

What it Means to Forgive and Why it Matters

DARRELL DELANEY

Forgiveness sounds beautiful until you see the name of the person who hurt you, and you feel your stomach tighten. Many of us believe that God forgives, yet we struggle to extend that same grace to others. What does it actually mean to forgive someone, and how is that different from reconciling or pretending everything is fine? Today on *Groundwork*, we turn to scripture to explore what forgiving others looks like in real life, and how God's forgiveness of us becomes the pattern for our forgiveness of others, next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, in our first program, we focused on God's forgiveness. We are doing a three-part series on forgiveness here, and we learned in the Old Testament and New Testament language that God shows up, lifting the burden of our sin and helping us let it go; and he let it go from us and he shows us how to let it go. We saw forgiveness as, not some side note, but it is the environment of grace in which believers live.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And today, we turn to maybe something that can be a little more uncomfortable—the other side of the coin here is that is when we have to forgive one another as God has forgiven us; and you know, just putting it that way reminds us, you know, of the Lord's Prayer, which we quoted in the first program: Forgive us our sins *as* we forgive one another. I remember Neal Plantinga, in a theology class, noting one time that that little word *as*, which is also just a two-letter word in the Greek of the New Testament: forgive us our sins *as* we forgive one another. Two-little-letter word there and it packs a wallop because it makes it clear that there is a connection. If you want God to forgive you, you had better be forgiving others as well. We are going to talk about in this episode that if there is a disconnect there, if we are not forgiving people, that is a real problem.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; that is a real problem, but before we talk about what forgiveness looks like in our everyday lives, we want to listen to how scripture frames the calling inside of God's grace, from Ephesians 4:31, 32, it says: Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³²Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is that little word *as* again.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, it is there again. So, Paul is tying the forgiveness directly to the character of God. The move from bitterness to kindness, from rage to compassion comes from remembering in Christ that God has already forgiven us, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Usually... You and I are both pastors, and we have been pastors of churches...and sure, yes; we know, you know, that we could tell our congregation, you know, you gotta get rid of slander and lying about each other and gossip and anger and bitterness, but I have never even, in any congregation, I have never said: Oh, and stop brawling. It is like, brawling! How did brawling get...what are these early Christians doing that Paul had to actually tell them to get rid of brawling? But, in other words, you have to get rid of this because forgiveness leads us directly to the character of God, and again, forgive each other just as God in Christ forgave you. As we made clear in the first program, it all starts with what God has already done. God sets the keynote here.

DARRELL DELANEY

He does set the keynote, and Paul keeps saying this. No matter what church he goes to, he says it to the church in Ephesus; he says it to the church in Colossi; in Colossians Chapter 3 he says this: ¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. *Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

There it is again: Forgive as the Lord forgave you. It is always identity first. God's people are chosen, holy, and dearly loved; and then there is the wardrobe change, where he says to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; and in that wardrobe is the forgiveness. That one: Forgive as the Lord forgave you. It is very simple, but it is also deep.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God's forgiveness is the pattern for our lives. We are going to do what we have seen God doing. Darrell, that means that forgiveness is not about your personality, okay? Yes, some people are more easygoing; they are not flustered; they don't get upset very often. That is true, but the New Testament is not talking about temperament. You do not only have to forgive because it is easy for you to do it. You have to forgive no matter what your temperament is like. Even if you are easily offended, you still have to forgive. So, it is a way of life that grows out of the Gospel. Again, God moved first. God lifted the weight of our guilt in Christ. God released us from a debt we could never repay—we will think about that a little bit in the next segment of this program—so, forgiveness of others is part of how that grace works its way into our relationships.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; that is clear, Scott. I am glad you brought that up. It also means that forgiveness is only necessary when there is something that really has gone wrong. That is why rage, anger, slander, malice, all these things are being mentioned, because they happen in relationships; they happen in congregations; they happen in communities; and we need forgiveness language because these are serious offenses, and broken promises, and deep disappointments in our story. When you forgive someone, you are not pretending that it didn't happen or that it is minor. You are naming the wrong, and you are deciding not to let that wrong rule you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; there are some things that happen in our lives where somebody says: Oh, I'm sorry about that; and you say: Ah, just forget it. It is not a big deal. I mean, it is not a big deal; you made a mistake. But you do have to forgive the big things; the serious offenses. We mentioned in the first program Neal Plantinga's definition that forgiveness is letting go of an anger that you have a right to feel, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When it is a serious sin, that is when forgiveness has to come in. It happens first in the heart of God when God releases us, and then it has to start happening in our hearts. It is sort of like God got the ball rolling...we've got good momentum, and we go with that momentum in our lives.

