

FORGIVENESS

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Scripture: Matthew 18: 21-35

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²¹ Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

*²³ "For this reason, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' ²⁷ And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ 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.' ²⁹ So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' ³⁰ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. ³¹ So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. ³² Then summoning him, his lord *said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. Jesus ends by saying, ³⁵ My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."*

Forgiveness is a tough one. The pain of the hurt stays for a long time, and we don't really want to give it up. Sometimes for us, it helps just to keep it and remember it and nurse it, bring it up every now and then, look at it and get upset and angry and bitter towards the one who has harmed us. Because in most cases the wound is very deep. Because the betrayal has come probably from a close friend or a broken promise or a word that was spoken in anger and still echoes in your mind. Forgiveness isn't easy because it's not natural for us to forgive. It's the unnatural thing for us to do.

And yet, it's one of the ventral themes of the gospel. Jesus was asked by Peter, "How many times should I forgive my brother?" And Peter thought he was being really magnanimous in asking for seven. He was quickly crushed when Jesus said 70 times 7. In other words, you continue to forgive. You don't count. You forgive until you lose count. Because, somehow Jesus says that's essential for the kingdom of God, to be able to forgive and release people. And then He tells this parable.

I want us to look at this whole idea of forgiveness as a continuum from the time we start now to the time we come to the Lord's table and partake. During this period of Lent, we've been allowing the Holy Spirit to move in us, to bring out those things that have no business in our lives. We've given God permission. That's been the accent during these days that we've been coming together on Wednesdays, and allowing a kind of a spiritual renewal in our hearts. I think that forgiveness is one of the areas that we really need to pay attention to, because it's one that can steal our joy and take away our peace.

I'm going to talk about various aspects of forgiveness. As I do that, I believe that God is going to bring to our minds people who have hurt us. And during the course of this meditation, as we move towards the Lord's table, to bring us to the point where we must forgive, because we will find that forgiving helps us.

I. FORGIVENESS IS HARD BECAUSE THE WOUND RUNS VERY DEEP.

Sometimes we look at the things that have happened in our lives and we say, "The pain is too much. It's really more than I can bear. I never expected it. It hurts too much. I can't forgive somebody for doing that to me." Maybe that's you today. Maybe there's a part of you that carries that place of unforgiveness that says that you will never release that person. Or maybe it's because you want justice. You want your day in court. You want to make sure that the person gets what they deserve. And so, until that happens, you're not willing to release them. Or it could be that you just fear that you'll get hurt again. "If I forgive, then things will go back to where they were, in a sense, and then I could get hurt again. So, I'd rather keep this as a status quo in my life. Or maybe, sometimes pride whispers to us that they don't deserve the forgiveness for what they have done.

But scripture reminds us that forgiveness is not about excusing the wrong. It's about setting yourself free from the grip of bitterness. That's the key. It's not about excusing the wrong. It's not about saying: Nothing really happened to me. Something did happen. And it was pretty bad. You acknowledge it. But forgiveness is about setting yourself free from the bitterness that gets associated with unforgiveness.

Ephesians 4:31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger be put away from you, forgiving one another as Christ forgave you.

II. FORGIVENESS IS A DECISION YOU MAKE.

Forgiveness is really a decision you make. It's not about feeling. So often we say, "I'm not ready to forgive. I don't feel like I can forgive that person." It's not about feeling. The chances are that you will never feel like forgiving somebody who has hurt you. Forgiveness is a decision that you make. It's not even based on whether the other person said sorry or repented of what they had done.

Forgiveness is an act of will because it has to do only with you. "I choose to forgive so-and-so because they did this to me." That's the statement that you and I need to make. We need to name the person and we need to name the wrong. That's where healing then begins. It doesn't mean it will happen overnight or that the pain will disappear. It just means that you open the door to freedom, that you open the door for God to start bringing healing to your life. "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus forgave not because it was easy, but because He knew forgiveness is at the very heart of the gospel.

Even as I speak, beloved, I am in no way trying to minimize the hurt that you may be carrying, or the hurt that was perpetuated on you. In no way. It is real. It hurts. It's a deep wound that carries a lot of pain. But as we go through, we'll find that God is saying: Step back. Step away from that person and look at what it is doing to you. God is saying: I'm interested in you and what this unforgiveness is doing in your heart.

III. FORGIVENESS IS A PROCESS.

It's not just a moment in time. The forgiveness happens once, but you reiterate that forgiveness to yourself over and over again. You remind yourself that you have forgiven, because the past tends to come back to you. You forgive and then the next time you remember this, and all the emotions come

back. You think: What happened? I forgave. But forgiveness is reiterating to yourself: I did forgive, and I'm not going to indulge those emotions now. And slowly over time, a distance comes between you and that event.

IV. FORGIVENESS IS ABOUT TRUSTING GOD TO DO WHAT HE NEEDS TO DO.

It's about trusting God to be the judge. In the parable, the king represents God who forgives a massive debt. But the unforgiving servant refused to extend that mercy to someone else and ended up imprisoned. Do not take revenge but leave room for God's wrath. *"God says: It is Mine to avenge. I will repay. I will take care of it. it's not yours."* Paul writes in Romans 12:19 When we refuse to forgive, we actually step into the place as judge which is the place that only God has. But when we release the offender to God, we say, "Lord, I trust You to deal with this. I no longer want to carry this."

