

## Witness Talk ~ Linda Lazarus

### Matthew 18:21-35 The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

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#### *What is our reaction and response to this scripture passage? (Matthew 18:21-35)*

Peter says to Jesus perhaps thinking he will be pleased with his answer that to forgive seven times would be very generous. The rabbinic teachings of the time gave the number of three which they based on some obscure passage in the Bible, which was misinterpreted. However, Jesus surprises him with the response of not seven times but 70 times seven. In other words, Jesus is saying there is no limit to how many times we must forgive.

And sometimes it feels like we're forgiving the same sin over and over as we recount the offense in our mind.

And then, as always, Jesus proceeds to tell a parable to make his point more clearly known. It is easy just to look at the surface truth of forgiveness, which is at the core of our faith journey. At first glance it seems like an exaggerated parable that Jesus is using to make a point. We may say to ourselves "how could that servant who was forgiven so much (10 million dollars) not forgive the other servant who in comparison had such a small debt, I would never do that" we might hastily respond. But let's be honest we live wholly on God's mercy and forgiveness, yet we are slow and resistant to forgive the offenses of others.

This subject of forgiveness took me down a rabbit hole because to glean the deepest truth, it was necessary to get down to the nitty-gritty and the practicality of what this all means for our soul and for our relationships.

#### *My first question was why is forgiveness so hard?*

Thinking about forgiving someone who harmed us goes against our very instincts because we don't like to feel hurt, rejected or have our sense of identity threatened.

We may also feel anger, sadness, and confusion which often leads to resentment and holding grudges.

The flesh resists especially when it is painful to the heart. We are so easily offended.

When someone offends us, we quickly revert to the basis of Justice demanding "pay me what you owe," "I demand an apology." "Give me my rights". "I demand to be treated with respect." When we hold a grudge, become difficult or bitter and refuse to settle an issue with mercy, then we are doing exactly what the unrighteous steward does. In the very moment of our forgiveness, which Christ has graced us with always, we are demanding justice. We speak severely and sharply to one another. We have too high of an expectation by asking others to be always right, truthful, honest, and good when we ourselves cannot live up to this standard every time. We can be severe, unbending, and rigid in our demands. Like the merciful servant, if we are unable to forgive them, that means we do not value or have not recognized or experienced the full forgiveness, love and mercy of God. That above all should keep us humble. Scripture reminds us "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

## ***Can we not forgive \$20.00 worth of injury when we have been forgiven 20 million ourselves?***

We especially dread seeing the person who offended us because those encounters bring all those uncomfortable feelings of pain, and anger back. We sometimes avoid any contact to protect our hearts because we do not like to be reminded there is still a big knot in our stomach.

When we find ourselves in this position, either needing forgiveness or giving forgiveness, there is usually a loss of peace and an unrest in our soul. We know something is off. There is an unease of conscience, and it seems impossible to get past the pain or the brokenness of the relationship.

The fruits of unforgiveness are grief, bitterness, and imprisonment. The ending of the parable is not good news when the master calls the servant back and hands him over to the jailers to be tortured. And this is what happens when we do not forgive. This is a prison of isolation, turmoil, and hardness of heart.

**My Story:** I did not even know why she was being so cold as I was begging for forgiveness, she refused to forgive me. Sitting at the feet of my friend, crying, I couldn't even understand depth of her anger, I apologized over and over not even seeing what I had done to offend her so deeply. I just took all the responsibility, but she could not let it go. I was willing to do anything just to make her forgive me.

Somehow after she was finally satisfied I had suffered enough she let me "off the hook." She halfheartedly forgave me and the whole episode was a mystery to me. No matter how hard I tried to be a good friend I knew that at any moment I could be back in the "doghouse."

In other situations, for most of our relationship I usually got the silent treatment; the problems would be swept under the rug.

My person just never wanted to take responsibility or say I'm sorry. I usually walked away waiting for her to get over it, but I wanted to talk it out immediately, however that was not her way, so I never got the relief for my heart and soul that I so desperately needed. I learned after many years you can't force someone if they don't want to face the problem.

It was a big deal to me, but it did not seem to be for her. I wanted quick restoration of our relationship, but I never really knew what she wanted. I guess it was time and space.

**Story:** Another time we were playing cards, I was winning but I could tell she was getting angry with me, I even tried to lose, but when I did win, she blurted out "I hate you."

Everyone was shocked and one person immediately said, "oh you don't mean that."

There was no comment from her.

As we left, I asked again "please take your words back!" as we were leaving. I just wanted to get a quick resolution, but I learned it takes two to want to reconcile and work it out. I was always too ready to make it right again .... a lesson learned ....my need may not be the same as another.

She finally said, "I'm sorry I hurt you but I'm not sorry I said it".

This did not make me feel better but only worse.

In truth: Once words are spoken you can't take them back. They take root in the mind and heart.

Later that night she did call saying she did not mean it and she could not believe I thought she did.

What sometimes happen is that if we forgive too easily and take too much responsibility, we lose inner power and respect for self. I learned I needed to create better boundaries and have mercy on myself.

Taking on all the responsibility of every disagreement can be harmful to our mental health because when anger is turned inward it can cause depression. This also was another road I traveled. I still had many lessons to learn...loving self and loving God above all else.

When we suffer it can affect others close to us.

Our friends and family get caught up in our mess and they end up being adversely affected.

But when we are in pain we want out of our darkness.

