

Sermon Notes

(A basic transcription with modifications for style and clarity)

UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

Michael McKinney, April 6, 2018

In the fifth grade, we were given the assignment to pick a poem and read it aloud in class. I drew a blank. As a fifth grader, I didn't sit around reading poetry. Tea, emasculated sandwiches and poetry had no place in my life. So, I asked my parents for suggestions.

After a bit, my enlightened Dad got a big smile on his face and said, "Why don't you read *The Cremation of Sam McGee* by Robert W. Service?" When my Mom said, "Jack!" and gave him that look (you know that look), I knew I we were on to something great. I mean, the bell rang, the gates flew open and the narrator of my life said, "And they're off!" and I never looked back.

It's a great poem. Seriously, who can put down a poem that starts off:

*There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who toil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.*

It's too cool! And it's a proper poem. It rhymes. So, it's got that going for it, too.

In the poem, poor Sam McGee was freezing to death prospecting for gold in the Yukon Territory and he made his partner promise to cremate his remains when he died because he was "chilled clean through to the bone." Sam said that it wasn't "being dead—it's my awful dread of the icy grave that pains; So I want you to swear that, foul or fair, you'll cremate my last remains." He knew cremation was the only way he was ever going to get warm. It has a happy ending, but his partner agonized over his promise to cremate him. He didn't want to do it, but in time, he did the deed because as he put it, "a promise made is a debt unpaid, and the trail has its own stern code."

This idea of debt describes our relationships much of the time. In literature and speech, we frequently use metaphors that relate to this idea of debt, like, “You owe me” and “I want to get even with that person,” because a debt creates an imbalance.

If I promise you, I owe you. If you promise me, you owe me. If I hurt you, I owe you. If you hurt me, you owe me. These debts are very real to us and must be paid. And when any of these debts linger past the due date, they start to smell and tension arises between us.

Anger is really nothing more than a perceived debt. Someone owes us something. We get angry when we don’t get what we want, because we believe we are owed something—something we think we deserve or are entitled to.

The only way this goes away is if someone pays the debt or we cancel the debt; we forgive the debt. Forgiveness isn’t something we typically like to do. In all fairness, we want the debt to be paid. We lost something, something was taken from us, we want it acknowledged and we want it back.

When someone gossips about us, it is like stealing our good reputation. They owe us. When we are disrespected, it is like our identity has been stolen from us. They owe us. When we are lied to, we are robbed of our trust and security. They owe us. For justice’s sake, a transaction must take place that satisfies the debt whether it be an apology, a favor, money or some other form of restitution.

This is an issue we feel very strongly about and we can get quite emotional over it. It is common to all of us and so the Apostle Peter brings up the issue of forgiveness to Jesus in Matthew 18.

While we know we should forgive, our sense of justice necessitates that there must be a limit to it; there must be conditions to it. I mean, what do you do when someone hurts you over and over and over again? At some point, they have to pay. Right? They have to know they are wrong and they hurt us. That’s only fair. We want to be even with or we want to get even with the person that owes us. There is a debt involved. An imbalance that we want to be evened up. So, in Matthew 18:21, Peter asks Jesus about it.

Matthew 18:21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

In other words, when is enough, enough? We’ve all been there, right? There’s no justice if you offer forgiveness any time and all the time.

Some sources say that the rabbinic teaching at that time was to forgive three times. So Peter, no doubt, thought he was offering a generous answer. Perhaps over the top, even. Seven times. Sound pretty generous to me.

In his question though, Peter exposes a misunderstanding we've all had about the nature of forgiveness. We think forgiveness is about them. It's something we do for others. We do it for their benefit, not ours. So he suggests seven times just to be nice. But after that, it's over. We all have our limits. In verse 22 Jesus answers him:

22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven."

In other words, you just keep on forgiving. What's up with that? But before Peter can say another word, Jesus launches into a parable about forgiveness in terms that we can all relate to—a debt—a debt that must be paid.

23 Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.

