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Where is God When People Hurt Me?

Rich Nathan

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Where Is God When Life Is Hard? Series

Matthew 18:12-35

One of the least reported major international political trends of the past 15 years is the role that the practice of repentance and forgiveness has played in healing disputes. Some of these disputes have gone back for centuries. In the American press we hear very little about how significant the role of repentance and forgiveness has been in national and international politics over the last 15 years.

Now, imagine this. A biblical and Christian concept applied to national and international politics. Let me give you an illustration of how this has worked out in the real world.

In 1788 the British began colonizing Australia. Over the next 150 years the Aborigines were systematically massacred and kicked off their land by white settlers. There was also a massive number of mixed Aboriginal and white settler children born. These mixed raced children were almost always the product of white fathers and Aboriginal mothers. And many of the children grew up in Aboriginal communities cared for by their mothers. Their fathers disowned them, very much like the slave situation in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Well, white authorities became alarmed by the number of mixed race children being raised in Aboriginal communities because they viewed Aboriginal culture as worthless. They felt that if the children were removed and placed in white foster families the Aboriginal culture would die out and Australia would become a wholly western country. So from the late 1800's till the late 1970's mixed race children were forcibly separated from their Aboriginal mothers.

In 1995 Fiona, an Aboriginal woman, described her experience in words that could be repeated thousands of times over across Australia. She said:

In 1946 I would have been five. We were playing together in my village when the police came. Suddenly the air in our happy little village was filled with screams because the police came and mothers tried to hide their children, and blacken their children's faces. Some mothers tried to hide their children in closets or caves. We three, Rusty, Brenda and me, together with our three cousins, the six of us were put on a truck and taken to this other city, which was hundreds of miles away, and we got there in the darkness.

My mother had to come with us. She had already lost her eldest daughter down to the children's hospital because she had polio. And now there was the prospect of losing her three other children, all the children she had. I remember she came in the truck with us. She was whimpering and curled up in a fetal position.

Who can understand the trauma of knowing that the police are going to take away all of your children? I often think about it from the point of view of my trauma, but our mother, to understand what she went through, I don't think anyone can really understand that. We got to the United Aborigines Mission in the dark, and we didn't see my mother again. She just kind of disappeared into the night.

A book by an Aboriginal named Margaret Tucker titled, *If Everyone Cared*, published in the late 1970s brought the issue to the consciousness of the Australian public in a way that forced people to deal with the horror of children being forcibly removed from their mothers. She describes her own abduction in graphic terms. Margaret Tucker writes:

As we hung onto our mother, she said fiercely, "They are my children and they are not going away with you." The policeman, who no doubt was just doing his duty, patted his handcuffs, which were in a leather case on his belt, and which May and I thought were a revolver. "Mrs. Clements," he said, "I'll have to use this if you do not let us take these children now." Thinking the policeman were going to shoot mother because she was trying to stop him, we screamed, "We'll go with him, mum, we'll go." I could not forget any detail of that moment. It stands out as though it were yesterday. I cannot even see kittens taken from their mother cat without remembering that scene. All of this took place 60 years ago. "We'll go with him, mum, we'll go. Just don't shoot my mum."

How do you heal this kind of hurt? How do you bring about a reconciliation of races where there have been so many traumas and victimization, and so much mistrust?

A government panel was formed in the mid-1990s and visited every state and territory in Australia, interviewing hundreds and hundreds of people, Aboriginals and former Mission staff, foster parents, adoptive parents, mental health professionals, and church representatives. They interviewed over 500 people who had been abducted as children. In 1997 they published their report. The government panel made 54 recommendations including compensation, counseling services, different standards for Aboriginal children in state care, and also most fundamentally there was a call for a national apology. But a new government came in, in 1998 and said: We'll offer some money, but no way are we going to apologize for actions taken by our ancestors, or by previous governments. We'll offer counseling services, but we're not responsible.

Parenthetically, this is part of the enormous spiritual tragedy when President Bush, a professed Christian, resisted bringing himself to make a clear, simple statement of apology concerning the horrific abuse of prisoners at the Abu Gharib prison – to simply and plainly say to the Arab world, “I’m sorry on behalf of our government and behalf of the American people. Not only will justice be served, as the president said, but I stand here as president apologizing to you for the sinful and immoral abuse of Iraqi citizens.”

