

THE PARABLE OF THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

(15-20 minutes, easy set-up)

Use this outline and any of the corresponding activities to share the Biblical Truth with students.

Introduction: What are some of the ways that people have hurt or offended you? The offenses might be small (like not saying hello or appreciating an act of kindness) or huge (like betraying a confidence or siding with an enemy). While you might be willing to forgive the occasional small slight, you probably find it more difficult to forgive repeated small offenses or even a single huge offense. In this lesson, we'll see how Jesus responded to Peter's question: "How many times must I forgive someone?"

1. Believers are expected to generously forgive people who sin against them (Matthew 18:21-22).

Biblical Background: After Jesus explained how believers should confront someone who had sinned against them (see Mt. 18:15-20), Peter wanted to know how many times he should forgive the person who sinned against him (v. 21a). In his efforts to understand God's expectations for forgiveness, Peter offered to forgive someone seven times, which was more than twice the requirements of the Pharisees (v. 21b). To emphasize that forgiveness should have no limits, Jesus prescribed "seventy-seven times" (ESV) or "seventy times seven" (NASB).

Illustration: Warren Wiersbe said: "By the time we have forgiven a brother that many times, we are in the habit of forgiving." He explained that when we choose to forgive, rather than condemn, a brother who repeatedly sins, "we create an atmosphere of love and forgiveness, we can help God bring out the best in him" (*Be Loyal*, kindle location 2332).

Application: If someone hurts us once and asks for forgiveness, we may easily forgive. If that person repeatedly hurts us, we often respond by holding a grudge and refusing to forgive. But Jesus challenges us to continue to forgive, without limit, those who hurt us. This type of forgiveness can only be accomplished by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit within us to help us do the impossible.

2. Believers have received extravagant and unmerited forgiveness from God (Matthew 18:23-27).

Biblical Background: To illustrate the magnitude of God's forgiveness, Jesus told a parable about a servant whose debt to the king was so great that he could never repay it (vv. 23-24). Although the king could have ordered the servant to be sold into slavery, he responded mercifully to the servant's pleas for patience and forgave his enormous debt (vv. 25-27).

Illustration: The idea of settling accounts can be compared to using a credit card to make all your purchases. Throughout the month, you swipe and swipe and swipe the card without stopping to think about what you're spending. But the credit card company is carefully monitoring every swipe so they can send out a statement at the end of the month expecting customers to pay their debt. No one would ever expect the credit card to send a detailed statement and then stamp the bill "Forgiven." But God, in His extravagant grace, extends complete forgiveness to those who place themselves at His mercy.

Application: When we think about standing before holy God to account for our sins against Him, we quickly realize we can do nothing to settle our debts. Thankfully, God has assured us that when we confess our sins, His forgiveness will be so complete that those debts will never be remembered again.

3. Believers who refuse to forgive others will not receive God's forgiveness (Matthew 18:28-35).

Biblical Background: Even though the first servant had received unmerited forgiveness of his debt, he refused to forgive an insignificant debt by enforcing a severe punishment on someone who was indebted to him (vv. 28-30). Upon hearing that the forgiven servant had refused to forgive another servant, the king condemned him to severe punishment (vv. 31-34). Because **People are God's Treasure**, God expects His children to forgive others as completely as He has forgiven them (v. 35).

Illustration: If someone murdered one of your family members, how would you respond? One example of such forgiveness occurred after a killer opened fire on an Amish schoolroom. Because forgiveness is intrinsically woven into the Amish faith, within hours of the shooting, the Amish forgave in both word and deed, even going so far as comforting the family of the gunman. For the Amish, "forgiveness is more than a good thing to do. It is *the* thing to do" (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/septemberweb-only/138-13.0.html>)

Application: When we refuse to forgive, we will suffer the consequences of bitterness, mental distress, and damage to our relationship with God. But when we focus on the gift of God's forgiveness, then we will desire to extend forgiveness to others.

Conclusion: As people who have experienced the blessings of God's extravagant and unmerited forgiveness, we have the honor of showing such forgiveness to those who hurt us. When we forgive as God forgives, we are set free from the chains of grudges and bitterness. In turn, we have the opportunity to tell others how they can experience God's forgiveness.