

Winning the Battle for Healthy Relationships

The Battle Within

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Bible Text: Matthew 18:21-35

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Winning the Battle for Healthy and Satisfying Relationships

Matthew 18:21-35

I. If you are going to win the battle for healthy and satisfying relationships, you must choose to _____.

II. God's strategy for victory

A. Forgiveness must be seen in the light of God's forgiveness of _____.

(24,28,33)

B. Our forgiveness of another person is not based on them _____ it. (21-22)

C. The offended one takes the _____ step. (15)

D. Forgiveness is not a matter of faith but _____. (Luke 17:3-10)

E. An unforgiving heart will _____ you. (34-35)

MAXIMIZING YOUR MARRIAGE BY WINNING THE BATTLE FOR HEALTHY AND SATISFYING RELATIONSHIPS

Matthew 18:21-35

NOTE: This is a transcript and not a manuscript of Dr. Stewart's sermon. Since we speak differently than we write, a transcript will not be as smooth or as polished as a manuscript would be. This transcript has the style of an oral presentation not a written presentation. In order to reflect as much as possible the original presentation of this sermon, Dr. Stewart has chosen to retain the transcript format.

We are all in the battle for healthy and satisfying relationships. We all desire to have meaningful relationships. God made us social beings, not hermits. In fact, studies have shown that if a baby is deprived of that interaction with humans, that baby will cease to thrive and will eventually die. We are made to have relationships.

We're seeking healthy and satisfying relationships but the problem is we're human and as humans we're imperfect.

Therefore it's a struggle to maintain healthy and satisfying relationships. In fact, you could call it a battle. Whether it's between a husband and wife or whether it's between family members, or whether it's between friends or between work associates or people at school, we all are in a battle for satisfying and healthy relationships. In fact, this morning, you're probably battling in a relationship right now, struggling to keep that relationship or to return that relationship to a healthy satisfying condition.

We're in the battle because we're human and as humans we tend to hurt each other, don't we? Either you're being hurt by the other person or you're the one hurting the other person. Therefore, we struggle to maintain healthy and satisfying relationships. Either we are hurt intentionally by other people or unintentionally, but the very moment we're hurt we enter the battle for satisfying and healthy relationships.

If you live long at all you will experience hurt from people. Someone has said relationships are ragged, they are not clean cut, they're not neat, because we're human they're ragged. Jesus and the Apostle Peter were talking one day and they had a conversation also about winning the battle for satisfying and healthy relationships. We find the advice that Jesus gave Peter over in Matthew chapter 18. So take your Bible, turn to Matthew's gospel, chapter 18 and we'll pick up the conversation between Jesus and Peter. We're going to begin reading in verse 21 of Matthew 18.

“Then Peter came to Him and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that

slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

It's interesting, the Bible never tells us to forgive ourselves. I think we're all but too ready to let ourselves off the hook and forgive ourselves. No, what did Jesus say? Jesus says the key to winning the battle for healthy and satisfying relationships is you must make the choice to forgive the other person who's hurt you.

Forgiveness is a choice that you must make to forgive the other person.

The reality is people are going to hurt you. It seems that the closest relationships can hurt us the most--that husband and wife relationship. It seems the one we love the most can hurt us the deepest, doesn't it? And the deeper the hurt, the more fierce the battle to maintain that relationship in a healthy, satisfying way. The deeper the hurt, the greater the battle to make the choice to forgive them.

In this passage Jesus gives us five biblical truths about forgiving those who hurt us. If you will put these into practice in your relationships, then you will be far along the road to winning the battle for healthy, satisfying relationships.

Truth number one: forgiveness of others must be seen in the light of God's forgiveness of us.

Everything else I say today revolves around this first truth. If you don't remember anything else I say today remember this, your forgiveness of those who hurt you must be done in the light of God's forgiveness of you and what you've done against him. This whole parable that Jesus tells brings up this relationship. In this parable God equals the king or the lord. The first slave that owes the king 10,000 talents equals us, you and me. We've sinned against God. Our sins are called a debt in scripture. The other slave in the parable represents those who hurt us, who sin against us.