25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

26 At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'

27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

The servant owed him the equivalent of millions of dollars—a debt he could never repay in his lifetime. It was silly for him to suggest that he could. As was his right under the law, the king decided to satisfy the debt by selling the servant, his wife, his children and everything he owned. The servant did the only thing he could do, he asked for mercy and promised to repay the debt. Of course, it was a debt he could never repay. But fortunately for him, the king had mercy on him and so far more than simply giving him time. He freely forgives the whole debt. The servant never asked for forgiveness, but yet the king made a decision to cancel the debt anyway. That is essentially the definition of forgiveness: the decision to cancel a debt.

But the parable doesn't stop there.

28 But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

29 His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

30 But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.

Now the servant is the master. His buddy owes him the equivalent of a little over three or four months' wages or one six-hundred-thousandth of the debt he had owed.

But unlike his own debt, this is something his friend could reasonably pay back. But instead of forgiving the debt, as we might expect considering the mercy that he was just shown by the king, he demands to be made right. He demands payment and has him thrown into prison until he or a family member could raise the money to pay the debt.

31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32 Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.

33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’

34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

And everyone listening thought, “Yeah. He deserves it. He should have to pay his debt since he is so ungrateful and failed to forgive the debt of his friend.” He didn’t extend to his friend the same consideration that he was shown.

Ungratefulness will get us into trouble every time. Gratefulness helps us keep our perspective and keeps our thoughts from turning inward. When we are having trouble with each other, or with others at work or at home, our thoughts need to turn immediately to what we can be grateful for in both the situation and with the people we are having an issue with. And even though we are told to do this over and over again throughout the Bible, we fail to do it.

But now at the end of the parable, Jesus delivers the line that should rock your world.

35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Wow. Now we see what’s going on here. The king is God the Father. The servant is you and me with a debt to God that we can never repay. Jesus is acknowledging that there is in fact a debt involved here. Our sins create a debt to God. When King David spoke of sin, he said to God, “Against you and only you have I sinned.” As we remembered a week ago at Passover, God in His mercy allowed His Son to die for our sins. It’s a debt we can never repay. While it may cost us no more than our pride to forgive, it cost God the life of His Son. What God has done for us is beyond human calculation.

The second servant is anyone we are holding something against because of what they have done to us. People we have a legitimate grip against. People that have offended us, hurt us, abandoned us, marginalized us, taken advantage of us or disrespected us. The people that owe us for something they did to us.

Jesus says very clearly, “Cancel their debt. Forgive them—or else.”

Jesus says forgive every time. It’s pretty clear. If we don’t forgive others that owe us, we will pay the price. If we cancel the debt of others, we will be the ones who are set free. Jesus’ response to Peter’s question indicates that there’s not only no limit to forgiveness, but to keep a tally of forgivenesses is wrong, too. No matter how “generous” we think we are in doling out forgiveness, there really is no forgiveness taking place if we are counting—if we are keeping a tally. From Jesus’ perspective, to not forgive is self-destructive.

Forgiving others changes your life—my life. Forgiveness is about our attitude, not their action. It’s a decision we make for our own good. Even on a physical level, studies have shown that having an attitude of forgiveness lowers our depression and anxiety levels and improves our sleep quality and overall health by reducing our physical symptoms, the number of medications used, fatigue and the number of medical complaints. Simply said, it’s good for us.

In all of human affairs, justice is not the last word. We think, “They can’t get away with that.” “I don’t have to take that.” And if that thinking keeps us from forgiving others, then we can know it is inspired by our adversary the devil. As Jesus just pointed out, that thinking is not God’s thinking.

God will decide what is fair and when justice will be done. Our job is, as Paul told the Romans:

Romans 12:18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Anger, bitterness, grudges are all forms of vengeance. We are trying to send a message to or get back at another person for what they did to us. Two chapters later Paul asks us:

Romans 14:10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;

11 for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.”

12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

No one is getting away with anything. Justice is up to God. But by not forgiving each other we bring justice down on ourselves.

Jesus is saying that forgiveness should be our first response to people that hurt us because of the debt that has been canceled for us by God through Jesus Christ.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told everyone: blessed are those who show mercy, for it is to them that mercy will be shown. Then later in Matthew chapter 6 Jesus makes it very clear that there is a connection between forgiving and being forgiven. In the model prayer He says:

Matthew 6:12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven (past tense) our debtors.

