

A Grateful heart is a Forgiving heart

I have heard people say, "I do not have to forgive someone if they have not asked me for forgiveness." As I have studied forgiveness as it relates to our fellow human, I have found this statement is unfounded. It has no basis in scripture.

How People come To That Conclusion

People have looked to the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23-34¹ for support of this idea. Before looking at the parable itself one should understand parables teach a single lesson and do not usually mean to apply the details unless the teller of the parable explains it with connections to the details, but even then, there is only one point made in the parable.

The lesson of the parable is of interest. Jesus powerfully states a warning immediately after the parable in Matthew 18:35 "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." But that is not the lesson. It is a warning to those who miss the lesson.

In the parable Jesus tells of a king who was settling a large account with a servant that could not pay his debt. The king was about to command the servant's belongings, including the servant and his family, sold to pay the debt. The servant pleaded with the king and the king forgave the entire debt.

This same servant then went to someone who owed him a small amount of money. He treated the man harshly. The man pleaded with him, but he still threw the man into jail until he paid the debt. The king soon heard of this and handed the servant over to the torturers until he paid his own previously forgiven debt.

The begging in the parable merely illustrates forgiveness is an option in both cases. Some people assume that because the king did not forgive the debt until the servant pleaded with him, the offender must ask for forgiveness before a person is required to forgive them. But that interpretation puts too much weight on a detail of the parable.

Jesus does not emphasize the detail that a person must ask for forgiveness. Instead He warns us of the consequences of not forgiving someone. We must forgive from our hearts or it will be very unpleasant for us. God will do the same to us. I will return to this again later.

Another verse some people may turn to in support of not forgiving someone without their asking for forgiveness is Luke 17:3-4. This verse does not apply to the question of the need for the offender to ask for forgiveness since it is a different case because these verses speak to those dealing with a sinful brother who needs to repent before God. Similarly, Matthew 18:15-17 goes on to say that the unrepentant brother is to be treated as a non-Christian.

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Getting the feel of an offense

Consider what offenses we might need to forgive someone of. Jesus says

“But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

Matthew 5:39 (NASB95)

Perhaps not the greatest offence one could face, but it is a strong one. Jesus basically says to just take it without resistance or retribution. This is not to say such an offence would leave us unaffected. Anyone would certainly wrestle with anger and the desire to get back at them. It would be a challenge just to calm down after such an event.

Ephesians 4:26-27 says, “BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.” We have emotions and it is not healthy to box them in. But we cannot let them get the better of us and cause us to sin. We are to deal with our anger quickly so that the devil does not gain a foothold over us. A few verses further on, Paul tells put away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and all malice. (Ephesians 4:31) These are not traits of a Christian and hinder our walk with Christ.

Maintaining good relations with others

Having good relationships with others is a major theme of the New Testament. In Romans chapters 12 through 15 Paul tells us how to become the people we should be and how to have good relations with others. We are to have empathy and leave vengeance to God. Romans 12:18 says, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” This places considerable responsibility on us to maintain good relations with others. We must be careful in what we say so as to not offend. We must reconcile our differences with others whenever possible.

It even goes as far as requiring us to reconcile everything we are aware of that someone has against us.

²³ “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

Matthew 5:23–24

This is also the case for when we pray. (Mark 11:25)

It can be difficult to forgive. Love opens the way to forgiving. Having love for other people is essential for having good relations. “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint.” (1

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Peter 4:8-9). “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted ...” (Ephesians 4:32) leads us to a kindness in our relationships that overlooks faults of others.

It not in human nature to be forgiving. Paul list 6 virtues that are necessary for the unity of the Church in Colossians 3:12-17. (See Virtues for Our New Selves²) In the middle of these verses it says “... and forgiving each other, just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.” Putting on the virtues prepare us to forgive.

Sometimes a person develops a habit of judging people. We cannot be kind to others if we are busy judging them. That kind of mental activity leads us to think of ourselves as better than others, which leads one to become brash with them. We do well to follow the commands of Christ in the beatitudes³. It is best to read it in the context of the beatitudes (Luke 6:20 – 43)

³⁶ “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned.

Luke 6:36–37

Forgiving Others

Peter had a question about forgiveness, “... Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). The statement indicates this is a sin against a person, not God. The Greek word used for sin (ἁμαρτάνω) can include a transgression against God, a custom, or a law⁴. It is likely referring to deviation from a custom of the people they see as an offence or an offensive custom as cultures tend to have. Jesus replies with a number large enough it is unlikely a factor when forgiving someone, not only 7 times but 7 times 70 times.

Jesus continues into the parable of the unforgiving servant⁵ followed by the strong warning in Matthew 18:35 indicating our forgiving of others, or rather our lack of forgiving others, affects our forgiveness by God. This is also paralleled in Matthew 6:14 - 15 where Jesus clearly says God’s forgiveness of our sins depends on whether we forgive others. Even in the Lord’s prayer “And forgive us our sins, For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. ...”⁶

A modern reader of the parable of the unforgiving servant can easily miss the point of the parable. It seems more than an interesting story and we think we understand it. Yet we do not

²Gray, Daniel, Virtues for Our New Selves: A study of Colossians 3:12-17, <https://basichurch.org/biblestudies/82-a-study-of-colossians-3-12-17>

³ Matthew 5:3-12 and Luke 6:20-45

⁴ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., p. 49). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵ Matthew 18:23-34

⁶ Luke 11:4

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really understand the reasoning behind the strong warning given by Jesus. We tend to miss the point of the parable because of the cultural divide between us and the New Testament Jew.

They could recall the Law of Moses specifying every 7th year mandating the forgiveness of all debts⁷. The law of Moses also provided for generosity to those in need⁸ as a way of life. A jubilee⁹ occurred every 50th year which allowed everyone to regain possession of any land they had sold and Jews who had sold themselves into service were released from their servitude. These were acts of forgiveness and mercy commanded by God through the Law of Moses. God wanted them to know His merciful forgiveness and for them to experience granting merciful forgiveness to others.

When they heard the parable of the unforgiving servant, they recognized the mercy the servant had received when the king forgave the huge debt. They may have heard of people with similar fates in jail because of their debts. This servant had virtually received his freedom, his family, and all his belongings back from the auction house and the debt forgiven. How could he not be grateful for that? Did he even say thank you?

When the people heard that such a fortunate man mistreated another man for much a smaller debt, they would have thought how merciful he should have been toward the man. If he had been grateful for the mercy he had received, his heart would have over-flowed with mercy for the man. But no, instead his heart was hard as rock. He was sent to the torturers because he was ungrateful. Gratefulness should have spilled out of his heart as mercy and forgiveness to others. His unwillingness to forgive exposed his ungrateful heart. Perhaps if we called this parable "The Parable of The Ungrateful Servant", more people would understand its meaning.

Can we be grateful for God's forgiveness and salvation? It is one thing to know God forgave your sins. But it is another thing to be grateful for it. This highlights the meaning of "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy"¹⁰ and our prayer becomes even more, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."¹¹ May our prayers be for a grateful heart.

⁷ Deuteronomy 15:1

⁸ Deuteronomy 15:10

⁹ Leviticus 25:1-22

¹⁰ Matthew 5:7

¹¹ Matthew 6:12, see also Luke 11:4