

When Repentance is Hard; When Forgiving Is Hard

2 Samuel 19:18b-23

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 3-16-2014

Introduction

Last week we looked at the big picture of reconciliation. And this paragraph gives a small snapshot of how difficult that can be. It would have been extremely hard for Shimei to engage in this repentance, and it would have been extremely hard for David to grant forgiveness. In fact, apart from grace, genuine repentance and genuine forgiveness is impossible. This is why Acts 11:18 says that repentance must be granted by God before people will come to Christ. They cannot produce it. It is a gift of God's grace. Now, they can have counterfeit repentance like Judas did, but not the real thing. And it's not just unbelievers - 2 Timothy 2:25 says that God must grant repentance to Christians before they will turn back from their backsliding. Only God's grace can produce it. So if there are people who need repentance, we better be on our knees asking God to grant it. I would like to see our church spending a day in prayer and fasting for Josiah's repentance. So watch out for an email on that.

But Scripture is just as clear that our forgiveness of each other is a work of God's grace. And it is my prayer that whether you have difficulty on the side of repentance or have difficulty on the side of forgiving those who have repented, that God's Spirit would make your heart long to have a deeper work of His grace.

I. Shimei's difficult repentance

A. *What made it so hard? (16:5-14)*

Let's look first at what made Shimei's repentance a difficult thing to do. And to see that, turn back to chapter 16, and we will just highlight a few things. Chapter 16, beginning to read at verse 5:

2Sam. 16:5 Now when King David came to Bahurim, there was a man from the family of the house of Saul, whose name *was* Shimei the son of Gera, coming from there. He came out, cursing continuously as he came.

2Sam. 16:6 And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David. And all the people and all the mighty men *were* on his right hand and on his left.

2Sam. 16:7 Also Shimei said thus when he cursed: "Come out! Come out! You bloodthirsty man, you rogue!"

2Sam. 16:8 The LORD has brought upon you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom your son. So now you *are caught* in your own evil, because you

are a bloodthirsty man!”

2Sam. 16:9 Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, “Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Please, let me go over and take off his head!”

2Sam. 16:10 But the king said, “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? So let him curse, because the LORD has said to him, “Curse David.’ Who then shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’ ”

2Sam. 16:11 And David said to Abishai and all his servants, “See how my son who came from my own body seeks my life. How much more now *may this* Benjamite? Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him.

2Sam. 16:12 It may be that the LORD will look on my affliction, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing this day.”

2Sam. 16:13 And as David and his men went along the road, Shimei went along the hillside opposite him and cursed as he went, threw stones at him and kicked up dust.

2Sam. 16:14 Now the king and all the people who *were* with him became weary; so they refreshed themselves there.

From that brief reading we can see at least some reasons why it would have been hard for Shimei to repent. The first is that from Shimei’s perspective, David deserved his angry words and deserved to be deposed. And it’s true – we’ve already seen that David deserved death and deserved to be deposed. Now, Shimei had false accusations mixed in with true accusations, and the way he engaged in this was not right. But it is hard to confess your own sins when you can see the sins of the other person so much more clearly. Secondly, it is shameful to confess your own sins if they are flagrant. Shimei was so angry when he did this that he probably wasn’t thinking straight. And looking back on it could have easily made him mortified. Third, it is hard to confess your sins when you have bitterness and anger, and he had plenty of both. He had misinformation about David, but his misinformation made him extremely bitter against David. But fourth, pride keeps many people from a full-hearted confession of sin.

B. Doesn’t wait (v. 16)

Yet interestingly, Shimei did not allow any of those things to keep him from repenting. In fact, if you look at 19:16, you will see that he came as quickly as he could.

2Sam. 19:16 And Shimei the son of Gera, a Benjamite, who *was* from Bahurim, hurried and came down with the men of Judah to meet King David.

He hurried. There are so many things that can keep us from repenting, but procrastination because of fear can certainly be one. Some time ago I told you about two long miserable years that I waited to confess two sins that I had committed in high school – stealing some potatoes when I was

hungry and cheating on a math exam. And I had a hundred reasons why I didn't need to confess those sins to man, but my rationalizations were all chaff that the Lord eventually blew away. But it took two years of misery before I repented. And once I did, I was amazed at how long it took me. I made a resolution right then and there to never delay repentance. But there are so many things that make that hard.