There is a direct correlation there. We do, so He will.

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.

Those who will not forgive must not expect to be forgiven. If mercy and forgiveness are characteristics of God, they should also be characteristics of His people. Now you might be thinking, "I still want to be made right." They must ask me to forgive them. That might seem like a loophole in all of this. But it is not in the spirit of what Jesus is talking about here. And considering what Jesus said, I wouldn't want to take the chance that I had found a loophole that will allow me to still get even with the person that owes me. The need to be right is strong in all of us. And it will be our undoing if we don't get it under control.

Before God, between justice and forgiveness, I'll take forgiveness every time. It's my only hope of survival. It's mankind's only hope of survival. While justice is desired, it is not the last word. Forgiveness is the last word. Think about it. Forgiveness gives a hard edge to the gospel message and its practice in our lives illuminates God's plan for mankind. There is no hope without it. It represents a characteristic of God. Do you want to preach the gospel? Forgive others. Cancel their debt.

Now, this may seem out of control or unreasonable to us and there is a reason for that. As we have read many times:

Isaiah 55:8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.

9 As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

In other words, our thinking and God's thinking are infinitely different. Now if we believe this is true, then we are confronted with a different mindset, a different standard than we are accustomed to. It's not intuitive. God's thinking, God's responses and God's approaches are not something we can reason our way to. So we should stop trying. We must just do and our doubts will be addressed in the doing.

When we try to reason our way to God's thinking, we fabricate loopholes, we create exceptions and we take on entitlements. If we try to reason our way, we will fall short and sabotage our relationship with God while all along we are imagining that we have met the standard. We will miss the mark. And forgiving is no exception. When it comes to forgiving, we often try to reason our way to loopholes.

What Jesus was telling His disciples is that we aren't to do unto others as they have done unto us, or even as we think they deserve. Instead we are to do unto others as has been done unto us by God and Jesus Christ.

As we should reaffirm as we begin another Holy Day season, our relationship with God is characterized by forgiveness and mercy. We are here today. God has called us not because we deserve it, or we have earned it, but by His mercy. We have been included at this time to be one of God's firstfruits, not because we deserve it, but because God in His mercy, chose to include us.

We are reminded of this over and over again throughout the Bible, because it is key to understanding the way God thinks. What God did for us should be something we rehearse each day, because it changes the way we look at Him and by extension, the way we look at each other. When we begin our day by being grateful for what God has done for us, how can we treat someone else any differently? God must just shake His head at times. But it is so easy to forget, because what God did is not as immediate as what they just did. It's why we have these days. Passover reminds us of what God did for us and these Days of Unleavened Bread remind us why we need it.

When we don't remember, it harms our relationship with God. When we do remember, it deepens our understanding of God and our relationship with Him and clears the way for us to grow—to convert our minds to the mind of God. If we can't be grateful for what He did for us, we can't make the first step to becoming like our Elder Brother Jesus Christ.

So, Jesus said, "As you begin to focus on your calling, what God has done for you, and the significance of your relationship with God—this is where your head needs to be—I want you to do unto others as I have done unto you." But that's tough, isn't it? I mean, you look at me and think, "Yeah, but you don't deserve that." And I look at you and think, "You don't deserve that." And God says, "Exactly. And you didn't deserve what I did for you either. So go and do likewise. Cancel their debt. Forgive them—or else."

Pretty simple isn't it? We could just stop right there. But let's look at how the apostle Paul builds on what Jesus. Here Paul gets very practical. He brings it on home. He removes the loopholes.

Ephesians 4:31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Over 2,000 years before Dan Wieden came up with the Nike slogan “Just Do It,” the apostle Paul says, “Just do it! When it comes to bitterness, rage, anger, outbursts, gossip, spite, revenge, grudges, and resentment, get rid of it. Just do it. All of these emotions that undermine your relationships, get rid of them. Period. If you are a person that gets angry, get rid of it. If you have a grudge, just get rid of it.”

