

The World's Worst Prison: Unforgiveness

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Prayer: Lord Teach Us to Pray Series

Matthew 6:12, 18:21-35

I don't know how many of you have either seen the movie or read the reviews of the recent Sean Connery film, *The Rock*. I haven't actually seen the movie, but from the previews I've watched and from reading the reviews, apparently Sean Connery is a former inmate at Alcatraz and he's hired to break into Alcatraz because it has been taken over. I'm not recommending the movie to you. I haven't seen it. I don't know what's in it. But I like Sean Connery. It seems like an exciting film.

In any case, my wife Marlene and I had an opportunity to visit Alcatraz. Apparently it is the most popular tourist attraction in San Francisco. They take you out to the island on a ferryboat, into San Francisco's harbor. It is about a mile or so from the land. The harbor's currents are very swift and the water is icy cold. It is virtually impossible to swim from Alcatraz to the shore in normal clothes.

They take you out and deposit you on this little island called "The Rock" and you walk around the prison that housed some of America's most notorious criminals—criminals like Al Capone. As part of the experience of walking around this maximum-security prison, they take you into this little solitary confinement cell that they call "The Hole." It is a big metal box. They put you in this big metal box with thick, metal walls and slam the door shut on you. Literally, there is no light in the room whatsoever. There are no cracks under the door. You are plunged into total darkness.

Apparently, what they used to do with the prisoners is if you were so bad you couldn't even get along in this maximum security environment, they would slam you shut into total darkness. You would have to sleep on a cold, metal floor without a blanket.

Around the world for the last 200 years, nations have tried to create their own "world's worst prison." The French came up with Devil's Island. The English, never to be outdone, took an entire continent, named it Australia, and beginning in the late 18th century, and began depositing criminals onto the shores of Australia, leaving them there. They emptied their debtor's prisons. They took rapists, thieves, pick pockets, alcoholics, rounded up the poor, herded them onto ships and dropped them on the shores of Australia. I suppose they figured it was as far from England as you could get.

This morning, as I continue in a series I've been doing on prayer, I want to talk about a prison that is far worse than Alcatraz, or Devil's Island, or being deposited on the shores of some uninhabited island. I want to talk about a prison that houses people in mental institutions, and people who go to counseling, and many people who are too proud to go to counseling, but who sit in churches or spend Sundays working in their yards. It is the Prison of Unforgiveness. This prison is so bad that if you are not set free from it in this life, that picture I gave you before of solitary confinement, having the door slammed shut and being plunged into total darkness, is not worthy of being compared to what will happen to your soul in the next world. As Jesus, our merciful Lord, puts it, "You will be plunged into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

This morning I want to talk about "The World's Worst Prison: Unforgiveness." Let's pray.

During this series on prayer, I've been working through The Lord's Prayer, and we come to that famous, but misunderstood verse in Matthew 6:12, "*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*" In a few moments I will talk about how this passage is terribly misunderstood and misapplied by many Christians.

But what I want to begin with today is the first half of this verse, "Forgive us our debts..." This verse recognizes that we sin either by doing something we ought not to have done, or by failing to do something we ought to have done. We sin by acts of either commission or acts of omission. Sin is not just things you do, but things you neglect to do. It is a sin to fail to pay your taxes when they are due. It is a sin to fail to pay your debts. It is a sin to fail to love when you ought to love. This first part of the verse recognizes that when we sin against God or against men and women, we incur debt. We run up a bill. That bill imprisons us in the wall of guilt as our consciences accuse us of a debt we have failed to pay. We can become enslaved by the burden of our debts.

I read a story about a boy and a girl who went to stay on their Grandmother's farm for the summer. The boy was five and his sister was eight. The little boy had a slingshot and he was playing with it during the day when he spied his grandmother's pet duck walking near the woodpile. So he took a big rock, pulled it back and let it fly. To his horror, he hit the duck in the head and killed it.

He ran over to the duck, but it was dead on the ground. In his fear, he hid the duck behind the woodpile. His older sister saw what he had done. With all the "mercy and grace" an older sister typically shows to a younger brother, she said, "Now, Jimmy, unless you do exactly what I tell you to do, I'm going to tell Grandma that you killed her duck."