C. Is willing to be known publicly (v. 17a)

Another thing that made this a difficult confession was that it was made publically, and he even brought along a thousand of his own friends to witness the confession. That is remarkable. Verse 17 says,

2Sam. 19:17 *There were* a thousand men of Benjamin with him, and Ziba the servant of the house of Saul, and his fifteen sons and his twenty servants with him; and they went over the Jordan before the king.

It's much more humiliating to repent publically than it is to repent one-on-one.

D. Is willing to endure inconvenience (vv. 17b-18a)

The last phrase of verse 17 indicates that he was willing to endure inconvenience. He swam over the river in order to confess rather than waiting for the king to come to him. In fact, we will see from verse 19 that he wanted to be the first one there.

If you have to be prodded and coaxed into confessing your sins, you need to ask God to give you grace to confess more quickly and eagerly. There is an old proverb from my grandma's generation that says, "Many people use mighty thin thread when mending their ways." "Many people use mighty thin thread when mending their ways." In other words, they do just enough mending to get by, but their repentance is not thorough. What we are seeing here is a much more thorough repentance than most people give.

E. Is willing to face risk (v. 18b)

The next thing that made this a tough repentance was that Shimei was willing to face huge risk when repenting. The second part of verse 18 says,

... Now Shimei the son of Gera fell down before the king when he had crossed the Jordan.

He wasn't crying out from the other side of the Jordan, hoping the king would forgive him, yet still safe from all their arrows and spears. No. He crossed the Jordan and fell at the feet of the king, knowing full well that

the king and his soldiers could spear him or cut his head off at any time. He was taking a huge risk in confessing his sins.

Does confessing our sins sometimes come back to bite us? Yes it does. Do people sometimes take advantage of our confession and abuse us? Yes, they sometimes do. But that is the risk of walking with *God's* favor upon your life. And having His favor is worth it. The risk you face in confessing your sins may be shame, rejection, misunderstanding, the other person putting all the blame on you when in reality they had part of the blame. And there are a lot of other risks. But when God's grace is at work in our hearts, we are more concerned with being right with God than we are with being safe with man.

F. Is self-abasing rather than self-justifying (v. 18b)

The next thing that made this a tough confession was that it was self-abasing, not sin-minimizing or self-justifying. We know from chapter 16 that he was a proud man, and in that chapter he threw stones at David and cursed him from afar. But here he prostrates his wet body on the ground before David and speaks with loathing of what he had done. He hates what he had done. That's a good sign.

James and Phyllis Alsdurf have worked for years to deal with domestic abuse where spouses are battered and abused. And while they do deal with the need for the battered to choose to forgive their batterers, they point out that nothing positive can happen until the abuser has a repentance that does not justify his or her actions or in any way minimize what has happened. They say,

It starts when the batterer spiritually and psychologically faces the awfulness of his actions. There must come that loathing of oneself for one's sins as Ezekiel exhorts: "Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices" (Ezekiel 36:31, NIV). The horrors of the past must be named, not left vague and undefined. Here sin and sickness move from the abstract to the concrete. And, most importantly, the batterer takes responsibility for what he has done.¹

While I don't agree with their psychological approach to this subject, I do thoroughly agree with their application of Ezekiel 36, which indicates that when God has given genuine repentance, there will be a self-loathing and self-abasing rather than a making of oneself to look better than he really is. To quote Ezekiel again, "Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable

¹ James and Phyllis Alsdurf, *Battered into Submission* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1989), p. 104.

practices” (Ezekiel 36:31). That is so contrary to the self-esteem movement. Repentance makes us loathe self and find esteem only because of our acceptance in the Son and our security in the Son.

G. Has humble speech (v. 19a)

Point G highlights the remarkable change in his speech that can be seen in the first part of verse 19:

2Sam. 19:19 Then he said to the king, “Do not let my lord impute iniquity to me...

He calls him lord. This is strikingly different from his view of David in chapter 16. There he was arrogant, unsubmitive, refusing to recognize him as king, rebellious, quarrelsome, and abusive. And he was so angry that he didn't care if he got killed over it. At that point, not even the risk of death would change his mind. But here he shows humility and is willing to submit to whatever the king decides to do. He recognizes that the king could have his head. There is no trace of arrogance or blaming in his voice. He takes the blame for what he has done. His speech is humble.

H. Is asking for remittal of guilt and relinquishing of resentment (v. 19b)

And I want you to also notice that this is not simply an apology. Apologies are a thin substitute for asking for forgiveness. If you say, “I am sorry,” that is OK as far as it goes. “I am sorry” means that I feel bad, and we should feel bad when we sin. But that doesn't go far enough. There is no reconciliation and there is no request that the offended party do *anything*. The ball of guilt is still in your hands burning you. And so apologies typically bypass the need for grace.

