



FOREWORD BY JOHN MARK COMER

THE SCANDAL OF THE KINGDOM

HOW THE PARABLES OF
JESUS REVOLUTIONIZE LIFE WITH GOD

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CHAPTER 11

THE MIRACLE OF FORGIVENESS

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-15

To be hurt is unavoidable in this world, and we have choices to make as to how we will handle it. To raise the very topic of forgiveness seems to many people to be unwise, troubling, and deeply personal. But we need to talk about it. God forgives. We just can't imagine *how* God forgives. Forgiveness is a miracle. It's a tremendous act of grace that introduces us into the whole world of God.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is about the generosity of God's forgiveness toward us. Jesus decided to tell this parable after Peter came to him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). I suspect Peter must have been thinking, *Oh, seven times is a lot.*

Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:22)

When Jesus said, "Seventy times seven," it's possible Peter could have fainted. He thought his suggestion of seven times was already way beyond generous, but Jesus countered, perhaps with a smile, "Seventy times that!" (I assure you he was not saying we can stop forgiving when we reach the 491st offense.)

Jesus was getting at the *legalistic way* of defining righteousness and forgiveness by saying, in essence, "Counting the number of times won't work. You have to cultivate a forgiving heart." The heart of the kingdom is not a heart focused on grievance over past issues, but one that is forgiven and forgiving.

However, the way of human nature in its fallen condition is to be unforgiving. If you were to remove unforgiveness from human life, human history would be transformed beyond recognition. But the way of life in the kingdom of God is to forgive routinely and easily, as illustrated by the king in this parable:

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made." (Matthew 18:23-25)

This response may seem unusual today, but it was common at the time. Debtors' prisons were in use throughout history, even in the United States and England, until the early 1800s.

THE POWER OF REQUEST

"The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt." (Matthew 18:26–27)

The servant's approach was met by *astounding* generosity. The master did not just postpone the debt; he released the servant from the debt and forgave him. This response is typical of God and is reminiscent of the father in the Prodigal Son story who refused to see his wayward son as a slave but accepted him fully as a son. The force at work here is the power of asking.* God answers prayers simply because we ask, and the king forgave simply because the servant asked. It's as though the king said, "I forgave you everything because *you wanted me to*."

"But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'" (Matthew 18:28–29)

Note the extreme contrast in the size of the debts. His fellow slave owed him a tiny fraction of what he had just been forgiven.†

* I will discuss this important principle in greater detail in chapter 14.

† One denarii was worth one day's wage. One talent was estimated to be worth twenty years of a day laborer's wage.

Both servants used the same language when their debts were called to account: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.”

“And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

“So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”
(Matthew 18:30–35)

Unforgiveness is the way of normal, ordinary human life. It is so embedded in our thinking that people often do not consider themselves unforgiving when they hold on to past wounds. We tend to accept it and think, *Oh, that’s just the way it is.* Certain nations are expected to be enemies of others. People have at times carried unforgiveness down through multiple generations: “Your grandfather did something to my grandfather, and I’m going to get back at you!”

The plots of countless novels and movies focus on revenge, on getting even. But no one ever really gets even because one person will not count as “even” anything but what the other person counts as “beyond.” It seems to be built into the human condition that getting even *never* works. For example, when children fight, that last punch or insult is what matters. Whatever was done last is somehow bigger than anything that came before it. No one ever tries to get even by letting someone else have the last word or the last blow.

The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ declares an end to that battle. It announces from the heights of heaven that *God doesn't want to even the score*, but rather he invites you and me into a life where *we* no longer need to either. This is an expression of the nature of the gospel of Jesus. One of the great spiritual practices is not having the last word. We cease trying to get back at others, catch up, or get ahead.

This is the *only* way peace can come to the human heart and then spread into the world. International negotiations and courts often fail because they focus on trying to make people and nations “even” when they will never be even. Until people rise above getting even, peace will never reign.

It's the same in relationships between brothers and sisters and between spouses. There's no peace as long as we're *trying* to get even. One sibling or spouse may deeply offend another, and the one who was injured may be peaceable for a while, but the offense takes up residence in the heart and eats away. And before long, getting even looks like a good idea. Sometimes spouses enter marriage with an unevenness in social skills, family wealth, or intellect, and when these apparent inequities cause friction, marriage partners become intent on finding the same level of evenness. In that case, a union of souls such as God intended cannot exist.

