

The Exhortation to Forgive

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- [0 : 0 0] Please turn to Matthew 6, 7 through 15, and that's on page number 5. And just congratulate all of you for getting here at 11 o'clock and not coming in at 12 o'clock after my sermon is over.
- And I'm hoping that you'll be able to stay awake, because this is the third part of a series on forgiveness that we've been preaching. And Felix has preached twice on the parable of the unforgiving servant.
- And it's a sermon series that is very challenging, because as you heard in Felix's sermons, if you were here the last two weeks, there is a real challenge for us to forgive those who are very difficult to forgive.
- And sometimes it's very hard for us in our life to pass on the grace that we have received at the hands of Jesus Christ.
- It's hard for us because we have been deeply hurt, and we don't know how to begin, even though we know that it's right to forgive. There are people in our lives who are in that situation.
- [1 : 1 4] And Jesus is absolutely uncompromising in that passage that Felix preached on. He doesn't say it's good if you forgive or you should forgive.
- He actually says you must forgive. There's no other way around his words. There's no option other than to forgive those who hurt you.
- And that's what makes this series so challenging on forgiveness. But notice that when Jesus teaches this very uncompromising message to us, in both the parable of the unforgiving servant and in this Lord's Prayer, he combines that command to forgive with the grace of God.
- He puts them as close together as you possibly can. In fact, he talks about the forgiveness of God in our Heavenly Father first. That is grace.
- We have to start with grace to forgive what seems to be unforgivable. And over the last two weeks, you may have thought of people who have really hurt you, or who you are really angry at.
- [2 : 2 5] And I find it easy to think of forgiveness by categorizing two types of people in our lives. And I don't know if this is human nature, but I think this is what we do.
- There's that list of people who we say, this is the possible to forgive list. And those are people who don't have a long rap sheet of offenses against us.
- And so there's a possibility of forgiveness there. But there's another list, and it's the unforgivable list. And the people on that are those who have deliberately hurt you, or who have betrayed you in a terrible way, or who are causing great ongoing pain.
- And if you've taken God's word seriously in the last two weeks, you are probably grappling with that second list of people. And you might be thinking, how can I possibly forgive him or her?

It's too hard. And I want to say that you're right. It is too hard. You can't do it on your own. You know, there's many times when Jesus was teaching, that the listeners said, who can follow this teaching?

[3 : 34] This is impossible. But what does Jesus say? He says, that's true. It's impossible with humanity. But with God, all things are possible. And Jesus is teaching us that we need the power of the gospel.

We need the power of Jesus Christ in our life in order to forgive in the way that he's teaching. Probably all of you know that we're in a sabbatical period as far as David's concerned.

We're not on sabbatical, but David is. And one of the things that I personally would find helpful is if people come to help preach. And they actually will. But I just sort of had a fantasy moment and thought, well, what if the apostles were able to be invited here to St. John's to preach part of this series on forgiveness, to help out with the preaching?

I know how they would start each sermon. And the reason I know is because, and here's what they would say. They would say, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's how they'd start. And the reason I say that is because that's how they start most of their letters in the New Testament. Grace, the means of salvation, and peace, the result of salvation, be with you, is how they start.

[4 : 53] And that is where we need to start when we think of forgiving those people on the unforgivable list. We need to know that God has given grace to you and to me.

We have received that ultimate, immense, undeserved gift. We are each like that man in the parable from the last two weeks, who has been forgiven this incredible debt of millions and millions of dollars to the king.

In an instant, that man's burden was lifted. That overwhelming debt is forgiven. You know, there's been talk for years, for at least 12 years, about the idea of what's called debt forgiveness in a monetary way.

There's many developing countries in the world who are under this immense burden of debt, and they can't get out from underneath it. It cripples their economies. It's something that, as soon as there is money available, it's sucked away by interest payments.

And so these are countries that are paralyzed, and there is a call to actually forgive the debts without having to pay them. But the problem with that call, and the reason it's taking so long is it is too costly to pay billions and billions of debt.

[6 : 11] Many countries feel it's too costly. And this is something similar to our debt, because each of us owes a kind of debt that paralyzes us, that keeps us, that it's impossible for us to pay.

We have rebelled against the God who made us, who is perfectly holy, and we can't know him. We don't have any resources, like those countries, to change this situation.

But here's the good news. In a costly way, God gave the Son, who he loved, to die for us, and to pay our debts, to forgive us.

And of course, that's brought home to us in this holy week. And this grace, the grace that is given to us in that forgiveness, results in the peace that those apostles talk about, peace with God.

