

## How do I forgive someone I can't forgive?

Message for Sunday, March 19, 2017  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:14-15; 18:21-35

**Children's Message:** Matthew 18:21-22

Peter apparently has someone who really bugs him, because he asks, "Lord, when someone sins against me, how many times should I forgive that person? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

In other words, "I've tried my best to forgive the person, to be nice, to be friends. But after I've done everything I can possibly do, if this person does it again after that, *then* can I get even?"

That sounds reasonable. Maybe there is someone who bugs you a lot, and you would wonder the same thing: How long do I have to put up with this, before I can do something back?

I wrote "I forgive you" on a paper seven times. Let's say it together.

But Jesus answers Peter, "No, not seven times. Seventy-seven times."

77 times! That would be ten more pages of saying "I forgive you"! *Pull out another ten sheets of paper. Start reading them together, then give up.* Whew, that's a lot!

I think Jesus is saying, "How many times you have to do it isn't the point. The point is, just do it. That's how God treats you, so that's how you should treat others."

*However*, we need to remember: forgiving someone isn't the same as letting them keep on doing it. Besides fighting, what are some other ways you can get someone to stop doing what is wrong? *Listen to ideas, such as:* tell your mother or father, tell a teacher or other adult, tell the police.

Idea from Philip Johnson, in *And More Celebrating the Seasons*.

**Message:** "How do I forgive someone I can't forgive?"

Every now and then a story comes over the news which is so amazing, I write down the details and store them to use later.

In 2008, John and Eloise Bergen, a couple from BC retired from their jobs. They sold their home and belongings, and moved to live in Kenya. They devoted the rest of their lives to work with orphans and widows, with the mission organization Hope for the World.

A few months later, on July 23, about five men charged into their yard. John was outside at the time, and they beat him with clubs and machetes. Two of the five men were the security guards they had hired! John was lying on the ground, and they continued beating him. Finally, thinking he was dead, they kicked his body into the bushes, and then went inside looking for Eloise. They found her having a bath. Three of them raped her, then also beat and cut her with their weapons. After ransacking the house, they stole valuables and cash, and took off.

John's injuries: jaw was broken in three places, a broken wrist, two broken arms (an understatement: the arms were slashed with a machete; the bone was sticking out of the left arm, and it was only some muscle and skins which kept the arm attached), plus many more cuts and bruises on his face and body.

Eloise: broken jaw, cuts requiring 35 stitches, plus lots of bruises.

Eloise said to reporters that she bears no ill will towards her attackers, but she forgives them. John said the same thing. Eloise put it this way: "It is freeing to us. It helps us to be healed."

However, she also said, "But justice has to be served. Those men should be sent to prison."

**QUESTION:** What is it that drives John and Eloise Bergen to forgive those who nearly killed them?

**ANSWER:** Let's hear it from John's own mouth, when a reporter asked him what he would say to his attackers if he had a chance to talk with them.

I would tell them that Jesus loves them, and I forgive them, and that God wants to forgive them, if they'd receive it.<sup>1</sup>

What drives John and Eloise is the love of Jesus. They have experienced Jesus in their own lives, and the greatest thing in the world is to share that love with others. That love is greater and more powerful than any other force in the world, more than hate, rape and murder.

Today I want to look at what Jesus says about all this.

### 1) Jesus says, "Follow my example"

Jesus taught not only with words, but also with actions. As he said to his followers after washing their feet:

John 13:15, New Living Translation  
"I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you"

### 2) Jesus teaches about forgiveness

Several times in the Gospels, Jesus teaches his followers that they must forgive those who hurt them:

Matthew 6:15, New Living Translation: [after teaching Lord's prayer]  
"If you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Matthew 18:21-22, New International Version:  
Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"  
Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Matthew 18:35, New Living Translation: [the conclusion to a story about a servant who was forgiven a huge debt, but would not forgive someone who owed him a little. He was thrown into prison.]  
"That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters in your heart."

### 3) Jesus sets the model for forgiveness

That's what Jesus said when he was teaching about forgiveness. But when Jesus was being nailed to the cross—we're no longer in the classroom—he lived out that teaching:

Luke 23:34, New International Version:  
"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Jesus says, "I have given you an example to follow." This isn't just for washing feet. It applies to everything that Jesus taught, including forgiveness.

