

Women's Retreat: "Forgiveness" Session 1

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[0 : 00] Okay, don't get excited. There is no chocolate in here. I know we are women gathered. This is a gift. But it's not to be thought of like a birthday gift or a Christmas gift.

We're going to be looking this weekend at the gift of forgiveness. And if I could place any value on the gift of forgiveness, I wouldn't be able to hold this.

I wouldn't be able to offer it to you the way Christ has given me and us his gift of forgiveness. It would be something so precious that the Mona Lisa would look like a crayon drawing of a four-year-old.

That's the gift of God's forgiveness. And we're going to be talking about it this weekend. This is my visual display. Brought to you by Susie Thomas. The reason why I've chosen this subject is because I think I need to understand it better.

And I really have a longing for you two as well. Because this is the most valuable gift that... It almost seems silly to say it.

[1 : 21] But the gift of forgiveness that we see from God is the most valuable gift in the world. And our eternity depends on it. But it also has real-life consequences on the ground.

And then I got like this little bee in my bonnet. Because I was reading some popular Christian books out there which discuss the subject of forgiveness.

But I have a concern. And what I'm saying is that although true things are said, I believe they miss the clarity of application of what God's forgiveness to us looks like when we model that to each other.

So what I don't want to do this weekend is to talk in circles about forgiveness and use platitudes. I want to get to the nitty-gritty. And if you're anything like me, it seems much harder to understand in real terms what it means to forgive someone who has deeply hurt or wounded us than it is to understand God's forgiveness.

It somehow seems to be more difficult. So what does forgiveness look like person to person when the rubber hits the road? What's expected of me?

[2 : 38] What does God expect of me? What does the Bible tell me I have to do? And I think that there is a genuine confusion about the answer.

Because it's a hard question to answer. And as I read these books, I found that I was getting definitions, different definitions on every page.

And then you go back to the Bible and you think, hang on a minute. The Bible seems to confuse me as well. Because I read in the Lord's Prayer. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

And then I read in Mark 11, 25. Whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone. So that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.

And I read in the Bible. And I read in the Bible. In these verses, it appears that the forgiveness that I receive from God is conditional upon my forgiving other people.

[3 : 41] But is that right? Is that what we've been taught? So you're going to find that I'm quite passionate about this subject. And I'm going to give you a couple of reasons for this.

What I like to do a lot is when I talk, I go first and second. First and second. So you're going to hear that a lot. Just ignore it. Put it up your mind. But there really are two reasons. First, it's this.

Someone very close to me once hurt me deeply. But they, as a Christian, rightly, they went and repented before the Lord. And then they came to me to ask for my forgiveness.

And I gave it. And you could visibly see the relief, the release of the weight of guilt. You could see it on their face. And it was a beautiful thing to behold.

Although I still think it would have been more beautiful if it was somebody else they were dealing with and not me. But while they skipped away happy, so to speak, I was left beginning a journey that I did not ask to be on.

[4 : 49] I felt broken, angry, betrayed. And like now I had to start this wrestling match with God. And to come to grips with my hurt.

And it seemed so unfair to have to forgive somebody. Because they asked me. I didn't ask for the wrestling match. And all of a sudden I was in one. It's easy to wrestle my brothers, but that's another story.

And then secondly, a young woman who's very dear to our family. She came up to me a few years ago in frustration.

Actually, she was struggling deeply. She was still trying to come to terms with a father who had abandoned the family for another woman and her children. You see, she had a sister and a brother. And when the father left the family and got together with this other woman, this other woman was jealous of the girls. They were eight years old at the time. So she was happy to see his son because he'd pose no threat to her.

[5 : 55] Whatever that meant. So he obliged. And ignored his girls. Christians would say to her she struggled.

You just have to forgive. Just forgive. So she did. Nothing happened. She still felt angry and upset. And then she felt guilty.

Maybe she was doing it wrong. Maybe she hadn't really forgiven. What was she supposed to do? Then she asked me. How am I supposed to forgive him when he doesn't even think he's done anything wrong?

And it was that question that set me on a journey. I wanted to know the answer to that. What does it mean to forgive someone when they don't even think that they've done anything wrong?

Well, when it comes to forgiveness, I believe that it's essential for Christians, and for some of us as Christian teachers, that we are not theologically lazy with the use of our language when it comes to the subject.

[7 : 02] Because too much is at stake. What's at stake? Two points. First and foremost, theological laziness can cause a misunderstanding of how the gift of God's forgiveness is extended to us.

So if we're lazy with our language, we're not even understanding correctly how God gives me forgiveness, grants me forgiveness. And secondly, and it flows from the first, theological laziness will lead to a misapplication of how we model God's forgiveness to others.