So later that evening, Grandma said to the sister, "Well, Betty, it is time for you to clear the table." And Betty said, "I would love to, Grandma, but Jimmy wants to clear the table, don't 'cha, Jimmy?" Jimmy dutifully got up and cleared the table.

The next day Grandma came in and said, "Betty, you need to make your bed."

Betty said, "I'd love to, Grandma, but Jimmy wants to make my bed, dontcha, Jimmy?" Jimmy made her bed. All through the day, when Betty had a chore, she volunteered poor Jimmy, who was dying under a load of guilt.

Finally, the next day little Jimmy couldn't take it any longer. He ran to his Grandmother in tears and said, "Grandma, I have to tell you something bad that I did. I killed your pet duck."

Grandma said, "Jimmy, I knew that you killed the duck. I saw it happen out the kitchen window. I wondered how long you would allow your sister to make a slave out of you. But now, I forgive you!"

This verse, "forgive us our debts," recognizes that when we sin we run up a debt with God and become slaves to our guilt. We need to experience God's forgiveness because God's forgiveness releases a sense of freedom in us. Revelation 1:5 says, "*Christ loves us and frees us from our sins by his blood.*" Psalm 51:7 says, "*Purify me and I will be clean, wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.*" God's forgiveness cleanses your conscience so you don't feel dirty anymore. It takes away the dirt and stain of sin.

The psalmist goes on to say in chapter 51, "*...make me to hear joy and gladness.*" Experiencing God's forgiveness restores joy to our souls. So much of depression is rooted in not experiencing forgiveness for past sins. Why are we despondent? Why are we downcast? Why do we suffer from depression? Some of the time it is because we're dragging along the guilt of past sins. We don't know we're forgiven. We haven't been released from our slavery. We haven't been let out of prison. Or at least we feel we haven't.

The psalmist goes on to say, "Don't cast me away from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me." Experiencing forgiveness releases a renewed sense of the presence of God and a renewed sense of friendship with God where you feel God is not your accuser and not your enemy and not standing over you or against you. But instead, God looks at you and says, "I regard you as a friend. You are my beloved. You are someone I want to spend time with."

Then the psalmist says, "Restore to me the joy, the joy of my salvation." Lord only through experiencing forgiveness can I ever be brought back to those initial honeymoon moments. When I was first saved I realized life with you was so much more valuable than what I had in the world. In those initial moments I knew that I had discovered what I was created for. And I said "yes" to you and "no" to the world and sin. Somewhere along the line I got deceived and began to think, "Well maybe there is something in the world more valuable than you and I turned my back on you. But now I want to be restored to the joy of my salvation."

Do you understand that the Bible says that virtually everything we want in life is obtained when we experience God's forgiveness? It is through the experience of forgiveness that you feel peace. It is through the experience of forgiveness that you feel joy. It is through the experience of forgiveness that you feel free. It is through the experience of forgiveness that you feel clean. It is through the experience of forgiveness that you feel confident.

Let me ask you something. Do you walk around feeling peace, feeling full of joy, feeling right, and feeling clean? If you say "no, or "often not," then I would say you have not yet escaped the prison of guilt. Some of you didn't know you were in prison.

What keeps us from experiencing forgiveness so we remain slaves like little Jimmy? Well, one thing is bad doctrine. I came upon this doctrine the first time several years ago. Since then I have encountered a number of people who have been taught there is no need to pray for forgiveness on a daily basis because we are justified. The idea is that our sins have been forgiven already. Christ dealt with my sins at the cross and so why do I need to ask for forgiveness of my sins today? Doesn't justification mean that it is "just as if I've never sinned?"

This teaching that you don't need to ask forgiveness when you sin is disastrous. While it is true that Christ has secured your eternal state, the daily experience of God's presence requires us to confess our sins as they occur. If you do not confess your sins daily, sometimes hourly, you will destroy your intimacy with God. I am not saying you will destroy your salvation. I believe our salvation is once and for all secure. The moment a person trusts in Christ, rests in his death on the cross as full and final payment for sins, I believe that person's soul is secured eternally. But your fellowship with God, your enjoyment of God, your experience with God is hindered and can indeed be almost blocked entirely by unconfessed sin.

There is a difference between being saved eternally and experiencing the joy of salvation. The people who have faulty theology often have virtually no enjoyment or experience of God. The pipe is clogged by sin. For a person like that, Christianity becomes a mental exercise of reminding yourself of certain doctrines while completely lacking the presence and the closeness, the friendship of God.