Now look at how much the king forgave this first slave. Jesus purposely used these amounts of the debt to make a point. Ten thousand talents in today's currency equals 2 billion, 280 million dollars. Two billion, 280 million dollars. That's a lot. But Jesus gave that on purpose, he wanted to exaggerate the amount. Now it would take over 15 years to earn one talent. Therefore, it would take this man over 150 thousand years to pay back this debt. You see how ridiculous it is? I mean, nobody could live 150,000 years to pay off a debt. It's impossible. Jesus said that because he wanted us to know it's impossible for us to pay off the debt of our sins against God. Two billion, 280 million dollars, over 150,000 years of working five days a week, 50 weeks a year to pay it back.

Yet, when this slave fell down before the king and said, "I can't pay you back. Please, please have mercy on me!" the king forgives the debt. Jesus is saying look at how much God has forgiven us. In Ephesians 1:7 we read, ***"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace."*** You see, it's according to God's grace, he has compassion on us.

Now if God has forgiven us so much, how can we refuse to forgive others who sin against us? So when it comes to the second slave, who sinned against the first slave, Jesus says he owes him \$4,800, now you see the comparison? \$4,800 compared to 2 billion, 280 million. That's actually around 500,000 to 1 or more particularly \$475,000 to \$1, that's the difference in the comparison. \$475,000 to \$1.

See, Jesus is making these outlandish numbers to make a point. He's saying look at how much God has forgiven you! Yet, you're not willing to forgive someone else such a small amount in comparison? I mean this slave was forgiven this huge amount from the king and yet he pulls his fellow slave aside and says, "I'm not going to forgive you for this insignificant debt that

you owe me even though I've been forgiven this humongous debt by the king." So when it comes to us forgiving others we must always see it in the light of God's great forgiveness of us.

I remember when Teri and I had only been married a few years she hurt me, made me so angry. Now personally, I don't get hurt as much as I get angry and I don't remember what she did, it's been 30 years ago, I know you want to know, but I don't even remember myself. But I know it made me mad, I mean, it really made me mad cause nobody can make you as mad as your spouse can make you, right? I mean, I remember I was just fuming, and I remember I was just laying in the bed just angry, so angry I couldn't go to sleep, just plotting how I could get back and make her hurt like I'd hurt, you know how you do. Then God brought this passage of scripture to my mind. And it's like God just spoke to me there as I was laying there in the quietness of the night and he said, "How much have I forgiven you?" and then he started bringing up different sins that I had done that he had forgiven me of. He just kept bringing them up and I just kept realizing, "Well, yeah." And you know it's amazing how that offense that Teri had done against me just beginning to shrink compared to how much God had forgiven me. I mean it did, it got to the point of ridiculous that I would refuse to forgive her of that when God has forgiven me of so much. That's the first truth you need to remember when it comes to forgiving those who hurt you. You look at how much God has forgiven you and how much you have hurt him.

Second truth: our forgiveness of another person is not based on them deserving it.

In verses 21 and 22, Peter comes to the Lord and says, "Lord how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me. Seven times?" Have you ever wondered how Peter ended up with seven? Well, the Rabbis of that day said you should forgive someone three times. Well, Peter doubled it and added one. I think he thought Jesus was going to say, "Man, Peter, that's great. Seven times! You've gone far beyond what the Rabbis teach." But much to Peter's surprise, Jesus said, "No, not seven times but seventy times seven." Jesus didn't mean 490 and then quit. No, he was saying unlimited forgiveness.

