



## **In the Father's Arms**

Understanding Forgiveness in the Scriptures

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*LWML has been asking, "What's your 80?" To answer, LWQ offers this Bible study from the '80s.*

Once there were two women who never spoke to each other. Both women belonged to the same church. Everyone at church knew they didn't get along. They could sit at a meeting together and never say a word to each other. They talked past each other, they walked past each other, and had been doing so for many, many years.

One day their pastor, a reconciling sort of person, was moved to suggest that the two women come into his office for an attempt at making peace. They agreed with hesitation. As the three of them talked they were astonished to discover that the bone of contention between the two women could simply not be found. "Tell me," said the pastor, "what started this whole thing? What was the wrong done or the hurt received?" The two women looked at each other, shook their heads, shrugged their shoulders, and said, "I don't know. I can't remember."

Now here were two women who received their heavenly Father's embrace in the very same church. Once in the Father's arms, though, they refused to respond to each other in the same spirit. Long ago something had been said or done and not forgiven. A lack of forgiveness turned to bitterness, the deep-rooted, hard-to-weed-out variety.

Forgiveness is one of those good graces of God meant to be received and given. Christians are conduits, not containers, where forgiveness is concerned.

Opening: Read, perhaps responsively, Psalms 32, 51, or 130.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, prepare our hearts and minds to look at how we have accepted Your forgiveness only to keep our own forgiveness from our brothers and sisters in Christ. We make excuses to hold on to anger and frustration over others' wrongdoing instead of forgiving and putting the best construction on everything. Lead our thoughts and words as we study Your word and gain more meaning for our lives, so we are ready to reflect Your love to others.

1. Silently read Luke 15:11-32, the familiar story of the Prodigal Son.

As you read through the story, keep an eye open for clear evidence of the three primary views of sin in the Scriptures. Where in the story do you see the prodigal son involved in each of these forms of sin? The three views are given below.

- a. an open act of rebellion.
- b. guilt, defilement or pollution.
- c. a condition of separation or bondage (original sin).

**Luke 15:11-32** 11 And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. 17 “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’” 20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate. 25 “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ 28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ 31 And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

- Open Act of Rebellion

When the younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, he is basically asking for his father to die and the estate to be divided. His father is nothing more than the son's way to get rich. The son then leaves the family, goes away, and foolishly spends his money on a less than desirable lifestyle.

- Guilt, defilement, or pollution.

The son's lifestyle is not only reckless but probably less than moral. He then is reduced to feeding pigs, which for a Jew is unclean, illegal, and the lowest of the low. He is starving and has reached the bottom.

- A condition of separation or bondage (original sin).

The son finally comes to the point where he knows the servants in his father's house are treated better so he intends to return, confess his sins, and beg for forgiveness or at least a job and a meal.

2. Now search the story again and find in Jesus' story evidence of the following aspects of God's grace:

- The unexpectedness of God's grace, surprise.

The father is looking for his son. He knows, somehow, that his son is hurting and may return so he waits. The father runs to his son, breaking the social standards of a man of wealth and position running, and immediately hugs his son. He is not only welcomed back but a party and celebration are planned for his return.

- The warmth and tenderness of God's grace toward the sinner.

The Father hugs the son who was probably filthy and nowhere close to clean even before the son confesses and apologizes.

- The initiating character of God's grace.

The father forgives the son (hugs him and was waiting for his return) even before the son asks for forgiveness. The son intended to be made a slave within the father's house but instead, he is restored as a son, a full member of the family.

- The extravagance of God's grace.

The father instructs the best robe a ring and shoes be placed on him. This signifies his return to a position within the family, provision for his earthly needs, and a visible statement that he is not a slave but a full member of the family. A feast is also prepared in celebration of his return.

3. The "prodigal Father" (prodigal meaning extravagant) lavishes grace upon all

His rebellious children in search of forgiveness. Once in the Father's arms, we are more than forgiven. We become forgivers as well. Complete the following questions by reading the appropriate passage:

What is the motivation behind a Christian forgiving another person? **Ephesians 4:32**

**Ephesians 4:32** Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

God in Christ has forgiven us of all our sins even when we didn't deserve it. He could have denied our forgiveness and condemned us, but instead, He is gracious and loving towards us. We, too, should forgive others even when it is difficult.

How often and in what circumstances must a Christian forgive? **Matthew 18:21-22**

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**21** Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" **22** Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

We should forgive others not only 77 times but constantly and continually and in all circumstances. There are going to be times when this type and frequency of forgiveness is difficult, but it is at these times we remember how we have been forgiven.