Biblical repentance not only describes the sin accurately, but also asks for forgiveness from the offended party. And forgiveness means that the offended part will no longer hold that guilt over your head and secondly will no longer harbor resentment against you. There is always those two parts: remittal of guilt and relinquishing of resentment. And verse 19 asks for both:

2Sam. 19:19 Then he said to the king, “Do not let my lord impute iniquity to me [that would be holding him guilty, or charging his guilt against him], or remember what wrong your servant did on the day that my lord the king left Jerusalem, that the king should take *it* to heart.

That part of the verse deals with holding a grudge. And when we ask for forgiveness we are asking that the guiltiness be no longer held against us and that the offended party no longer harbor bad feelings against us. Now, already you are seeing that this is making the forgiveness itself difficult. But

it also makes the confession difficult. It is admitting to guilt and admitting that his sins have caused great pain in David. I've always found it easier to say, "I am sorry" than to say "I have sinned against you in this, this, and that way. And it was wicked. I should not have done that. Please forgive me."

I. Calls sin "sin" (v. 20a)

And that brings us to point I – Shimei calls sin "sin." He does not minimize it. He does not blame his actions on his emotions, his health, or his having a bad hair day, or anything else. In the first part of verse 20 he says,

For I, your servant, know that I have sinned.

The hardest words to come out of any person's mouth are the three words, "I have sinned." Pride keeps us from saying it. In fact, it is this recognition of our own sins that separates the sheep from the goats and the wheat from the tares within the church. Why don't you turn with me to Luke 18, and see the vivid illustration that Jesus used. It is Luke 18, beginning to read at verse 9.

Luke 18:9 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

This is the natural state of the human heart – to think well of ourselves and to think poorly of others. When we are graceless, we are blind to all but the most obvious of sins in our own life, but we can see sin with 20-20 vision in the lives of others. But grace always reverses that. The more grace we have, the more we see our sin as being greater than the sins of others. And you might think that is contradictory, but it is not. Near the end of Paul's life, God's grace was so at work in his life that he declared himself to be the chief of sinners. Why? Wasn't he a pretty righteous man? Yes he was. But the closer he got to the spotlight of God's holiness the more wretched his heart appeared. And by the way, by inspiration he said that this ought to be a worthy saying for every Christian to experience. He said, "This *is* a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."

If you spend more time thinking about the sins of others than you do your own sins, it is an evidence that God's grace is not very much at work in you. It is graceless people who trust in themselves that they are righteous and despise others. It is graceless people who see others as the chief of sinners. Read through all the Puritan literature and you will see that this was the testimony of the Puritans, who were probably the most holy generation of Christians that the world has seen. But they saw themselves as the chief of

sinners. The closer they got to God's light, the more filthy they saw their own hearts. Anyway, continuing to read in Luke 18 and verse 10:

Luke 18:10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

Luke 18:11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

Luke 18:12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess."

I think you get the idea. There's no point in even arguing with a man like that about his sins. He doesn't see them. And even should you point them out (as Jesus did) you are more likely to get crucified than you are to get a confession of sin and repentance out of him. Such Pharisees will hit the roof when you point out their sins. Why? Because repentance is a work of grace. And you can see God's grace at work in this tax collector who agreed with the Pharisee's assessment of him and saw himself as the chief of sinners. It didn't bother him that the Pharisee looked down on him. He looked down on himself. Verses 13-14:

Luke 18:13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

Luke 18:14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Can you see why genuine repentance is tough? It's not hard to have the fake remorse that Judas had. Judas felt bad because no one thought well of him anymore. Of course he is going to have remorse. Pride demanded it. But it is exceedingly hard to have genuine repentance.

J. Initiates reconciliation (v. 20b)

But the last characteristic of genuine repentance that we see in Shimei is that he doesn't confess his sin and then walk away. He wants reconciliation. And we see that in the rest of verse 20.

2Sam. 19:20 For I, your servant, know that I have sinned. Therefore here I am, the first to come today of all the house of Joseph to go down to meet my lord the king."