This might seem a bit insensitive of Paul. He has no idea what we just went through, does he? He doesn't know the hit we just took. Besides, we like talking about our anger. And we like talking about our hurts. We're comfortable with our story. By hanging on to our story, we can rationalize doing what we want to do. It excuses a lot of behavior. I'm human. I get your story. I understand why you feel the way you do.

Now you may be thinking, “I don't have any anger issues” even though your family and close friends have tried ever so carefully to talk to you without you blowing up. And they don't talk about it anymore because when they do, there is just something inside of you that boils up and you lash out. You can't acknowledge that you've got some of this stuff that Paul is describing here. And when someone asks you why you are that way, you immediately blame. If he wouldn't, if she wouldn't, he said, she said, they said, they always, if it hadn't been for them. Immediately you've got an excuse. And so you go on carrying around some of this stuff wherever you go. Paul says it's time to face it.

You know why we think what Paul said is insensitive? Because he didn't get to hear our story. If he were to sit down and hear our sad story, then I know he would say, “Oh, I get it. In that case, you should just stay mad. If that happened to me I'd be mad, too. If my parents had treated me that way, if my spouse had done that, if my kids were like that ... sure, I get it. You're the exception.”

If Paul heard our story he would say that we have every reason in the world to be mad. And besides that, it's hard to forgive and let go. We hang on to our anger because it becomes part of our identity—who we are. It's hard to let go of that.

It seems insensitive and unreasonable for anyone who has not had the benefit of hearing our sad story to just say, “Get rid of it.”

So, why would we take what Paul says seriously? I mean, if we went to a counselor and he said that, we would just walk out and say, “What a waste. He's a jerk. He just doesn't get it.” Right? So why listen to Paul?

Well, besides being chosen by God to tell us this, we should listen to Paul because he's writing this while being held illegally in a Roman prison. And this wasn't an overnight. He has been held there a long time without a trial and God still hadn't gotten him out of there. He had a right to be mad at everyone—his Jewish friends, the Christians, the Romans. No one was helping him. And here he is in this very difficult situation and with every reason to be angry, bitter, and hostile and he writes, “If you are angry, bitter, or revengeful, just stop it. Love, Paul.”

If he can do that, I want to know his secret. How did he do it? Here's a guy whose situation is just like ours or maybe worse and he thinks we should just drop this stuff. How is that possible?

We should listen to Paul, because for some reason he actually believes that it's possible to just get rid of all that stuff. If you're like me—and I suspect, you are—there have been times in my life where I was so hurt that I didn't think I would ever get over it. I didn't think I would get back to normal. I wasn't sure I would be able to see certain people, have certain conversations, think about certain people, without intense anger or at the very least roll my eyes.

And now Paul comes along and says, "Just get rid of it." And he thinks it's possible. He's talking about some of the strongest emotions you'll ever have. "Just get rid of it," he says.

And some of us would say, "I have tried to forgive, I've tried not to lose my temper, and I've tried to get past it, but the best I can do is manage it, because I'll never get over it." Even though our anger, our malice, has cost us over and over again. Our mouths have destroyed marriages. Our temper has alienated us from our kids and our loved ones. We know it is there and we wish it would just go away, but there just seems no way out. But Paul says that there is a way to be free of it. You can get rid of it. How is that possible?

There is a mechanism to make this happen. Ephesians 4 and verse 32 gives us the solution. Paul writes:

Ephesians 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.

Forgiving each other is the answer. You get rid of this stuff by forgiving one another. If you have a bad attitude, just forgive. All the toxic stuff that spews out of your mouth, you don't get rid of it by just shutting your mouth. You get rid of it by forgiving one another. You don't just ignore the people or the problem, you forgive it.

But we really don't feel like it. We don't feel like forgiving. We've grown comfortable with our story. It gets us attention and sympathy. What would we talk about? Besides it's easier to get attention as a victim than it is as an overcomer.

However, forgiveness isn't an emotion. It's not a feeling. It is a decision. You don't make a decision when the emotion is right. It's not a question of being in the mood for it. We make a decision because it is the right thing to do. Forgiveness is the decision to cancel the debt. That person doesn't owe you anymore.

