

Forgiveness and Loving God

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you for having me as your guest tonight. I don't know if this has been your experience, but this has been my experience.

Some people seem to be able to love God without any difficulty at all. And some people find it very difficult to love God. Some people seem to be snaky with God.

In 1992, the Christian students at Oxford University invited me to give a series of lectures on their behalf. They had the Sheldonian Theatre for a week.

And before I spoke each night, one of the undergraduates told us how they'd become a Christian. On the last night, a young man in a wheelchair was lifted up on the stage.

He manoeuvred himself to a short mic this is his story. He said, I've been in the wheelchair since I was eight. It was the result of a family car accident.

[1 : 0 9] However, he said, that's not important. He said, I'm a fourth year classicist at this university. And that is equally unimportant. He said, several years ago, my uncle wrote a book called The Enigma of Suffering.

And he gave me a copy of it. He said, I found the book very technical, but I ploughed on to the end. He said, by the time I'd got to the end of that book, I'd come to the conclusion that God was there and that he was basically good.

So I said to my uncle, do you want to further direct my reading? He said, he gave me a book, the name of which I've now forgotten. But in the book, he just said, I discovered I was a sinful man in desperate need of forgiveness.

And he said, in the death of Jesus, I read in this book that there was sufficient for me to be totally forgiven. And although it sounded strange, he said, I stand before you tonight as a totally forgiven man.

And that is important. The other thing I want to say, and it's the last thing I want to say, that God has been so good to me during my lifetime, I want to spend the rest of my life in serving him.

[2 : 2 7] And I think that is important. And that is all I've got to say. He then manoeuvred himself to the front of the stage and the ushers lifted him down.

I said to the president of the Christian Union, that's a very hard act to follow. I said, do you think I ought to say anything? He said, why don't you just sit still for a while and let it slowly simmer in?

Is that not truly astounding? When I spoke with him privately and when he spoke publicly, I was made to feel as if I was odd because I thought he was disadvantaged.

He'd soared above it all. I don't doubt he has bleak moments, but this wasn't one of them. What causes people to love God? How is it possible that when all the circumstances are running against you, you can still go on loving God?

Well, the story that was read in Luke 7, which is the part I want to draw to your attention tonight from the Bible, it's on page 841 in the Pew Bibles if you want to follow along. It's not a bad idea.

- [3 : 35] No, it's on page 840. Not a bad idea to follow along because I want you to see that what I'm telling you is what in fact Jesus says and does.
- And one of the things I like about the Bible is it's basically uncomplicated. I'm glad... Inspector Morse's gone off here. I'm glad he has in Sydney.
- Inspector Morse... Have you ever thought how dangerous it is in Oxford on Friday nights? If you're going to visit Oxford, I'd go on another night.
- The trouble with Inspector Morse... I'm known as what's... as a ten-on, ten-off television watcher. Ten-on... ten-off. And when I come up for air, there are 25 more characters walking around I haven't seen.
- On the other hand, of course, if you watch Columbo, you've only got to stay awake for five minutes. You know who's done the murder? It's just a matter of how far has he bumbled along towards...
- [4 : 39] And it's not complicated. You don't need to video it and pick up the bits you've missed. Now, do you think the Bible's more like Morse or Columbo? I think it's more like Columbo.
- This story is about three people. It's not a bit complex. Three people. And I want to look at them because here is the secret about loving God. I don't know if you love God very much or not.
- I don't know if you'd describe yourself as somebody who loves God greatly. But there are three people and the first one is called Simon a Pharisee. He is curious to know whether Jesus is a prophet.
- That's why he's invited him to dinner. He's curious to know that. And at verse 39 he concludes that Jesus is not a prophet. Now, when the Pharisee who'd invited him saw this, he said to himself, if the man were a prophet, he would know who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him.
- They were all in the know. They thought Jesus was relatively naive. He was obviously not in the know. And this incident sparked in his mind to negate the idea that Jesus was in fact a prophet.
- [5 : 58] He said, if he really were a prophet, he'd know what was going on. He'd know the sort of woman she is. Well, the funny part about passing judgment on Jesus, you've got to be careful because the judgment you pass on Jesus springs back on yourself.
- It is like the pop star which said of the Mona Lisa, it is a load of rubbish. It doesn't tell you anything about the Mona Lisa, but it tells you a great deal about the pop star.
- You see, he is not a prophet. Jesus turns out to be greater than a prophet. He knows precisely what is in Simon's mind and there follows the little parable inside this story.
- Now, some parts of the Bible, some people seem to have a difficulty in believing. I haven't had a great deal of difficulty believing most things in the Bible, but this parable, I find it nearly impossible to believe.
- Do you believe there was a money lender who let two people off and got nothing? You believe that? You'll have no trouble with the rest of it, I'm telling you. It's a lovely parable, isn't it?
- [7 : 05] Two men owed money to a money lender. One owed \$6,000. The other owed \$60,000. That is my estimation of the price of the denarii.
- And he discharged them both. Which will love most? Simon almost seems grudging. He said, I suppose the one who's let off most.
- You see, Simon's basic problem is he doesn't think he needs to be forgiven much. And he is hard of heart. Hard towards the woman and hard towards Jesus.