He initiates reconciliation. He is not being drug into this. He could have escaped from Israel just like David did. There were plenty of countries that would have harbored Shimei. But Shimei for some strange reason wants reconciliation even at great personal risk. You might question his sincerity in that he came *after* David won the war; but hey, he came. And in that, he is at least a picture of grace, whatever you might think of him as a person. If there

is one thing that you learn from the Sermon on the Mount, it is that God calls us to do difficult things – actually, He calls us to do impossible things that can only be done by the Spirit’s help. So this passage shows us difficult repentance and difficult forgiveness. But before we get to David’s difficult forgiveness, I want to look at Abishai’s easy response that is sandwiched in between.

II. Abishai’s easy response (vv. 21-22a)

A. *An understandable response*

Verse 21 says,

2Sam. 19:21 But Abishai the son of Zeruiah answered and said, “Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the LORD’S anointed?”

There is no forgiveness there. There is no acknowledging of Shimei’s repentance. But I would say that his angry response is perfectly understandable. It just doesn’t seem right to forgive a slimeball like Shimei who had thrown stones at them, cursed them, and metaphorically kicked them when they were down. If you are not familiar with grace it just does not seem right to let a offense like this go so easily. Surely he’s got to pay in some way. The natural thing is to allow anger to fester rather than casting it off as an enemy. The natural thing to do is to nurse our grudges against people and brood over those grudges and pet them rather than to blow them up and bury them. The natural thing to do is to want mercy for ourselves and justice for others. The only way that Joab and Abishai are willing to forgive was when they were forced to forgive. But that isn’t genuine forgiveness is it? That’s a horizontal conforming to peer pressure. It’s not God-directed.

I read a story from John Wesley that perfectly illustrates this. He was one of the evangelists of the First Great Awakening. When Wesley was traveling by ship to America, he heard an unusual noise in the cabin of General Oglethorpe, the Governor of Georgia. Wesley stepped in to inquire, and there was Grimaldi, the Governor’s servant, drunk as a skunk, and having consumed every bottle of the Governor’s favorite wine – extremely expensive wine. When the Governor came in he was in a rage. He said, “I will be avenged!” and he ordered the poor man to be tied hand and foot and to be carried away for severe punishment. He probably would have been flogged to death. On passing Wesley, he said, “For you know, Mr. Wesley, I never forgive!” Wesley simply gave the quiet reply, “In that case sir, I hope you never sin!” That’s all he said. But that so threw the governor for a loop that he was confounded for a few moments, and just stood there not know

what to say. Then he put his hand in his pocket, took out his ring of keys, threw the keys at Grimaldi, and said, “There, villain, take my keys and behave better in the future.” At least he forgave, but it was just because of peer pressure. But my point with Abishai is that his response is the easy one. It takes no grace whatsoever to appeal to the law of God and hit someone over the head with it. It takes no grace whatsoever for Governor Oglethorpe to want vengeance. It’s the easy way; it’s the fleshly way.

B. A learned response (a son of Zeruiah – vv. 21,22)

The second reason why this was an easy response can be seen in two phrases. In verse 21 the author makes it clear that God does not approve of what Abishai was saying by using the code phrase, “Abishai the son of Zeruiah.” And David did not approve when he used the same phrase of both Abishai and Joab, “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah” in verse 21.

When we did our brief biography of Zeruiah some weeks ago, we saw that she was the sister of David and the mother of Joab and Abishai. And she had the reputation of being sharp with her mouth, angry, vindictive, ready to take people’s heads off, and hard to get along with. Used here, it indicates that just as they had learned their other bad habits from their mom, they had learned this lack of forgiveness from Zeruiah as well. That made it the easy thing to do. It was a learned response. It was a habit. Grace takes us out of the easy and into the difficult, and makes the difficult response to eventually become the new easy normal habit. But initially it isn’t easy to overcome the old bad habits. That’s what Paul is saying in Romans 7. When sin is deeply habituated, it feels like murder to get rid of the old habit and put on the new habit. But Romans 8 assures us that you can.

C. A deserved response (16:5-14)

The third thing that made Abishai’s response the easy response is that Shimei really deserved Abishai’s wrath and anger. The law of God made it clear that Shimei should not have cursed the king. The law did not give a penalty – Abishai added that. But Shimei clearly deserved Abishai’s wrath. But again, God does not call us to give people what they deserve when they ask for forgiveness. That’s the easy way; that’s the natural way; that’s the graceless way.

Chuck Swindoll once said, “The proud have a hard time forgiving. Those who have never recognized their own failures have a tough time

tolerating, understanding, and forgiving the failures of others.”² And that is so true. When people deserve a different response than forgiveness and reconciliation, it takes grace to forgive.