Have any of you been taught that you don't need to confess your sins because you are justified?

On what basis, Rich, you might ask, do you assert that a Christian needs to ask for forgiveness on a regular basis?

On the basis of the Lord's Prayer! Who is it that prays this prayer? Who is this prayer addressed to? This is not a prayer for the world. This is not a prayer to

be saved. The Lord's Prayer could be retitled the Children's Prayer. The audience it is addressed to are the children of God. Only they, who can call God "Father", are entitled to pray this prayer. Who is this that can look to God and say, "Father in heaven"? The Bible tells us that only they who have received him and who believe in his name have the right to become the children of God and call God, "Father."

John warned us in verse 12, that the Lord's Prayer, or what I'm calling, The Children's Prayer, is restricted for those who have been born of God through the renewing, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. On what basis do I say Christians need to confess their sins? On the basis of the Lord's Prayer? On the basis of 1 John 1:9, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and will purify us (or cleanse us) from all unrighteousness."*

Who is 1 John 1:9 addressed to? Christians! The whole letter of 1 John is addressed to Christians, those who are already justified. And yet, we who are justified need to regularly confess our sins and be cleansed from unrighteousness. Not for the purpose of reobtaining salvation. We have salvation. But for reobtaining fellowship and intimacy with God and his presence; for reobtaining the experience of peace and joy, which I spoke about before.

There is a vivid picture of what I'm talking about in John 13 where Jesus told the disciples at the Last Supper that he wanted to wash their feet. In that story Peter told Jesus in John 13:9, *"Lord, not just my feet, but my hands and head as well."* And Jesus answered, *"A person who has a bath needs only to wash his feet. His whole body is clean."* And you are clean. What Jesus is saying is you have all ready received the major cleansing, the whole body cleansing, through justification. But as you walk in the world, your feet get soiled, so they regularly need to be cleaned.

That is a picture of sanctification, our progressive growth, and daily confession. Some of you have been taught bad theology that you didn't need to ask God's forgiveness regularly. And so you have not experienced God's presence.

Some of you have a major stronghold that needs to be pulled down in your life before you experience God's forgiveness. I want you to see this because the text I'm about to cite is crucial for your understanding of the experience of forgiveness – making forgiveness personal. It is also crucial for you in doing spiritual warfare. Many of you haven't a clue regarding how to conduct spiritual warfare.

And so I want you to see this in 2 Corinthians 10, which may be the most famous passage in the Bible on spiritual warfare. In verse 3 the apostle Paul writes, *"Though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every*

pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. And we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

Now in verse 4 Paul talks about divine power that destroys strongholds. And if you want to experience God's forgiveness, you have to know how to pull down strongholds. If you want to conduct spiritual warfare you have to know how to pull down strongholds.

What is a stronghold? Very simply, in the ancient world, large walls often surrounded cities and fortresses. Some of them were 100 feet high or more and very thick. The wall around Babylon was wide enough for 4-5 chariots to ride abreast on top of the wall. It might have been 20 feet thick or more. If you want to understand a stronghold, just picture a city surrounded by a 100-foot high wall that is 20 feet wide. The wall is there to keep out the invading presence of an army.

Now, let's apply this to our lives. What is the stronghold? Paul tells us what the stronghold is in verse 5. He says we demolish arguments. Strongholds are arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. And we take captive every thought. Strongholds are made up of arguments, thoughts, and ideas, which merge together in our minds. These arguments, ideas and thoughts get demonically energized so they keep out the invading presence of God.

Let me share with you a stronghold. I want to teach you how to pull these things down, these arguments, these ideas, and these thoughts that keep out from your life the invading presence of God. A major stronghold for many people is the statement: I have confessed my sin, but I still don't feel forgiven. Do you know that one? I have confessed, but I still don't feel forgiven.

Some of you would say: I rarely feel forgiven. And in that state, people follow the silliest counsel. Someone suggests the problem is not that you haven't experienced God's forgiveness, but you haven't forgiven yourself. The way you are going to pull down those strongholds of ideas and thoughts is you need to forgive yourself.