Every time you've been hurt, there is this sense that something has been taken away from you. Somebody owes you something; something you believe you deserved. So we need to say before God, "They took this from me and I'm making a decision to

forgive them. I'm not going to wait for them to own up to it. I'm not going to wait for them to apologize. I'm not going to wait for them to come to me. I'm making a decision. They don't owe me anymore. I'm canceling the debt." That's what forgiveness is.

Forgiveness must become a life habit. Once we cancel the debt, what has happened inside of us will be manifested outside of us in how we talk, how we react, our temper and our perspective on life. A godly person makes a habit of dispensing forgiveness.

Now don't misunderstand, when we are hurt, they really do owe us. We don't imagine all of this. And we should identify what has been taken and then cancel the debt. In prayer, in the presence of God, say, "I cancel the debt. They, he, she, owes me nothing. Debt canceled."

This is between you and God. It is not necessary to go to the person and tell them you forgave them. In fact, you will probably do more harm than good if you do. They most likely don't even know that they did anything wrong and will view your forgiveness as an accusation. It's also very one-sided. Going to the person to tell them you forgive them is usually just our pride in action. Another way to get back at them—to be made right.

Again, this is not intuitive. What Paul is saying here flows right into his next thought about marriage in chapter 5. When Paul says, husbands love your wives and wives respect your husbands, it's a straightforward command. It's the same as forgiveness. It's a decision we make. It's not dependent on the other person. It's unconditional.

You don't love your wife because she is loveable. You don't respect your husband because he is respectable. To be sure, it's easier when they are loveable and respectable, but it is a decision we make to do what God expects of us. Love is a decision. Respect is a decision. In the same way, forgiveness is easier when the other party asks for it, but it is not required. Forgiveness is something we decide to do because God expects it of us.

We don't have godly relationships by thinking like human beings. We don't have godly marriages by thinking like human beings. Some things won't make sense until we do them. With commands as clear as this, we can't stand before God and say, "I would have, but they didn't ask for forgiveness. They weren't loveable. They weren't respectable." Our story won't factor in. There are no victims on judgment day. So we need to get past that now. We are judged on the choices we make, not on what other people do or don't do. And we can thank God for that. Our relationship with Him is personal. No one gets in between us. Our eternal life is not dependent on someone else's behavior.

And yet we fight this, because in the back of our minds, there is still this nagging sense that if I forgive them, I'm letting them off the hook. They don't deserve it. It's like

I'm rewarding them for what they've done. I'm the victim here, why in the world would I do that for them? That doesn't make any sense.

We think, "Sure, I recognize my anger is eating me up inside. Yeah, I recognize it's hurting my relationships. I recognize I've got some stuff that makes people crazy. I know I can't stop talking about this. But I just can't forgive. Why would I do that?"

From our human perspective, it's tough to justify forgiving someone else without conditions. So Paul tells us why we must do it in the last part of verse 32:

32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.

Just as God in Christ also forgave you. To the same degree, to the same depth, as God has done for you.

What Paul is saying is that, we don't forgive others because they deserve to be forgiven, or because they have asked to be forgiven. We forgive others because we have been forgiven. We're not doing it for them. It's not about them.

The underlying issue here is that if we have a problem forgiving, it is because we have lost sight of the sacrifice Christ made on our behalf. The degree to which we understand what God has done for us, the degree to which we appreciate what God has done for us, is the degree to which we will willingly forgive others, no questions asked. We need to maximize God in our life. He needs to be bigger in our lives than life itself.

Our story isn't part of the equation here. It's never brought up. The only thing that matters is what God has done for us. When God is our focus, then forgiveness becomes easier. It's a focus issue. What are we focusing on?

This is the kind of thing that Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians 11:27 where he writes:

1 Corinthians 11:27 Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks *this* cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

These are the kinds of issues we need to be looking at, so that by this time next year, we have canceled all the debts owed us. In that process, we may need to go to others and say that we are sorry. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

Matthew 5:23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you,

24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."

He isn't saying that this is something you make someone else do. You don't hold their feet to the fire. This is about you. This is between you and God. We have to get

rid of these relationship issues or we undermine our relationship with God. Plain and simple.

After we cancel their debt, there is little doubt that the memories will creep back in. We're human and these things have a way of resurfacing. But when they do, we must say to ourselves, "No. They don't owe me. I canceled that debt," and shift our focus from that person to what God has done for us.