D. A response that is uncomfortable with grace

It’s also true that those who are not daily experiencing God’s grace in their lives have no grace to give to others. It doesn’t take grace to appeal to God’s law in verse 21 – Satan can quote the Scriptures too. Why is it that the people who dish it out the worst have the thinnest skins when it comes to receiving rebukes? I’ve never found an exception to this. There may be exceptions out there, but it seems to be a rule of life that those who dish out harsh treatment to others are the ones who are least likely to be able to receive harsh treatment graciously. They just blow up. Why? I believe it is because they don’t see themselves as the chief of sinners. It is a superficial bandaid level grace that they have tasted, not a grace that plows deep beneath the soil of our lives. When David tells these brothers, “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruah, that you should be adversaries to me today?” they don’t get it. They think they are doing the Biblical thing. They think they are defending David. They are probably thinking, “What do you mean, ‘adversaries’? We are defending you!” But their heart desires were constantly in conflict with David’s heart desires. They were operating on totally different orbits and their bitterness was robbing everything around them of grace. David was trying hard to do the right thing, and Abishai was making it difficult for him. He had to resist their tempting suggestions. And Abishai's suggestion was tempting. That’s why he calls them adversaries. He is in effect saying, "Why do you always make it difficult for me to do the right thing?"

E. A response that shut Abishai off from experiencing more of that grace (v. 22a)

That same phrase indicates that Abishai was being shut off from more grace from God. Jesus was quite clear that those who are not forgiving will not be forgiven. One of the scariest parables that Jesus gives to describe Christians who refuse to forgive is in Matthew 18. In fact, why don’t you turn there with me? Matthew 18. It’s the parable of the servant who begged his master to forgive him of millions of dollars worth of debt, and the master did. But that servant turned around and threw a fellow servant into prison for failing to pay a few hundred dollars of debt. By comparison *he* was the chief

² Charles Swindoll, *David* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group of Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 432.

of sinners, but he saw his fellow servant as the chief of sinners. And Jesus ends that parable by describing how miserable such a Christian will be. He has opened himself up to the demonic tormentors. And I'm just going to look at the conclusion beginning at verse 34: Jesus said,

Matt. 18:34 And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

Matt. 18:35 “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”

He is talking to Christians about Christians here, and He indicates that when we are unforgiving, the Father gives us over to the tormentors. Some see those tormentors as demons, others as our inward life, others as providence. I personally take it that the Father allows demons to have legal ground to work in our lives and to torment us. But however you take it, everyone agrees that you are miserable when you don't forgive. It is sad when Christians do not realize how serious failure to forgive really is. And people respond, “But you don't know how bad it is with my brother who has sinned against me.” Just keep in mind that this parable was an answer to Peter's question, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” And Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” And then he gave the parable of forgiving a million dollars worth of sin. And apart from grace, people say, “No. That's asking too much. I'm not going to forgive that much.” But that's how much God forgave you.

Robertson McQuilken said, “The sin of unforgiveness is a cancer that destroys relationships, eats away at one's own psyche, and – worst of all – shuts us off from God's grace.”³ And it does shut us off from God's grace. Jesus is quite clear that if we do not forgive, neither will our Father in heaven forgive us. James is quite clear that God resists the proud, but gives more grace to the humble. And cutting that brother or sister off from your life just makes the torment within us permanent.

Dr. Paul Brand told a story on his medical school administrator, a man by the name of Mr. Barwick.⁴ This man had a very serious circulatory problem in his leg that caused him incredible pain. Initially he resisted amputation, but the pain was so agonizing that eventually he agreed to it. Strangely, he asked if the surgeons would preserve his leg in a large jar. He said, “I will install it on my mantle shelf. Then, as I sit in my armchair, I will

³ Robertson McQuilken, *The Two Sides of Forgiveness* (Columbia International University), p. 1

⁴ See *Leadership Journal*, Summer 1984, p. 55.

taunt that leg, ‘Hah! You can’t hurt me anymore!’” He was kind of a strange fellow. But the weird thing is that after they amputated the leg he had phantom limb pain of the worst degree. Even though he didn’t have a leg, it felt like his leg was hurting. He thought he had gotten rid of the pain, but he hadn’t. And that’s the way it is when we get rid of a brother because of bitterness. Bitterness ensures that the pain will stay forever. And some Christians think, “No way. I will feel so much better if I am never around that person again.” Jesus says otherwise in the last two verses of Matthew 18. In effect you will have that phantom leg pain.

So my admonition to you from the life of Abishai is, “Don’t go the easy way because it eventually becomes the hard way.” Certainly Abishai and Joab discovered that their unforgiving hearts led them to a very hard way indeed.

