

FORGIVENESS

Introduction

How do you forgive someone? One day, Jesus was talking about reconciliation—restoring relationships—through face-to-face conversations about what went wrong. Specifically, if someone sins against you, Jesus said, “you need to go talk to them and tell them.” His hope is the other person will listen and confess wrongdoing. Then, you forgive, and the relationship is restored.

A little later, Peter—one of the closest to Jesus—has been pondering what Jesus said. Peter comes to Jesus and asks, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” Peter is being generous and knows it—maybe trying to impress Jesus. The Rabbis of the day taught you only had to forgive someone three times for the same offense.

Jesus answers Peter’s question in a surprising way. “No, not seven times, but seventy times seven!” There are variant translations of the Greek but it’s not about math. It’s about forgiving from the heart. Jesus goes on to tell a parable, found in Matthew 18. It goes something like this:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who decided to update his accounts with servants who owed him money. In the process, he brings in one of his debtors who owes him millions of dollars. The man can’t pay, so the king orders that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to help pay the debt.

The man falls down before the king and begs him, “Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.” The king moved with compassion, forgives the debt and lets him go.

But this freshly forgiven man goes to a fellow servant who owes him a fraction of what he has been forgiven—a relatively small amount—a couple of thousand dollars. Our freshly forgiven friend grabs this other guy by the throat and demands instant payment.

His fellow servant falls down before him and begs for a little more time, using familiar words. “Be patient with me, and I will pay it.” No! Having no compassion, he has the man arrested and put in prison.

Some of the other servants see this and are very upset. They go to the king and tell him everything they saw. The king is furious and calls in the man he had forgiven a huge unpayable debt, and says, “You evil servant! I forgave your tremendous debt because you pleaded with me (and was happy to do so).

Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?” Then the king sent the man to prison.

Jesus then adds, these unsettling, disturbing words: *“That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.” (Matthew 18:35 NLT)*

How do you forgive someone? It’s easy if they bring you a Pepsi when you asked for a Coke. How do you forgive someone? One day I picked up a friend for a lunch. I was expecting a super-important phone call; it came as were leaving. I ran outside, talked for while, got in my car, and left. I totally forgot my friend. About an hour later, I remembered. He got a ride home with someone and forgave me.

Forgiving someone for lying to you is harder, and how do you forgive someone who slanders you and undermines or destroys your work? How do you forgive an abusive dad or a mean stepmom? Forgiveness gets really difficult if it’s a spouse who cheats on you. How do you forgive someone if they kill your wife and your only son? How can we forgive?

Discussion

Today we wrestle with the complicated idea of forgiveness as we consider the *Space Between Us*. This could get a little rough this morning. There is so much pain and injustice associated with forgiveness, naturally. For some, please don't try to navigate or process this by yourself; reach out to someone for help.

Shawn has done an outstanding job, as usual, in talking about all of this. I want to emphasize something he has said. Not every relationship can be, will be, or even should be reconciled. I'm thinking about abusive relationships. Forgiveness needs to be present—at some point—for your sake but reconciliation is not wise. In other situations, reconciliation is not possible because someone has died. Sometimes, if reconciliation happens, it doesn't mean the relationship is the same as it was before. It may be better but maybe not. It will be different.

The bottom line of forgiveness is this: we forgive because we have been forgiven. We forgive relatively small debts because we have been forgiven of an unfathomable unpayable debt. We saw it in the parable we started with, and we see it in the Lord's Prayer. It's everywhere in the New Testament. Paul says it like this:

Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.

—Colossian 3:13 NLT

To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

—C.S. Lewis

There are **two Greek words** that come into play when we try to understand forgiveness. One is ἀφῆμι which means sending something away, getting rid of it. Our sins were sent away, put away, at the Cross and are no longer held against us. The other one is χαρίζομαι which comes from the word *charis*, which means "grace." It means to grant a favor unconditionally—it's undeserved. It means to extend grace, to pardon, and to forgive. We don't deserve God's goodness and kindness to us but he gives it to us anyway.

We'll build our concept and understanding of forgiveness as we go on this morning, but let's start here:

When I forgive, I absorb the pain, the loss, the cost, and the injustice of what happened. While not ignoring it, I will not seek vengeance or payback for the wrong. I will not dwell on it and will not use it to slander or harm the wrongdoer. I choose to forgive because I have been forgiven.

When we pursue forgiveness, we begin with humility. We understand our absolute inability to save ourselves, and if God had not extended grace and forgiveness to us, we would have no hope. We rest in the grace of God, and that's where, and how, we stand and live.

From that platform, we decide in a ruptured relationship, that we are going to let go of our right for revenge, to get even, to make them pay. Forgiveness is letting go of a vindictive spirit. It's a form of suffering that imitates Jesus. Forgiveness is expensive. It hurts.

From the platform of humility, love, and grace, forgiveness does say not that what happened is OK. Forgiveness does not excuse what happened. True forgiveness names the evil and speaks the truth about it, while holding up what is right. True forgiveness asks—even demands—that the wrongdoer own his or her actions rather than excusing them or continuing them. Of course, some won't own what they did. Reconciliation is not possible in those cases because it takes repentance and confession from the wrongdoer. Even if they don't repent, we still forgive.

