really* forgive him – and let go of what he had done to me. I even started entertaining the possibility of reconciliation, that *one day* we might be able to be in relationship again. He died in 2018, before that could happen. And at first, that was the hardest part of losing him. Knowing that we would never be able to be reconciled in this life. But this life is not all there is. And God's ultimate goal for us, for all of creation, is reconciliation; that all things, all people, all relationships be made new and whole. Sometimes it can happen in *this* life, sometimes it can happen in the life to *come*, but God's ultimate purpose for us and for creation will not be thwarted.

You can let go of something, not hold it against them anymore, and still not be in relationship with them. Sometimes *they* need to let go of something and find healing, and the best course of action is to go our separate ways until that happens. Forgiveness only depends on *one* person: me. Reconciliation takes *two*. Jesus Christ died, not just so that we would be *forgiven*, but so that we would be *reconciled* with God and with each other. So that we could live a *new life* with God and with each other. Sometimes that is possible *now*, sometimes it is *not*. But so far as it depends on *us*, we can choose to let go.

There is a poem I love by Cheryl Lawrie called, “70 x 7 + 1,” and it goes like this:

They always said that what he really meant
was a figure so unimaginably large
there was no way anyone would reach it;
that what he was really saying was
you had to forgive an infinite number of times,
and then still more.
After all, who could need forgiving that often?

So I forgave and forgave again
the smirk, the belittling, the ignoring, the dismissing
of everything that mattered
and made me *me*.

I forgave and forgave again
the anger and the names,
the threat of the slap and the bruise of betrayal.

I forgave the life that got sucked out of me
every day.

I forgave and forgave again once more,
although I didn't have it in me,
although it used up every ounce of love and hope
I had for him and for me and the world,
until there was none left.

And still I forgave again.

And then one day, when I had lost count,
when I had passed all the numbers I knew
and couldn't add a single one,
I had the faith to listen to the voice that says,
“Don't do this forever. You count too much.
Enough.”

Forgiveness is *hard*. I will be the first to admit that. There are plenty of times that I still struggle with it. I can't tell you *how* you should do it or even *if* you should do it. I think that it is *always* the better option, but I don't know your situation. What I *can* tell you, the *good news* is that you *can* do it. You *can* let go of it. You *can* find freedom and peace. You *can* forgive. It is within your capacity. Jesus would not ask us to do something he knows we can't do. And when we *feel* like we can't do it, he gives us the courage and the strength that we need.

My hope for *you* is that whatever you dragged in here with you today that you just can't let go of, you would set it down and leave it here when you leave today. And you may need to let go of it again later this afternoon, and again tomorrow, and the day after that, and three times on Wednesday, and again next Sunday, and the Sunday after that. Jesus calls us to keep forgiving until we lose count, to keep letting go until we can't even remember what we're letting go of. When we can do *that*, we will find freedom and peace and *eventually* reconciliation, in Christ. Amen.