There is a story of a three-year-old who wakes up early and it is still dark. He is in another's home standing from balcony stairs screaming, "I want it to be morning!"

However, we can't control the sun! Darkness to daylight is a process for us and for the other. We want the pain to be over NOW!

### *How do I begin to want to forgive?*

We must begin with self not our story.

**Why?** Because we get lost and embedded with the details and repetition of our story and it consumes us.

Instead, we must begin with our heart, and ask what's going on inside of me.

Is my heart constricted and hard or open to self-honesty?

**THIS IS A TIME FOR SELF STUDY** to examine our feelings of fear, anger, pain, resentment, and insecurities along with our lack of love, compassion and empathy. We experience the "pit of misery" until suffering looks worse than effort it takes to change our attitude and surrender to a better way.

Corrie Ten Boon writes, *"There is no pit so deep, that God's love is not deeper still."*

Corrie Ten Boom, in her book *The Hiding Place*, wrote about how God brought incredible beauty and healing through her difficult experiences in a Nazi concentration camp. One of my favorites about the power of love that triumphs over pain is the following quote:

*"Do you know what hurts so very much? It's Love. Love is the strongest force in the world, and when it is blocked, that means pain. There are two things we can do when this happens. We can kill that Love so that it stops hurting, but then, of course, part of us dies, too. Or we can ask God to open up another route for that love to travel."*

We identify more with our body of emotions instead of as a divine soul and child of God.

Jesus reminds us every time we go to Mass:

*"This is my body given up for you."*

We must give up our body for others by releasing and letting go because love is stronger than any sin.

### **Love is contagious.**

Of course, there is still a chance the other will not soften or let it go, thus causing themselves unnecessary suffering, but we cannot be responsible for other's happiness. One day my friend said, "you are not responsible for me." My lesson was I had tried to always make it my mission to make her happy. Yes, I loved her deeply, but sometimes she felt smothered, and I began to realize I was trying to fill the hole in my own heart by trying too hard to be loved and understood. We must do our part, everything we can but then we leave the rest in God's merciful heart. We have a choice to be free, happy as we set others free or suffer and be imprisoned.

### ***What does a sincere apology look like?***

1. Acknowledge your actions or words that hurt someone.
2. Take responsibility without an excuse.
3. No place for “but” (then not sorry) trying to justify self.
4. Be authentic and clear.
5. Do not expect immediate forgiveness (it shows we do not respect others' emotions or timeline)
6. Mercy triumphs over judgment and withholds punishment when we ask or receive forgiveness.
7. As we receive God’s mercy, we become merciful.
8. “His mercies are new every morning and great is his faithfulness.”
9. How we can forgive is a decision and we depend on God’s love and grace to set us free

The end of my story is that after many years, when my friend was leaving, I finally got a heartfelt apology in a letter that brought ultimate healing to my soul.

*Dear, dear Linda,*

*How can I begin to thank you? In the words of scripture: “May the Lord reward you well for the great kindness you have shown.” We’ve had our ups and downs, but I dare say our ups far outweigh our downs. We were separated for a while physically but not mentally or spiritually. I believe that’s what made our relationship stronger. Oh, happy fault!!*

*You have been a blessing through and through to me and to so many others and the beat goes on. I am sincerely sorry for the pain I costed you at times, you certainly didn’t deserve it.*

*May our gracious God bless you and your lovely family always in all ways.*

*Your problem child loves you. Love, hugs, and kisses.*

### ***How do we overcome our lack of forgiveness?***

1. Meditation: sit in stillness in God’s love and listen.
2. Seek truth and guidance by aligning heart with divine light and guidance.
3. Give Jesus permission to change our heart.
4. Stay consciously awake and aware to discern and control reactions and respond from centeredness.
5. Practice humility and generosity of mercy.
6. Release role of being victim.
7. Forgiveness is act of will involving the mind and the heart.
8. We can repress and ignore or transcend it, raise our hearts to God.
9. Don’t give up on self or others.

## **Fruits of Forgiveness**

1. Learned lessons brings us wisdom and transformation!
2. Learn to accept others as they are. God will use it for our good.
3. “For he himself knows our frame He is mindful we are but dust.” Ps. 103:14
4. Peace (“my peace I give to you”) He is our peace, He is really saying I am here with you as we grow in freedom and God likeness.
5. In Col. 3:13 Paul encourages us “Make allowance for each other’s faults and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.”
6. We are most like God when we forgive, we become a Godlier person.

### ***How do we know forgiveness has occurred?***

When we stop saying “look what you’re doing to me.” and start saying “what can I do to relieve your hurt”

We are no longer concerned about self.

We are at peace, knowing we have done all we can.

We recall examples of others who have inspired us: we remember Stephen as he was being stoned to death who said: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Jesus is our prime example when he was convicted for things He didn’t do, and he died in one of the most gruesome ways possible. As he was dying experiencing the tortuous pain of the cross, he asked the Father to forgive the people who convicted Him and nailed Him to the cross. If someone has hurt you in a way you feel is forgivable, consider Jesus’ example.

Forgiveness and unlimited mercy aren’t easy, but God can help us both give and receive forgiveness. As a result, we can experience the joy and love that are produced by forgiving and being forgiven.

I learned a lot about myself with all the ups and downs of my rocky relationship with my friend but in the end, I would rather err on the side of being too gracious, too merciful and too forgiving. I’d rather go overboard on mercy---just look what Jesus did on the cross.

**May we always and forever be loving and forgiving like our Father.**