III. David’s difficult forgiveness

A. Requires recognizing what lack of forgiveness does (v. 22a)

But let’s look last at David’s difficult forgiveness. He recognizes first of all what lack of forgiveness does. And we’ve already dealt with that. David’s remonstrance with Abishai shows that he recognized what bitterness and lack of forgiveness does, and he wanted no part of it. There is an old saying, “He that doth not forgive burns the bridge over which he himself must needs pass.” (Anonymous) So the first step is to recognize the dangers of lack of forgiveness and to be quick to resist it. And we’ve already dealt with that.

B. Requires remembering that we too have sinned and been forgiven (context)

Second, Shimei’s words, “I have sinned” probably struck a chord and reminded David of his own horrible sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah. After all, Nathan had prophesied these bitter fruits of his sin. He is thinking about it. In fact, some of the Psalms written during this period showed that God was impressing upon his mind that he should not be angry, should not fret, should not take revenge into his own hands, and *should* have a forgiving heart just as God forgave him. He actually did a lot worse to Bathsheba and Uriah than Shimei had done to him.

When David had just written Psalm 39 that week, and said,

Psa. 39:8 Deliver me from all my transgressions; Do not make me the reproach of the foolish.

...he was not in a state of mind to withhold forgiveness from others. No, He saw himself as the chief of sinners. When Psalm 141 shows David thinking words that are much to the effect of, “There but for the grace of God go I,” he is going to be more willing to be sympathetic to Shimei. When the same Psalm says,

Psa. 141:5 Let the righteous strike me; *It shall be* a kindness. And let him rebuke me; *It shall be* as excellent oil; Let my head not refuse it...

...he is in a humble state of mind to learn from his afflictions and to be merciful rather than vindictive.

C. Requires resistance (v. 22)

1. Resisting the wisdom of others

But let me hasten to say that David is not telling Abishai to ignore the sin. Far from it. Forgiveness is much higher than that. Even pagans recognize that indifference to sin is not the same as forgiveness. George Bernard Shaw once said, “The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that’s the essence of inhumanity.”⁵ What Shimei had done was heinous; it was wicked. David was not indifferent to the sin. Forgiveness does not minimize the heinousness of sin.

And so David has to resist the wisdom of the world in two directions. First, he has to resist the impulse to lessen the standards of God’s law and treat sin as unimportant. That slanders grace.

2. Resisting the attitudes of others

But the other extreme slanders grace as well. It is to want to take revenge into our own hands just like Abishai and Joab did. I don’t know where I got the quote, but someone once said, “Doing an injury puts you below your enemy; revenging one, makes you even with him; forgiving him sets you above him.” Shimei is perfectly described in the first part: doing an injury puts you below your enemy. In chapter 16 we saw how poorly that reflected on Shimei. Anybody who knew about that was shaking their head at Shimei. Abishai is described by the second part: “revenging one, makes you even with him.” So Abishai was even with the former bad Shimei, which is not exactly a compliment. It shows him stooping down to his level. It shows him to be graceless – at least on this particular point. And David is described by the third part of that saying: “forgiving him sets you above him.” So David’s forgiveness involved active resistance to the thinking of

⁵ Cited in John Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations, p. 680.

the world. And Christians have imbibed way too much psychological thinking on this area of repentance and forgiveness. If you want a good book that gives the Biblical perspective, get Jay Adams' book, *From Forgiven To Forgiving*.

D. Requires an action before seeing the fruits of repentance

The fourth thing that made David's forgiveness difficult was that he gave his forgiveness before he could see any fruits of repentance. David didn't say, "If you prove yourself over the course of the next year I will forgive you." That would be an easy way to approach it. But how many times do we do that in our relationships with each other? For many, forgiveness is conditional. And people say, "Yeah, but what if he hurts me again? I can't forgive him till he changes." And the answer is clearly given by Jesus in Luke 17. Why don't you turn there? This occurs in the middle of four chapters dedicated to teaching us about forgiveness. If you struggle with forgiveness, read those four chapters – Luke 15-18. But let's read the first 10 verses of Luke 17.

Luke 17:1 Then He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come...

Let's stop there. Christ wants you to forever get it out of your mind that brothers and sisters will miraculously stop sinning against you after you have forgiven them. It's impossible that no offenses should come. You should be committed to the forgiveness process knowing full well that you will likely be hurt by that person again. And people object to that and say, "Then you aren't taking their sins seriously. You are minimizing God's law." But that's not true. Look at the whole verse:

Luke 17:1 Then He said to the disciples, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe *to him* through whom they do come!