Well, the Australian government failed to apologize, but the cat was out of the bag. Community groups, church groups, college students, and members of Parliament decided to call by the thousands a National Sorry Day. There were events held all over Australia. Over a million people wrote messages of personal apology to Aboriginals. Some of the messages were really simple like: For the terrible grief of a people, and for my people causing your grief, I’m sorry. Saying “I’m sorry” is not enough, but this day is appropriate to remember your suffering.”

A huge statue was unveiled with a fountain of water like tears pouring over the faces of mothers being separated from their children. There were bridge walks where hundreds of thousands of people in the city of Sydney and also in the city of Melbourne that met on both sides of a bridge – Aboriginals and whites coming together – in a demonstration of reconciliation. And then all of Australia celebrated when during the Sydney Olympics the torch was lit by Cathy Freeman, an Aboriginal.

Now, more work needs to be done. But it is generally acknowledged across Australia that the efforts made toward a national apology, the acknowledgement of wrong doing and sin and the beginning steps of repentance has gone a long way toward the healing of the relations between the races.

Repentance and forgiveness has been adopted as national policy in South Africa to heal the wounds of apartheid. It has been a model used in Northern Ireland. The Japanese Prime Minister apologized and asked forgiveness of English and American POWs held during WWII next to the River Kwai. The same approach was taken in Argentina and Chile, in El Salvador, and by the German government before the Israeli Knesset.

Everywhere we look in the world today we see the lingering effects of past hurt. Sometimes we see the hurt beginning to be healed as in Australia. But very often, as we look at our world, and we see the pain of broken relationships. Every week the Columbus Dispatch reports the most recent filings for divorce and dissolutions of marriages. There are divided churches, broken families, destroyed friendships. Every day we hear about suicide bombs, and campaigns of terror, oppression by occupying forces. We human beings cause so much hurt to each other. How can that hurt be healed?

I've been doing a series titled "Where is God When Life is Hard?" Today, the title of my talk is "Where is God When People Hurt Me." Let's pray.

We have lots of ways that we cause hurt to other people. Sometimes we cause hurt unintentionally. Husbands and wives, who want to get away from each other, decide to divorce. And even though they love their children and don't want to hurt their kids, nevertheless, the effect of their divorce can cause a scar that lasts for decades. Sometimes we're hurt by people who don't intend to hurt us, but who are negligent. They are driving negligently and they slam into our cars. Or a doctor could be negligent in diagnosing an illness, or performing an operation. A lawyer may simply bungle our case. A church may fail to act wisely or quickly regarding our problem. A counselor or pastor may give us really bad advice. A car mechanic may fail to fix the problem with our cars. A builder could do a shoddy job. Sometimes we're hurt by people's negligence and it particularly hurts if the offender is a Christian.

Sometimes we're hurt by people's addictions. Some of you grew up in homes with an alcoholic parent. Some of you have been hurt by a gambling addiction, or a sexual addiction, or the drug addiction of a family member. Or you have caused hurt to others through your addictions. We can hurt people through compulsive behaviors. We may be neatness freaks, or absolute penny-pinching cheapskates so that everyone in our family lives under the tyranny of being screamed at because the lights were left on, or you took more than a 5-minute shower and you're wasting water, or you accidentally leave the door open and we are wasting air-conditioning – "Were you born in a barn?" Compulsive behaviors can wound us.

We can be hurt by deliberate abuse. Some of you have been victims of abuse. Husband hitting their wives with the excuse that "Well, I just needed slap some sense into her." Children being punched and kicked and hit with various objects. Some of you have been sexually abused. Some of you have been abusers. Over the years I've had discussions with many, many people in this congregation who have been victimized, or are being victimized in their own homes.

We can be hurt by being overlooked. Your contribution at work was not acknowledged. Someone else steals the credit due you. Or you were overlooked in a bride's choice of her bridesmaids, or a groom's choice of his groomsmen. Or someone who is close to you always comes in ahead of you. A sibling, a close friend always does better than you in school, always wins the prize, and always comes in first. Have any of you been hurt just because you always got the message that no matter what you do, a sibling is always going to be ahead of you?

You know, we have lots of options concerning our hurt. We can paper over it and play pretend saying: No, that doesn't hurt me at all. All the while we're stuffing our feelings and swallowing our hurt. We could displace our anger on to

someone else. I'm really mad about what happened to me growing up, so I'm going to take it out on you, my spouse. I'm really angry about the way I've been treated at work, so when I come home, I'm going to kick the dog, or drive super aggressively.