Forgiving persons lay down all plans to get even for wrongs done, even in small ways. They also let go of requiring compensation, no longer saying, “You must make it up to me!” Getting even is a tremendous burden, and it's a great relief to let it go.

FORWARD-GIVING

Try thinking about forgiveness by playing with the combined wording *forward-giving*. Forgiveness is forward-giving because it looks forward, envisioning future plans to be generous and giving. Forgiveness does not hold on to the past, making the other person suffer because of past wrongs.

In our *actions* toward those who wrong us, we no longer hold them responsible or base our behavior toward them on what they've done. We lay down the grudge. The *inward* side of forgiving means we no longer brood, dwelling on the hurt or wrong. We have come to some degree of liberty from the hurt because we have *chosen* to look to the future.

There must be *readiness* to forgive, even toward a person who is unable to receive forgiveness from us. This works at the level of the will. Pain generally is like that. We have at least some degree of choice as to whether we will soak our minds in the pain or focus on moving forward with our life in Christ. Forgiveness means we are not obsessed by it. We are not dominated by it.

Some wounds are so deep you may be hurt for the rest of your life. We need to understand that the pain is not always entirely bad. As it mixes with our experience of life in the kingdom of God, we remember the pain but are not consumed by it, just as Joseph was not consumed by the harm his brothers intended and was able to see how God used it for good (Genesis 50:20). We find we can still be content and find joy in the eternal life God offers us.

I've seen people crushed by the burden of thinking that if they don't manage to forget the harm done, they haven't truly forgiven the other person. You may not be able to completely forget. God can help you with that, and maybe someday you will forget. But if you've been deeply injured by someone, you're not going to forget it, and I don't recommend you try. But you *can* forgive them.

Someone who has harmed you may say, "If you haven't stopped hurting, you haven't forgiven me." Please don't believe that. To forgive does not mean to forget. People who say that are trying to manipulate you to make it easier on themselves because they're struggling to come to terms with what they've done.

If you're trying to stop hurting when you forgive, this may confuse you so much that you will not be able to forgive. Your hurt may go on, even though you've let the person off the hook and released your intention to get even with them. The mark of forgiveness is *not* that you no longer hurt; it is that you are no longer preoccupied with the hurt.

GROWING IN GOD'S FORGIVENESS

It's important to understand *what* forgiveness is and *how* to forgive. People experience a lot of grief because they feel they *should* forgive; they feel obligated to do so. They would even *like* to forgive, but it isn't clear to them how to go about doing that. You can do several things to help yourself grow into a person who forgives more easily and naturally.

First, as with many things in the spiritual life, approaching forgiveness too directly may cause you to fail. It's the same way with temptation. If you're being strongly tempted by something and decide to confront it head-on, you will probably fail. If you're tempted to eat candy from a bowl on the table, you had better find something else to do other than think about how you're not going to eat the candy. If you dwell on it, it will conquer you. It will just reach up, grab your mouth, and climb right in. And you will say, "That terrible candy! Look what it did!" *You must focus your mind on something else.*[†]

Second, be mindful that *forgiveness is not a simple act of will*. You cannot handle forgiveness the way you would normally handle many other things. Forgiveness involves the will, but it is not an act of the will alone. I suggest you approach it this way: If someone has hurt you badly, don't just try to *not pay them back*, but fill your mind with Jesus Christ and how he responded to

† For deeper insight, see my *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), chapter 7, particularly pp. 118, 122, 137.

those who hurt him. Look at Jesus. Set him before your mind. Dwell on stories of his life. Consider how he must have felt when he was wronged. Doing so will immediately take you away from yourself and your woundedness and put your mind in the right place to receive the grace of forgiveness.

Third, *pray, acknowledging to God that you cannot forgive another person without his help*. Ask for the grace of God to enter your heart and mind to help you forgive. Forgiveness is one of those things in our life through which God teaches us how dependent we are on him. If we say to the Lord, “I can’t forgive,” he will say to us, “Of course you can’t forgive *without my help*.” You have to accept forgiveness as something that comes from God through you to others. And then, because Christ is living in you, you will be able to forgive those you thought you could never forgive.