I want to ask you a question, who deserves unlimited forgiveness? Nobody, nobody. Because we don't forgive people because they deserve to be forgiven. The Lord didn't forgive this slave the 2 billion 280 million dollar debt because he deserved it, the slave didn't do anything to earn that

forgiveness of the debt. He just threw himself on the mercy of the king and said, "Please forgive me!" Look at what the Bible says, it says, "**The king had compassion**" in verse 27, he had compassion on him. The king didn't forgive him because he deserved it, the king forgave him because of the king's love, because of his compassion. God doesn't forgive us because we deserve it. Is there anyone here who can stand up and honestly say, "I deserve God's forgiveness?" No, because we do not deserve it. But God doesn't forgive us because we deserve it, he forgives us because of who he is, and because of his great love and mercy. We're not to forgive someone else because they deserve it, that's not the point. You say, "But I want to make them suffer like they made me suffer." And when we feel that they have suffered enough, when they've hurt enough like they've hurt me well, then I'll talk about forgiveness, but not until I make them hurt like they hurt me." We want to get back at them, make them feel the pain that we feel. Or we say, "If I forgive him, he'll just do it again." That's not the point, now is it? The point is, you forgive him because God's forgiven you. You didn't deserve it so he doesn't deserve it either so that's ok. You forgive because of what God has done for you.

Jill Briscoe talks about a conference that she was teaching and this lady came up to her during the conference and said that her father had sexually abused her when she was very young, that she had worked through, she thought, the issues and eventually got married and became a missionary and had children of her own. Her children were now grown and she'd gotten a letter from her father saying that he had become a Christian and that God had forgiven him of what he had done and he realized that he desperately needed her forgiveness as well because of this evil that he had perpetrated against her. She said that when she read that, feelings of anger and bitterness surfaced in her that she didn't even know were there. She thought to herself, "Look at him! He goes and gets saved and God forgives him and he's probably going to the home church and they probably killed the fatted calf for him and they'll probably invite me to the party." She said she was so angry she couldn't believe it. She went to sleep that night and she had a dream. She said in that dream she saw her father standing on a stage by himself and she saw the hands of God and this white robe in God's hands being dropped over her father. She recognized it was the white robe of righteousness because she had one on herself. And as that robe was falling down over her father, she woke up screaming, "No, no, it's not fair!" but then she began to realize that that robe that she wore and the robe that was being dropped on her father, both robes were purchased by the blood of

Christ. Jesus had died so that they both could wear those robes. Just as God had forgiven her for her sins, God had also forgiven her father. She realized it was all a matter of God's grace in both of their lives, not a matter of each one deserving their forgiveness. When she realized this, God melted her heart and she began to exercise forgiveness toward her father.

So don't fall into that trap of the enemy, "He doesn't deserve it. She doesn't deserve it." No, none of us deserve it. We don't forgive because they deserve it, we forgive because God has forgiven us in Christ.

Third truth: the offended person takes the first step, takes the initiative.

Notice it was the king that came to this first slave. He didn't wait for the slave to come to him, he went to the slave and said, "Let's get this debt squared away, let's get this thing right." You see the problem with us is we want the other person to come to us. Look what Jesus says over in verse 15 of this same chapter, he says, "If your brother sins go and show him his fault in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother." The implication is that if he sins against you, you go to him, don't wait. You see the problem is, many times we don't even realize we've hurt somebody. I know it's hard for you ladies to realize, but we men are thick headed and we sometimes are emotionally stunted. We just don't realize we've hurt somebody, we just don't, we really don't.

I think it was Gary Small that represents the difference between men and women as women being like a butterfly and men being like a buffalo. The wind can blow and the butterfly will just flutter back and forth and the wind will move it in this direction or the other with the slightest breeze but the old buffalo just plods on, it doesn't bother him a bit. You can take a little pebble and put it on a butterfly's wing and it weighs it down and crushes it. You can put that same pebble on a buffalo and he doesn't even know it's there, he's totally oblivious to it.

Many times ladies we don't realize, really we don't, that we've hurt you. Please don't say, "Well, you just outta know." Don't give us that, I mean we don't know. But please tell us so that we can do something about it. Don't say, "Well, I'm going to wait for him to ask me to forgive him. When he asks me to forgive him then I will but I'm going to wait until he does." We're just going along thinking they're something wrong but we don't know what it is and she won't tell us what it is so how are we going to get it straight? She

says I outta know what it is, but I don't know what it is. So we are going in a circle.

The one who is hurt should take the first step to mend the relationship, to get it right.