And that peace with God is at the heart of being a Christian, because we go from being enemies of God, to being his children. Instead of this massive chasm that's between us and God, we know him as our Heavenly Father.

[7 : 20] It's extraordinary transformation. And this is shown in the first phrase of the Lord's Prayer, if you look in verse 9. because there's two words there that say, you are at peace with God.

And those two words are our Father. Those two words say that we can hear from God, that we can talk to him, that we can be assured that he loves us, and that we have confidence that we can, nothing will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

We have this relationship of a parent and a child. This is the peace that we have through the grace of Jesus Christ, who paid all our past debts, past, future, and present.

And I believe that this is incredibly important for us, because if we are ever going to begin forgiving that relational debt that other people owe to us, we need to begin with that grace and that peace.

And that's why Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6. Always pray, Father, forgive our debts as we forgive those, as we forgive our debtors.

[8 : 37] And that hard part that we are challenged with right now comes after the grace and the peace of Father, forgive us our debts. And I want you to notice something.

In verses 12 and 13, 11, 12, and 13, there's three basic needs that we have that are laid out there.

There's the daily bread, which is everything that we need in life, food, shelter, clothing, everything that we need for life. And the third one is this basic need of not being taken away from God.

But the second one is also a basic need, and that is the need for forgiveness and for us to forgive. Jesus is saying here, this is what is elementary in your life, that there would be forgiveness in every relationship.

And that's why God, Jesus, in this prayer, connects the grace and the peace of our own release from debt with a challenge for us to forgive. In our prayers, what he does here is he asks us to think about our relationship with God at exactly the same time that we think about those people who have hurt us, those people that we need to forgive.

[9 : 56] And I think he does this because we cannot possibly forgive deep hurts without help, without his grace. We talked about the Lord's Prayer one night at church committee last fall, and one of the people in the church committee said that what they have found helpful in forgiving others is to actually pray for the person who is difficult to forgive.

And I thought that was an excellent thing for us to hear. It's the way to move forward with those who we can't forgive. Because when you pray for that person, you're actually bringing together your forgiven relationship with God and your broken relationship with the person that has hurt you.

You're bringing those two relationships together. And really, that's what verses 14 and 15 do as well. It says there, if you forgive people their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you.

But if you do not forgive them their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. And I want you to notice there's an emphasis here that God is our Father.

He says it twice. He doesn't have to. And in the same breath, after saying God is your Father, He connects that wonderful relationship with those that we might or might not.

[11 : 22] forgive. It says, if you know the grace of God who has forgiven you, you must forgive. And very clearly, Jesus says, you will not know God's grace and forgiveness if you do not forgive.

This doesn't mean you're going to lose your salvation if you don't forgive. forgive. This is written to disciples who are already saved, who are able to call God Father forever. But it does say that if you refuse forgiveness to others, you are not receiving the grace and the peace that God gave.

God is still your Father, but that relationship is clouded. It's not where it ought to be. You are actually in spiritual danger. And Jesus sets us free from sin when he comes into our life, yet sin can still entangle us.

When we don't forgive people their offenses against us, we actually choose to be imprisoned by their sin and ours. You see, God allows that forgiveness to remain over us, that unforgiveness to remain over us.

And it's like a prison. And so the question that you need to ask yourself is, if there are people that you can't forgive, that you don't want to let off the hook, as it were, you need to ask yourself, how long will you let that person control your life?

[12 : 46] How long are you going to be bound to that person? If you don't forgive, you are a slave to bitterness and anger every time you think of them.

And that distorts your relationship with God, and God does not forgive you. But we are meant to be free. We are meant to be free to serve Jesus, free to know his peace and his grace in very real ways in our lives.

And we simply don't experience that forgiveness or that freedom if we do not forgive. One person once wrote that when we forgive another person, we set a prisoner free.

And we discover that the prisoner we set free is us. And that's what Jesus is teaching in the Lord's Prayer here. And I believe that in the end it's really about trusting in God.

It's not an easy thing to take this step of forgiving. There are many very important things that keep us from doing it. But Jesus is calling us in this prayer to trust him, to trust him in this journey of forgiveness.

[13 : 57] Some of you may know that I used to have a small blue car. And that blue car was dying a slow death. It got to the point where any repairs would be more than the car was worth.

And so slowly things got worse and worse. And it got to the point that as I was driving to St. John's I was often not sure that I would actually complete the journey to St. John's.

And they were stressful drives even though I was five minutes away. Especially on Sunday mornings it was stressful because if I was preaching or leading the service I needed to be sure I could get there.

So I'd make contingency plans. You know, would people pick me up with a collar on and looking like a minister? Would I be able to find a way to get there on time if it did break down?