Luke 17:2 It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones.

So Jesus is saying that the sin that the other person has sinned against you is serious and should be taken seriously. God will discipline him over it, the church should discipline him over it, and no one should just ignore sin. But He goes on to say that the seriousness of sin never excuses your lack of forgiveness. Continuing to read in verse 3:

Luke 17:3 Take heed to yourselves....

Literally that means to watch out or to be on guard. Jesus knows that His instructions are so radical that our flesh will resist, our mind will rationalize about it, and we will try to ignore the clear words that Jesus has spoken. So He says, "Watch out! Be careful." Continuing to read:

Luke 17:3 Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you...
 And that's a big "If." Don't confess things as sins that God does not describe as sins. Too many people confess to sins that they have not committed just to be reconciled. But that blasphemes the process of grace that God has set in place. God's point is to take sin seriously, and confessing to sin that you didn't commit does not take it seriously. So Jesus says,

Luke 17:3 Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.

Notice that it doesn't say, "If he shows the fruits of repentance for a specified period of time." No. It says, "if he repents, forgive him." But that also implies that there is no need for forgiveness if he does not repent. David could have treated Shimei as an enemy if Shimei had not repented. But he did repent. Continuing to read in verse 4:

Luke 17:4 And if he sins against you seven times in a day...

Wow! No time for fruits of repentance there. This is a pretty radical call to forgiveness. Now keep in mind that this is not saying that you have to forgive a person who does not repent. Repentance is a commitment to turn around and start working on a problem. But Jesus reminds us that there can be failures initially, and people can fall down even on the road to recovery. So let's read that again:

Luke 17:4 And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, "I repent," you shall forgive him."

Did David do the right thing with Shimei? Yes he did. Had he been abused by Shimei? Yes. Shimei had probably connected with David with some of those rocks that he threw. David probably still had the bruises to show it. So it was a radical forgiveness. And if Jesus wasn't calling for a radical forgiveness, you would not have verse 5. But Jesus didn't say to forgive if he proves his repentance. It says that if seven times in a day he returns to you, *saying*, I repent, you shall forgive him. The apostles are stunned. They are flabbergasted. They don't think this is fair. Verse 5:

Luke 17:5 And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

Sounds pretty spiritual right? "Lord, if you can increase my faith, maybe I'll do that eventually, but not right now. I don't have the faith to do that now. I'm not ready. You've got to be more sympathetic to the plight that I'm in." But Jesus will have none of it. He doesn't care how much of a newbie Christian you are, you can follow this. Verse 6:

Luke 17:6 So the Lord said, "If you have faith as a mustard seed [that's pretty small – that's baby-like faith], you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

So it's not the size of your faith, but whether you are willing to exercise your faith. If God commanded you to say to a mulberry tree, "be plucked up," it

wouldn't matter how small your faith was, if you exercised it, God's almighty power would come through. Thankfully God has not commanded us to pluck up mulberry trees or arbitrarily remove mountains at will, or we would have a topsy turvy world. That's not His point. His point is that even if the command to forgive is as impossible as plucking up a Mulberry tree or moving a mountain, you can do it with little faith, because God *has* commanded that. He has commanded us to forgive in just as impossible a way. So he is basically saying, "Your immature faith is not a legitimate excuse."

He next tackles the excuse that I'm an emotional wreck. I can't do that. I don't feel like it. My emotions won't cooperate." And Jesus basically says, "It's not about your feelings. It's about whether you are a servant of God or a servant of Satan."

Luke 17:7 And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, "Come at once and sit down to eat?"

Luke 17:8 But will he not rather say to him, "Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink?"

Luke 17:9 Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not.

Luke 17:10 So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, "We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.' "

That servant is hungry while he is cooking the master's meal, but he resists his feelings to snatch food and he does what is his duty before he does what he wants. Jesus is basically saying that when you are a servant you do what you are commanded to do even when you don't feel like doing it. Christianity is not about feelings. It's about obeying by faith. And you might think, "I don't have it in me to forgive." And with *that* I can agree. In yourself you cannot forgive. But the point is that we are to walk by faith in the Spirit's power, not by sight in what seems reasonable. Just as Corrie ten Boom asked God for help to do the impossible, and reached out her hand to forgive the Nazi soldier who had abused her and her sister, you too can do the impossible and forgive those who have hurt you and watch God's supernatural love and forgiveness come through. So it is difficult forgiveness that God calls us to. And part of that difficulty is that we forgive even before we see the fruits of repentance.

