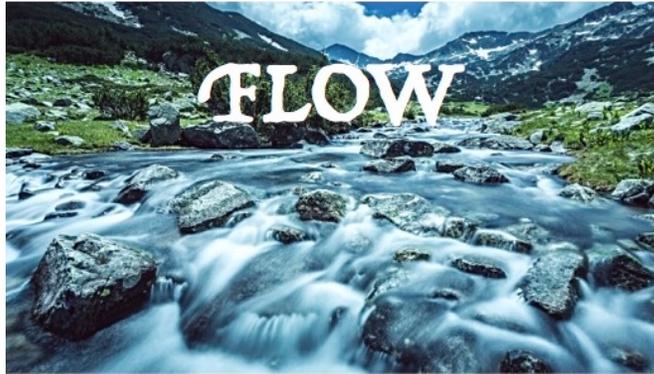


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Forgiveness The Extravagant Gift

by Dan Taylor



“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

Matthew 6:12-15

“If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them.⁴ Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”

⁵ *The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”*

Luke 17:3-5

In 2013, WestJet Airlines pulled off an amazing Christmas gift for their passengers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIElvi2MuEk>

It wasn't because their passengers were any better than other airlines', more deserving, or the best at what they do. Forgiveness is a form of gift-giving, but unfortunately, forgiveness is not quite as much fun as the West Jet Christmas gift.

Most of us are probably like the apostles in the Luke passage above. In hearing that we must forgive someone for the same thing seven times in a day (really this means an infinite number of times) the apostles and many of us respond, “Lord, increase our faith!” In other words, “What are you, crazy??? That's impossible!” True. Forgiveness doesn't make a lot of sense.

With these words Jesus set a high standard. His life set an even higher standard. While hanging from nails pounded through his body, in physical agony, betrayed and humiliated, Jesus looked at those responsible and prayed, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”* (Luke 23:34)

So what did his executioners do to merit forgiveness? Was there a sudden change of heart, tearful apologies, demonstrated difference in life choices? They didn't deserve to be forgiven. And that's the funny thing about forgiveness, it isn't and can't be deserved. So when each of us hears the good news of the gospel that says “You, _____ (*fill in your name*), are forgiven. Everything you've ever done, are doing, or will do is forgiven.” It has nothing to do with your worthiness of being forgiven.

Pause right here and steep in this truth for a minute: you and I don't deserve God's forgiveness in any way. (did you keep reading? Nope, just pause. Stop. You need to pause a bit more.)

What emotions are associated with that truth for you? Is it uncomfortable? Joyful? Numb? Take some time to journal about those emotions and that truth and what that does or doesn't say about your relationship with God's grace.

Ok, so going on—Jesus is pointed in his application of this truth: we do not have a corner on the forgiveness market. As we have been forgiven so we should forgive—extravagantly, without waiting for change in the other, forgiveness as a gift, not as a response, but initiated by the offended. (Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, 168.)

Lord, increase our faith.

How then do we forgive so generously? Is forgiveness an intellectual act? Do the emotions associated with being hurt or sinned against simply disappear if we decide to forgive?

Forgiving another person can lead us toward emotional healing, increase our experience of peace and contentment, and lessen our anger and pain. "But emotional healing is not the main purpose of forgiveness...the heart of forgiveness is a generous release of a genuine debt...that's a gift we give not so much to ourselves but to the one who has wronged us." (Volf, 169)

So forgiveness is an action of love, done for the sake of another. It is an action that is prompted when we receive God's forgiveness for our own sins and motivated by God's crazy love in us that allows us to love our enemies (even if they remain our enemies).

Prayer:

Our Father, Please continue to remind me of my forgiveness in you. You have given me this gift, so help me now to continue to extend that gift as I forgive others. Form me into a person for whom the process of forgiveness is natural and letting resentment linger is impossible. Lord, increase my faith. Amen.

Some Challenges:

Think of someone who has wronged you. Use the prompts below as one possible way to pursue forgiving them. Repeat throughout the rest of your life. (These ideas come from: Walter Wangerin, *As for Me and My House*, 96-104)

1. Realistic Assessment

On your own, name what was done that was sinful or hurtful. Name who was affected. Name what the affect was (emotional, physical, spiritual, financial, social, etc. consequences). Strive to avoid exaggeration, “always” or “never” statements, or lumping unrelated experiences together.

2. Remember Your Own Forgiveness

The basis for this crazy act of forgiving doesn't lie in the other person or in you. We are only ever grateful servants being gracious toward others with the grace we have already received. “This step is the equalizer, leveling in you any sense of superiority over the sinner, to whom you are more similar that to the righteous God.” (p.98)

3. Sacrifice Your Rights in Prayer

The world tells us we have a right to revenge. Justice tells us we have a right to expect restitution, or at the very least that the offender should remorsefully apologize. Our stubbornness tells us we have a right to expect the offender to initiate reconciliation. But Jesus' example turns this on its head. We are not left with the option to hold on to our rights. Instead we give up our rights in prayer.

Talk to God about what you've named. Tell Him you let go of your rights for fairness and revenge. It is God who works in your heart the miracle of genuinely releasing another from their debt.

It is here that we encounter the scandal that forgiveness is not ultimately about *gaining* something (healing, peace, etc.) for ourselves. Forgiveness is instead a gift to the debtor, given to benefit them. It seeks to overcome evil, not continue it, as is clear in Romans 12:20-21: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Volf, 160-162)

4. Speak the Sin and the Forgiveness

Now with the work you've done above in mind, if at all possible, make a time to talk with the person who wronged you. Tell them two things. Say what happened and what the effect was, and tell them you have forgiven them. You have released the desire for revenge or to make them hurt, this act of speaking is done for their sake, that their relationship with God be restored and they would be changed, grown, and transformed to be more like Jesus.

5. Demonstrate the Sincerity of Your Forgiveness

This conversation could indeed produce true, sincere repentance and joyful acceptance of your forgiveness in the other person. More often, though, interactions might feel awkward as the person doubts the depth of your forgiveness and wrestles with lingering guilt. It is also possible, that after this conversation, despite your best efforts, the other person would get defensive and reject your forgiveness.

Regardless of their reaction, if the person you've forgiven is someone with whom you have ongoing interactions, your next job is to assure them that the gift of forgiveness you gave them really was free—through treating them with respect and warmth (not trying to subtly punish them with coldness), serving them humbly (reinforcing that you don't think they owe you anything), and even verbally affirming them (not giving guilt the silence it needs to fester).