It means that we will not mention it to the offending person or to others at any time, no matter how easily the opportunity presents itself in conversation, in emails or in off-handed remarks. Day in and day out, it becomes a matter between you and God. In the beginning we may have to rehearse this with God several times a day. It is not easy, but it is right.

Paul says, "Don't focus on the person, focus on the solution." Think about it. For some of us there are hurts that can never be paid back. Even if they came and apologized, they could never repay us. They could never repay the years of hurt. So why would we continue to hold a debt over their heads that they could never repay anyway? Why let it impact us and those around us? Why, when we have the opportunity to let it go and say before God, "They don't owe me," just like God has done for each of us?

We can run, instead of forgiving. We can try to run from our problems into a new situation and it will work for a time. We can kid ourselves into thinking that it's all better. But we are still the same people and the issues that drove us on will creep up again. If we are offended here, we'll be offended there. Offense is an *us* issue, not a *them* issue. So, in time, we will be back before God with the same dilemma. Do I submit to God or do I place my ego above all else? Do I need to make myself right or do I let God do that? Does my pride trump my relationship with God?

Life is really too short to make it all about us. We have but a short time to demonstrate to God that our ego is not the basis of our decisions. His Word is our foundation. It's where we get the strength of our convictions. It's where we discover the blessings that God wants for us.

Learning to forgive others demonstrates to God that we understand His sacrifice for us. Does it still hurt? Will we cry and fight it? Yes. Mostly, yes. But it is nothing compared to what God has done for us by sacrificing His Son on our behalf. And that is Paul's point. We can't forgive sin. Only God can forgive sin, but we can demonstrate to God our appreciation for what He did for us.

Learning to forgive also allows us to move on. To grow. Waiting to forgive until we are repaid only hardens us and distances us from God. Disconnected from God, we are connected to the negative impulses and emotions that Paul wrote about—bitterness,

anger and resentment. It allows for negative attitudes to grow. There is no neutral ground here. We must forgive.

Forgive unconditionally. I wonder how many more prayers would be answered and how much more clearly we would see the will of God if we were more forgiving.

When we deal with others, remember that we are only rarely dealing with logic. We are dealing with emotions and ego. This is where God's Word becomes our anchor. It supersedes whatever we are dealing with. We cannot become effective members of the God Family if we are defective members of the Body of Christ.

Just as forgiving is a choice, anger is a choice. We all get frustrated and how we express it is a choice. Anger is only one response. There are many other choices we can choose in response to what we don't like.

Although we don't like to admit it, relational issues are rarely one-sided. Many times we contributed to the issue. We perhaps pushed a few buttons. We set them up. We need to acknowledge our part in it and ask God to be forgiven.

Finally, let's look at Luke 23, beginning in verse 13:

Luke 23:13 Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people,

14 and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him.

15 Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.

16 Therefore, I will punish him and then release him."

17 (for it was necessary for him to release one to them at the feast).

18 But the whole crowd shouted, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!"

19 (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.)

20 Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again.

21 But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

22 For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore, I will have him punished and then release him."

23 But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed.

24 So Pilate decided to grant their demand.

25 He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will.

Like us, these people were just trying to keep their world from spinning out of control. Things were moving along just fine, they thought, and then Jesus comes along and starts upending their world. It's what happens when our world comes in contact with God's Word. Jesus questioned them. He questioned their motivations. He questioned their approach. They felt like He was undermining their authority. They wanted to be able to go home at night and kiss their family and say, "I did everything right today." They had a lot at stake. Their story was at stake. They just wanted this problem to end. And they were willing to do anything to make that happen—to be right.

32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed.

33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left.

34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

And you know, they didn't have any idea what they were doing or to whom they were doing it to. So Jesus said, "Father, cancel their debt. They are clueless. They have no idea what they have just done. Forgive them, anyway."

They weren't going to come to Jesus with an apology. They didn't even think they had done anything that anyone else in their position wouldn't have done. They will, one day. And when they do, Jesus will say, "Your debt has already been canceled. Now go and do likewise." ♦