Back in 1980 Jimmy Carter was running for the President of the United States and Ronald Reagan was running against him. You may remember there was a televised debate between the two candidates and unknowing to the Carter camp, George Will, a columnist, had found the debate notes of the Carter camp and he had given them over to the Reagan camp. Well, Reagan won that debate according to most pundits and eventually went ahead to win the presidency. Carter knew what had happened. Years later, in fact 1997, a writer for the New Yorker magazine was interviewing Jimmy Carter and Jimmy Carter told him that one day he was teaching a Sunday School lesson on forgiveness and in preparation for that Sunday School lesson he started thinking, "Now, who are some people who I have resentment toward?" Immediately George Will came to mind because of what he had done and what it had perhaps cost President Carter. So Jimmy Carter determined that he would seek to find out what he and George Will might have in common and he would take steps to try and reconcile the relationship. Well, he found out that George Will had written a book on baseball and he remembered that and he remembered he refused to read it at the time so he went to a book store and found a used copy of the book, bought it for a dollar, he read it, he sat down and wrote George Will a note explaining about the facts, what had happened, how he had felt about it and how he'd had resentment all these years but how he wanted to get past it, that he wanted to be reconciled, that he had thoroughly enjoyed the book and he sent it off. He said George Will wrote him back, a humorous note and basically George Will wrote, "Well, my only regret is that you only paid a dollar for the book and didn't pay full price." But, he said, "We're reconciled."

You see Jimmy Carter had to take the first step to get that relationship reconciled. "*And God demonstrated his own love toward us in that yet while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*" God took the first step. If God had waited on us to seek him for forgiveness, he would still be waiting. But he took the first step to bridge the gap to forgive us of what we've done against him. You and I need to take the first step to be reconciled to those who hurt us.

Fourth truth: it's not a matter of faith but obedience. It's not a matter of faith but obedience. In a parallel passage Jesus was talking to his disciples in Luke 17 about forgiveness and I want you to see what they said, *"And if he sins against you seven times a day," Jesus says, "and returns to you seven times saying I repent, forgive him. And the apostles said to the Lord, increase our faith."* They're pretty good Baptists, you know. "Lord just give me more faith. If I've got to forgive anybody who comes to me and says they repent when they really have not, I've got to forgive them then hey increase my faith." Now that's a good Sunday School answer isn't it.

But notice how Jesus responded, *"And the Lord said that if you had faith like a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree be uprooted and planted in the sea and it would obey you."* You see it's not a matter of faith, Jesus said, it's a matter of obedience. Jesus goes on to tell this story, he says, *"Which one of you having a slave who's been out working hard all day and this slave comes in after working hard all day, which one of you would say to him, now you sit down and let me fix something to eat, you've been working hard all day."* He said, *"No, what you do is you say to him, alright clean up and fix me supper."* He said you don't thank him for what he's done because he's only done what he's supposed to do, he's only been an obedient slave.

So Jesus is saying, look forgiveness is not a matter of faith, it's a matter of obedience, you make a choice to act forgiving toward that person. You don't have to wait until you feel forgiveness, you don't have to wait until you have a certain degree of faith, Jesus said no, it's a matter of obedience, just start acting forgiving. Say, "I will forgive" and then you start acting forgiving and in time the feelings will come.

Forgiveness is a choice we make, it's not a feeling, it's a choice to act forgiving toward that person. In time, the feelings of forgiveness will come up and the feelings of anger and bitterness and resentment will go away.

Forgiveness for God is like a dump truck, he forgives us all at once. We come to God in Christ and he wipes the slate clean totally all at once. But as humans, our forgiveness is not like a dump truck, it's like a flat bed truck, one shovel at a time. And so you've got this pickup truck filled with bitterness, anger, unforgiveness but you say, "God by your grace I'm making a choice today to forgive so-and-so" as that first shovel full. You put the shovel in and you started putting it out.

The next time you see that person those feelings are going to start trying to come up again. What are you going to do? "I'm forgiving them." Second shovel full. Go along and you see them again, you're going to have to go outta your way to go up and be forgiving, act forgiving and you say "How would I act towards this person if I was totally forgiving?" Then you go and act that way. It's going to be tough. You're going to want to run away, you're going to want to say something ugly, you're going to want to ignore them but forgiveness is a choice you make and an act of obedience. You take another shovel full and scoop it out.