That is an entirely unbiblical concept! I challenge any of you to find me one verse in the Bible, one phrase in the entire book, which tells you to forgive yourself. That is a completely secular notion. That is not a Christian idea. Your problem is not that you haven't forgiven yourself; your problem is that you have not experienced divine forgiveness. Divine forgiveness has been walled off from you. You have not felt the invading presence because of a stronghold.

You say: Rich, how do I pull down this web of lies, thoughts, ideas and arguments that are keeping me from experiencing divine forgiveness?

Let me share three steps with you:

First, you need to expose the lie. There is no way for you to pull down a stronghold of thoughts and ideas unless you expose the lie. Let me share with you some of the lies:

"I've sinned too often in this area." Too often for what? Too often for the blood of Jesus to cleanse you? Too often for the infinite mercy of God? Too often for what?

"I've gone too far."

"I should have known better." How about that one? I should have known better. Our disappointment in ourselves: "How could I have done this?" Because you are a sinner. Because you are not nearly as holy and I'm not nearly as together as I wish I was.

"It is too easy for me to receive forgiveness. I'll just sin again."

"I'll abuse God's grace." Not if you go through an experience of forgiveness, you won't and let God worry about that! He's the God who receives the Prodigal back. And before the prodigal can wind out his fancy speech, he forgives and he grants mercy. I don't know what the lie is in your life. Sometimes the lie is the result of misplaced faith where a person says: "I can't be forgiven because I'm not really sorry." Or, "I can't be forgiven because I'm not as repentant as I should be."

Forgiveness is not based on the depth of your sorrow. Forgiveness is not based on the depth of your repentance. Forgiveness is based on your trust in the blood of Jesus to cleanse you from every sin. Expose the lie!

Now, a lot of people do step #1. I know what the lie is. But just exposing the lie does not pull down the stronghold. You've got to break agreement with the lie. Renounce the lie. Before God in prayer say: "Lord, I specifically renounce the lie that I have sinned too often for you to forgive me." I specifically renounce the lie that I must pay, somehow, for my sin. It is a complete lie that anything that I could pay would be worth more than the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Expose the lie." Break agreement with the lie.

And the third step crucial to pulling down strongholds is to confess the truth. By confessing the truth I mean saying to God that no matter what you've been thinking, you are going to believe with his written Word, which reveals God's mind. Lord, I want to break my agreement with the lie that says that this particular sin must cling to me. And right now, I come into agreement with your Word that says in 1 John 1:9, *"If we confess our sins, you are faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* O Lord, I didn't

realize one of my greatest sins as that I didn't believe you told the truth. I accused you of being unfaithful, promising forgiveness and then not being willing to grant it. I accused you of being unjust. You know that it is not only the mercy of God that grants you forgiveness; it is also the justice of God that awards you forgiveness.

1 John 1:9 says: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just. You can underline that. Just to forgive us our sins. It would be unjust of God to not forgive you. You, who have pled the blood of Christ, because the blood of Christ paid the debt. It would be unjust of God to charge you with a debt that has already been paid by his Son. It would be unjust of God to charge you with a crime that's already been taken care of, to charge you for something that someone else has all ready been judged for, condemned for, and born the curse for.

Christ has been your surety. He is your bail letting you out of jail. That's the truth. Lord, I've always put myself outside the sphere of the righteous. Whenever I read the words in the Bible about the righteous or your friends or your beloved, I always say: "No, not me." But that's a lie. And so now before you I say: I am your friend. I am your beloved. I am the joy of your heart. I confess that as sin abounds, grace abounds all the more (Romans 5:20). I confess the truth of your Word that as far as the east is from the west, so far have you removed my transgressions from me. You forgive all my sins, all my diseases (Psalm 103).

I believe if you go through these three steps: 1) expose the lie; 2) break agreement with the lie; and, 3) confess the truth, the stronghold of interlocking ideas and arguments that have been demonically energized in your life will break down. You can use this three-step formula regarding so many of the things that keep you from experiencing the invading presence of God.

The text goes on and speaks to us not only about escaping the prison of guilt, but escaping the prison of bitterness. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

One of the most imprisoning things a person can find himself or herself in is bitterness. Many of you, of course, watched elderly relatives just shrivel up inside behind a self-imposed wall of grudges, bitterness for the things life has dealt. The fact is it is impossible to live in this world without getting hurt. It doesn't matter how good a person you are, how nice you are to other people, or how high your standards are. It doesn't matter how good a person you are, you will be hurt, offended, misunderstood, misrepresented, ripped off, inconvenienced, bruised, sometimes abused, by other people, family, brothers, sisters, spouses, children, in-laws, as well as coworkers, employers, competitors, and clients because we live in a sinful world.