From the platform of humility, love, and grace, by the power of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, we are empowered to deal with our feelings of rage, vengeance, vendettas—which includes slander, gossip, cutting remarks, etc.—we let go of hatred. When God’s forgiveness is experienced deep in our hearts, we are enabled to move through our feelings—though the process is difficult and painful—toward a forgiveness that takes our hands off the other person’s throat. We are set free! We are experiencing healing from God. It can be quite a long process. It may take years.

A few years ago, Desmond Tutu and his daughter, wrote, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*. People thought after apartheid ended that South Africa would be a bloodbath, but instead of widespread revenge and retaliation, there was confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

The Tutus wrote a manual on the art of forgiveness. In it they lay out four steps of forgiveness, which I find helpful and reflective of biblical teaching.

1. **We tell the story** – we tell the truth about what happened. If we don’t acknowledge what happened and try to suppress it, it will damage our souls and come out in unhealthy ways.
2. **We name the hurt** – Jesus said in Luke 17, if someone sins against you, you rebuke them, i.e., you tell them what they did, why it was wrong, and you move past the facts of the story into the pain and the damage done and how you feel about it. We lament, and maybe vent—all as a part of the journey to forgiving.
3. **We grant forgiveness** – we decide to absorb the loss, the pain, and the injustice. It’s a process rooted in a decision that recognizes that we all need of grace and forgiveness. As we forgive, we can learn to pray for the wrongdoer’s health and spiritual life, just as Jesus said to pray for our enemies, we can pray for our former enemies that we have forgiven.
4. **We renew or release the relationship** – renewal is ideal because it is reconciliation. But it’s not always possible or advisable. If someone has died, it’s not possible. If it’s an abusive relationship, then renewal should not happen. I can forgive a pedophile but I certainly will not allow him around children. Sometimes couples reconcile after marital unfaithfulness; one spouse forgives the one who repents and the relationship is renewed. Sometimes that doesn’t happen because the other doesn’t repent or trust is too far gone. The relationship is released.

So, we’ve looked at forgiveness and what it can look like in action, but I think for many of us, the question is: yeah, but how? We are still so hurt, so angry, so humiliated. How in the world can I forgive, when I’m not even sure I want to? I want to see them suffer and pay.

We may have to start from a little bit of a selfish standpoint. Henri Nouwen says,

“As long as we do not forgive those who have wounded us, we carry them with us or, worse, pull them as a heavy load. The great temptation is to cling in anger to our enemies and then define ourselves as being offended and wounded by them. Forgiveness, therefore, liberates not only the other but also ourselves. It is the way to freedom for the children of God.”

How do we find that freedom? A long time ago, way down in Egypt, Joseph, who had been severely mistreated by his brothers and others, forgave all of them and all of it. He absorbed a lot of injustice, pain, and loss. He did not seek revenge or retaliation, though I think he was tempted to do so. Ultimately he does not. How? Why?

The key is found in Genesis 50:20. These are words that show his deep faith in a God who redeems terrible messes, a God who works in injustice, a God who has the ability to bring good out of bad, a God who loves forgiveness. Joseph says,

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.”

Joseph recognized, by faith, the formative value of suffering through injustice and the way God who also suffers injustice—sometimes mysteriously—can use injustice to accomplish great things. This view liberated Joseph. It can do the same for us.

Forgiveness is the work of God, and when we do it, it is a dim reflection of who God is and how he forgives us. I believe true forgiveness is supernatural—it comes as the love and forgiveness of God flow into our hearts. It is very difficult at times—seemingly impossible—but if we will receive the forgiveness of God through Jesus, then, if we ask, he will empower us to forgive others. I know about it.

Corrie ten Boom tells a story about this. She survived the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, while dear loved ones did not. Later, she would go on to speak at churches about the necessity of forgiveness.

After one such message, a man came up to her to thank her for her words of forgiveness. She immediately recognized him as one of the most abusive guards in the concentration camp. He particularly liked to mock the women as they showered. And now he presents himself to her as one who appreciates her message, commenting on the beauty of God’s forgiving heart.

He confesses he was a guard and asks for forgiveness as he extends his hand to shake hers. Her hand freezes by her side as painful and humiliating memories flood her mind. His hand still extended, he asks, “Will you forgive me?” Here’s how she describes what happened next (from a Guidepost article in 1972):

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“Help!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment, we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then.

I think about the surprising and supernatural power of forgiveness in my own life. Like most, I’ve had to forgive some really horrible things, and by the grace of God, I believe I have. I had to wrestle with it all again over the last couple of weeks. There are others in the room who have powerful stories of forgiveness. I was speaking to one of our receptionists, Sweet Juanita, and she was telling me her story of forgiving. It took a while and took some nudging from God.