And so my life was filled with anxiety every time I got into that car and tried to make it to church. Well, it finally died and we're one car family but the other car is a very dependable car.

[15 : 02] It's a car actually that I can trust. And the first few times I started driving that to church I had a completely different feeling. I had a relaxed drive to St. John's and I didn't have these thoughts of not knowing whether this car would take me to the end of my journey.

And you see we often think in our relationship with God as though we are in that old little blue car. We don't know whether we can trust him to take us to the end of the journey of forgiveness.

And we feel anxious and we feel stressed and we don't think that it will actually make it. But God truly is one who is trustworthy. He is one who we can be confident in will take us to the end of the journey.

And that we are meant to place ourselves into the hands of God who will lead us into the goodness of forgiveness. And to sort of spell that out there are two ways that we are called to trust him when we're thinking about forgiveness.

The first thing that we are meant to trust him for is his forgiveness of us. There's a story of a little girl who was told by her mom that there's a part of the room in the living room that you cannot play in because there's an expensive lamp there and I don't want it broken.

[16 : 25] And one day of course she decided well maybe I'll play over in that corner of the room. And she did. And she ended up breaking the lamp. The big crash. She went running to her mom in tears and telling her mom I'm sorry for what I did because I know you told me not to go over and play by that lamp.

And her mom said you're right that was wrong to do but I forgive you. Now help me clean it up and we'll put it away in the garbage can. Well the next day she came running in this little girl to her mom again into the other room crying.

And again she had in her hands the pieces of broken lamp that she grabbed from the garbage can. She held them out to her mom and said mom I have broken this lamp and you told me not to.

And her mom said I'm I told you yesterday that I forgave you. I have forgiven you for what you have done. Now go put that back in the waste paper basket and leave it there.

Well the third day the same thing happened. Running into her mom crying holding these little pieces of lamp and her mom sat down with her and said to her you need to know that that lamp will never come between us.

[17 : 43] I have forgiven you. And what that means is that I love you and our relationship will always be this way. And I think that in our life with our sin we need to take out the trash as it were.

Get rid of it as God has done. And not to keep bringing it before God not trusting that he has actually forgiven us. There are things in our life that are so big that we think we have to keep bringing it up.

We have to keep holding on to it like that girl was holding on to the little lamp. But Jesus clearly teaches that the debt that he has forgiven is immense, far greater than we can imagine.

And besides trusting him for his forgiveness of us, we need to trust him that he will take care of you and that you will know the goodness of God when you forgive those who don't deserve it.

You know, one of the very difficult things about letting people off the hook, as we call it, is that we believe we are making ourselves vulnerable when we forgive.

[18 : 51] And that's true. And that's why when you forgive, you very well might be praying, everything in me emotionally is saying, no, I can't forgive. They don't deserve it.

But I trust you, God, that you know me, and you know that person best, and that you do call me to forgive, forgive, that you will bring your goodness into the situation.

Now, that doesn't mean that you're going to invite further sin against you. C.S. Lewis wrote an excellent essay on forgiveness, and he said in it, forgiving doesn't mean that you must necessarily believe the person's next promise, but it does mean that you must make every effort to kill every taste of resentment in your own heart, every wish to humiliate or hurt that person or pay him out.

That's the hard work of forgiveness, and that act of forgiveness is what God blesses. He always will. It's a risk that Jesus commands us to take, but he commands it because he loves us, and he knows how to give us his grace and his peace.

And so, again, as we end, looking at verses 14 and 15, that really tells us that our forgiveness is like a sacrament. Our act of forgiveness is a sign of the reality that God has forgiven us.

[20 : 19] It's a sign of the reality that Jesus has made us right with God. And it brings you a true assurance of the God, the Father's forgiveness of us, of his love for us, of the right relationship we have with him.

And when you forgive real sin that has no excuse, God will show you his forgiveness in a clearer, more powerful way. And you really will know the joy of his salvation.

And so this Palm Sunday, when we see Jesus with this purpose, as Neil said, of going to the cross for this one purpose of accomplishing the forgiveness of sins, may we this week know the wonder of that gift in a deeper way as we forgive those who are so difficult to forgive in our life.

And I wonder if you'd turn to your hymn sheet, because number four on that is our next hymn. And Terry has chosen very well, as usual.

And this prayer actually captures what we're talking about in this sermon and in this passage. passage. And it does it in a much shorter amount of time, too. But the hymn may not be familiar.

[21 : 37] Terry's going to play it through, and then we'll sing it. But sing this hymn as a prayer to God. Let's stand and sing number four.