

Forgiving the Unforgivable

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Date: 10 May 2020

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[0 : 00] So we're continuing our study of the Lord's Prayer this week, which is a prayer that Jesus taught His disciples, and then through them, we've received this prayer. And the reason that Jesus teaches us this prayer is not just to teach us how to pray, although it's helpful for that.

It's really to teach us how to live. It's to show us how to live in this world, and to have a relationship with the God who made this world, and to belong to Him as children belong to a Father.

And so that's what we've been looking at, and normally I like to take a couple of minutes at the beginning of a sermon and show the relevance for any particular passage and why people should care about understanding it.

But I don't really think I need to do that this week, because we come to the petition that I consider to be the most challenging one of all, which is the petition, Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And I don't know a single person who doesn't have some area of their life, some relationship, where forgiveness is necessary. For some of us, it may be a parent.

[1 : 04] For some of us, it may be somebody from our childhood, or a teacher, or a coach. Maybe it's somebody from your job, like a boss, or a co-worker. Maybe it's a friend, or a roommate, or a spouse.

Maybe it's a friend, or a spouse, or a spouse, or a spouse, or a spouse. Whatever the case may be, I don't know a single person who doesn't have some area where forgiveness is needed. And if we're really honest, I think most of us not only have areas where we need to extend forgiveness, but we also have things about our lives that require forgiveness.

And so I think this is relevant for every single one of us. And so to understand more about this petition and about forgiveness, we're going to look at one of the central go-to passages on forgiveness, which is Matthew chapter 18, and this encounter between Peter and Jesus, and the parable that Jesus tells.

And we're going to see two things about forgiveness. We're going to see, first, why we need it. Why we need it. And then, second, we're going to see how to do it. So let's pray, and then we'll open God's Word together.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word. And we thank You for Your promise and Your ability to do Your work through Your Word. And Lord, we all, when it comes to something like this, we all need You to do Your work in our hearts.

[2 : 18] And so I pray that You would do that through Your Word. And I pray that this would not only happen for our betterment, for our good, but ultimately for Your glory. And it's for Your glory, and in the name of Your Son, that we pray.

Amen. So first of all, why do we need forgiveness? Why does the world need forgiveness? In verse 21 and 22 of this passage, Peter comes to Jesus with a question.

And this is in the middle of a place in Matthew where Jesus has been teaching about kingdom people, about the new community of the kingdom of God and how it's turning the world upside down.

And so He's been teaching about what life looks like in this community and how it's different from the surrounding world. And He's been talking about forgiveness and restoration in the community. And so Peter comes up to Jesus and he says, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times? And what you need to understand is in the rabbinic tradition, the traditional understanding was that you could forgive somebody up to three times, and that was evidence of a generous heart.

[3 : 26] But if you continued forgiving people, they might take advantage of you, and it might be indicative of the fact that they weren't really sorry to begin with. And so for Peter to say seven times is extravagant.

It's over the top. So of course, Jesus' response surprises him. Jesus says, I do not say to you seven times, but 77 times.

Now, this translation that I'm using, the ESV, says 77. Your translation at home may say 70 times 7, and that's because the same Greek phrase can be translated either way.

So both are correct. But the point is the same regardless of your translation. Jesus is saying, on one level, the number doesn't matter. Forgive as often as it takes.

Now that alone is worth noting. But there's a lot more going on here behind Jesus' words. The Greek phrase that we translate either 77 or 70 times 7 also shows up in the Greek version of the Old Testament in Genesis chapter 4.

[4 : 29] Now, if you know anything about Genesis chapter 4, this is the kind of origin story of human civilization. This is where we began to see the trajectory, the way things are going to play out now that the relationship between God and human beings has been broken.

And we meet a man named Lamech, who, by the way, is the first in Scripture to decide to take two wives instead of just one. And that's a separate sermon, but it's worth noting.

And then Lamech says this to his wives. He says, You wives of Lamech, listen to what I say. I've killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me.

And it seems as though he's been in some kind of altercation, and because of some either physical slap or insult, he has responded by killing this man. And then he goes on to say this. This is kind of a vow that he makes.

If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is 77-fold. The same phrase. This is the beginning of the way of retribution.

[5 : 34] This is the beginning of a cycle of retribution that is going to spread and multiply and cover the face of the earth. This is where retribution gets written into the DNA of the world.