Then I think about Dave Pruet, Donna’s husband. Donna is our outstanding Executive Assistant. Dave, years ago, was married to Tina, and they had a young son, Eddie. In 1989, Dave Pruet, was waiting for Tina and Eddie to come home. They never made it. Dave heard there had been a bad car crash not far from his house. Long story short: he came upon a horrible scene of twisted and crushed metal—the remains of cars. In one of those cars was his wife. Deceased. His son had been taken to the hospital. Dave went there looking for his son, only to find he was also dead. Can you imagine losing your wife and your only son in such a horrible way? And it gets worse. Tina and Eddie lost their lives because someone chose to drink, get drunk, to get in a car, and drive, crashing into and killing two innocent people. How do you forgive that? Dave did; it took a while. He tells his whole story in such a powerful way. Let’s watch a portion of a video that’s found on that site. [Play video \[socc.org/blog\]](http://socc.org/blog)

Conclusion

Last year, I was blessed to travel to Israel with Brad, Gail, and around 30 others. It was a wonderful life-changing trip. And by the way, Tim Thompson and I will be leading a trip to Israel March 10-23 next year. You can find information at socc.org/bulletin.

On this trip last year, we spent considerable time in Jerusalem. For me, the most intriguing place was *The Church of the Holy Sepulcher* [photo]. For some, it's the least favorite because it's a weird place of all kinds of sights, sounds, smells, and bells.

The history goes back to Constantine and his conversion to Christianity which changed the course of human history. Shortly after Constantine is converted, his mother, Helena, also becomes a Christian.

They become interested in the land where Jesus walked. Helena made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem where tradition claims she—guided by locals—found the place of Christ's crucifixion. In 326 A.D., she orders a basilica built over this holy site. Of course, it's been added to and changed many times over the last 1700 years.

Inside *The Church of the Holy Sepulcher* is a place where some say Jesus was crucified—a rock on which his blood dripped. You can crawl a few feet, reach down and touch it, and I did. Then I sat nearby for quite a while, intrigued by what I saw.

I was struck by the diversity of those working at the site and those visiting the site. I watched people of different sizes, shapes, colors, and languages come and go. Some were moved to tears, and others seemed not moved at all. Some worshiped and some watched. But they came.

Why do they come? Why do we go?

Because on a hill far away, stood an old rugged cross. And on that cross, Jesus died to take away your sins. He absorbed the loss, the pain, and the injustice of it for the sake of saving you and me.

For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

—2 Corinthians 5:21 NLT

He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.

—Ephesians 1:7 NLT

As he was in the process of dying, and people were spitting at him and on him, as people were mocking him after he had been beaten and bloodied, *Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."*

—Luke 23:34 NIV

And as He spoke and died, a hundred billion failures disappeared. He lost his life so we could find ours. He offers forgiveness to any and all who will turn to him and ask and say, "I want your forgiveness and to live for you so I can live a life of peace, joy, and confidence. I want to love as you have loved me and forgive as I have been forgiven."

How do you forgive someone? You stand at the Cross and receive your forgiveness. It starts there. Find it, receive it, forgive yourself, and forgive others. We are about to enter our Response Time. Take communion, sing, give, pray, be baptized.

Additional Material (not presented in the sermon)

Forgive and forget! It sounds good, but is it even possible in some cases? If you cut my hand off, I can forgive you, but every time I need that hand, I will remember I don't have it. Forgiving, while remembering, is powerful and can only happen by the power of God, as we realize his amazing grace toward us.

Henri Nouwen speaks helpful wisdom:

Forgiving does not mean forgetting. When we forgive a person, the memory of the wound might stay with us for a long time, even throughout our lives. Sometimes we carry the memory in our bodies as a visible sign. But forgiveness changes the way we remember. It converts the curse into a blessing.

When we forgive our parents for their divorce, our children for their lack of attention, our friends for their unfaithfulness in crisis, our doctors for their ill advice, we no longer have to experience ourselves as the victims of events we had no control over.

Forgiveness allows us to claim our own power and not let these events destroy us; it enables them to become events that deepen the wisdom of our hearts. Forgiveness indeed heals memories.

CS Lewis:

Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who had done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness, and that we can always have from God if we ask for it.

This is hard. It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single great injury. But to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life—to keep forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son—how can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say in our prayers each night 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us.' We are offered forgiveness on no other terms.

Over the last couple of years, I have heard Lysa TerKeurst as a guest on a couple of podcasts I listen to. Her story of forgiveness is compelling. I recently read her latest book about it.

One of the things she speaks of is an attitude of forgiveness that anticipates the need for it before anything happens. It's a proactive approach that is rooted in the fact we are all flawed and will make mistakes that require forgiveness. I need it. You need it. I want to be prepared to give it to you in advance. Such an approach really changes the way you live life.

When I develop a mindset of forgiveness, rather than a mindset of grievance, I don't just forgive a particular act; I become a more forgiving person. With a grievance mindset, I look at the world and see all that is wrong. When I have a forgiveness mindset, I start to see the world not through grievance but through gratitude. In other words, I look at the world and start to see what is right. There is a special kind of magic that happens when I become a more forgiving person—it is quite remarkable. What was once a grave affront melts into nothing more than a thoughtless or careless act. What was once a reason for rupture and alienation becomes an opportunity for repair and greater intimacy. A life that seemed littered with obstacles and antagonism is suddenly filled with opportunity and love.

— Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*

Wow, that's good a good way to live, and it's a reflection of what we receive from God.