

# Bible Studies for Life for September 7: Forgive and ... just forgive

August 25, 2008

• *Matthew 18:21-35*

About 10 years ago, an old book was pulled off the bookshelves, dusted off and turned into a modern-day catch-phrase. The book, *In His Steps*, was written in 1896 by Charles Sheldon, and it became the WWJD, or “What Would Jesus Do,” movement.

According to Sheldon, to be true disciples of Jesus, we should act like he does. So rather than following our instincts, before doing anything, we should ask ourselves what Jesus would do in that situation.

It’s a great idea. But it isn’t an easy one. Today’s lesson illustrates why.

## **Our debts have all been forgiven**

Jesus tells the story of a man who owes a huge debt to his master. One day, the master decides to collect that debt and threatens to sell the man, his family and all his possessions if he cannot pay. The man begs for mercy, and the entire debt is forgiven. He walks away a free man.

This man is Everyman. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). And the wages of sin is death—eternal death (Romans 6:23). That’s a debt none of us can pay. But God, in his infinite mercy, doesn’t want us to pay that debt, so he found a way to pay it himself. He sent his son Jesus to live a sinless life so he could take up our debt and pay the penalty for us. In short, our debt is forgiven completely.

There's only one catch. You see, God is in the business of forgiving. It's what he does, and he expects us to do it as well. Yes, we are granted forgiveness of sins, but according to Jesus, that's not the end of the story.

### **Unforgiveness is not an option**

The man in Jesus' story heaves a great sigh of relief at his narrow escape. But rather than celebrating with his friends, he sets out to collect all the debts owed him. Perhaps he thinks his master will change his mind. Perhaps he doesn't really believe his debt was forgiven. Regardless of the reason, this man finds someone who owes him a piddly debt and throws him in debtor's prison.

None of us is perfect. There's a 100 percent chance we'll offend someone in the course of our lives, and an equal chance we'll be offended. But God wants us to forgive as we have been forgiven. "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matthew 6:14-15)."

Jesus is telling us there are two sides to this coin we call salvation. On the one side, we are forgiven. On the other, we do the forgiving. If we understand the extent of God's gift, we will forgive as generously as we have been forgiven. If not, if we forget our narrow escape and deny forgiveness to those who wrong us, we'll be forgiven in exactly the way we forgive.

It's as if God is asking each of us, "What does forgiveness look like?" And whatever we tell him is what he'll grant us. But God isn't listening to our words. He's looking into our hearts as he watches our actions.

### **How do you define forgiveness?**

You've heard "forgive and forget." You've probably been told if you just say

you forgive someone, your heart will eventually catch up with your words. But neither idea is very realistic. First, we can't will ourselves to forget. Nor is it always wise to forget, since our memory of the past helps guide our future. Second, our heart doesn't necessarily follow our words. By speaking things that aren't already true, we keep ourselves from dealing with something that needs attention.

Forgiveness is not easy, nor does it just happen. It is an act of mercy extended to someone who can never repay their debt or undo the damage they have done. Forgiveness, therefore, is a conscious act. It requires courage. And it must be done wisely.

### **Forgiving consciously**

Forgiveness isn't the same thing as letting things slide. It isn't closing your eyes and pretending the offense didn't occur. And it doesn't require relationship to be restored. Forgiveness is nothing more than release. To forgive, you make a conscious decision to release your right to reparations and the offender's obligation to pay. And when this happens, you cut the ties that bind you to that offense. You become free to move on with your life.

### **Forgiving courageously**

Forgiveness is hard because it goes against the grain. If you release a debt, you fear you will be stuck holding the bill. You may be perceived as being weak. And the guilty party may get off scot-free. Forgiveness doesn't seem fair. But forgiveness is an act of godliness that doesn't have to be fair.

To forgive, you must partner with God. You see, you won't be stuck holding the bill because, when you forgive, God pays the bill. As he says in Deuteronomy 32:35, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay." When we forgive, we must trust God to pay the bill however he wishes. We must trust his wisdom and be willing to accept his ways. It's an act of courage, but it

defines forgiveness.

### **Forgiving wisely**

Forgiveness is an act of obedience. Relationship is not. God does not expect us to maintain relationship with someone who doesn't treat us with respect and love.

I know a man who, as a boy, was kidnapped, shot in the head, and left for dead. Years later, upon meeting the man who tried to murder him, my friend forgave him. He did not offer to become friends with his would-be murderer. That would be foolish.

Sometimes relationships are dangerous. Although we are commanded to forgive the damage done to us in those relationships, we must be discerning about whether we should continue those relationships. It isn't unforgiving to remove ourselves from situations that could be dangerous on a spiritual, emotional or physical level.

But most cases of forgiveness aren't that big. The relationship isn't dangerous. Instead we have taken offense because our pride was damaged or our feelings were hurt. In these situations, the wise thing is to go immediately to God. Instead of nursing our wounds, we need to humble ourselves and ask God to show us the truth of what happened. We need to give him the bill we want the other party to pay and ask forgiveness for our part in the disagreement.

### **Just forgive**

The story of the unmerciful servant is Jesus' answer to a question asked by Peter. It's a question most of us have asked at one time or another: How often does a repeat offender deserve to be forgiven? (That's not how he asked it, but it is what he wanted to know.) As always, Jesus gives an answer that creates more questions. But the point is this: When it comes to

forgiveness, there is no magic number. How often should we forgive? As often as we want God to forgive us.

### **Discussion questions**

- *In Jesus' story, he likens an offense to monetary debt. Why is this a good comparison?*
- *If Christians could master the art of forgiveness, how would it change the church? The world?*
- *Do you think forgiveness could become easier over time, or is it something we must always wrestle with?*