So if I haven't got the vertical forgiveness right, I'm not going to model it horizontally. If we don't understand the nature and wonder of God's gift of forgiveness to us, we're going to get it wrong. And we're not going to know, how do we go about forgiving people who have offended me, who have hurt me? And I believe, and this is where my concern comes from, that if we misapply forgiveness, we end up being weighed down with guilt.

Because we don't know what to do with it. Am I supposed to forgive? So in the back of our mind, if you are a Christian here today, you probably have a really good grasp, especially if you've been at St. John's, of how God comes to forgive me.

[8 : 33] We understand that. And we're going to look to the model of that. But we don't know what to do with the pain when someone's hurt me.

Because it doesn't seem right just to say, well, I forgive you. There seems to be a conundrum. So our aim this weekend is to align ourselves with God's design in modelling and living out forgiveness to our fellow human beings, both as ones who have been offended and as the offender ourselves.

So we're not going to ask ourselves if we should forgive. The question is how. How do we forgive? So to help us look at forgiveness with clarity, we need to set up the parameters of forgiveness.

And that means taking some time to understand God's gift of forgiveness first. So what is forgiveness? Well, the actual definition of forgiveness is to grant or to gift pardon to an offender. It's literally to release, to not count their guilt against them. That's what forgiveness is. So again, if you are a Christian here today, you will know the deep joy of that definition.

[9 : 58] And there's a reason for that. From scripture, we will have understood that God is holy. He is perfection.

He is without impurity, without flaw. So we understand that my sin, my wrongdoing, means that I cannot be in his perfect presence to enjoy a relationship with him.

He is light, and I get some dark spots. He is holy, me not so much. He is perfect, I try. At every point, I miss it.

You see, we understand our sin to mean that we are guilty of offending a holy God. And hence, we are under his judgment. So without his gift of forgiveness, we're not going to be able to approach his throne of grace with confidence.

That's Hebrews 4.16. Without Christ's forgiveness, my guilt would be counted against me. I would not have been released.

[11:15] And scripture tells us very clearly about the consequences, the eternal consequences for that. But consider this. Because the God who created me is holy and pure, my sin, my wrongdoing, creates an obligation or a debt that I cannot repay.

And I love what Don Carson has to say about this. The first sin, sequentially, first in fundamental importance, is to not love God with heart and soul and mind and strength.

That is the sin that we always commit when we commit any other sin. God is always the most offended party.

So think about that. When the scribe asked Jesus, if you've been following the Gospel of Mark, you'll know he comes up, he's like, what's the greatest commandment?

Jesus is like, love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. And all I had to do was drive east on the number one to break every single one of those. Thank you. Psalm 51.

[12:40] Against you, you only have I sinned, cries David, and I've done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.

David got it. I mean, it had to be shoved in his face for him to get it, but he did get it. He sinned, and the prophet Nathan comes up to him and shows him a few things. And boy, when the penny dropped, it dropped.

It is against you and you only that I have sinned and have done what is evil in your sight. but, that sounds all very heavy and sad, but right from the beginning of the Old Testament, we are introduced to a God who forgives.

He is unlike any invented God. That's little g. because, because after all, invented gods are created in my image, out of my own imagination, and my own image doesn't like to forgive.

It's quite the opposite. I mean, I think I would choose self-righteousness or revenge any day. It's an ongoing battle. Like, it could be anything, the little things. Someone's getting in front of me, well, I don't know, I'm competitive, right?

[13:56] So, you get in front of me, I'm going to fight back. You do this, you know, I'm always like, you know. You know, I just, that's my struggle life. Competition.

So, if I invented a God after my own image, it wouldn't be a very nice God. But, the God who is revealed in Scripture is quite the opposite.

Do you know that God, it says in the Old Testament, looks for opportunities to forgive? I mean, I don't. I don't go out of my way to look for a chance to forgive someone. It's never been a problem I've had.

But, Nehemiah, chapter 9, verse 17, says this about God. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful.

Or, I like this in Jeremiah 5, Jerusalem's a mess. Murder in the streets, blood running down the streets. It's mayhem.

[15:01] And this is what God says to his prophet, Jeremiah. Run. Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem. Look and take note. Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth, so that I can pardon Jerusalem.

Like, he wants to pardon Jerusalem. He's like, go find somebody who wants to repent, who seeks righteousness, find them, that they would repent, so that I can forgive them. He longs to forgive.

So the Lord longs to forgive, but he doesn't always forgive. 2 Chronicles 7.14 sums it up.

He's calling out to a rebellious people. If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

So just flip that upside down. If my people who are called by my name do not humble themselves, do not pray, do not seek my face, do not turn from my wicked, do not turn from their wicked ways, then I will not hear and I will not forgive their land.

[16:19] There is condition. Humble yourself. Come before the Lord. The same message appears in the New Testament.

There is continuity. Mark chapter 1, verse 4. John appears baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

1 John 1, 9. If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The point I want to stress here is this.

Nowhere in Scripture is it stated or implied that forgiveness is granted without repentance. I like what the old theologian L.L. Morris says, forgiveness is rooted in the nature of God as gracious, but his forgiveness is not indiscriminate.