We can escape. Many of us do that. I don't know what to do with my hurt, so I avoid facing it by drinking, or by a sexual addiction, by abusing drugs, or by doing some insane exercise routine. I'll throw myself into work, or Christian ministry. I'll complain and tell everyone how hurt and frustrated I am, how anxious I am.

In Matthew 18 the Lord Jesus Christ gives us, perhaps, the clearest counsel regarding what we are to do when people hurt us that we find anywhere in the scripture. In fact, I venture to say, that I know of no chapter in the Bible that more completely deals with the issue of hurt and the resulting relational breakdown from hurt than Matthew 18.

Now, we need to understand the context of Jesus' words of healing in Matthew 18. The context is found in verse 1 where we read:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

The rest of the chapter is dealing with relationships in the kingdom – what Christians ought to do when other people hurt them. Now, some of this, or course, only works if the other person who hurt you is a follower of Christ. Some of the counsel works even if the person who hurt you is not a follower of Christ.

I believe that Edling, who is a retired Coast Guard Captain, had the best title for verses 12-35 of Matthew 18. He called it God's Search and Rescue Plan. He had a real good title for verses 12-35. You can call it God's Rescue Operation. The problem that occurs when people come to this chapter, Matthew 18, is that we don't see there is a consistent theme running through each of the paragraphs. So, for example, in verses 12-14 Jesus is talking about finding lost sheep. He says:

What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

We read it and say: Oh, that's a passage about evangelism, saving people who are outside of the kingdom. In this context, the passage about the lost sheep is not a text about evangelism; it is a text about rescuing people who have

wandered away. The little ones in verse 14 are the same little ones referred to in verse 10:

See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

Children of the kingdom have gotten themselves into a place where they need to be rescued. Maybe they've wandered away from the church; maybe they've fallen into sin; maybe they are making bad choices – how do you rescue people?

Now, Matthew 18:15 through the end of the chapter lays out the means and methods by which rescue is accomplished. Again, we read these verses as totally unrelated to each other. We read Matthew 18:15-17 as a text about church discipline:

If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

We say: Ahh, that's about church discipline. So we think we've moved from evangelism to church discipline. And then in verses 19-20 we say: Ah, that's a passage about prayer.

Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

Oh, now Jesus is talking about something else. He's talking about prayer. And then he moves on to a different subject. In the parable of the unmerciful servant, beginning in verse 21, Jesus starts talking about forgiveness.

This entire text, particularly beginning in verse 12, is discussing the healing of relationships when someone has hurt us, when someone has offended us. Now, I believe that it is our failure to put into practice the commands of Jesus in this text that leads to so much ongoing hurt and the dissolving of so many of our relationships. The crying need in the church today is that we simply submit ourselves to the wisdom of Christ, particularly regarding our personal relationships and personal hurts. When someone hurts us and they profess to be a follower of Christ, there is a process that the Lord commands us to practice in order to deal with our hurt. He says:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you.

Friends, we do everything *but* go to the person who's hurt us and speak them to alone. As I said before, we paper over the problem. We say: Hurt? I'm not hurt. Or our hurt comes out sideways in sarcasm. Or we brood and sulk. Or we make our mates guess at what's in our minds and what the hurt was. Or we keep score. Or we leave the small group where the hurt occurred and we talk to lots of other people about how unloving the small group was, or how unloving the church was. Or we ask for prayer to deal with our hurt.

And you know, asking for prayer can sometimes, not always, but sometimes be a spiritual cover for gossip. Will you pray for me? My small group leader really hurt me. A woman in our women's group offended me. Will you pray for me? I'm having real problems with my mate, with my roommate, with a coworker, with my parents.

I tell people at newcomers' class: If you join this church, when someone offends you, you have two choices...I don't say, *if* someone offends you; I always say *when* someone offends you. If you join the Vineyard, someone will offend you. You won't like something that one of the pastors say. You won't like something that happens in one of the children's ministry classes when a teacher reprimands your little angel child, who got in a fight and bit another little demon child, who deserved it. Someone will offend you by the way they pray for you. The church will do something that you don't like.

I tell people: When you are offended, and you will be offended because there are 6000 sinners who gather here every week, you have two choices. You can handle that hurt and offense biblically, or unbiblically. If you choose to handle it unbiblically, you have a million choices. You can leave. You can leave mad; you can send an angry anonymous note. You can gossip; you can slander the person. You can put it out over the Ohio Prayer Line for lots of prayer covering, or you can handle the matter biblically, privately. You can go to the person who offended you and speak to that person about the offense. Look them in the eye, call them on the phone, or send them a simple note and say: Here's the problem that I have with what I believe you did.

