

**Series: WHEN YOU JUST CAN'T LET IT GO...April 22, 2007**

**DO I HAVE A CHOICE?  
Matthew 18:21-35**

**I. INTRO**

- A. A university student is hurt by the rejection of his peers. But he's isolated—even from his family—and the infection of bitterness in his heart rages out of control. And one day it blows—and 32 people are killed. And he is the final victim of his own hatred.  
-But now this anger and hatred and hurt has been passed on to the families of those who died or were maimed—who just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Now **they** will be forced to make a decision: Do I **hate**, or **forgive**?  
-Our world is **sick** of this cycle of violence and revenge—and more than a little curious about how Jesus said to end it. By forgiving and **being** forgiven. All you have to do is *google* the word forgiveness to find that the amount of information out there is **huge**. One site has a whole section with 29 pages of anonymous apologies—people longing to be forgiven.
1. I think it's pretty clear in our world that choosing **not** to forgive is an extremely unhealthy choice—potentially more unhealthy than spending your life as a couch potato who lives on potato chips. It's clear. People who forgive live longer, have more friends, and have hope for the future.  
-Unforgiveness has the potential to blow up everything we hold dear and most want from life.
  2. So—why don't we just **do** it? Forgive? As I've read and listened, my sense is that sometimes people pray and expect that God will suck the pain out of their hearts and fill them with good thoughts. Others are waiting for the person who hurt them to either **pay DEARLY** for what they did—or come crawling to them.  
-Let me give you an analogy for how unlikely that is. Imagine that a drunk driver swerves off the road and hits you as you're walking home--breaking both your legs. He pauses—and speeds off. Someone runs over to help, call 911—but you say, "No! The **fair** thing is for the guy who hit me to come and drive me to the hospital!" Would anyone here do that?  
-Okay—so you wouldn't. But you get to the hospital, they immediately take you in for surgery—put plates in your legs—and you wake up plastered--from the hips down. But whenever a nurse or aide comes in to help, you say, "Oh no! The drunk who hit me needs to be forced to come in and take care of me until I heal!" Would anyone do that?  
-A physiotherapist comes in and says, "You'll be able to walk—that's the good news. The bad news is—it will take a lot of work, so we'd better get started." But you say, "Oh, no! It's not **fair** that **I** should have to experience all this pain and frustration to walk. The drunk who **hit** me should have to do it. It's **his** fault!"
  3. As crazy and weird as that sounds, a **lot** of people have placed their whole future—their happiness, their wholeness—and even their relational world in the hands of someone who hurt them. A person who may not recognize, apologize for—or even give a flying rip about what they did! Forgiving may be the single greatest skill we will ever learn. And the only way to **learn** it is to actually **do** it!

- B. Last week we talked about the broad picture on forgiveness. We crave relationships—and yet are hurt in the process of developing them because of the imperfect world we live in as imperfect people. Relationships are very important to God, and that’s why He has given us the gift of forgiveness to help us heal when we’ve been hurt.
- In that moment of hurt, we have a choice. We either keep the hurt churning around inside us, or we pretend we’re okay, or we get revenge. Or—we do what God asks and choose forgiveness.
  - Forgiveness is not excusing what the person did—or even jumping back into any kind of trusting relationship with them. Forgiveness is **given**; trust is **earned**. When we forgive, we do what God does; we restore the person’s humanity; we give up our right to get even, and we eventually choose to wish them well. Forgiveness means we cut ourselves loose from the wrong someone has done to us. **We let it go!**
  - Forgiveness may seem hard. Unfair. Unreasonable. But it’s what you want. And forgiveness **is** a choice!