Forgiving is not quick, and it does not mean the relationship can or should be fully restored. Suppose you’ve been betrayed by a business partner. Not only were you hurt deeply, but you may also never recover financially. You anticipate that your children won’t be able to attend the school you had planned they would attend, and you won’t be able to live where you had hoped to live. Perhaps you’re facing these possibilities while seeing this partner living in great prosperity. It may take a great deal of time to work through those feelings, and what you have learned about your partner means it would be unwise to reestablish that partnership, but that does not mean you are being unforgiving.

I realize a time may come when God gives a gift of grace, taking away the resentment and hurt. That happens, but generally, we can’t count on that. And if it doesn’t happen, we don’t need to feel like we’ve done something wrong. It is disappointing, to be sure, but in the normal course of recovering from a deep wound, it takes time for forgiveness to come. Persistently pray for it; be patient as you wait for it.

Don't assume the burden of making forgiveness happen. Your part is to fill your mind with Christ. Pray for the grace of forgiveness to come through you to others, because it must, after all, come from God. It came to *us* through another—namely, Jesus Christ.

And then concentrate on the good to be done, first of all, in your own life. Sometimes this may mean simply paying attention to the beauty of the flowers in your backyard. God made them and gave them to you to fill your heart with joy, so pay attention to them.

DWELLING IN GOODNESS

Many of our troubles stay with us because we don't accept the little, wonderful things that God places in our lives every day, such as the simple pleasures of eating and resting. Even shallow talk between neighbors who love one another is a gift. Yes, *shallow* talk. I once had to learn the depth of shallow talk during a time of study in a Franciscan monastery in Belgium. I stayed there while doing research in a nearby university's library archives.

Surrounded by people who gave themselves fundamentally to service, meditation, and prayer, I observed how important it was for the brothers of the Franciscan order to greet one another and share small talk. I then understood that casual conversation is a way in which people reach out to one another and share life. There may well be nothing that goes more deeply than the ability of people to be with one another in shallow talk.

It was my pride that had once said, *Oh, I shouldn't waste my time with trivialities. Don't just say, "How's the weather?" I want to get right to the big ideas and deep thoughts.* I learned that loving people is a matter of being able to live with them at all levels.

People primarily live at the level of small things. Turn to those. God gave them to you. Pay attention to your garden, your

dog, or whatever delights you, and enjoy the good that is there. You will find that doing this can help you forgive. It's hard to be angry with someone when you're looking at flowers or watching ducks. Perhaps that's why God made them.

BABY STEPS

Beyond the three basic suggestions listed above, you will want to occasionally concentrate your thoughts and prayers—in small, manageable amounts—toward the good of the individual who hurt you, especially in connection with the harm they have done. In doing so, be careful not to assume the role of being the one to straighten out their life. You are not their savior; Jesus Christ is their Savior. Try to reach the point where you can pray sincerely for their good.[§]

As Jesus hung on the cross, he was able to look at the soldiers who had nailed him there and say, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). He truly meant the words he prayed, because he had a *heart proficient in forgiveness*. And when he said those words, his heart was full of generosity toward them. He wasn't praying through gritted teeth in an effort to impress God, but rather because he genuinely wanted what was best for them.

On the other hand, when *we* try to do this, we are apt to be distracted with thoughts of our own nobility or to indulge in a bit of self-congratulation. We may think, perhaps subtly, *Aren't I wonderful because I'm praying for the good of this person who has injured me!* That's why it's important to consider offering this kind of prayer in small, manageable amounts. Don't burden yourself with this until you feel that you're doing it genuinely and easily.

It will begin to come naturally to you when you engage in the previously mentioned efforts: occupy yourself in some other way;

§ Jesus gives practical advice on this in Luke 6:27-36.

don't try to will yourself to forgive; and acknowledge to God that you cannot forgive without his help. In time, you can come to the place where you will be able to pray for the person who hurt you without thinking about yourself at all. Then it will not be an exhibition of what a fine person you are—someone who didn't deserve to be hurt like you were.

Forgiveness can become a simple, straightforward act done because it is the best thing to do—not because you have to and not to try to prove anything about yourself. It's simply the wise thing to do. That's why God forgives.