Now, this conversation about hurts takes place privately, just between the two of you, Jesus says. Remember, Jesus is speaking in a Middle Eastern culture that is highly sensitive to issues of shame and reputation. And so he is urging us toward the private handling of disputes, something that we're very bad about in America. How often do you husband or wives publicly embarrass your spouse? You tell embarrassing stories. Or you point out flaws. Or you tell jokes at your mate's expense.

How often have you violated this principle with your children, parents? Or children, how often have you violated this principle of privacy regarding your parents? My parents are so unfair. How often, friend, have you done everything

But go to the person who offended you and speak to them alone? Indeed, what percentage of conversation would be eliminated in our workplaces, in our homes, in our groups, if we just put this principle into practice?

Now, it takes tremendous courage to confront. But what it communicates is that you value the person you are confronting. What you are saying is: I care enough about you and our relationship that I don't want to see you stuck in a sin, and I don't want to be permanently alienated from you. Now, it takes great courage to do this. Because the person who you go to speak with may not receive you. Or they may respond with a counter accusation. Or they may get angry and try to turn the tables on you. Maybe the person is more verbally skilled than you. But there are times when you are hurt that you need to screw up your courage and confront.

And some of you need to be more assertive in refusing to allow yourself to be verbally manipulated, or sweet-talked, particularly in instances of abuse, particularly when there's been repeated patterns of hurt, particularly when you are talking about compulsive behavior. It is important for you to assert yourself and say: No, I'm not going to make excuses for this. I'm not going to accept any more of your explanations. I seek a single goal, the acknowledgement of and the end of your sinful behavior – the cessation of your drinking, the end to your overspending, accountability for your time, the cessation of your putdowns or angry outbursts, your verbal abuse – I speak to you because this must be acknowledged and it must end.

And Jesus says:

If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

This sin that is between you has ended.

Well, what if the person doesn't listen to you? Well, then Jesus says,

If he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

Jesus says there is a time to go public, to pull the veil back on secret sin. You know, so much sin remains hidden in our home. So much sin remains in the church because people are told, "You must keep this quiet." The rule for dysfunctional families is "don't speak, don't tell." Jesus says that there are times to tell, after you've gone to the person and nothing has changed, – here's what's going on in my marriage; here's what's happening in my family; I'm living with a pornography addict; I'm living with an alcoholic; I'm living with a drug abuser; I'm living with someone who has out of control anger; I'm living with a compulsive spender. Jesus said if a person refuses to repent and acknowledge their sin, then tell on them, bring two or three witnesses.

And based on the Old Testament that these two or three witnesses are there to support the charge. Alcohol abuse counselors will speak of this process as an intervention. The spouse sits down with an alcoholic mate and says: Here's what you've been doing. Here's the impact to my life and our home, on our finances, and on our kids. The children speak and say: Mom, dad, this is what your drinking is doing to us. You embarrass me when my friends come over. I was afraid when I drove with you. And then a counselor or pastor says: Now, here's what you must do in order to remain in fellowship with the church. Sometimes the mate might say: This is what you must do, or I will leave you. I will separate from you. Intervention – going public.

And then Jesus says:

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

Jesus is thinking about small cells of disciples when he speaks of the church. He is not thinking of a mega-church, tell it to 6000 people. The early church was composed of house churches, what we would call home fellowship groups, kinship groups, women's groups, and men's groups. Step three is that we tell it to the group – the men's group, the women's group where a person is known. And the group begins to assert pressure. You've got to stop his behavior. You've got to go into recovery. You've got to acknowledge that you've been lying. You've got to stop your gossip.

And Jesus says,

If he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Put that person outside of the community. Do you understand that this whole process is designed to restore the person? What we are doing in Matthew 18 is we are holding up a mirror to an individual who is living with a high degree of self-deception, who is a professed Christian and playing pretend that all is right to me. We're coming to that person and saying: All is *not* right with you. Your profession is just a veneer. What's underneath is lots of rot.

I'll tell you something. Whenever our church engages in this process, we have a storm of protests from supporters of an individual who come to us, confront us as leaders and pastors, and they say: How dare you? How could you do this? It is so unloving, so insensitive.