### 4) Jesus gives the power for forgiveness

Some of you might be thinking right now about someone who has hurt you. You might want to say to me, "Yes, Bruce, I understand everything you've said about forgiveness. I even agree with most of it. But I just *can't* do it!"

In Matthew 17:20, Jesus encourages the disciples to trust God, to have faith. He gives them this incredible promise:

Matthew 17:20, New International Version:  
"I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Probably most of the mountains we think about in our lives are out *there*: other people, obstacles in our way.

What if the mountain is in *here*, that is, in me?  
What if I'm the one who needs to change?

When we offer ourselves to God and say, "I want to follow Jesus, but I need your help,"— I don't know of any prayer which pleases God more than that. God is then able, with our permission, to work in our lives, to help us grow and become the people we were meant to be, to be more like Jesus.

I'll tell two stories which demonstrate the power of forgiveness, or the lack thereof.

<sup>1</sup> John and Eloise wrote a book about it: *Forgiveness in the Face of Terror*.

Preacher Greg Boyd tells about meeting a woman whom he described as “the ugliest, scariest woman I’ve ever seen.” He was even more surprised when he came across a picture of her from years before: she was stunningly beautiful. At the time of that early picture, she was engaged to be married, and she was radiant with joy. Three days before the wedding, her fiancé eloped with her sister. They got married somewhere else, and when they came home it was all completed.

The left-behind woman never forgave her sister or her fiancé. They wrote long letters to her, but she burned their letters. They tried to come and see her, but she slammed the door in their face. They sent presents, but she returned them all. They tried this, not just once, but many times over the years. The forsaken woman was so full of bitterness that her physical body eventually took on the character of her soul.

Lee Strobel, in his book *God’s Outrageous Claims*, tells of Elizabeth and Frank Morris of Kentucky. Two days before Christmas, their only child, Ted, was hit by a drunk driver. You know the story: the innocent person was killed, while the drunk is only slightly injured. Even more, the other driver just got probation instead of prison.

Elizabeth was consumed with hatred for her son’s killer. She began replaying the mental videotape of that night like a horror movie, over and over again. She ached for revenge. She would fantasize about driving down the street and seeing Tommy Pigage, the other driver. She imagined hitting him with her car, pinning him up against a tree, and watching his agony as she slowly crushed him to death.

She spent a lot of her spare time tracking Tommy, to see if she could catch him violating the terms of his probation, so he would be sent to prison. Over time her negative attitude began to drive a wedge between her and her husband. It chased away their friends. It drained away her ability to laugh and enjoy life.

(You see how unforgiveness works? It is a self-imposed prison sentence; it makes you live the pain over and over, instead of letting you deal with it and find hope. Elizabeth described it as a poison, a cancer that was eating away at her inside.)

Elizabeth knew her life was messed up, but she couldn’t find the cure. Then she realized that her heavenly Father has also lost his only Son. And yet when Jesus suffered on the cross, as he looked at the merciless soldiers torturing him, he said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

That’s when Elizabeth knew it was time for her—as *an act of her will, certainly not because she felt like it*—to offer forgiveness to Tommy Pigage. Over time, her attitude changed and the bitterness drained away. She not only restored her marriage, but together she and her husband Frank wrote to Tommy Pigage and went to visit him. It was this offer of friendship which influenced Tommy to begin following Jesus and turn his life around.

There’s more. Frank is a part-time preacher in a small church, and baptized Tommy, the kind of baptism where you are immersed under water, symbolizing the death of the old person, and rising to a new life with Christ. When Tommy came out of the water, the three of them hugged and sobbed together. Later Frank presided at Tommy’s wedding. And today the two families ride together to church every Sunday, and together they worship the God of the second chance, the God of forgiveness and healing.

Now that’s the power of forgiveness. You see, it’s really the power of God and God’s love—the greatest power in the universe. And as hard as it may seem to you to forgive someone, that power is possible in your life.

### Next Steps:

- Receive God’s forgiveness. No matter what you’ve done, God still loves you and calls you his child. This is grace. Confess and receive forgiveness.
- As God has done for you, do the same for others.
- *Especially* for \_\_\_\_\_.
- Pray for God to help you do this, to *really* mean it.