

On Forgiveness

(Finkenwalde)

November 17, 1935

TEXT: Matt. 18:21-35

Let us begin this sermon by asking ourselves whether we can think of someone in our neighborhood, in our family, or among our friends whom we have not forgiven a wrong they have done us, of someone whom we have broken with in anger—if not in open anger, then in silent bitterness—with the thought: I can't put up with that anymore, I can no longer have any fellowship with this person.

Or would we really be so absentminded as to say we can't think of any? Are we so indifferent to others that we don't even really know whether we are at peace or at strife with them? Will one after the other stand up and accuse us one day?: "You parted from me in strife—you couldn't stand me—you broke fellowship with me—you disliked me and turned away from me—I hurt you once, and so you left me alone—I offended your honor once, and so you broke with me, and I couldn't find you again—I looked for you many times, but you avoided me—never again was an open word spoken between us, and I didn't want anything more from you, but only your forgiveness, and you were never able to forgive me, I am here now, and accuse you—do you still know me?" Will names that we hardly know anymore come alive before us in that hour—many, many, wounded and cast out, whose sins we did not forgive? And among these people, a good friend, perhaps, a brother, a sister, one of our parents?

In that hour a single, terrible, threatening voice will grow against us: "You were a hard person—all your friendliness is of no use. You were hard and proud, and cold as stone; you didn't worry about any of us; we all meant nothing to you, you detested us, you never knew what pardon does; you did not know how much good it does the one who experiences it, nor how free it makes the one who pardons. You were always a hard person."

We make things so easy for ourselves, when it comes to others. We become unfeeling, insensitive, and think that if we harbor no evil thoughts against people, then that is just the same as if we had forgiven them. And in

so doing, we completely fail about them. Forgiving: that c about them, supporting the we don't support those othe accustomed to their silence; But it's precisely the suppo every step, in all their difficu their injustice and sin, even without ceasing—that would

Only those who stand in su to spouse—but also to strang knows how hard it is. Someti now; I can bear them no lon on forever like this, "Lord, h me, and I forgive?" or how l that they offend and injure derness, that they cause me Surely, it must come to an e injustice; surely, it cannot b ously—"as many as seven tim trifling to us. How often hav shouldn't smile; compared t forgive seven times, really to completely to best account, the others as if they had alwa small matter. Ah yes, what we to forgive, solely from a love carry them farther; that is no

It is a real torment, this qu sons; how can I bear them? W Let us always take this questi go to someone else, or to ask only poor help. But Jesus doe Not seven times, Peter, but s only in this way does he help number; do not torment yo end, Peter, without end. Tha you; that alone makes you fre

You count, once, twice, thr threatening to you, the relati menting. But you have simp counting, as long as you keep in reality, you have not yet f from counting; forgiveness ar don't have to concern your safe keeping with God; you n

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so doing, we completely fail to see that we don't have any good thoughts
 about them. Forgiving; that could indeed mean having only good thoughts
 about them, supporting them whenever we can. Yet it is just that we avoid;
 we don't support those others, but rather walk beside them and become
 accustomed to their silence; indeed, we do not take them seriously at all.
 But it's precisely the supporting that counts; supporting those others at
 every step, in all their difficult and unpleasant sides, saying nothing about
 their injustice and sin, even when it is against you; supporting and loving
 without ceasing—that would come close to forgiveness!

Only those who stand in such a relation to the other, to father, to friend,
 to spouse—but also to strangers, to all whom they encounter—they alone
 know how hard it is. Sometimes, it escapes one's lips: I can't do it anymore
 now I can bear them no longer; now my strength is at an end. It can't go
 on forever like this, "Lord, how often shall my brother or sister sin against
 me and I forgive?" or how long must I tolerate that they are hard on me,
 that they offend and injure me, that they lack all consideration and ten-
 derness, that they cause me pain without measure—Lord, how often . . . ?
 Surely it must come to an end sometime; surely, injustice must be called
 injustice; surely, it cannot be that my rights are being violated continu-
 ously—"as many as seven times"? We smile at Peter; seven times, that seems
 trifling to us. How often have we already forgiven and overlooked! But we
 shouldn't smile; compared to Peter, we really have no reason to smile. To
 forgive seven times, really to forgive; that is, to turn the injustice done us
 completely to best account, to return good completely for evil, to accept
 the others as if they had always been our dearest brother or sister; that is no
 small matter. Ah yes, what we call forgive and forget: "Live and let live!" But
 to forgive, solely from a love that does not want to let go of the others but
 carry them farther; that is no small matter.