Friend, the most loving thing we could do to a person who is killing himself or herself by the cancer of sin and hurting others is to cut that cancer out. I know that discipline and confrontation hurts. It is a sharp scalpel. But would you have a person live with the rot of sin in their life? When we talk with a person and

confront them and hold them accountable, we are doing the most loving thing possible because we are taking that person seriously. We are saying: You are valuable and worthy of restoration. We don't restore a particleboard piece of furniture that we bought at Sam's Club. But we do restore a family heirloom, a cherry desk handed down to us from our grandparents. When we engage in this process of accountability and intervention, this is love.

Now, I know it is not the 21st century version of love. It is not an easy-going kind of tolerance where we wink at sin and say: it is none of our business. Live and let live. Who are we to judge? I understand that when we confront, when we challenge, when we exercise discipline, when we call people to account, it is not what we used to call back in the 1970s "sloppy Agape," the kind of sentimental mush that is sometimes confused with love. Real love desires the utter, complete restoration of a sinner. Real love desires that a person come to a place of acknowledgement and freedom from their sins. Real love calls for real repentance, radical repentance.

I want to show you one of the best illustrations of the demand for acknowledging the truth that I'm aware of in the movies. It comes out of the movie, *Dead Man Walking*. In the movie, Susan Sarandon plays a Catholic nun, named Helen, who is ministering on death row to Sean Penn. Sean Penn has been convicted of the brutal murder of two teenagers and the rape of one of the teens. He's consistently denied his involvement. In this first clip you are going to hear Sean Penn still defending himself, still deflecting, still playing fast and loose with the truth.

So what do we see here? We see the restoration of a human being. This Catholic nun saw value in this accused murderer and refused to let him off the hook until he came to a full embrace of the truth about himself and what he had done.

So rather than be upset when the church or an individual comes and holds someone accountable for sin, we say this is perhaps the most loving thing that anyone has ever done. I love Gene Peterson's rendition of Philippians 1:9 from the Message Version of the Bible, which he translates this way:

So this is my prayer that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much, but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. My prayer is that you not only love much, but love well.

In loving someone well, you're calling them to account and demanding truth in relationship.

You know, if we do not confront, if the community of faith never exercises church discipline, if we don't go through this process of Matthew 18, if we think we are

more loving than Jesus, then what's the alternative for people who have been hurt or abused, people whose mates are committing adultery, people who are living with a drug or sex addict, people who have been cheated in business, people who are repeatedly slandered? What's the alternative if we don't go through Matthew 18?

Here's the alternative. The alternative is that the victim is left by themselves to continue to be victimized. The alternative is that every one of us has to suffer in silence alone. If you think that church discipline and confrontation is too hard, consider the alternative. Should we allow the abuser to keep hitting his wife, so that he can knock some sense into her? If you think discipline is too hard, should we continue to allow the addict to destroy his or her home?

The alternative to doing Matthew 18 is to not deal with sin. The alternative is to allow people to destroy themselves and everyone around them. The alternative is a total lack of integrity where each of us just minds our own business and we have the near Christians lives over lots of rot.

Now the text goes on and says:

Again I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

Now, this is not just a general promise of Jesus' presence with us in prayer. That's the way it is usually read. It is read out of context. We have people say: Will you agree with me that I'm going to get this job. Let's pray together, you agree with me, and then God will give me this job. Pray with me, agree with me, and I'm going to get this healing.

Rather, these verses have to do with the restoration of someone who is in sin. The two or three mentioned reference back to the 2-3 witnesses that have been brought with us to testify against the offender. These 2-3 witnesses are now to be the first to pray for the person who has been confronted. Other than as the book of Deuteronomy said, the 2-3 are to be the first ones to cast stones, slay the person, these 2-3 are the persons first to pray for the person.

The spirit is always one of desiring restoration. So we have a little small group and instead of having our little small group, our support group, being a place where we just gripe to each other, instead of having our support group being a place where we incite one another to anger, the group gets together and part of our time is prayer for the restoration of people who have abused us.

Let me read to you a translation of a prayer that came out of Croatia, where so many were killed by Serbian mobs during the most recent conflict in the 1990's. Listen to this poem:

Pray for that SOB?
No, God, can't expect me to do a thing like that.
I love my friends.
I love meadows, woods, the sea.
I'll pray for plants and animals
For when they die our planet dies.
But to pray for that SOB and other trash,
isn't that too much to ask?
No, its too little.
How do you expect to change the world
If your love extends only
To those who belong to you
If your love creates camps?
We on the one side; they on the other.
Friends on one side
Enemies on the other.
You have no faith,
If that's how you divide the world.
You have no faith,
Though you are baptized
Though you go to mass on Sunday
Though you give your old clothes to charity.
You have no faith
As long as you love only your friends.
The world does not change through you.
Everything remains the way it was
And the earth will slowly die from your love.
Yes the enemy hinders our growth.
He has robbed you of your heritage.
He has settled on your land.
You can hear him laughing from your home
From which you have been driven away.
Yes, all this is true.
But you have no faith
If you do not pray for him.