If we had only the example of Jesus that would be sufficient. Here is a man who never sinned, who was full of love for others. His heart beat with compassion and mercy. He was falsely accused, misrepresented, cursed, spit at, ultimately beaten, and crucified, murdered unjustly.

Our need to forgive proceeds out of the simple reality that all of us will regularly have cause for offense. Now, just in the case of experiencing God's forgiveness, there are lies that really lock up our thinking about extending God's forgiveness. Many people misinterpret this verse, "Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors" as suggesting that if we forgive, only then will we earn God's forgiveness. They take this verse to mean that our forgiveness becomes the grounds upon which God forgives. Our forgiveness becomes the cause of God's forgiveness.

Let me teach you a little lesson for interpreting scripture. We never can take a phrase out of context and interpret it any way we see fit. That is the way cults use the Bible to teach false doctrines. They take a verse out of context; give it a spin based on that verse that appears to be reasonable. It appears that perhaps that is what Jesus is saying, that our forgiveness is the grounds for, or the cause of getting God's forgiveness. The safeguard against cult-like scriptural interpretation is always to compare scripture with scripture. That was one of the rules of the Protestant Reformation – compare scripture with scripture.

What is the cause of God's forgiveness? What is the ground upon which God extends mercy to us? The blood of Jesus Christ and only the blood of Jesus Christ! 1 Peter 1:18 says: *"For you know it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."*

You're redeemed because of the blood of Christ. Ephesians 1:7 says, *"In him we have redemption."* How? Why? On the grounds of our forgiveness? Because we are so merciful? No! In him we have redemption, through his blood, the forgiveness of sins. Again, what is the only grounds and basis for forgiving you? The blood of Jesus Christ.

What then does Jesus mean when he says, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?" I believe Jesus is not talking about earning or meriting forgiveness, but rather having the capacity to receive forgiveness.

Let me give you a simple illustration. Let's say I meet you coming in from the car. You have a bag of groceries in your hands. I say: I have a present for you. Put out your hands and I'll give it to you. In order to receive my present, to have the capacity to take it, you must put down your bag of groceries and empty your hands so you can take my gift. Now, putting down the bag of groceries doesn't earn you the gift. It didn't merit it. But because of my sheer goodness, I want to

give you a gift. But you would not be able to receive it if your hands were filled with groceries.

I believe that is exactly what Jesus is talking about here when he says: Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. He is talking about capacity. While your hands, or in this case your heart, is filled with bitterness there is no room in your heart to receive the forgiveness of God. So you are unable to take it, to receive it, and therefore unable to be forgiven. Not because you haven't earned it, not because you haven't merited it. The blood of Jesus Christ has merited it. But your heart is full of something else, bitterness and a grudge. You and I must unpack our bags of bitterness in order to be able to take in the invading presence of God. The pardon is there. The forgiveness is available. The gift is extended. But while you are still full of bitterness and unforgiveness, grudges and ill will, you can't obtain it. You can't take it in.

Here's another lie. You say, "Rich, if I really do forgive, this person is going to get off without paying." When you are sinned against, when you are offended, misrepresented, when someone takes advantage of you or your friendship...And by the way, I've had this happen to me so many times – people take advantage of my friendship, my position, or they misrepresent me to others. I'm talking out of personal understanding having experienced hurt...When someone does something wrong to you, does you dirty, your conscience accords with the mind of God, or ought to, suggesting that justice demands that that person pay.

It would be unjust for a liar to get off Scott free. And so you have this internal feeling when you've been sinned against, of that person should pay. Then you have these Bible verses that say you must forgive. And they run head long into each other like two colliding trains.

Is it true that if you forgive that person that they will escape penalty? The answer is no! Look with me to Romans 12:19 which says: *"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay, says the Lord.'"*

Do you understand that when you forgive you are not saying that this person will never face judgment or justice? You are saying that you trust the promise of God, who says: "I will repay." God says, "Leave justice and judgment to me. I will make sure it is exacted down to the very penny." No one that you forgive escapes. If the person who you forgive is not a Christian, and they do not repent, and they go to their death carrying the sin that they sinned against you, God will exact retribution from them through the judgment of hell. They will pay for every careless word they utter, every act of abuse, and every word.