And so this is the origin of tribalism and animosity and division and resentment and revenge.

This is the origin of eye for an eye justice. This is where we begin to see the seeds of karma, karmic justice, where they begin to root down into human society.

And so history is filled with cycles of retribution that play out endlessly, generation after generation. We see tribes killing other tribes.

We see cycles of revenge killings that in some parts of the world have resulted in the near extinction of entire people groups. We see nations warring against nations.

[6 : 35] And even when wars end and peace treaties are signed, often those peace treaties are based on the guilt of one offending party. And so that accusation of guilt then plants seeds of resentment that then lay the groundwork for future wars.

And this is much of our history. But this can also happen not just at a national level, but of course it can happen in our interpersonal relationships. It can happen between friends and in marriages and in families and between roommates, between siblings.

People can have experiences of being insulted or feeling slighted or feeling disregarded or feeling hurt, and then those turn into grudges, and then we nurse those grudges, and then those grudges are transformed into seething cauldrons of resentment.

There are many marriages out there that seem peaceful, but that peace is more like a ceasefire. It's a thin veneer of peace, a kind of thin crust that is sitting on top of a deep pool of magma, just waiting to erupt.

You know, in the HBO show Big Little Lies, one of the main characters is Madeline. And one of my favorite quotes from her is she says, I love my grudges. I tend to them like little pets. And you know, I think it's funny partly because of her character, but also partly because many of us are like that.

[7 : 54] We sort of love to nurse our grudges and tend to them. There's something that feels kind of good and satisfying about that. But what this means is that these grudges, this sort of sin, this guilt, this blame, this revenge, it compounds upon itself.

It builds one generation to the next. And so this little snowball that begins with Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and Lamech, this little snowball turns into an avalanche.

And this great avalanche of retribution and guilt is now crashing down through history, doing damage to everything it touches. And this avalanche and this cycle of retribution and the guilt and

the brokenness, this means that our society is deeply divided.

There are deep cracks and fissures in our society. One of the prime examples of this for our society is the example of race. Just this week, new footage of Ahmaud Arbery's murder was released.

And what we see is that there was a struggle that ensued after two white men identified Arbery running down the street. He was out for a jog. And they identified him and thought he looked like a burglary suspect.

[9 : 11] And so they get in their truck, they chase him down. And then in the struggle that ensues, because those two white men are armed, Ahmaud Arbery is shot and killed and dies on the street. And then we see a report that came out about DC and coronavirus this week, where we learned that even though 47% of people who test positive are black, that 80% of the people who are dying from COVID-19 are black.

Now, these realities are exposing painful realities about our society.

The vast difference between being white and being black in our country. Truths like this emerge, and we can't ignore that there's a massive difference between being white in America and being black.

It's like we have two countries. And there's this chasm that exists in our society, these two alternate realities almost. And that chasm exists because of centuries of systemic injustice and racism and poverty and ignorance.

It's even been written into our policies. But because of this, the resentment and the anger that this causes is justified. The desire for retribution is justified because these are real realities.

[10 : 32] The injustice is real. And yet, all of this only serves to deepen the divide. The cracks are getting wider and deeper. So there's this massive avalanche of retribution and guilt that is crashing down through history.

And listen to this. Like any avalanche, like any avalanche, it has become such a tangled mass of destruction that it's almost impossible to clearly separate victim from perpetrator.

Right? In an avalanche, trees that were uprooted, that were torn out further upslope, are transformed into weapons of destruction further down the slope.

And you see the same thing happening with people in history. History shows us that today's victims can become tomorrow's perpetrators. Shows us that today's liberators can become tomorrow's tyrants.

And so we are all implicated. No one is free from this. No one has the luxury of stepping outside of it and analyzing it from a position of moral neutrality. And this avalanche of retribution will not stop until it destroys everything and everyone.

[11 : 44] All from these words that we hear Lamech utter so long ago. All from the sin that entered the world when our relationship with God was broken. Our only hope is to interrupt the cycle.

Right? Our only hope is to stop the avalanche and if we can, to reverse it. So here's the point of all this. When Jesus says to Peter, I do not say to you seven times, but 77 times, he is deliberately reversing Lamech's words.

He is deliberately reversing the way of retribution. The way of retribution says vengeance. Vengeance seven times over. Vengeance 77 times over.

