

Withholding forgiveness is poison. It tears the heart of the offender; it eats away at the offended. There are reasons why people don't forgive, but the results are not as satisfying as when they do.

In today's parable, we meet a man who withholds forgiveness. He's an official whose fellow servant owes him a day's wages. But he is so consumed by this small debt that he imprisons the offender. The scene is all the more horrifying because the official himself had just been forgiven an enormous debt. Certainly, a servant who owes money is not a good servant. But the official shows himself even more hateful when he refuses to forgive.

Why does he do that? Why does he act this way? There are many reasons why people don't forgive.

One is power. By refusing to forgive, the official keeps power over the servant. Committing sin is like incurring debt: It's as if we've borrowed good will from someone. And until we pay it back, the one who loans keeps power over us, control over our freedom.

Another reason the official may have withheld forgiveness is anger. He could have been angry at someone else--maybe his family upset him--but he takes it out on the servant. Challenging the true source of our anger is hard, so we often take it out on whatever or whoever is weak, even if they're completely unrelated.

A third possibility is that the servant hurt the official. And now the official has a chance to hurt back, so he takes it. In this case he may not grant forgiveness until the offender earns it. When we put something up for sale, we expect to get what it's worth. How much is forgiveness worth? What will offenders have to do to buy it? Forgiveness is priceless. No one can afford it. If we withhold forgiveness until the offender can buy it, until the offender apologizes sufficiently, until the offender restores all that was lost--if we withhold forgiveness till the offender does enough, we'll never forgive because forgiveness is priceless. It's a giveaway. It's a bonus. It's a perk. No one can earn it from us; none of us can earn it from God. Even though God is hurt, he still forgives.

Three possible reasons why the official refuses to forgive: power, anger, and hurt. But whatever the reason is, Jesus suggests it's not good enough.

What would the official gain if he grants forgiveness? It depends on why he withheld it. If it's power he wanted, forgiveness won't give him power, but it will give him peace which is more satisfying than power. If it's anger he's dealing with, forgiveness will help him direct his anger where it belongs. If it's hurt, forgiveness will help heal.

Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight. If we know why we withhold forgiveness we may more easily grant it.