E. Requires a refusal to be vindictive (v. 22c)

What does David mean by the phrase in the second half of verse 22? When he asks, "Shall any man be put to death today in Israel?" he is

refusing to be vindictive. He is refusing to give the other person a taste of his own medicine. He is refusing to return tit for tat. He is refusing to operate in the natural.

F. Requires security in Christ (v. 22d)

When he says, “For do I not know that today I am king over Israel?” he is saying that his security in his position is dependent on God, not dependent on giving forgiveness to his enemies or not giving forgiveness. Too many people won’t forgive because they fear that they will be abused again. Well, we will find out in chapter 20 that ten tribes abuse his forgiveness. Not Shimei; but ten tribes do. Though they were forgiven of the previous rebellion, this is a new one, and until they repent of the new rebellion, they won’t be forgiven of that rebellion either. David fights against them. You can hold people accountable for new sins and even bring church discipline, but forgiveness achieves the process of reconciliation. And we saw last week that God is in Christ reconciling all things to Himself. We are part of His cosmic goal of reconciliation. And Christians of all people should be secure enough in our own reconciliation to God that we are able to give the same reconciliation to others. Ephesians 4:32 tells us that we are to forgive each other just as God in Christ forgave us. It takes faith to walk in repentance and forgiveness as God calls us to, but we should do it no matter what the outcome of the risk. We should do it to please God, not for pragmatic reasons.

G. Requires a promise to no longer hold guilt over his head and to no longer hold a grudge (v. 23)

1. To the offender

Finally, the difficulty of forgiveness is that forgiveness is always a two-part promise made to two people. We have looked at those two sides under Shimei’s asking of forgiveness, but we see it again in verse 23.

2Sam. 19:23 Therefore the king said to Shimei, “You shall not die.” And the king swore to him.

2. To God

So there was a promise being made to Shimei, and there was a promise being made to God. Swearing always invokes God’s name. But the two sides of these promises are a remitting of guilt and relinquishing of resentment. The remitting of guilt is a promise not to hold this against him. The relinquishing of resentment is a willingness to drop the matter and

become friends. And that's implied in the swearing – they are now in covenant.

Conclusion

Let me end with a story told by prison warden Kenyon J. Scudder in a 1961 Reader's Digest article. Because I have seen various iterations of this story, I've done background checks on this, and it does seem to check out. Anyway, in the Reader's Digest story, the prison warden Kenyon Scudder claims that his close friend was riding on a train and had a fellow passenger sitting next to him who looked rather depressed. After striking up conversation with this young man, it was discovered that the young man had just been paroled from prison and was returning home. And he said that his imprisonment had brought incredible shame upon his family and to his whole town and he was wrestling with whether he should go back there. No one in his family had written to him or visited him in prison, but he hoped it was only because they were so poor that they couldn't travel and too uneducated to write. He had written *them* a letter, which he hoped someone might have read to them. And in the letter he had repented of his crime, had asked forgiveness for the way that he had shamed them, but understood if they refused to forgive him. He said that he was on his way home, and if they had forgiven him to put up a white ribbon or cloth on the big apple tree near the railroad tracks. If they didn't want to have anything to do with him, to not do so and he would keep traveling onward.

But as the train neared his hometown, the suspense became so great that he simply couldn't look out of his window. He finally asked the guy sitting next to him, "Will you watch for the apple tree at the side of the track?" His travelling companion agreed to do that, so they exchanged places. When they got near the apple tree the man said, "I see the tree. I see not one white ribbon, but many. There is a white ribbon on every branch. Son, someone surely does love you."⁶

And brothers and sisters, I would urge you to make it your goal in life to have this kind of willingness to forgive – not halfway, but filling the tree with ribbons. Spread so many white ribbons on your apple tree that it would be easy for your kids or your parents to repent. Those white ribbons are symbols of the presence of grace in your life. And if you are the one who needs to repent, make sure that you get on the train and head toward home after you write or say your repentance. You've got to begin to reverse your lifestyle. It is my prayer that this church would be a symbol of people

⁶ John Kord Lagemann, *The Reader's Digest*, March 1961, pp. 41–42

meeting under the apple tree. What better way of magnifying the grace of God than to be a people of grace. What better way of magnifying the forgiveness of God than to be a forgiving people. Put off the Abishai syndrome and embrace the David syndrome. Amen.