### III. THE MOST OUTRAGEOUS THING JESUS TAUGHT

- A. Whenever you put **forgiveness** and **choice** in the same sentence, there are always people who will say, “This person has so hurt me and ruined me, **I can’t forgive them!**”
- Know how I know forgiveness is a choice? Because Jesus commands us to do it. Without exception. How many of you are familiar with The Lord’s Prayer? **Our Father in Heaven...our Father in Heaven, Hallowed by Thy Name... hallowed be thy name, Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven... Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven, Give us this day our daily bread... give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins... And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us...as we forgive those...What?!**
1. And then He adds this footnote. **If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins (Matt. 6:14-15 NLT).**
    - In total defiance of this, I’ve watched believers in Jesus—who know their Bibles and all the secret handshakes in religious circles—not just hold onto grudges, but nurse them to full monster-hood! It travels everywhere with them and sits on their lap. Anyone bring their pet grudges to church with them today?
  2. The first important thing you and I need to understand is that the people Jesus was talking to didn’t want to hear about forgiveness any more than we do. They had been crushed into submission by Rome; about 80 – 90% of their pay went to taxes for Herod’s building programs and Caesar’s army—and there were Roman soldiers everywhere reminding them that they were a defeated people. If you can imagine Germany winning WW2, and Canada been run by the SS—then you can imagine living there.
    - And the Messiah was supposed to set them **free** from this tyranny, not teach them out to forgive the tyrants! Most of the people in Jesus audience had a relative or friend who had been crucified, hauled into slavery, or brutalized by Rome. And Jesus says, **forgive them**—in fact, **ask God to forgive YOU just like you forgive THEM!**
  3. Why would Jesus ask his followers to do something that was so **hard** to do? It’s because forgiveness is the **heartbeat** of Jesus’ kingdom. Write that down, burn that into your memory. **Forgiveness is the heartbeat of Jesus—and it’s the heartbeat of his Kingdom (slide).**

-Forgiveness is the tool of healing that frees you from the resentment and hatred of the past and allows you to live and **love** in the present. Forgiveness gives you back your future! Remember Jesus' summary of what God expects from us? "Love God, love others—including those who persecute you and do unfair things to you!"

4. In fact, the whole message Jesus gave His followers to pass on—the Good News—was centered around a cross where our forgiveness was purchased by the punishment Jesus, who was perfect, took on **our** behalf. This is the point. To be an unforgiving Christ-follower is an oxymoron. Everyone know what an oxymoron is? Let's hear some from you. Tight slacks, plastic glasses, jumbo shrimp, military intelligence, heavy metal music. I know—cheap shot.

-What Jesus is saying is that for us to receive forgiveness—we have to be willing to pass it on.

- B. We're not the first one's who've choked on this. Jesus first followers did too. He was teaching them one day about how to repair broken relationships—and about how when His followers declare people forgiven here, that forgiveness somehow translates into the heavenly realm.

1. Now, Peter is apparently tracking with Jesus here. He says, "I'm diggin' it, Jesus. I catcheth the groove of what thou art saying. So, if someone sins against me, should I forgive them up to seven times?" Now—understand—Peter is being quite gracious here. The Rabbi's taught that we should forgive up to three times—based on a teaching from the prophet Amos implying that God forgives nations up to three times. So, Peter is being pretty generous.

-But Jesus says, "Nope! Try 70 X 7." Jesus wasn't saying, "On the 491<sup>st</sup>, that's it!" The point is to **keep on** forgiving.

2. Whenever Jesus wants to cement a teaching in place, He tells a story. If you have your Bibles, it's in the book of Matthew, chapter 18. Let me read it.

**"Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn't pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt.**

**"But the man fell down before his master and begged him, 'Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. "His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it,' he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full.**

**"When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt.**

**"That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart (Matt. 18:23-35 NLT)."**

3. Jesus uses an analogy here to explain forgiveness that everyone listening could understand. Debt. Now, I realize that debt is an ancient problem that you can hardly relate to—but I'm going to ask you to really **try** to understand.
- The phrase in this story used to describe his debt, **millions of dollars**—is quite an understatement. Jesus was being extreme. He uses the highest numbers in that language to describe his debt. 10,000 talents or 325 **tons** of gold! Just for the sake of comparison, all of the gold in Solomon's temple amounted to 900 talents. In fact, it would've taken 11 years to collect that much in taxes from all of Judea and the surrounding kingdoms. Jesus' point is that this was a debt he could never, ever repay.
  - That's what makes it so laughable when this guy falls on his face before this king and pleads with him to be patient cause he'll pay it all back! I can image everyone in the court rolling their eyes, "Yeah, like he's going to wait!" But the king makes a stunning move. He **cancel**s the debt.
  - Just so we're clear—when someone cancels a person's debt, **who actually pays it?** Whoever cancels it, right? What makes this forgiven guy such a monster is that he leaves the palace does something no one can quite believe—or stomach. Chokes and demands payment from someone who owes him less than a millionth of the debt he'd just had totally wiped clean—right off the books. And when he can't pay, throws him into debtor's prison.
  - The people who have just watched this whole drama unfold stand there with their mouths open. His unwillingness to forgive—when he had been forgive **so** much—turns him into this ugly, nasty disgusting troll of a man. Jesus' point is powerful. It's about grace. When we understand grace, and the monstrous debt that has been paid by Jesus--our forgiveness of others is an act of sheer gratitude.
4. Any guess who the forgiven servant is in Jesus' story? It's me. You. **We** have been forgiven a massive debt we could never repay on our own. And if we're into justice, payback, vengeance—getting people back for the things they've done to us, **we** become the monster in Jesus story. It is **unthinkable** for a follower of Jesus to be willfully unforgiving to fellow sinners.
- Jesus stark absolutely **frightening** words that follow are: **"That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart (Matt. 18:35 NLT)."** Remember the title of the message? "Do I have a **choice?**" It depends. Do you want justice for **your** sin—or grace? Forgiveness? If you **need** forgiveness, then you have to **choose** to forgive. If you don't think you have a massive debt you could never repay on your own, well, counselors call that denial. Narcissism.
  - One of the questions that came up from the **Hey Ken** cards raised the issue of, "So, let's say I can't forgive? Do I lose my salvation? Like, "Does this mean that if I don't forgive—I lose my status as God's child and have all my sins dumped back on my soul?"
- a. Now, this is a huge question, and I'm going to try to answer it in a simple way. When I put my faith in what Jesus has done on the cross, nailed their for **my** guilt, I am coming to God as a Judge. As a judge, he declares me **not guilty**, sends his Spirit to live in me and help me live, and gives me eternal life. The Bible uses the image of parenthood to describe the relationship from that point on. I am born into His family, adopted as his child; He becomes my Father. **All** my sin—past, present and future is forgiven.