DARRELL DELANEY

It's a beautiful thing, but I think we need to make this clear, Scott, that forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation is the repair of the relationship, right-restoring everything, and it requires repentance, truth-telling, and a shared commitment to rebuild trust over time; but forgiveness is a gift. It happens first because Christ has forgiven us. It happens in the heart of God, and it is the decision to release the debt that someone owes...that you owe someone or someone owes you...or that we owe God. So, forgiveness is separate from reconciliation. In reconciliation, you have everything going back the way it was, or better; but you need to separate the two, because you can have forgiveness and still not have, on this side of heaven, the reconciliation that comes after that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Forgiveness doesn't always mean that everything goes back to the way it was before. Sometimes that is just not possible, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Or safe.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I mean, it is possible that a woman who was a victim of abuse from her husband...it is possible for her to forgive him and never be with him again, because it is just not safe, as you just said. But you know, we sometimes have said, too, and you have said it before, Darrell, you know, God forgives wholesale, we forgive retail. God got it all done through the cross of Jesus Christ. God has forgiven the whole smack. That is the whole work of his salvation. You and I, Darrell, we have to work at this forgiveness stuff, and we do it in small installments. We forgive one person at a time; we get over, through forgiveness, one bad memory at a time. We forgive one conversation at a time. God does it wholesale, we do it retail, but we are still nevertheless doing what God showed us how to do.

DARRELL DELANEY

And sometimes that happens in a moment and sometimes it happens over time, more of a cycle. It doesn't mean that you didn't have any faith and it didn't take the first time if you had to do it again. It may mean that you need to go deeper into the walk of forgiveness. It is a journey for some. So, we want to talk about the importance of the difference between those two, and how to not deny the pain and bring it under the cross; but in just a moment, we want to talk about Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant, and show how it exposes the danger of unforgiveness. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, when we move from the idea of forgiveness to the actual faces and histories in our lives, then things become intense very quickly, and Jesus knew that, and that is why he brings up in Matthew 18 a scenario that he talks to Peter about; because Peter is trying to find out: Where is the line? Where is the limit? How many times do we forgive a person? How often should we forgive? So, let's listen to this story to make that point.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Matthew 18 at the 21st verse: Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" ²²Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought (in

to him. ²⁵Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had (should) be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."

DARRELL DELANEY

²⁸"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' ³⁰But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³²Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ³⁴In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. ³⁵This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is a parable that turns on a comparison, right? So, the servant owes the king, or the master...he owes him a million bucks...he owes him two million bucks. He cannot pay it back. I don't know how he got into that much debt in the first place, but anyway, Jesus uses exaggerations to make his point. He owes the king two million bucks, and the king says: Fine; the slate is clean. Forget it. The guy turns around, leaves the king's presence, runs into a guy who owes him twenty bucks. Twenty bucks! He chokes him and says: Give me my money! I don't have it; give me some time. Nope! He doesn't give him time; he throws him right into prison. Again, forgive as you have been forgiven, and that is where the servant in the parable fails. He *was* forgiven *huge*, but he doesn't turn around and do the same thing; in fact, he does the opposite.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and Jesus ends that parable with a warning about hearts that receive God's forgiveness, yet refuse to let it flow outward. I was thinking about the series we did on Jonah and how he was being told to go to Ninevah to preach against it, and that he was upset when those people repented; but he was under the shade while he was angry with God about it. So, I call it *Jonah syndrome* when we want to receive mercy for ourselves, but judgment for others; and we don't get to determine those levers...we don't get to determine those. Here Jesus is not saying that the wrongs committed are small or painless...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No.