The prayer of agreement that Jesus is talking about in Matthew 18 is the prayer specifically for the person who has abused you. It is the call for a much expanded heart. You've called the person to account. You've confronted. The person has refused. They've been separated from the community of faith. But you still pray for them.

Well, Peter understands what Jesus is saying. In order to pray, I have to desire to see this person's good. I have to want God to restore, to heal, to change this person. That demands forgiveness. So we read in verse 21:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Jesus is calling for unlimited forgiveness. Now, forgiveness is very hard. Just like confrontation is hard, forgiveness is very hard. We have a hundred alternatives to forgiveness and a hundred reasons why we can't forgive. Listen, forgiveness is not forgetting. If the hurt can be forgotten easily, then you probably don't need to forgive. If the hurt is just an annoyance, a little slight, then you probably don't need to forgive. A lot of times forgetting is really nothing other than a defense mechanism. We're repressing hurt that we don't want to face.

And you know, forgetting is not something that you can force on yourself. We human beings do record what's done to us. The issue is not whether you remember the hurt, it's what you do when you remember it.

Now listen, a lot of people read this passage about seventy times seven and they say: I guess what that means is that I've just got to allow myself to continue to be abused. He gets to hit me in the head 490 times. My mother can come over every single day and harangue me. My roommate can keep stealing from me. And my 23-year old can still lie on the sofa and not work. I guess this seventy times seven is a free pass for anyone to keep abusing me.

Again, remember we read these verses in context. Forgiveness is not about letting people get away with stuff. Forgiveness is not a substitution for confrontation. Forgiveness does not mean that we keep allowing someone to abuse us. Forgiveness does not mean that we refuse to call an addict to account. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you stay with someone who hurt you.

We can limit a person's behavior, but we don't limit forgiveness. We can set boundaries around people, but we don't set boundaries around forgiveness. Our capacity to trust may be limited, but our capacity to forgive needs to be infinite. Let me work this out for you.

How can I keep forgiving someone who has done dreadful things to me? Just this week a young adult in our congregation wrote to me and told me a bit of her life story. Her mother wanted to abort her when she was pregnant. She finally decided to have her. But Dad was away in the military. She actually only saw her dad a couple of times. Mom sadly was involved with drugs, alcohol, and a variety of men who moved in and out of their home. Many of the men were also drug abusers and addicted alcohol. So in front of the children, mom and her boyfriends would get into violent fights. Some of the boyfriends would literally strangle mom in front of the kids.

One boyfriend, who eventually married mom, was the worst. And when this young woman was just a child, he came into her room at night and began to fondle her sexually. She said she was absolutely petrified. She just froze and tried to pretend that it wasn't happening.

She told mom about the abuse, but her abusive stepfather denied it all. And then in private, he threatened her. The abuse kept happening. So in high school this young woman turned to all of the teenage escapes to deal with her pain – alcohol, drugs, and boys.

Now, as a young woman, she's come to Christ. How does she forgive all of these different people, and all of the different hurts she suffered? How does she forgive her dad for leaving her? How does she forgive her mom for bringing different men into her life, including an abuser? Mom, for her drug and alcohol abuse? How does she forgive the stepfather's sexual abuse? And in particular, how does she forgive these individuals if they never acknowledge their wrong, if they never repent, if they never say they are sorry, if they always defend themselves, always deny any wrong doing, turn the tables? Or if they don't want to have anything to do with us? How do you forgive where there's been no owning up, or perhaps the person has died and can't own up?

I like what Lewis Smedes writes in a very important book titled *The Art of Forgiving*:

Forgiving happens inside the person who does it. Forgiving happens inside our minds and our hearts. When we forgive, we rediscover the frail, failed bruised humanity of the person we forgive. And we give up our fantasy of revenge. We treat the boulder as a fellow human being and wish him well. All of this can happen without giving the matter of restoring the relationship more than a second thought. Though we welcome the person who hurt us back inside the orbit of people we try to care about, we do not necessarily welcome him back into our special circle of friends and family. We can weep at her funeral and feel a genuine sadness at her leaving. We can even be happy about the prospect of meeting her in heaven. Reunion is about something else.