- b. Now, if that's true—why would 1 John 1:8-9 say this: **If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. 9 But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness (1 Jn.1:8-9 NLT).**  
 -When we live in a relationship with God as our Father, our rebellion against him creates guilt and embarrassment and distance. And the relationship needs to be restored for us to have peace, for us to sense God's love and forgiveness and experience his power.  
 -Struggling with forgiveness is not sinful. Choosing **not** to forgive doesn't change our status as a child—but it does change our relationship. And God, as a parent, moves into discipline mode—just like parents who see their child taking a path that will destroy them and others.
- c. Here's what Jesus is saying here. When you choose unforgiveness—to put others in debtor's prison—you are giving yourself the same prison sentence. Your unforgiveness will be your jail. You can't let unforgiveness and anger and rage and malice sour and curdle in your heart—and then feel the blessing and forgiveness and freedom and grace of a clear relationship with the Father. Unforgiveness is **sin**. What happens when let's say an older child rebels against a parent? The relationship is damaged. With God as my Father instead of my judge, we now have a parent-child relationship
- d. One more issue. Choosing to follow Jesus, by it's very nature, transforms a person's life—the way they think. Everything. It's not fire insurance—where I pray this cool little prayer that keeps me out of hell—so now I just go live like everyone else. When someone chooses hatred, unforgiveness, revenge—the question comes up, “Have they really come into a personal life-changing relationship with God.”  
 -The Bible is very clear that if someone claims to be a follower of Jesus—but doesn't think like Jesus, act like Jesus—or even want to be like Jesus—chances are they don't **know** Jesus.
5. One more note that I think you'll find very encouraging. Jesus says that we need to forgive others **from our hearts**. To us, that immediately raises questions, because we say things like, “Oh, I love her **with all my heart.**” In other words, I have all these feelings of love pouring from my heart—where I store my emotions. **-That's not what Jesus is saying!** In that culture, the seat of emotions were seen as coming from the “gut.” The **heart** was the seat of the will—central place where a person made their decisions. To forgive someone from your heart is to **choose** to forgive them—even if you don't **feel** like it.  
 -Forgiveness is the **choice** to set aside someone's debt. When you **choose** to forgive—your “gut feelings” will eventually catch up. It's like they're on a bungee cord. When you choose to treat someone as a forgiven person—it's amazing what happens in your feelings. The choice to forgive helps us step **past** our emotions and **do** something to save a dying relationship. And that's **good** news!
5. So. Do I have a choice about whether or not to forgive? Well, forgiveness ultimately **is** a choice of the will. Your choice is—will I remain a victim—or will I take my first step toward healing? Will I choose prison or freedom? Disease—or health? Will I choose to live in a loving, cleansing, grace-filled relationship with the One who forgave **me**? Forgiveness may be one of the most important decisions you ever make!