And if the person is a Christian, then the judgment has been exacted out of the blood of Jesus Christ. The Lord says he will provide payment either through the

judgment of hell, or the judgment of the cross. And I do hope the judgment of the cross is enough for you.

How do you forgive and let somebody go? By letting them go unto God and believing his promise that he is a just judge.

“But if I forgive, Rich, then am I saying things have to be restored to the way they were before?”

“I’ve got to go back and leave my children with an abuser?”

“I’ve got to go back into business with a supposed friend, who ripped me off and be friends with him again, if I forgive?”

“Does this mean that I have to go back and things have to be returned and restored to the way they were, as if there had been no sin?”

“I return to sleep with the adulterer again?”

So many people stumble on forgiving a person, letting them off the hook, letting them go, because they think that it means relationship must be fully restored. That they must pretend that other person is not an abuser, not a liar, not a thief.

Friends, you don’t understand forgiveness if this is the way you think. Forgiveness is something that you grant totally apart from whatever that other person does, whatever they are, or whatever they say to you, or whether they ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness is a gift. It is a gift to this other person. It is a gift you give to yourself where you step aside as the judge, recognizing that there is only one Judge, who alone can execute justice—God Almighty. I let the person go and before God I name their sin and declare them to be free from my judgment. But as far as a restored relationship with them, that requires their repentance. Restored relationships require their change. Relationship is something that is earned.

It is very possible that an adulterer will never win back the affections and love of an offended spouse. It is very possible that a friend who steals will never earn back the trust of a business partner so that the partner would want to go back into business with them. It is very possible that an abuser would never earn back the trust of someone so that they would leave their children with them again. In fact, I would recommend that you never do. But you can forgive. You can wish that person no ill will. You can let go of your bitterness. Trust is something that is earned. Forgiveness is something that is given as a free gift. I may never be great friends again with someone who really ripped me off, but I can forgive them. Do you understand the difference?

Piling up a debt that we could never repay. If you want to be in a position to be able to forgive another, don’t minimize your own debts and your own sins.

I want to give you some keys to escape from the prison of bitterness. We’re going to look at Matthew 18:21. It says, *“Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven*

times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I did not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’”

Here is the first key to escaping from the prison of bitterness: Don't limit your forgiveness. Don't ever limit your forgiveness.

The rabbis used to teach that if you were sinned against by a person; you had an obligation to forgive them three times. Some rabbis said up to four times, but after that, you had no duty to forgive whatsoever. Three or four times, that was it! It was like the “Three Strike Rule” – three strikes and you're out!

So Peter thinks he's being incredibly generous and gracious by saying to Jesus how many times shall I forgive, up to seven times? And Jesus says not seven times, but seventy times seven times. In other words, not just 490 times, but Peter, eliminate your counting mentality entirely. Tear up your scorecards. Let your forgiveness be as infinite as the forgiveness of God. Don't ever limit your forgiveness by the size of the sin against you. It may be incredibly awful. Some of you have been sexually abused. Sometimes it was repeated. Or you suffered horrible physical abuse, or were abused for years in a loveless, lifeless marriage. Don't limit your forgiveness.

And friends, I want to tell you that forgiveness is not just about the big things. When I talk about not limiting forgiveness, I believe a place Christians often stumble is we forget to forgive the little slights, the little injuries, the insensitive remarks, and the little bits of neglect that we suffer at the hands of each other. If I were to ask, have you forgiven everyone of every sin that you're aware of against you? Are you carrying around any bitterness? Some of you would say, “No, Rich, I'm not carrying anything around.” And yet, if you aren't practicing regular, repeated forgiveness about little things that arise in your relationships with others, if you have any judgments against your brothers and sisters, any memories of neglect and hurts, as Song of Solomon says: It is the little foxes that destroy the vines. The little things must be forgiven.