Vengeance 70 times seven times over. As much as it takes until the world is destroyed. But Jesus is saying there's another way. This is the place where he's teaching about the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God is turning the world upside down. It is undoing and reversing the wrong that has entered the world. It's a reversal of what it means to be human.

[12 : 51] It's turning everything on its head. And Jesus says there's another way. There's a way to interrupt the cycle of retribution and revenge and guilt. It's the way of forgiveness.

Right? Forgive. Forgive seven times. Forgive 77 times. Forgive 70 times seven times. Forgive as much as it takes until the world is made whole.

So why is forgiveness important? And why do we need it? It's because forgiveness is the way that God is making this world whole again.

Forgiveness sits at the very heart of God's plan to renew this world and us. So that's why we need it. But how do we do it? How do we do it?

In Matthew 18 when Peter asks this question of Jesus about forgiveness Jesus responds by telling him a parable. And in the parable a king is settling his accounts and a man is brought to him who owes him 10,000 talents.

[13 : 55] And you need to understand that this is an astronomical ridiculous ludicrous sum. It's like saying that he owes hundreds of billions of dollars. It's unimaginable sum. And the man can't pay. And so the king is going to respond with retribution.

He's going to sell this man and his family into slavery which was commonly a way to punish debtors. It was an act of retribution. And this man begs for mercy. And he promises to pay the debt back but it's such a large sum that that's impossible.

But the king has compassion on this man and he shows him pity. And of all things this king cancels the debt which means the king has to absorb the cost himself.

He has to absorb the cost of hundreds of billions of dollars but he cancels the debt entirely and he releases this man and lets him go free. But then this man goes out the same servant and he immediately runs into a man who owes him money.

And this man owes him a much smaller amount. It's a paltry sum. It's worth about three or four thousand dollars. But the servant chokes this man and he demands payment. And this man says the same thing.

[14 : 56] He begs for mercy. Promises to pay it back. But the servant refuses to show mercy and he throws him in prison. And then the king hears of this. He calls the servant back and then he throws the servant in jail until he can pay the debt in full.

So this shows us a number of things about forgiveness. And first of all it simply shows us what forgiveness is. What it looks like. And in short I would say this. Forgiveness means giving up the right to retribution.

Forgiveness means giving up the right to retribution. Even if it's justified. So it means maybe giving up your right to expect repayment of a debt.

Could be financial repayment like this parable or in much more commonly I think this could refer to emotional repayment in the form of revenge. But forgiveness means giving up that right even if we're justified.

The Greek word literally means to let someone go which is exactly what the king does to this servant. And in order to forgive somebody that requires sort of three parts.

[16 : 03] There are three parts to forgiveness at least. And we see these play out in this parable. The first thing that you have to do is if you're going to forgive somebody you have to name the debt.

You have to honestly and thoroughly name the debt. Now this could be a monetary amount like in the parable 10,000 talents. But much more often this means naming the hurt or naming the wrong. You have to name it. It has to be stated and acknowledged. And this also means that we have to be able to honestly voice our emotions and the pain that has been caused.

So forgiving somebody does not mean minimizing the wrong. It doesn't mean downplaying it. It doesn't mean being conflict avoided and saying oh it's no big deal it doesn't matter. If you do that you're laying the groundwork for resentment down the road.

nor does forgiveness mean that we condone injustice or overlook the need for justice. We can forgive somebody in our heart but justice may still need to be done.

[17 : 06] Justice may still need to be carried out especially if somebody has committed a crime. We can forgive and still long for justice. And when it comes to an issue like race in our country yes we need forgiveness but we also need justice and we should fight for justice.

And the two can coexist. Forgiveness and justice can coexist. But the first part of forgiveness is simply naming honestly the wrong or the debt that's been incurred.

The second thing we need to do is we need to decide we need to choose to cancel the debt. To cancel the debt. Which means we choose to absorb the loss ourselves.

What this means is you decide in your heart from now on I am giving up my right to demand repayment. I'm giving up my desire to seek revenge.

I'm giving up my desire to see harm done to this person. I'm giving up any tendency I have to wish ill of this person which means when those temptations arise you don't give in to them.

[18 : 10] You're giving all of that up. I release this person from their debt. I set this person free in my heart. Now this doesn't mean automatically that you reconcile with that person.