It is a real torment, this questioning. How am I to cope with these per-
 sons; how can I bear them? Where do my rights begin with respect to them?
 Let us always take this question to Jesus alone, as Peter did. For were we to
 go to someone else, or to ask ourselves, then we would receive no help, or
 only poor help. But Jesus does help, only he does it in a most peculiar way.
 Not seven times, Peter, but seventy times seven, says Jesus; and he knows,
 only in this way does he help him. Do not count, Peter, but forgive without
 number; do not torment yourself with the question, how long?; without
 end, Peter, without end. That is what it is to forgive, and that is grace for
 you; that alone makes you free!

You count, once, twice, three times, and the matter becomes ever more
 threatening to you, the relationship to your brother or sister even more tor-
 menting. But you have simply not realized then, that as long as you keep
 counting, as long as you keep on crediting their old sins against them, then
 in reality, you have not yet forgiven—not even once. Free yourself, Peter,
 from counting; forgiveness and pardon know neither number nor end; you
 don't have to concern yourself about your own rights, they are surely in
 safe keeping with God; you may forgive without end! Forgiveness is without

beginning and end, it occurs continuously, every day, for it comes from God. That is liberation from everything strained and unnatural in our life together with our fellow human beings. And with real anger, Jesus proceeds to tell that terrible story of the wicked servant, of the man who experienced mercy, and yet remained a hard man: now all mercy is pronounced over him, now the dreadful judgment of God is pronounced over him. And in telling this angry story, he gives us the greatest help he can; he points out the path to real forgiveness. Let us now explore that path.

Does each of us recall a moment in our life when God called us to judgment, when we were lost persons, when our life was at stake, when God demanded an accounting from us, and we had nothing but debts, immeasurably vast debts? Our life was stained and unclean and guilty before God, and we had nothing, nothing at all to show but debts and more debts. Do we recall how we felt then, how we had nothing to hope for, how lost and senseless everything seemed? We couldn't help ourselves anymore, we were utterly alone, and before us there remained only punishment, well-deserved punishment. Before him, we could not stand erect. Before God, in front of God the Lord, we sank to our knees in despair and prayed: "Lord, have patience with me"; and all kinds of foolish talk passes our lips, as here in the story of the wicked servant: "I will pay you and make amends for everything." So we said, and yet we knew for certain that we would never be able to pay it. And then, at once, everything changed: God's face was characterized no longer by wrath, but by great sorrow and pain toward us, and God released us from all debt, and we were forgiven. We were free, and the fear had been taken away from us; we were joyful again and could look God in the face and thank God.

So there was a time when we looked like that wicked servant. But how forgetful we are! Now we go and lay hold of those who have done us some small injustice, who have deceived or slandered us, and we say to them: "Make amends for your sin—I can't ever forgive you that!" Don't we see that we should say instead: "What others have done to us here, that is nothing, nothing at all, compared to what I have done against God and against them as well"? For who called upon us to damn others, when we have done far worse than they?

Verses 31–34. Now grace has been squandered; now all the old guilt has returned; now we come under wrath; now we are lost people, because we have scorned grace. That is the whole lesson: the sins of others you see, but your own sin you fail to see. In repentance, recognize God's mercy toward you; in this way alone will you be able to forgive.

What path brings us to heartfelt forgiveness of one another for every sin? Dear brothers and sisters, those who have the experience of God tearing them out of great sin and forgiving them; those to whom God has sent a brother or sister in such an hour to whom we could tell our sins; those who know the struggle the sinner wages against this help because we do not want to let ourselves be helped; and whoever nevertheless has discovered that our brother has absolved us from our sins in the name of God and in

prayer—from such a one, disappears; we want only a brother and sister, to serve conditions, without end. No longer, but love them all the same. O Lord, our God, let your mercy without end! Amen.



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disappears; we want only one more thing: to share in the plight of our
brother and sister, to serve, to help, to forgive, without measure, without
conditions, without end. We can hate our sinful brother and sister no
longer, but love them all the more, and forgive them everything, every-
thing. O Lord, our God, let us experience your mercy, that we may practice
mercy without end! Amen. Amen. [GS, IV, pp. 399–406]