DARRELL DELANEY

But he is making sure that it is placed into a larger story. This is in light of what God has done for you, not just what that person has done against you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Again, forgive as you have been forgiven. What the parable shows, Darrell, is sometimes we have it in our lives where we will say to somebody: You just don't get it, do you? You just don't get it! This servant in the parable just didn't get it. He had received a *huge* boatload of mercy in forgiving his debt, but he just didn't get it. It just like rolled off his back, you know, like water off a duck's back; like it never even happened; and so, he turns around and takes somebody who owes him a pittance and throws him into debtors' prison; and right; he gets nailed for it when the master is outraged. And Jesus says: My Father will treat you that way if you don't get it. You have been forgiven everything, and it cost the Son of God his very life. Talk about a costly forgiveness. If you cannot do that for others...if you don't even want to...or don't even try...you don't get it.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; you don't get it, because in light of the mercy that we have been shown, our demand to collect every debt from others is exposed; and I think that is the meaning he is getting at. A heart that clings to every offense, and puts an IOU on everything that may not have really bowed down to God's mercy; and the question is: If God has released you from a million-dollar debt...a two-million-dollar debt...then how can you continue to hold over other people the 20-dollar debts that they have in your life? It cannot coexist that way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; that said, forgiveness is not declaring that justice doesn't matter, Darrell, but it is shifting where justice is handled, you know. We are going to talk a little bit in a few minutes about, you know, just leaving some of this stuff to God. Justice is important, but it is not up to you. You are not the justice enforcer for the whole universe. You have to let things go, and if there is a justice issue involved, we will leave it to God. We will talk about that; but the shift changes, you know, in how you carry the hurt. You don't want to just keep anger alive forever. You don't want to just nurture it, right? We have to trust God, to, you know, even everything out, and we cannot just keep plotting in our own lives how we can get back at somebody or how we can, you know, make somebody pay. No; that is not the posture of people who have been forgiven the way we have been forgiven.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think that is kind of our dilemma, especially when we try to take matters into our own hands. How do we live as believers who lovingly and readily and thankfully receive the abundant forgiveness from God, and the grace that he gives; but then, when people hurt us and offend us, what does it look like to entrust that situation to God and not act like it didn't matter, and not fall into the trench of they have got to pay for this right now because I need to see something happen to them that will repay; and how do I keep this from replaying in my own mind all the time, as well?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I mean, that is one thing: When we bear a grudge, you know... We talked in the first program of this series that the Greek word *aphiemi*...or *aphesis* in the New Testament for forgiveness...means letting go. You let it drop. Have you ever said this to somebody who is just dwelling on some grudge, you know: If you spend ten minutes talking to Robert, he is going to tell you how he got messed up by his boss in 1966, and nothing has ever been right... Eventually you want to say to somebody like Robert: Would you drop it?

DARRELL DELANEY

How long are you going to hold onto this?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; how long are you going to hold onto this? Just drop it. You are making yourself miserable. Just drop it. Get over it, we sometimes say. Nobody will ever owe us as much as we owe God...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if God could let it drop, we could let it drop, too. You know, I think, Darrell, if some of our listeners today...if you are listening, and if a name or a face is coming to mind as Darrell and I talk about this stuff, and you feel your stomach tighten a little bit, that is the one...that is the one. Invite the Holy Spirit to help you try to finally let it go, especially if it is a longtime grudge. Just try to let it go.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; you know, forgiveness does not erase the need for truth, consequences, or boundaries, but it can change the posture of the heart of those as they are being pursued in the right way; but in our final segment, we want to look at what forgiveness is not, and why it is not identical to reconciliation; and how scripture helps us deal with strong emotions that surround it. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, Scott; and we have been talking about forgiving others, and we wanted to clear away the confusion and help people understand how this works. 1) We are accepting what God has done for us. 2) We set what happens against us and when people break their promises when they sin against us. We have said it in the larger story. We move the issue and the case from our desk, so to speak, to God's desk, because he is the one who will deal with the situation and help the righteousness happen, even if reconciliation does not happen after forgiveness is given.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we alluded to this in the previous part of the program, but a key passage here is from the Apostle Paul from Romans 12 at verse 17, where Paul writes: Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Interesting passage; and also interesting that Paul doesn't sugarcoat it. He calls it evil. Evil things actually happen to us. We are the victims of evil sometimes. He is not saying you are the victims of just a little peccadillo, you know...just a little misdemeanor. No; he is using the word *evil* here. Sometimes we are the victims of evil, but don't give as good as you got. Don't give it back; leave it to God to straighten out the justice issues that are involved.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, he doesn't call evil good. I mean, even Jesus says that the days are evil. So, the evil is actually still happening in the world, but we are told to overcome evil with good. So, I refuse to answer and repay tit for tat. I am not going back and forth. That is the first thing. The second thing is, forgiveness does not erase the longing for justice. I mean, leave room for God's wrath is what we are told in scripture: It is mine; I will repay, says the Lord. So, we have to allow God to do what he does when it comes to that; and justice...it matters, because God is going to repay it. But you lay it into his hands. Now, the issue that we have as believers is the timing on which that happens, because I would like it to happen right now!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes...