The second thing is don't ever minimize your debt if you want to escape the prison of bitterness. Don't minimize your debt. Jesus says in verses 23-26, *“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. And when he began to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him 10,000 talents. But since he didn't have the means to repay him, the lord commanded him to be sold along with his wife and children and all that he had as repayment to be made. The slave, therefore, falling down, prostrated himself before him and said, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay everything.’ The lord felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.”*

One of the keys in forgiving others is to not minimize your own debt to God. God in the story is the king. And we are the servants who owe God an incalculably

large debt. Here it is called 10,000 talents. Back in Jesus' day, a talent was the wage that an average worker made in 20 years of labor. So let's say the average worker today makes \$30,000 a year. Twenty years of labor would make him \$600,000. Multiply that by 10,000 and you have a really big number. I'm lost with all the zeros, but some of you can spend the rest of the service figuring it out. We're talking about 200,000 years of labor. To show the enormity of the debt, verse 25 says he didn't have the means to repay. The lord says he should be sold into slavery.

Remember, sin brings us into bondage, into slavery. A slave would be put into debtors' prison. He and his children would be in there until they died. Here is a slave who doesn't understand the enormity of his debt owed to the king. He just thinks he needs a little more time to repay it. So in verse 26 he says, *"Have patience with me and I'll repay everything."* Many of us are guilty about minimizing our sins against God. The reason why we don't show another person mercy is that we have no idea how merciful God has been towards us. We think, "Well, if we just had a little more time, maybe we could repay God, rebalance the accounts." Day by day, moment by moment, we speak against God's children. We criticize, we judge, we gossip, we hurt other people, we covet. We misuse God's name. We love something else more than we love God.

And the third thing is do not miss out on God's mercy. It says in verse 27: *"The Lord felt compassion on that slave and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 denari (we're talking about \$10), seized him and began to choke him and said, 'Pay back what you owe me.' The fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But he was unwilling."*

Literally, the verse says, he was repeatedly unwilling. He was asked over and over again for forgiveness and over and over again he said, "No, No, NO!"

"He threw him in prison until he was able to pay back what was owed. His fellow slaves saw what happened, were deeply grieved and reported to their lord all that had happened."

Let me tell you something. When you don't forgive somebody, they will report to your Lord by their own hurts, by their own prayers, by their own hearts. They and their friends are reporting to the Lord on you. They are uncovering your crime before God.

"Summoning the slave, the Lord said, 'You wicked slave. I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slaves even as I had mercy on you?' The Lord moved with anger and handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him."

If you need motivation to forgive somebody for anything or any repeated series of things, maybe the best motive for you is not missing out on God's mercy for you. The calling card of heaven is mercy. Mercy is posted on the portals, the entrance gates of heaven. Mercy is the watchword of God's heart. Mercy is always in the hand of the Father. You never need to know what you are going to get if you return to God. He shows you his hands. His hand is mercy. He imparts it at the cross. Mercy. Mercy. God cares so much about mercy. You see how willingly and easily the man's sins were forgiven, his debts were covered, and even a 10,000-talent debt was covered. But he was thrown in jail for his lack of mercy.

I believe God is saying in that, Friends, you have a choice. If you want to live under the law and require the law's penalty, then I will let you live under the law. If you want to live by mercy, I will let you live under mercy." You get to choose. What standard do you want applied across the board—the standard of the law or the standard of mercy? All God does is just withdraw mercy and then we live under the law.

Do you need a motive to forgive? My motive is real simple. I want to have the capacity to receive the mercy of God. So what must I do? Jesus tells what we must do in verse 35: *"So shall my heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you do not forgive his brother from your heart."*

Do forgive everyone from your heart. Do name everyone's sins against you. Do bring them before God. Do release them to God and his judgment and then leave them with God.

How do I know I have forgiven from the heart? Because I don't daydream about their downfall. If you forgive someone from the heart, you won't speak ill of him or her any longer. You will not try to put them in a bad light. You will not plot their ruin. You will not fantasize about hurting them. You will have no cloud over your mind regarding them. That doesn't mean that trust is restored. It doesn't mean that relationship will be restored. Without a person's repentance, relationship cannot be restored. Without a person recognizing the gravity of their sin, you cannot be in restored relationship. But you can forgive from the heart.

God has given to us the keys to let us out of jail. The lock is on the inside. You can escape from the jail of guilt by coming into agreement with the truths of God's Word. No sin can stand against the blood of Jesus Christ. You can escape from the jail of bitterness. According to the truth of God, which calls you to forgive everyone for everything, all the time, from your heart. Let's pray.