V. FORGIVENESS DOESN'T MEAN RECONCILIATION OR FORGETTING.

Forgiveness doesn't mean reconciliation or forgetting. Forgiveness is not the same as saying "It's okay," when it's not, or pretending the offense didn't happen, or resuming the relationship as though nothing happened. You can forgive and still have healthy boundaries. You put in new boundaries in that relationship and you say, "I still will have a relationship with that person, but I will not allow myself to be in the same position in which I got hurt." And you can forgive without restoring trust right away. Trust is always earned. And a betrayal always is a breach of trust. So don't be in a hurry to trust again. that's between you and the person. Forgiveness is what you have to do in relationship with you and God. Forgiveness is a solo act; reconciliation takes two people.

VI. THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNFORGIVENESS ARE VERY, VERY SERIOUS.

- Spiritual separation from God happens.
- Bitterness and anger take root.
- Mental and physical stress begin to come upon you.
- It leads to a hardened heart. All of this happens when we keep unforgiveness in our lives and in our hearts. I look around and I see on your faces there's so much that's going on. And yet, beloved, this is God's word for you and me. He's most interested in the fact that we don't carry unforgiveness even for one more day.
- If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.
- Unforgiveness disrupts our fellowship with God. It blocks our prayers and hardens our hearts against the work of the Holy Spirit. And it contradicts the grace that we've received from God. It's through grace that we have been forgiven.
- It makes us carry unnecessary emotional and mental baggage. Unnecessary, because when we keep unforgiveness, then bitterness, resentment, anger, all begin to fester in an unforgiving heart. And bitterness, anger, resentment are all just so caustic things to have in our hearts. They only harm us.
- It can lead to anxiety and depression and chronic stress.
- Then that can lead to physical illness in our own bodies.
- It also leads to broken relationships. Unforgiveness often spreads. Somebody sees or hears what you say about another person, and then, if they are in connection with you, they take on that offense as well. And so another relationship gets broken. Families get split because people take sides. Conflicts are unresolved, and unresolved conflicts only is a breeding ground for Satan. He's the only one who works in that area.

- It leads to a hardened heart. People who carry unforgiveness for a long time – it mars their visage. You can almost see it on their faces. It’s hard, they’re cynical. They use sarcasm. They’re negative in their speech.
- It creates a kind of spiritual callousness. Resisting grace from others and eventually for our own selves.
- It gives the enemy ground in our lives.

David’s son, Absalom, was such a classic example of unforgiveness. He never processed his anger or pursued reconciliation. And his unforgiveness turned into rebellion and ultimately led to his tragic downfall.

The same thing with Jonah. Unwillingness to see Nineveh forgiven, left him bitter and disconnected from God’s heart. He couldn’t accept that forgiveness could be extended towards the people of Nineveh. And so it hardens us and does so much of damage to us.

BENEFITS OF FORGIVENESS.

The benefits of forgiveness are life-giving. When we forgive, we begin to experience emotional freedom. We’re no longer carrying that baggage around with us. Bitterness goes, anger goes, resentment goes. Then when those are taken away, then healing is allowed into our hearts. Then we have peace with God. Once again, there’s restored fellowship and then healthier relationships all around. Even physical healing begins to happen.

You may have heard the name of Everett Worthington. He’s done wonderful work on this whole area of forgiveness. He used to speak at various seminars on forgiveness. He said it was really tested when one day, he got the news that somebody had come into his parents’ home and bludgeoned her to death. He said, “It took a while for me to realize what I’d been speaking, and what had just happened, and to put those two together. Forgiveness is a choice to show compassion to someone who doesn’t deserve it. But here’s the key. It reflects your character and not theirs.”

- Joseph, betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery. But he forgave and God used him to save his family and a nation.
- Stephen, while being stoned, modeled and reflected the same words that Jesus said, “Father, forgive them.”
- Corrie Ten Boom, holocaust survivor, who met the guard who had inflicted so much of humiliation on her and others, including her sister. She forgave.
- Jesus on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Beloved, I believe it all comes down to the cross, and what Jesus did for us. And hard as it is, as you think of a person or persons who have harmed you, hurt you, hard as it is to extend forgiveness, and say, “Lord, I release them.” That’s what Jesus is inviting us to do. And as we come to this table, we must come saying: I release this person, Lord. I no longer want to carry the weight of this baggage on me. It has weakened me. It has taken away my joy, my peace, and my communion with you as well. But I want it all back. I’m going to make a decision today to forgive that person. It could be a family member. It could be a former friend. Or it could be yourself. It’s something you’ve done. You’re refusing to forgive yourself even though God says, “I can forgive.” I believe with all of my heart that today is the day for us to lay down this attitude of unforgiveness that we have nurtured in our hearts for so long.

Charles Wesley wrote this beautiful hymn – And Can It Be. Such a beautiful hymn about God’s love. But one of the stanzas kind of captures what happens when we forgive. He writes:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray
I walk the dungeon filled with light
My chains fell off, my heart was free
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.

That’s what happens when we release unforgiveness. Our chains fall off and we are free to arise and follow the Master. I believe this morning, that’s our call. Are we willing to follow Him? And if we are, whether we’re willing to release unforgiveness in our lives.

As we prepare to come to the Lord’s table this morning, let us just quieten our hearts, close our eyes maybe, just so we can focus and hear what God is saying. What is the Holy Spirit speaking to your heart? Is He bringing a person/persons to your mind and saying that they’ve taken up space in your home for too long? It’s time to release them. Would you do that, beloved? That is what God wants you to do this morning.

Let us pray.

Amen.