Forgiveness is something that you can do on your own. Reconciliation is a two-way street.

Reconciliation requires both people working to rebuild trust in a relationship and that can take a long time and sometimes it's not possible.

Nor does this mean allowing someone to continue hurting you. If you're in a situation where abuse is happening or you're being repeatedly harmed and somebody is repeatedly sinning against you it is possible for you to forgive that person but also set whatever boundaries you need to set in place to make sure that person can't keep hurting you.

But what matters is that you cancel the debt in your heart. And then the last thing the last thing that you once you've made that choice is you commit to forgiveness for as long as it takes.

You commit to forgiveness for as long as it takes. Seventy times seven or more if that's what it takes. because if you've ever forgiven anyone for really causing you harm then you know that it's not a one time choice.

[19 : 23] It's a choice that you have to make again and again and again because that hurt and that pain and that resentment will resurface again and again and again and what this means is that you choose every single time to cancel the debt.

You commit to it as a posture. I have pain in my life. I have ways that I've been wronged and I know I know that pain is going to be there for the rest of my life and so what this means for me is that sometimes every single day I have to wake up and I have to choose to forgive once more.

Committing yourself to forgiveness means making that choice even when you don't want to and for this reason forgiveness may be one of the hardest things you ever have to do in your life.

For many of us it is. Which of course begs the question why do it at all? Why do it at all? You know much has been said mainly by Christians about all of the psychological benefits of forgiveness and all of the spiritual benefits of forgiveness and how it sets us free and you know some of that's true but in my experience forgiveness is often extremely painful and I don't often feel free when I'm doing the hard work of forgiveness.

It's interesting to note that while some of that is true while there are many benefits to forgiveness it's interesting to note that Jesus doesn't say any of that in Matthew chapter 18 nor does he mention any of the benefits of forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer.

[20 : 55] According to Jesus the reason that Christians forgive is simply this we have been forgiven. we've been forgiven.

That's the reason. All of that avalanche of retribution and blame and pain crashing down through history it all started as this tremor when our ancestors turned their backs on God but it has compounded over the millennia down to us and we were born into it.

We were born into the guilt. We were born into the brokenness. We were born into the chaos. And the great moral debt of that rebellion and all of the damage that this avalanche has done that sits on our shoulders and by comparison 10,000 talents is a paltry sum and all of that sits on our shoulders and it crushes us and the thing that we need to understand is God has every right to demand retribution.

God has every right to demand retribution and yet the core truth of Scripture running from Genesis to Revelation is that God chooses to forgive.

He chooses to forgive which means as we said before that God chooses to absorb that debt into Himself and that's exactly what we see on the cross.

[22 : 19] On the cross of Christ we see that entire avalanche of human sin and retribution and guilt and blame. it all comes crashing down on Jesus and Jesus takes all of that on Himself and so the ultimate consequences of human evil and rebellion and sin the ultimate consequences fall on Him instead of us.

He takes our place. Many religions many philosophies extol the value of forgiveness and talk about the importance of forgiveness in our society.

Only Christianity says that God was willing to bear the cost of forgiveness in order to set humanity free. Only Christianity says that.

Which means God stands ready here and now to extend that forgiveness to anyone who asks. No matter what you've done no matter where you've come from no matter what you've done even today God stands ready to extend that forgiveness because He's absorbed the debt.

It's been paid in full. And those who come to Him and those who are set free from that debt they are given a new life.

[23 : 35] They're given a new way of being human in the world. They become free women and men and they have an entirely new range of possibilities in front of them.

Which means they are free to break the cycle of retribution. They can choose to forgive instead because they've been forgiven. And that's really the point of this parable.

The point of this parable is not that God's forgiveness is conditional on our forgiveness of other people. That would run against the entire witness of Scripture. The point of this parable is that God's forgiveness is what makes possible our forgiveness of other people in our lives.

It's what makes it possible. The scholar N.T. Wright puts it like this. He says, you know, forgiveness is a lot like the air in your lungs. There's only room for you to inhale the next lungful when you've just breathed out the previous one.

And he says, so if you hold it in, if you hold the forgiveness in and you refuse to exhale it into the life of someone who needs it, you won't be able to take any more in yourself.