DARRELL DELANEY

Because if it happened to me right now, I need it to be fixed right now! But the Lord has a timing and a date on the calendar for when that will happen, and we have to trust him and his timing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, we have mentioned this before in the episode, but again, forgiveness does not always, always mean automatic reconciliation. Reconciliation is all about a restored relationship, renewed trust. Sometimes that happens, sometimes it doesn't. I mean, look, again: Paul is a realist. *If* it is possible, as *far* as it depends

on you, live at peace with everyone. But sometimes maybe that isn't fully possible. We can forgive, but we cannot reset the clock. We cannot pretend that it never happened. We cannot pretend that we can just go back to how it was. So, that happens sometimes, you know. As far as you are able, Paul says, which implies that sometimes maybe it is not possible. Forgive, leave things to God, let God figure out what justice looks like in the long run, and then you just try to live at peace with everybody...*try*, Paul is saying.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, the forgiveness is what happens in your heart before God, right? But then boundaries happen when you do what God is giving you as far as wisdom or how to move forward in relationship with this person; and it may be context where that relationship has ended as far as fellowship goes, but in your heart, you have forgiven this person. So, the emotional side of forgiveness is real and scripture does not hide it. We see this language actually being intensified and highlighted in the Psalms. In Psalm 13 we pick up a couple of verses from there. It says: How long, Lord: Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ²How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

So, the psalmist feels forgotten; he feels overwhelmed; close to despair; and yet chooses to trust in God's unfailing love. So, we are bringing the issue *to* God. That is a matter of faith. Not away from God and blaming God, or trying to find other reasons, but the feelings of being abandoned, being lost, being overwhelmed; bringing them to God is a strong act of faith that we see in the Psalms, and our example.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And when we struggle to forgive somebody, you know, when we can only lament, God doesn't ask us to come and say, you know: Hey, God, you know this person sinned against me, but it is no big deal. You know, it is not a big deal to me, God. No; it is a *very* big deal. You can but lament, you know; you can but lament because it really happened.

So, you want to move from saying: Oh, Lord, do unto them what they did to me. You want to lean toward: God, have your way with the situation. Just free me from this grip of bitterness. I am going to leave it to you. So, that shift...sometimes it takes a long time. Forgiveness is not instant always, but it is real.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is real, Scott; I think that if we name where we are, then we can allow God's Spirit to take us through this process. So, for me to name what happened to me, and how I felt about it: I was angry; I was hurt; I felt betrayed; I felt disrespected; I felt attacked. When you name that in prayer to God, that is the lament; and then, when you lament and you are honest to God about: God, why is this happening to me? This is frustrating; this is painful; then you begin the process of releasing it to God; saying: I am turning this over to you. That is how we get to have your way, God; and you deal with that and you give me a new heart; and don't let this bitter root that Hebrews talks about sit in my heart.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I mean, if there is a name that every time you hear it...every time you hear: Michelle's name, you just: Oh, oh; the anger over what Michelle did! Bring Michelle's name to God: Dear Lord, please let me let go of what Michelle did to me. Help me forgive Michelle. Help me let that drop. You know, we don't carry these things alone. We carry them to God; we carry them to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. The progress can feel slow; it takes time; and sometimes about the time you think you have forgiven somebody, something happens that triggers you all over again. It is like: Oh; it is almost like I have to start over! So, forgiveness of others is not easy; it is not quick; it is not cheap.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is not, Scott, but it is the life that Christ calls us to live; and he doesn't call us to live it alone. He forgives us; he lives in us; and he walks with us as we learn to give what we have received; and that is where grace has the final say, thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. Join us again next time as we conclude our study on forgiveness by examining scripture passages that help us think about forgiveness in life's complicated situations, like when there is no remorse or repentance; like when somebody repeatedly hurts you; when you need to forgive somebody, but they die first. So, listen for that next time, and connect with us now at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or to share what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

DARRELL DELANEY

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Printed on June 18, 2026