THE GREAT HEART OF GOD

Forgiveness is available because of the great heart of God that played itself out in history and culminated on the cross where Jesus died. That event, foreseen from the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:20–21), was never absent and will never be absent from God's mind. God arranged and made provision for our salvation in a way that invites us into his kind of life.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ was necessary in God's dealings with humanity in order for God to be able to forgive; for human beings to understand the significance of sin, redemption, and salvation; and for God to make his favor efficaciously possible for all human beings. Whatever God needed to be done to open the floodgates of his compassion on the world was done.

EARNING AND RECEIVING

Once we know we live by forgiveness, we're ready to extend forgiveness to other people. Jesus addressed this at the end of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant: "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (Matthew 18:35).

Jesus taught about this elsewhere in Scripture, including in the Lord's Prayer: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our

debtors. . . . For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:12, 14–15). Why is forgiveness from God tied to our forgiving others?

This teaching has been misunderstood to say that forgiveness from God is something to be earned, as if you can earn your forgiveness by the righteous work of forgiving those who have offended you. It isn’t a matter of our *earning* our forgiveness; it is a matter of our *receiving* it.

It’s always important to distinguish between *earning* and *receiving*. While you can do nothing to earn your salvation, there is something you can do to receive it, and you’re so much better off for doing it. A gift is not imposed on you, forced on you, or fastened on you somehow. A gift requires *reception*.

I believe Jesus was saying that in order for us to receive the forgiveness that comes from God, we must have a certain kind of heart and life shaped by the grace of God in us. When we concentrate on the work of Christ (his coming for us, his life, and his way of living) as we apprentice ourselves to him, we step into the flow of that grace to receive a forgiving heart—a heart that can reach out in faith and accept forgiveness from God.

The Pharisees and the prodigal son’s brother are examples of people who have no knowledge of a forgiving heart. They had not had an *experience* of forgiveness.

THE FLOW OF FORGIVENESS

It is impossible for us to forgive until we have experienced forgiveness ourselves. It’s like love: “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). We find many hard, unhappy, unloving, unkind people in our world, some of whom even profess belief in Christ. Oftentimes, these are people who do not feel loved and have never experienced the reality that God is the One

who “freely give[s] us all things” (Romans 8:32) and who haven’t embraced the truth that nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39). Like love, forgiveness becomes an active part of our lives because we are forgiven. The generosity of God that comes to us enables us to be generous and forgive those who have offended us.

When we experience forgiveness, it becomes a way of life we learn to identify with. When we think of our sins and our inability to meet the standards of God’s righteousness, our faith will not be capable of moving out and receiving forgiveness from God unless we are standing in this *mode* of forgiveness. That’s why many followers of Jesus continue to act as if they have not been forgiven. They are hindered and bound by things that have happened to them in the past, whether it was done to them, done by them, or some combination thereof. In their hearts and minds, they still see themselves as the person who did “that thing” rather than as someone who has been forgiven and cleansed.

Cleansed is a lovely word. To cleanse something is to take the spot away so that the dirt is gone. The place is still there where the dirt was, but it’s no longer dirty. A lot of Christians still experience the dirt as being there. They still *feel* dirty. This may come from an inappropriate teaching of the gospel or a lack of the Spirit in fellowship. It may come because, in their hearts, they are unforgiving. There’s someone in their life they have not forgiven. We all need to look deep into our hearts about these things and ask God if there is someone we have not forgiven.

The connection between God’s forgiveness of you and your forgiveness of others is entwined with the reality of him living in you. And if you do not forgive, if you *cannot* forgive, it means, at least in some significant measure, that he does not occupy that part of your heart. If he is there, he is enabling you to forgive. And if he is there, you are forgiven. The experience of forgiveness

comes to those who forgive, just as there is a connection between the experience of being loved and being able to love.

As we learn to forgive, we *receive* forgiveness and enter into it as a way of life. We pray, “Forgive us our debts, *as* we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12, emphasis added), because it’s a kind of totality. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive others.” It’s a whole. We choose to forgive because we are involved with God’s action, and he’s in the business of forgiveness. And so are we.

MAIN POINTS ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF GOD

- The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is about the generosity of God’s forgiveness toward us.
- It is safe to forgive in the kingdom of God because God forgives us and empowers us to forgive. In God’s kingdom, there is no need for getting even.
- To receive forgiveness, we immerse ourselves in God’s grace by concentrating on the person of Christ, his coming to earth, and his way of living that shows us how to step into the flow of his grace.
- Forgiveness is the simplest and best thing to do, and it is the most joyful way to live.