And that's basically why he doesn't love all that much. And he is dispensed with. The major player in this story is a woman who is designated who had lived a sinful life in that city.

A woman in the city who was a sinner came. Now that's everybody, isn't it? So whatever it is she'd done, she was notorious.

[8 : 14] Some people's sins you can do privately and not be known by everybody, but everybody knew hers. Might have been a country town. I began teaching in northern New South Wales.

At that stage there were no automatic telephones. They all went through the girls at the exchange and the girls at the exchange could tell you where anybody was at any given time and mainly what they were doing and more than that what they were saying.

We suspected they listened. Whatever happened this woman was known and her sin was known. I'm glad we don't really know what she'd done because we'd all looked down the end of our nose feeling superior if we hadn't done it.

She's been forgiven and she's been forgiven by Jesus because the whole action is to say thank you. That's all it is.

Thank you. I need to say something about eating in the land of the Lord Jesus. They didn't sit at tables with their legs underneath like we do. There'd have been a low table circular like a lazy Susan and people reclined on couches towards the table where their heads were near to the food and where they could converse.

[9 : 37] They came out like spokes and a wheel and if you arrived through the door you'd have been met by a row of feet. Servants milled around at the back. You could get in at the back and not be seen.

The action was all taking place somewhere else. My own view is she thought she'd be able to slip in break open the very costly perfume pour it on his feet and nip out again.

And by the time the perfume the scent of the perfume filled the room no one would know who'd done it but Jesus would know because he'd have felt it. But in the heat of the moment her emotions get the better of her and she breaks down and begins to cry and the tears roll down onto Jesus' feet and she lets her hair and she dries them and she's all over in confusion.

My mother decreed that I would preach at her funeral. She'd want to make sure the Rells heard the gospel. I said, well why don't you make a tape dear and I'll play it.

It will have dynamic impact. She said, why don't you do what you're told. I can't win with you mother can you? I should have had more sense than I thought it would be an easy thing.

[10 : 58] The rector of our parish had me pumped up like anything before we even left the vestry and when I got up to preach I found it was much more difficult than I thought it was going to be and I have much sympathy for this lady.

What she thought would be a simple thank you action turns out that she's the centre player in the drama and there's a little theological argy-bargy going on around her and Jesus is full of compassion for her.

He says, lady your sins are forgiven you. Your faith has saved you.

Now what does that mean? She believed what Jesus told her and because she believed what Jesus told her it was true not because she believed it, it was true that her sins had been forgiven.

She put her trust and confidence in what Jesus said. Now we don't know where she heard about Jesus.

[12 : 09] We don't know where that, where she heard about forgiveness. We know she heard it from Jesus because it's Jesus which is the centre of her thankfulness.

She may have heard the word of forgiveness on the time when Matthew the tax collector was called by Jesus. You recall that? Come and follow me. Matthew then gave a great party and we're told that many tax collectors and sinners came.

And the Pharisees looked down their nose because Jesus was there and they said you can tell a person by the friends he keeps and you can. Thankfully he is the friend of sinners or there'd be no friendship for me.

He is the friend of sinners. And do you remember on that occasion what Jesus said? You don't need to go to the doctor unless you are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners that they may be saved.

And it might have been in her heart of hearts she said to herself that night that's me I need to be forgiven and she availed herself of that forgiveness. It's possible that she heard Jesus tell the story about the two men at church.