How does God respond to the Christian who will not forgive? **Matthew 18:23-35**

**Matthew 18:23-35** **23** "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. **24** When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. **25** And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. **26** So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' **27** And

out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

God knows we are sinful and need forgiveness. We too need to forgive others. When we don't forgive others, we are saying that their sins against us are more serious or unforgivable than our own sins against God. We cannot expect our Father in heaven to forgive our sins and then turn around and have less compassion/mercy on those who sin against us and not forgive them. This puts us as the ultimate judge as to whose sins should be forgiven, in other words, putting us in the place of God.

When and by whom was the right to forgive sins given to the church? **John 20:19-23**

**John 20:19-23** 19 On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

The right to grant the forgiveness of sins was given to the church by Christ Himself when He appeared to the disciples in the upper room on Easter evening. He has just granted them forgiveness by His death on the cross, now he tells His disciples, and by extension the church, to forgive the sins of others

Under what circumstances may the church deny the word of God's forgiveness? **Matthew 18:15-17**

**Matthew 18:15-17** 15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

The forgiveness of sins may be denied to those who are unrepentant and unwilling to listen to the admonishment of brothers and sisters in the faith. It is withheld from those who will not listen to the rebuke of God's law proclaimed by many with various connections to the individual. This denial of forgiveness by the church is not haphazard or easy but rather withheld after much prayer and attempts at reconciliation.

What happens in a church when forgiveness is not extended to everyone? **Hebrews 12:15**

Hebrews 12:15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;

When forgiveness is not granted to those who repent and desire forgiveness there may be division and trouble within the church. Those who do not receive forgiveness may feel as if God does not forgive them and may resent those who are forgiven. If forgiveness is desired by anyone and those sins are confessed there needs to be full and complete forgiveness.

## GLEANINGS

1. A little boy once prayed. "Father, forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are dead against us." Perhaps, at times, we feel we need to forgive those who are against us as well. Describe, if you are comfortable, a time when the grace of God "stretched" you to forgive someone whose wrong against you had been serious.

Remind your participants that this is not a time to gossip, but rather to glorify the Lord with how He has helped us to be able to forgive others. It would be wise to not use names or examples from the congregation or community.

2. Do we forgive because we have to forgive or because we have been forgiven?

We should forgive because we have been forgiven. However, there may be times when that forgiveness is difficult, and it feels as if we are only forgiving because we have to.

3. Lutheran Service Book contains an order of Individual Confession and Absolution (p. 292-293). Why do you think private confession has fallen into such disuse in the church today? What are the special benefits of experiencing one-on-one confession and forgiveness?

Many times, it is difficult to confess our sins and admit guilt and wrong. We live in a society where admitting sins is contrary to our "win at all costs" attitude and lifestyle. We don't want someone telling us we have sinned and make us feel bad or less about ourselves. One on one confession and forgiveness is a great opportunity to hear from a pastor, or a fellow Christian, that our sins indeed have been forgiven for Christ's sake. That forgiveness becomes personal and real.

4. What can be some of the results of "the root of bitterness" in a person's life? In the life of a Christian congregation?

Bitterness creates division and an attitude of me versus you. It separates Christians from each other and possibly from the church and Christ. The devil wants us to fight, disagree and take our eyes off of Christ and His cross.

5. What do you think was at the root of the elder brother's unwillingness to accept his younger brother in Luke 15? What is often behind a person's unwillingness to follow the Father's lead and forgive someone already forgiven by God?

The younger brother may have felt as if he was not appreciated or loved by his father. He may have also felt like he had been the good son and here the younger son who has messed up his life is being rewarded for his sin.

We may think that they don't deserve God's love or forgiveness because of their sins. We may look at their sins and find their particular sin as especially horrific or somehow unforgivable.

Closing: We are extravagantly forgiven by our Lord. When it is hard to forgive others, we can ask Him to help us to be reminded of the grace shown to us in our sin and failures and also to soften our hearts to share grace with others who have hurt us. Keeping ourselves in the Word and surrounded by those who model forgiveness and Christ's love help us to follow the calling of the Holy Spirit to forgive and live with others in unity and respect.

Prayer: Our extravagant Father, Your love for us is beyond compare. You have given us the greatest gift, your Son Jesus to pay for our sins and show us the joy of living in unity with You. Help us as we live our lives on earth to be reminded of that perfect love so that we may also show grace and mercy to those who have sinned against us. Forgive us for the many times that we "have not let His love have its way, so that our love for others has failed". Give us Your words to say to not only forgive but point others to You the author and perfecter of our faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

\*LSB p. 292