### III. MORE PRACTICAL STUFF

- A. Now. I want you to close your eyes. I want you to think of someone—the **main** someone—who has really hurt you. The pain stings even as you think about them. Lock in. Have someone in mind? I do.
1. I never expected this person to hurt me—because we were friends. By the way—the **greatest** hurts don't usually come from unknown gunmen; they come from someone we knew and loved. Now, I chose to forgive this person—but not because I **felt** like it, but because if I didn't, I'd be a hypocrite. And I knew anger and hurt would ultimately contaminate everything I touched.
    - I find that I have better days—and worse days. Like Lewis Smedes said, "I forgive you, but I don't want to do lunch with you!" My feelings vacillate back and forth.
    - Now, the strange thing about this whole thing is that I have good friends who have hurt others in the same way this person has hurt me. I can sit and talk with them, hug them, and enjoy their company. They've failed...and then repented. So have I—and I'm cool with that.
    - So, why do I find it so easy to forgive and be good friends with people who've sinned against others—when I struggle to do that with the person who's sinned against **me**? The only difference is...**me!**
  2. This thinking pattern also fits with the pain that goes on every day in our world. Every so often, I'll meet with someone where awful things have happened in their world—and their question is, "How could God let this happen if He's a good God?"
    - a. Let me just use a dumb illustration. We used to have a hamster named Hammy. We loved Hammy. But one day Hammy got sick and died. Let's say we said, "Why did Hammy have to die? It's not fair! Is anyone up there running this place—or are we just on our own!"
    - b. You'd say, "Well, Ken, you weren't asking these kinds of questions yesterday—and **lots** of hamsters died all over the world! Why have you suddenly developed philosophical questions about the goodness of God?" "Well, Hammy was still **alive** yesterday!"
      - We many times don't think about pain and unfairness until it enters **our** world; happens to **us**." And then there's a **lot** of energy! "God, how **could** You?" See it? Pain and injustice doesn't register all that strongly until it hits **us**. **Me!** And when it reaches **my** world and affects **my** life—all of a sudden, it's like way off the charts of forgive-ability.
  3. But God sees the horrible, unthinkable things that go on in this world every single second of every single day. And it's destroying the world and the people He created and loves. What if he were to just annihilate all the guilty parties? Turn them into grease spots with little tufts of hair still sparking and smoking! **Some** grease spots with more tufts of hair than others. If He did that we'd all be gone.
    - But God chose another way. He showed up—humiliated—naked in a manger. He taught about love and forgiveness—but he was accused and sentenced to die by people who **knew** better. **He** paid for **our** sins against him. We were the debtors. He paid the debt for every scummy thing that we've done to Him and others. He hung, impaled on that cross, humiliated, rejected—carrying the full weight of my sin. That's the **only** way I could be forgiven.
    - When I forgive someone—I have to go to the cross. My pride is at stake. My sense of justice and injustice is at stake. And it's painful. And that's why when we

forgive, it feels like something inside us is dying. It's our pride. Self. It's a **very** uncomfortable feeling. Paul, an early leader in the church, needed extreme forgiveness because of how he had persecuted followers of Jesus before he was transformed. He said, "You have to **get rid** of anger and malice and slander!" Then these words. **Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you (Eph. 4:32 NLT).**

4. Anyone here ever sinned against someone else? Hurt them. **That's** what we have in common—and it affects every place where humans gather—in families, churches, schools or offices. Any gathering of **humans** is a gathering of **sinner**s—and all the little sinnerlings they create. And we get **too** close, do **too** much together to not **hurt** each other. And only the surgery of forgiveness—heals community.

-Years ago at the age of 20, I had an appendix that rebelled. At first there were just dull reminders that it wasn't happy. Then one night, in the middle of the night—it let its rebellion be known to the whole body. It had been stuffing poison for some time—and it just broke loose and spread the poison all over. And all of the other bodily members were in pain. I was in so much pain that when the surgeon said, "You need surgery right away—I was **happy**."

-After the cutting, the blood, and all the clean-up of infection, I was pretty sick—**worse**--at least for a while. But as the poison drained and the wounds healed, there was this defining moment one day when I started feeling better! And the other body parts stopped blaming the appendix for all their trouble. And now, years later, I'm this **amazing** specimen of manhood!

-Unforgiveness is like this swollen, infected appendix. And poison never stays contained in one little section of our lives. It affects the whole body of Christ—family, friends. Blaming doesn't help. Only surgery—which is scary and bloody and painful. And if you **wait** too long, you'll die. But **after** we have it—well, **then** we **start** to heal!

- B. One of the questions that comes up about forgiveness goes like this. "God doesn't forgive us unless we come to Him and **repent**. So that must mean that **we** don't forgive someone unless they come to **us** and repent!"

-And to that I would say this: God chose to forgive us when Christ paid for our sin. But we can't be reconciled with Him until we come to God on His terms. It would be like a parent whose child flips them all, steals their money and takes off. They forgive them for doing that—but if they child never comes home—and their life spirals out of control, they will die—alienated! The forgiveness was available. They could've been reconciled, become part of the family and found healing—but they refused!