Reunion, a totally restored relationship or as the Bible calls "reconciliation," requires the other person to acknowledge their wrongdoing and to repent. And if it is necessary, they need to make reparations. As Bishop Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Prize winning leader from South Africa said concerning the white apartheid regime: We can forgive the victims of injustice and oppression must always be ready to forgive. But can we come together in peace? Those who have wronged us must be ready to make what amends they can. If I've stolen your pen, I can't really be contrite when I say: Please forgive me, if at the same time I keep your pen. If I'm truly repentant I will demonstrate this by returning your pen. Then real reconciliation, which is always costly, will happen.

There is a difference, friends, between forgiveness and reconciliation. Let me just list some of the things that Lewis Smedes says in his book, because I think they are so helpful.

- It takes one person to forgive; it takes two to be reunited.
- Forgiving happens inside the wounded person; reunion happens in a relationship between people.
- We can forgive a person who never says he is sorry; we cannot be truly reunited unless he is honestly sorry.
- We can forgive even if we do not trust the person who wronged us once not to wrong us again; reunion can happen only if we can trust the person who wronged us not to wrong us again.
- Forgiving has no strings attached; reunion has several strings attached.

Following adultery, a spouse must forgive unconditionally, but can also say: For us to come back together, there are conditions. We can't reunite apart from joint counseling. We can't reunite apart from radical honesty. We can't reunite apart from you being held accountable for your schedule, your free time, and your money. We can't reunite unless you leave your job where he or she still works.

You say: Well, what is the motive for us to forgive? Let me read to you from Jesus' words, Matthew 18:23-33:

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 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. The servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denari. He grabbed him and began to choke him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me and I will pay you back."

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay his debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. "You wicked servant," he said, "I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"

We all need a push, a prod to let go of our rights to avenge ourselves. We all need a push or prod to let go of our anger, to let go of our hurt, to let go of our

judgment to God. We all need a push or prod to release this offender. By the way, the word “forgive” means to let go, or to release, to set free. We need a push or prod to do that with people who have offended us. What is the push or prod for a Christian?

It is the realization that God has forgiven us a debt infinitely greater than any debt owed to us by the offender. In this particular case, the first servant owed the king ten thousand talents. In Jesus’ day, ten thousand talents would be an infinite sum. It was the money earned by a hundred million days of labor. When you consider that the entire tax bill to Rome by all of Palestine was 800 talents, ten thousand talents was more than all the money in circulation. On the other hand, the other servant owed a pittance. The nudge to forgive springs from the clear recognition that we have been forgiven much more by God our Father.

Forgiveness is passing on a drop of water from the bucket the Lord has given you. Has a person betrayed you? You have been a traitor to God more often and in worse ways than this person has. Has a person physically abused you? What do you believe your sins and my sins did to the Son of God? The Son of God had spikes pounded into his wrists and ankles, and a spear run through his side. The Son of God was crucified because of your sins and my sins. Has the person lied, cheated, stolen? What have you and I done? This parable tells us that forgiveness does not first spring from us, but it comes from a higher source. It comes from our experience of forgiveness.

Let me ask you a question: Are you a person who has experienced the forgiveness of Jesus Christ? I don’t mean that you believe that Christ died for your sins. That’s important. I don’t mean that you believe God is a forgiving God. That’s also important. I mean have you ever personally experienced the forgiveness of your sins? Have you ever knelt before God, recognized the awfulness of your own sins, how much you have grieved God and been forgiven? Have you ever come before God and known that you’ve known that he receives you and welcomes you the way the Father welcomed the prodigal son in Jesus’ story of the prodigal?

Friends, if you can’t honestly say that I know what it feels like to experience forgiveness from God, then you will never be a good forgiver. You need to start there. Forget what has been done to you for a moment. Forget the hurt and anger you feel. Forget your rights for a moment. The first step for you is to go before God and experience his forgiveness, his acceptance, his restored favor on your life.

You say: Well, what if I don’t forgive? I just don’t want to let go of this abuse. I can’t forgive that person for hurting someone I love. I don’t want to let go of my hate.

Well, Jesus says in verse 34:

In anger his master turned him over to the jailers until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

If you don't forgive, you are imprisoning yourself in the world's worst jail. If you don't forgive, you will be tortured. You will be consumed by bitterness, anger, and hatred.