[13 : 26] You remember that one about the man down the front who tells God how lucky he is to have God in his sight? Oh God I thank you that I'm not like other men. And you remember the man at the back beat on his chest he wouldn't even lift his eyes to heaven and said Oh God have pity on me sinner that I am.

And do you remember what Jesus said that man that man was right with God when he went home. And she said in the heart of hearts that night that's me.

And she may have echoed his prayer to God I don't know. Oh God have pity on me sinner that I am. And she knew the wonder of forgiveness.

She knew what it was to feel clean inside. Acceptable to God. A new beginning. And it was so good.

So good. She came back to say thank you. Thank you. And Jesus said be absolutely sure the word you heard from me was accurate and that you believed it has caused you to be forgiven.

[14 : 45] Now we need to step back from the story just a little bit because it is this great forgiveness which caused her to love him. And that's what Jesus said. Those who are forgiven much love much.

Those who are forgiven little love little. And if you find it hard to love Jesus it might be that you've not sensed forgiveness. You know you're not forgiven.

That'll certainly be the secret. It might be that you are but you've forgotten. And here is the secret. Forgiven much love much. Forgiven nothing love nothing.

Forgiven little love little. Forgiven when the Bible says that she is a sinner we don't know what she did and I'm not interested in her because my own are bad enough to worry about.

What is it we're talking about? Most people get a bit edgy when it comes to sin don't they? I remember romping home in the full flush of my 17th year. There isn't very much like a teenager is there?

[15 : 47] They're marvellously unique. I said to my father I've just become a Christian and you're a sinful man and you need to be a Christian too. He said if you ever speak to me like that again I'll smack your head up against the wall.

I am sure he thought I thought he was doing something which I knew only too well he wasn't doing. What is sin at its essence? It's when I say to God please leave me alone.

Please. and because he ought to have the central place in everybody's life because he is God we push him aside.

And because in the relationship between me and God there's only me and God once I push him aside I step into the role of God.

Mind you if you bumped into me and said do you think you're God I knew better than to say yes. I just behaved as if I was God.

[16 : 52] I thought I was right. I knew what life was about. I made life decisions on my own. I decided for me what was right and what was wrong and it was all done without reference to what God might have said.

In as much as God's word coincided with mine so much the better for God. But my life was lived as do you know what the Bible says?

From that concept from that idea stems every known problem that we have. Bosnia is about that. Rwanda is about that.

Northern Ireland is about that. It is about whose will will be law. God. You see if Paul is pretending to be God and I am pretending to be God when we meet together which one of us will be God?

That idea puts me into a collision course with him straight away. You may do it politely but it's there and it's why we don't get on all that well with each other.

[18 : 02] We've got a bad track record. And it's for this reason that Jesus came that we might be forgiven. You see all of us need to be forgiven.

The third player in the story is the Lord Jesus. He loves both of them passionately. Love for Simon means he's ticked off and that's what he deserves.

And every now and again the reading of the Bible and the preaching of the Bible causes us to be ticked off. And every now and again the reading of the Bible does what it does for this woman.

Reassures us that we are at peace with God. Right at the heart of Christianity is the Lord Jesus and at the heart of the work of the Lord Jesus is his death on the cross.

As I close I wonder if you'd picture the death of Jesus in your mind. What is he saying? My God my God why have you forsaken me?

[19 : 09] You say hold on is he not the son of God? What is going on here? And the Bible says that Jesus is taking the punishment which my sins deserve so I can be forgiven.

Is that not truly astounding? That when I ask for forgiveness it is available not because it's a simple insignificant thing but because Jesus has died for this very reason.

His death on the cross enables me to be forgiven. It was a happy day for me when I came to terms with that. It was a happy day for me when I said to Jesus please take your rightful place as Lord of my life.

Please forgive me and I know what it is to be forgiven because of the death of Jesus and as I close let me ask you do you and has it caused you to love much?

Now you may as you listen tonight say to me I'm a stranger to that sort of experience I don't know what it is to be forgiven and I don't know what it is to love God very much and I'm saying I'm glad you're here.

[20 : 36] That could be rectified. Tonight would be a good night for you to turn back and say Lord Jesus will you forgive me? I shouldn't have pushed you aside in my life.