Finally, over time you have emptied out that pickup truck and guess what? You see them then, and hey, those feelings of anger, bitterness, resentment have gone and you do indeed not only act forgiving toward them but you feel forgiving toward them. This is a process, it takes time and the deeper the hurt the longer it takes. But we, as an act of faith, commit to act forgiving toward them, trusting God, in his time, he will bring the feelings and the change in our heart.

Final truth: an unforgiving heart will destroy you.

In verse 34 and 35, *"And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."* The truth is bitterness, resentment is a poison pill that we swallow hoping it will kill the other person. Bitterness hurts *you*, an unforgiving spirit crushes *you* much more than it hurts the other person that you're holding the grudge against. It can cause ulcers, it can drain your strength. It takes energy to keep anger and bitterness and resentment towards someone. It can drain the joy out of your life, it is like an abscess pouring poison into your life. You know something, it affects other relationships too. As much as you try to compartmentalize it and you just keep that anger and that bitterness and that resentment on that one person, it still spills over into other relationships.

Ronald Reagan's daughter, Patty Davis, was writing about the assassination attempt on her father by John Hinckley. What you may not know, that John Hinckley was using special ammunition that was made to explode upon impact. Now the bullet that lodged within ¼ of an inch from President

Reagan's heart did not explode until ten days later when an FBI lab tech was examining the bullet, it exploded. It destroyed the microscope and destroyed the metal tweezers that they were using but fortunately the technician himself was not hurt in any major way. But she was writing about how God had protected him and she said that her dad said to her the day after he was shot that he knew that his healing and the progress of his healing was directly related to his willingness to forgive John Hinckley for what he had done. Now President Reagan understood the power of forgiveness and the danger of an unforgiving heart.

When you harbor bitterness or an unforgiving spirit you're practically useless to God. In fact, you release God's discipline in your life when you've refused to forgive those who hurt you. Jesus said, "*So God will do to those of you who do not forgive his brother from your heart.*" It destroys us, it eats us alive. So you see, **the choice is forgive or die.**

A book on Robert E. Lee's life entitled "*Robert E. Lee, the Last Years,*" the writer says that one day Robert E. Lee was visiting with a lady who lived in Kentucky. There was a grand old tree in this lady's yard that during the Civil War the Union artillery shells had just mutilated this grand, beautiful tree in her yard. And this lady would go out periodically when she'd pass by she'd see this grand tree that had been disfigured, the branches destroyed by these artillery shells and she would just get seething with resentment and anger toward the Union armies for doing this, destroying a beautiful tree. This went on for several years. One day Robert E. Lee was visiting with her so she took him out to show him this tree. She told him what had happened and how the Union soldiers and their artillery shells had destroyed this tree. She was looking for him to condemn the Union army or at least show her some sympathy for this tree that had been destroyed. He didn't say a word for a moment and then he said, "My dear Madam, cut it down and forget it."

Maybe there're some trees in your life that you need to make a choice to cut them down and forget them.

Let's pray.

Father we look to you in your word to draw us close to you, to give us the grace to win that battle for healthy and satisfying relationships as we forgive others because you have so richly forgiven us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Indeed the greatest forgiveness is God's forgiveness of us in Christ. God forgives us because Christ was willing to come and take our sin upon himself on the cross. What we could not do, he did. He paid the price for us. He lived the perfect life that we could not live and therefore he could take our place on that cross and be punished for our sins. And what he calls upon us to do is to surrender our will to his will, to trust him as our personal Savior that he died for us, to give our life to him and to invite him to come into our life, to realize that we cannot do anything to earn his forgiveness, we don't deserve it, but he forgives us because of his love. And we come and receive that forgiveness freely trusting he did everything necessary for us to have eternal life and to have our sins wiped away, that he will give us a place in heaven with him for eternity as his free gift. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." And he calls on us to just ask him to come into our lives and place our trust in him and his love, commit our life to follow him as our Lord and he comes to live within us and gives us that eternal life.