1. There are some people who have probably hurt you deeply. And they will **never** humble themselves, admit their wrong, or ask forgiveness. In fact, they avoid you and make like **they're** the innocent party. Does Jesus call you forgive them? Of course He does. Does he ask you to chase them down and try to be really good friends with them? No. They're not safe, and friendship with them **won't** be safe until there can be some understanding and ownership for what they've done.
  - One person can forgive another person—and needs to, irregardless of what **they** do. Reconciliation takes two. Forgiveness is a gift. Trust is **earned**.
2. What if the person asks forgiveness, admits wrong, and **demand**s reconciliation and restoration? The most common place where this happens is in relationships between men and women. Let's say the woman has a three year affair, is caught, admits that she was wrong—and then demands that they get back together again

and resume life. Or let's say a man beats up his wife, says he's sorry and begs for forgiveness—and then demands to be let back into the home to resume life.

-Know what I would say? Forgiveness, **Yes!** Reconciliation and business as usual? No way—not until trust has been rebuilt—and it's clear that they have gotten the professional help they need to figure out **why** they did that in the first place. It takes **time** to rebuild trust. And I'm not talking about making someone pay forever for what they did. The question has to be asked...and answered, "Why should I trust you again?" Trust is earned.

3. It's important to understand something. Forgiveness doesn't wipe out consequences. If you steal from an employer, they can totally forgive you—and your friendship can be reconciled. But there is a justice system in our world that demands accountability. One of the most amazing stories of forgiveness is the story of Jeffrey Dahmer—a mass murderer who did unspeakable things. But he apparently came to faith in Jesus Christ and was baptized in a prison bathtub.

-Could Jesus forgive something that heinous, that awful? Absolutely? He—like me—fits the person in Jesus story with a debt he could **never** pay. But he stayed in prison—that is until he was murdered by fellow prisoners. There are consequences for what we do. God in His mercy sometimes tempers them—but sometimes we face the full brunt of what we've done.

C. One final thing—and I'll make this brief. Don't underestimate God's power—and His ability to work through horribly unfair circumstances. That's what the Bible story of Joseph—you know, the guy with the Technicolor dreamcoat—tells us. He's a boy with big dreams. But, without thinking, he blabbers about them to his brothers—how one day he's gonna be—**de man!** And they hate him. After all—he's their 17 year old kid brother! -Well, they catch him alone, rip off the special coat his Dad gave him, and sell him as a slave to some traders headed for Egypt. And Joseph is launched into 20 years of horribly unfair circumstances. Every time you think he's going to get pulled out—he gets knocked down.

-Through an incredible but subtle act of God, he winds up 2<sup>nd</sup> in command in Egypt—and his brothers are put in the position of having to come to him, begging for food—not even realizing that it's him! This was Joseph's chance. He could've thought, "Hey! It's **pay back** time!" But it was a test from God. Will you pay back evil for evil? Will you **become** the evil your brothers did to you?

-Joseph has already forgiven them—but takes them on this incredible circuitous path—a **wise** path—to see if they've really changed. When he finds out they have, there's this unbelievably emotional moment of reconciliation—I cry almost every time I read it. And Joseph shows that he has this amazingly deep understanding of God. He closes the story with these words: **Am I God, that I can punish you? You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people (Gen. 50:19-20 NLT).**

-This may be the most important thing you'll ever understand in life. God **specializes** in taking the unfair, unjust things others do to us—and somehow working through them for good—in ways we would never suspect. Unforgiveness sabotages the process. Forgiveness unleashes the power of God—and sets you free!

#### IV. CLOSING IMAGE

I don't know if any of you remember the movie from the 70's with Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman—**Papillion**. It's the true story of a man falsely accused—and committed to this extremely severe French penal colony. He tries escaping several times. In his final attempt, he stands on the edge of this cliff, ready to throw his sack of coconuts into the ocean and swim to freedom. His friend, played by Dustin Hoffman, refuses to go. He says, "You're going to die, you know." Papillion says, "Maybe." Then he makes this incredible leap—and finds freedom. The final note of the movie is that he ultimately outlived the prison system where he had suffered such pain.

-Some of you this morning need to be free. Free from hurt, bitterness—this gnawing anger you feel about what's been done to you. It's a prison. And you **can** be free. But it feels like this risky jump from a cliff—you think, "Maybe I'll die!" I'd say it's your best chance at **really** living!