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Revenge: Prison wall number one of withholding forgiveness

Wisdom Worksheet

Jesus likened withholding forgiveness to a prison (Matthew 18:21-35). The irony is that the person who will not forgive is the one locked inside the four walls. *Forgive* means “to let go.” In order to forgive someone who has wounded us, we must *let go* of four prison walls that incarcerate us in the prison of un-forgiveness. The first prison wall is *revenge*.

In Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving debtor, He described three scenes illustrating the three applications of the story. Scene one portrays the largest debt ever incurred (150,000 years’ wages) being forgiven, or *let go*, vertically from the king to his servant. Scene two paints a similar scenario; however, the debt incurred horizontally between the forgiven servant and his fellow servant is comparatively quite small (a hundred days’ wages). The servant who had been forgiven the largest debt ever incurred will not *let go* of the small horizontal debt with his fellow servant. He wants to *hold on*. Scene three casts a dark reality. Word of the forgiven servant’s behavior reaches the king who responds by throwing the unforgiving servant into prison. Jesus concluded the parable with quite possibly the most sobering words in Scripture, “*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart*” (Matt. 18:35).

As we see in Jesus’ concluding statement, forgiveness flows from the heart. The Bible teaches us that two heart conditions exist: *proud* and *humble*. A proud heart is hard



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and unforgiving. A humble heart is soft and forgiving. A proud heart holds on. A humble heart lets go. When someone harms us, we either *hold on* or we *let go*.

Have you had the opportunity to forgive someone who has wronged you?

Who harmed you?

What did he do? Why?

How did the act make you feel?

Did you *hold on* or *let go*?

Often times our first reaction to someone who wrongs us is *revenge*, the first prison wall of withholding forgiveness. Revenge means retaliation, or repayment.

We are harmed in three ways representing our *3 resources of life*: (1) *talent*—the unique person God has created us to be, (2) *treasure*, and (3) *time*. Jesus addressed all three regarding how we should *let go* of revenge (read Matt. 5:38-42). Jesus commanded us to *let go* and not *hold on* to revenge when any of our 3 resources of life are dinged by others.

We let go of revenge for an attack on our talent. Jesus said, “*If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also*” (Matt. 5:39). A strike on the right cheek was made with the back of one’s right hand (dominant hand). The phrase “*strikes you on the right cheek*” was an idiomatic expression for an insult. Today, we use similar phraseology when we say, “That was a backhanded comment.” An insult is an attack on our *talent*—the unique person God has created us to be. In turning the other cheek, we



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are ignoring the insult which is a character trait of wisdom (Prov. 12:16). We *let go* of the prison wall of revenge.

We let go of revenge for an attack on our treasure. Jesus said, “*If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well*” (Matt. 5:40). In ancient Palestine, a tunic and coat represented one’s only asset, or *treasure*. When our treasure is harmed, Jesus communicated that we should *let go* of the prison wall of revenge.

We let go of an attack on our time. Jesus said, “*If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles*” (Matt. 5:41-42). Two thousand years ago, a Roman soldier was empowered with the authority to stop any person in order to be used to carry out official business. The person was charged with carrying goods or correspondence up to approximately one mile. A Persian royal post officer could do the same. This dinged the resource of one’s *time*. Jesus taught His disciples to go two miles, and *let go* of the prison wall of revenge.

Jesus commanded us to *let go* of the first prison wall of withholding forgiveness, the prison wall of *revenge*. When our resources of life (talent, treasures, or time) are taken, we are to *let go* because the small horizontal debts pale in comparison to the vertical debt *let go* of us. Besides, the resources are graciously given to us by God.

Revenge comes in 3 levels: (1) greater, (2) same, or (3) lesser. When our talent, treasure, or time is damaged, we are tempted to repay the offender with either greater, the same, or lesser damage to his resource of life.

Which form of revenge do you favor? Why?



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Revenge takes the matter into my own hands and removes it from God's—the horizontal removed from the vertical (read Rom. 12:17-21).

Revenge is the enemy of loving our neighbor—the greatest horizontal commandment (Lev. 19:18) and the enemy of loving God—the greatest vertical commandment (Deut. 6:5). Love, not revenge, fulfills the law (Rom. 12:10; Gal. 5:14).

Forgiveness does not occur horizontally in relationships without first occurring vertically with God in Christ. So, I am not the one forgiving, or letting go. Christ in me lets go. In order to forgive others, I must first be forgiven by God. Freedom in Christ from the penalty, power, and one day the presence of sin leads to freedom in relationships with others (Matt. 6:12, 14-15).

Forgiveness frees us for reconciliation. Forgiveness always precedes reconciliation, but reconciliation does not always follow forgiveness because reconciliation takes two.

Forgiveness welds together two ideas: justice and mercy. Both are found in Christ and are displayed in their ultimate clarity at the cross. The key that unlocks the prison of withholding forgiveness is crossed-shaped (humility toward God and others).

How:

Movement One of the Parable: God let go in Christ the biggest debt ever incurred

There is a direct correlation between the amount that I perceive I've been forgiven vertically and how liberally or conservatively I forgive horizontally (Lk. 7:41-43)



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Remember that Jesus was not standing idly by watching us be harmed; rather, He was being harmed with us (Heb. 4:14-16; 10:10, 18)

Movement Two of the Parable: Let go of small horizontal debts

Think of a setting where I have *done*, currently am *doing*, or *would do* someone harm in a similar fashion. *Connect* the offender's sin with the sin in me.

Movement Three of the Parable: Experience freedom from prison in my heart

Do the instant forgiveness experiment. For the next two weeks, instantly let go of every wrong committed against you (your talent, treasure, and time). You will be free.