He will by no means clear the guilty. Penitent sinners are forgiven. Impenitent people who still go on in their wicked ways are not.

[17:35] But the story just keeps getting better with God. That's why I love that I haven't had to invent God because I think my image, if God was created in my image, it would just digress continually.

Not so with Christ. Not so with the God of the Bible. It just gets better and better and better. You see, the Christian knows that when our sins have been forgiven by God, that forgiveness is complete.

And you've got to look at this vivid language. It's amazing. Psalm 103, 12. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Isaiah 38, 17. Isaiah speaking, you have put all my sins behind your back. Isaiah 43, 25. I am he who blots out your transgressions.

Jeremiah 31, 34. I will remember their sins no more. Micah 7, 19. Iniquities are hurled into the depths of the sea. Look at the use of language.

[18:50] Blot out. As far as the east is from the west, behind the back, depths of the sea. I mean, that's enough to kind of let us know that when God forgives, it is complete.

There is a pattern here. A framework. And that's what we're going to look at now. The framework of forgiveness is an acknowledgement of wrongdoing. It is then repenting before the Lord.

And then, as a result of repentance, I ask and receive his forgiveness. forgiveness. And when it's with God, there is reconciliation. Amazing.

It is breathtaking. And that's what I want this little present here to represent. This is God's gift. Like, this is just like a fun little picture.

But boy, oh boy, isn't it anemic compared to what we know in Scripture? But let's look at what forgiveness is not. knowing what we know about forgiveness, it becomes a whole lot easier to identify what it's not.

[19:59] It's not cheap. It is not, forgiveness is not a commodity to be bought or to be coerced from God. Like, as if I could do that.

Okay, God, I'm now going to put your arm behind your back. Hold tight. Give me forgiveness. No. And it's not indiscriminate. So, God doesn't scatter forgiveness randomly.

And also, forgiveness is not to deny something has happened. It's not to condone it. It's not to excuse or to forget. And when I say forget, I'm talking here about human forgiveness or human pain, human offense.

So, when the Bible says that God forgets, what it means is he is choosing not to call to mind. He is making a choice not to bring back.

So, when he says, as far as the east is from the west, so far I have removed your transgressions from you, I choose not to bring that back, is what it says to us.

[21:11] But forgiveness also is not a release of legal liability or justice should the offense require. Even for our offense against God, there had to be accountability.

And it came in the form of process. You see, the discussion of forgiveness this weekend is set in the context of us being part of an upside-down kingdom.

the kingdom that Christ inaugurated sits in complete contrast to the kingdom of this world. And we have to bear this in mind as we go on this weekend.

It is a high calling to walk as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It means something. And so, it's not necessarily an easy road.

but also the discussion of forgiveness needs to be set in this context that we are in the care of the great high priest.

[22 : 21] Hebrews 4, 15 and 16. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin.

let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Knowing that we are part of Christ's kingdom and knowing that we are in his care, we can pray our gritty and raw theme verse with confidence.

I'm going to get to that. The theme verse for this weekend tells us that there is something we shouldn't do and tells us something that we need to do.

And that's what we're going to work on over the next three sessions. So tomorrow we're going to start by looking at the practice of forgiveness when we are the ones who have been offended, been hurt.

[23 : 32] then we're going to follow this by the pursuit of forgiveness. That's when I've been the offender. This is the part I don't really like.

And finally on Sunday we're going to address the power of forgiveness where all of this comes together and the rubber hits the road. So the theme verse Ephesians 4 31-32 This is what we should do.

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling and slander along with every form of malice. And what we should do?

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you.

But that section, forgiving each other just as Christ forgave you, we're going to really start to dig down what does that look like.

And you will have had, so don't step on Hazel. In your welcome bag you will have received cards.

[24 : 49] I know what you're thinking. Some people brought some lovely cupcakes and little things, you know, like, oh, I'm going to go ask her for the recipe. No, that's not what these are for.

Multi-colored recipe cards. This is recipes for success. Take one of the cards and write the theme verse for this weekend on it. And then carry it around, memorize it.

Chew on it, eat it, spit out paper, I don't know what you do, but memorize it. And then there are three other cards. And as we perhaps look at this topic this weekend and you open the word and there's a verse that comes to you, write it down.

This is what I love to do. This is one of the things I do, actually. I have little recipe cards all over the place with Bible verses on so I can whip them out, make them their prayers, prayers for me, prayers for my husband, prayers for my children, prayers for the people I like, prayers for the people I don't like.

That's what these are for. So as we get into the weekend, we're going to tackle that subject of forgiveness. But we need to have set the parameters so we know what forgiveness is and what isn't, so that when we get to the nitty gritty, we've got some context.

[26 : 08] Amen. Amen.