Lewis Smedes, in another one of his books titled *Forgive and Forget*, opens with a parable that takes place in a village called Faken. There was a man who was a righteous man who sprayed righteousness over everyone who came to him, absolutely upright and stern and he had a lovely wife. She tried to get this man to love her. She spread joy everywhere in the village. Everyone loved her and unfortunately, one man loved her too much. One day the righteous man came home and found his wife in the arms of another lover.

Everyone in the village expected him to divorce his wife, since he was a righteous man. But he decided to keep her as his wife; he just chose not to forgive her. And so day-by-day, year-by-year, he made his wife miserable. Oh, she had to pay for her sin.

God saw this man's unforgiveness, and so he had an angel drop a pebble in the man's heart every time feelings of hatred or anger came to his mind. A pebble would drop into his heart every time he had thoughts of revenge and fantasies of getting even. Eventually, there were so many pebbles in the man's heart, that he was literally bent over, stooped over, from the weight of his own hatred.

One day an angel visited him and told him a way to be free. He said: You need to ask for magic eyes to see your wife in a new way. Every time you ask God to give you magic eyes to see your wife in a new way, I'll take a pebble from your heart. It wasn't enough for this man to ask one time because his heart had gotten so used to hatred. The man had to ask again and again until little by little the pebbles were taken out of his heart.

Friend, this is such a wonderful parable of forgiveness. When you've really been hurt, when you've really been abused it is like pebbles in the heart. People say: Well, I've forgiven. I remember praying and I forgave him. Do you still have revenge fantasies? Do you still carry on mental dialogues with the other person who has hurt you? Are you still weighed down because of the hurt and abuse? Do you still have a stabbing feeling in your heart because of what was done to you? Then we need to go before the Lord again and release another pebble. It's a process, one pebble at a time. C.S. Lewis said in his 50's he finally felt like he forgave a drunken, sadistic boarding school master who used to beat him and other boys.

I want to close with this story. Some years ago I graduated from Law School and was hired by a law firm here in town to do business litigation, trial work. Some of you have heard me mention that one of the first clients that I was to help with was a client named Larry Flint, the publisher of Hustler Magazine.

There was a young attorney who was mentoring me. We went out to lunch one day and I was rather indiscreet. I said to him: Some of the firm's clients really bother me. I told him that I was a Christian and I found it very difficult to work on cases like Larry Flint's. I was really struggling. I was looking for a friend. I said: How do you handle dealing with the firm's clients? So many of them are so sleazy, how do you deal with it?

He seemed friendly. He seemed understanding. He seemed empathetic. I felt a little bit relieved.

But the next day I was called into the managing partner's office and it quickly became apparent that my young mentor had gone and shared everything that I told him in confidence with the managing partner. They held a partnership meeting that night and fired me on the spot. My wife, Marlene, was 6-7 months pregnant with our first-born. We had just bought a house. We had very little savings.

As a result of this man's act of betrayal, I was out of work for five months. I tried to put it behind me. I went to work for the government for a little while, and eventually I was hired at OSU as a professor in business law. Several years passed, and one day I was walking in the French Market with my wife and who came toward me, approaching me with a big smile and his hand out, but this young attorney that I hadn't seen for five years. I didn't see him after the betrayal.

"Rich, how are you doing? I haven't seen you for a while."

I remember as I walked toward him everything was in slow motion. All of my feelings of betrayal and hatred, the pain that he put me and my family through, immediately sprang to the surface. I had this rush of rage as I walked toward him. And I knew, as things slowed down in my mind, I knew that I had a choice. I could either hit this man in the side of his head, or I could extend my hand to him and in my heart forgive him. I could live in the prison of my own unforgiveness and grudge or I could release myself from bitterness and release him from my desire to seek revenge.

So I extended my hand to him. And I said: It is good to see you too. We shook hands for a little while, and I was released.

Jesus says if we refuse to forgive, our Father in heaven won't forgive us. Forgiveness is like CPR. When our lungs are filled and we refuse to breathe out

the forgiveness that has been given to us, we can't receive any more forgiveness from God. We need to give away what God has given us. Let's pray.

Where is God When People Hurt Me?

Rich Nathan

July 24-25, 2004

Where Is God When Life Is Hard? Series

Matthew 18:12-35

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- C. The Freedom of Forgiveness (Matthew 18:34-35)