I shouldn't have gone on as if I was God. Please take your rightful place. Take over the running of my life. And then I'd ask for forgiveness.

I'm going to do that in a prayer. It's not going to be appropriate for everybody but it could be appropriate for you so will you listen while I say it and judge if it's appropriate for you and if it is I'm going to invite you to pray it.

I'll say in my prayer Lord Jesus I have not had you at the centre of my life. And I'm sorry about that. But from tonight onwards that's what I want to happen.

Well that might have already happened with you. It would be inappropriate to say it. However it would be very appropriate if that's not what's happened. Then in my prayer I'll say Lord Jesus thank you for dying for me.

[21 : 48] please forgive me. Let me run it past you again so you've got time to think. Lord Jesus I haven't had you at the centre of my life.

I'm sorry about that but from tonight onwards that's what I want to happen. Lord Jesus thank you for dying for me please forgive me.

I'll tell you how I'm going to pray my prayer. I'm going to pray it sentence by sentence and stop. If it's a good prayer for you why don't you echo it to God inside your own head and if for one reason or another it's not a good one for you why don't you say something to God right now that is thoroughly appropriate.

Okay let's pray. Lord Jesus I haven't had you at the centre of my life.

I'm sorry about that. From tonight onwards that's what I'd like to happen. Lord Jesus thank you for dying for me.

[23 : 20] Please forgive me. Amen. Pray that prayer with me tonight and somebody will have done that unless you're different from the rest of the world and I can't believe that.

Not psychic I don't know who's done it if you think I'm staring at you because I think you might have it's basically because I'm short-sighted. I appear like an owl at everybody you know. Just think what's happened.

You came in tonight and you were unforgiven and you're going home forgiven. That's a pretty good night isn't it? You came and you weren't friends with God and you're going home friends with God.

Welcome to God's people. You've started out in a new life with Christ. And you by the way is the operative word and new people need help and the only way you can get help is to ask for it.

I used to say to people if you prayed along with me tonight why don't you tell me and I'll organise help to come to you. Do you know how many people told me in 30 years? None. I realised I was much more fearsome.

[24 : 36] Trust me I am quite a nice person. But no one ever told me. It's not a very efficient method is it? So we found a better method. When you came in there's a blue card. I wonder if you get the blue card.

I'm going to ask you if you'd write something on it please. Everybody. I ought to tell you it's not about money. The only time you're ever asked to do anything in our church is when it's pledge time.

So you've got this blue card it says thank you for joining us tonight. There's a pencil in the rack in front of you. Don't write until I tell you what's going to happen. Because I hate getting caught don't you?

There are several options here and most of them are about help. John Chapman's talk tonight raised a number of questions for me.

I'd like to discuss them with somebody. That'd be a helpful thing for you. Put a tick in the box. Help's on the way to you. I'd like to become a Christian. You might become a Christian tonight by praying the prayer.

[25 : 39] That's a box for you. You want help? Tick that somebody. Paul will organise help to come to you. I'd like details about the next alpha course. That's a course explaining Christianity.

You might say I'm not up to that yet. But I'd like to inquire. Probably put a tick in the box there. I'd like to become more involved in Holy Trinity and put a tick there. But I'd just keep coming.

If I were you, you're bound to be picked up. Please let me know the details of the 1998 parish dinner. All right. Well, why not?

I'll tick that one straight away if there's a dinner on. Okay. Now, it occurs to you, doesn't it, if you're going to tick this, that people will look. If you've been invited, you're a guest of somebody tonight, they'll be peeking now to see what you're going to do.

You'll be sure about that. And I can see all the way along the front here. Now, the comment is really just to get everybody looking at their own slip and minding their own business, really.

[26 : 41] So, if you write a comment, nobody will know who's ticking what box. You know what somebody once wrote in a comment? Great talk, pity about the face.

I don't know what that meant, really. But I, there you go. I'm going to write a comment. Oh, by the way, if you're after help, you need to put your name on it. So, I'll do that now. Are you writing now?

This is the time to write. Everybody looking at their own. By the way, if you don't want to fill it in, it's a free country, be happy. Okay. Cambridge Street.

Don't forget to put a nine in front of your number, your telephone number. Okay. Now, what will you do with the card when you finished it?

Fold it over, put it in the collection plate when it comes around, and if you're after help, help's on the way to you. Thank you.