[24 : 41] And if you do that, if you hold it in, then you will very quickly suffocate. And so he says, no sooner do we take God's forgiveness into ourselves, then we exhale it, we breathe it out into the life of someone else who needs it.

And you know, that's honestly been my experience. Every day, making that painful choice to forgive, breathing in God's forgiveness of me and then breathing it out into someone's life who needs it from me.

Breathing in God's forgiveness and breathing it out into the world. And as we do that, we are breathing life into the world. We're breathing hope into the world. We're breathing love into the world.

We're breathing renewal into the world one act of forgiveness at a time. Now there's one final piece of this that I want to emphasize.

That if you want to be a kingdom person, if you want to be a part of making the world whole again, if you want to be a part of breathing life into the society around you, one act of forgiveness at a time, if you want to break this cycle of retribution, this is not something that you can do alone.

[25 : 48] It's not something that you can do alone. When you see these extraordinary acts of forgiveness, I'm thinking of the Amish at Nickel Mines after a shooter entered a schoolhouse and killed five young girls before killing himself.

I'm thinking of the people of the Charleston AME Church that also experienced a violent shooting and the deaths of many of their loved ones. I'm thinking about times like this when a horrible tragedy occurs, when a random act of violence occurs, and then the community responds with an almost inexplicable act of forgiveness.

In both cases, the community forgave the shooter, forgave the families of the shooter, and in some cases surrounded the families of the shooter. At the funeral for the shooter for the Amish at Nickel Mines, over half of the people who were present at his funeral were from the Amish community.

And that response is breathtaking and beautiful and amazing. And when interviewers ask these people, interviewers go in and say, how could you forgive? How is something like this possible?

And in both cases, the people interviewed talked about Matthew chapter 18. And they talked about the Lord's Prayer, which is something that they had prayed so often that it had simply become a part of them.

[27 : 11] It was hardwired into their DNA. But the other point I want to make is this. In both cases, these are people who were rooted and formed in a culture of forgiveness.

A culture of forgiveness. They were in communities, communities of forgiveness. You know, three sociologists actually wrote a book about the Amish at Nickel Mines called Amish Grace.

And, you know, I heard Tim Keller make this point in a talk he made gave to the House of Lords. But they wrote this book about the Amish act of forgiveness in Nickel Mines.

And they basically say in that book that this act of forgiveness was not the product of American culture. See, a lot of media at the time, a lot of people were saying, this is America at our best.

This is just shows what America can do. We forgive the killer. But they make the point this is not an outgrowth of American culture. He says, this is the product of a subculture that is deeply rooted in the truth that God suffered and died in order to forgive His people.

[28 : 17] And the humility and the self-denial and the gentleness and the kindness and the love that comes out of that reality, that that is what produced this extraordinary act of forgiveness.

You know, the American culture of consumerism and expressive individualism, that doesn't produce people who forgive. That doesn't form people for that. What it forms is people who are full of outrage and moral indignation and accusation.

So if you want to become part of this movement of grace, if you want to be a kingdom person and end the cycle of retribution and make the world whole, it starts with your prayer life.

It starts with praying the Lord's Prayer and prayers like it and praying it so much, praying it so often that it replaces that DNA of retribution, that it begins to rewrite your DNA so that forgiveness becomes more and more and more a gut instinct.

And then even more than that, it means finding a church community that is committed to forgiveness and reconciliation and then diving into that community and becoming such a part of it, so deeply intertwined in that community that it forms you.

[29 : 36] It forms your heart, it forms your mind, it forms your imagination, and it forms your sense of what's possible. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you again and we know that forgiveness is not something that can be sourced in us, that the point of this is very clear, that forgiveness is something that we need to receive from you before we can extend it to others.

And so I pray for all of us here listening who need forgiveness, I pray that right now they would turn their hearts to you and ask for that forgiveness and that you would grant it, Lord, because we know that you're a God whose eternal nature is always to have mercy.

And then, Lord, we pray for those difficult relationships, those pain points, those areas of struggle where we need to forgive. I pray that you would give us your divine strength to do just that, even if it means breathing it in and out one breath at a time and one act of forgiveness at a time.

And we pray this not only for our good, not only that our world might become whole one day, but we pray it for your glory, Lord, because you're the source and the center of all. Amen. Jesus, what a friend for sinners, Jesus, love of my soul, friends may...