

Forgiveness: The Ultimate Necessity

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- [0 : 0 0] You'll know that today we're talking about forgiveness, the ultimate necessity. I was brought up in Toronto, and in Toronto the Boyd Gang were very famous about the early 1950s, and they were made up of Alonzo Boyd and Bill Jackson and Leonard Jackson, who weren't related, and Steve Suchan.
- And in the course of one of their endeavors in Toronto, they came up to a police cruiser, and the police cruiser identified them.
- I guess the cruiser came up to them, is probably more likely. And Steve Suchan pulled out a gun and shot one of the detectives in the Toronto Police Force.
- And subsequently the gang was arrested and were in prison and broke out of prison and did various heroic things.
- But ultimately, Leonard Jackson and Steve Suchan were tried for murder and convicted, and the day was set for their hanging.
- [1 : 1 4] And it was, in the interests of justice, some months from the time that they were sentenced, so they spent the time on death row in the Toronto Jail, right in the Don Valley at Broadview and Girard, just by the Don Valley Parkway, as it is now.
- And one of the chaplains came and worked with them for quite some time. And these two fellows, if they were sitting in their room today, I can tell you, you wouldn't be able to distinguish who they were.
- They were just like you and me. And they spent a long time waiting for the day of execution.
- And during that time, the chaplain, they came, according to the biography of theirs, they came to a place of peace with God and were aware by faith of his forgiveness.
- And they had a relationship to God through faith in Jesus Christ. And they went to the gallows, were hung back to back in the Don Jail.
- [2 : 3 7] Now, the reason I tell you that story is because they, according to the record, were forgiven by God, but they were punished by society.
- And, you know, that's the way it has to be. There's no way around it. In our society, forgiveness is impossible.
- You can't do it. Now, despite the fact that the Christian gospel has been around for many centuries, it has never caught hold in the sense that people are prepared to build a society on the principle of forgiveness.
- You can't do it. So, if you're confronted by a child molester, you throw the book at them. If you are subjected to sexual harassment, you bring everything in the arsenal of law to bear on the harasser and see that he is duly punished.
- The Jews and the Arabs live in the same country with thousands of years of reasons for which they cannot forgive each other.

[4 : 06] Every country in the world, and most people in the world, I suppose, have an indebtedness that they can't pay off, but they don't live in a world where that can be forgiven.

Protestants and Catholics find it difficult to forgive each other. The amazing reality of modern-day, I don't know what to call it, Russia, is that where for 70 years they were under suppression by the Marxist regime, that authority kept them unified in the United States of Russia.

And when that authority was lifted, then all the old hostility and all the unforgiveness came roaring back, and now you find war and civil war and rebellion and quite violent human hatred going on.

And you know what's happening in Yugoslavia, because people who have lived next to each other for centuries cannot forgive each other.

You may find it interesting to note that there are lots of Muslims in Yugoslavia, and that's because of centuries ago, when under the sort of great period of Arab history, there was a tremendous migration up into Europe and up into Spain, and this is the people who are left from that time, and there is no forgiveness.

[5 : 49] They're absolutely, adamantly unforgiving. The Japanese Canadians and the Aboriginal people and the Chinese people who came to Canada, it's very difficult to say of the past, it's all forgiven.

Some kind of retribution has to be exacted, and some kind of compensation has to be paid. Some kind of guilt has to be expiated.

And so we live very much in a society which is built on the understanding that there is no forgiveness. The French and English in Canada.

You know, the French can't forgive the English for being English, and the English can't forgive the French for being French. And there's nothing you can do about that, because Frenchmen go on producing Frenchmen, and Englishmen go on producing Englishmen, and it goes generation after generation.

So you get, you get, the only way people can live together is under authority with some authority that is able to control the violence.

[7 : 19] And, you know, everybody wonders why Saddam Hussein is still in power, and that's because he hasn't been forgiven. He just has the power that nobody can challenge him.

And there he is, that you saw. In our society, divorce is a principle based on the fact that ultimately there is no grounds for forgiveness.

And if I was to ask you to review your life at the moment, and identify the people who have caused you the most agony in the course of your life, you will not find welling up within you a great sense of needing to forgive them, to extract from them some compensation for the damage they've done, you can get hold of very quickly.

But to come to a place of wanting to forgive them is not something that's liable to happen.

And so I think you've got to be aware when Christ teaches us to pray, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, he's saying something which is way out of the ballpark in which we do business, you know.

[8 : 47] It's just something else altogether that humanly speaking, we simply cannot come to terms with. We can't do it. If we could do it, we could order in pizza and beer and spend the rest of the week here celebrating because there'd be no work for you to do.

You know, because forgiveness is the thing that keeps us all busy, keeps the wheels going around. Not forgiveness, but the opposite to it.

So, what a society that used to think it was great to confess your sins, now is much more strongly oriented in the direction of claiming your rights.

And before, where you might have been tempted by cultural force to confess your sins in order to stay in relationship, that's abandoned now and people have rights and they're going to demand their rights and there's going to be a legal structure to see that they get their rights.

And rights has become the great slogan of our society. But part of the significance of it is that forgiveness doesn't work in our society, in our culture.

[10 : 20] It doesn't belong to us. And so, it's very difficult to make it happen ever under any circumstances. Well, I tell you that by way of just introduction to this subject.

I think when Christ teaches us to say, forgive us our debts as we forgive those who sin against us, or trespasses or whatever word you want to use there, that we're asking for something which is way beyond the scope of our everyday experience, which is way beyond where our gut is at the moment about most of the issues that confront us in our lives.

We're not seriously interested in it. And that's why I ask that Hosea 11 be read for you, just to give you a brief picture of the dilemma in which God finds himself with his people.

And it's a lovely picture of a father caring for a child, loving a child, establishing a child, teaching a child to walk, picking the child up in his arms and embracing it, and kissing that child, holding the child to him with cords of kindness, trying to tie the child in with bands of love.

And all this is smashed and broken, and the child goes away and defies and ignores the one who loved it.

[12 : 07] And that's the way the child behaved. And, you know, that's what happens. I mean, that's... You know, I mean, one of the problems, the problems of preaching nowadays is you can't say anything nasty about divorce because most congregations are made up of people who are.

So, and... But what I want you to see in that is the fact that our society understands and accepts the principle of divorce much more easily than they understand or accept anything else.

That's the way our society works. And I'm... And I'm... You know, nobody is excluded from that. That's the way it works.

We understand that you come to the point where it won't hang together any longer, and it's got to break. And in terms of business partnerships, they come to the point where they can't hang together any longer, they've got to break.

Debts and debtors, you can't tolerate it any longer, it's got to break. And all that... That breaking thing is the thing that is characteristic of our society.

[13 : 29] That's how our society works. But it's... You see, what God is saying about His people is that though He loved them, though He cared for them, though He watched over them, though He fondled them, though He taught them to walk, though He did everything for the child, the break came.

The child could only understand it in that way. And the consequences of that break were simply that... If you look at it, you can see it in verse 5.

They shall return to the land of Egypt, which is their captivity. Assyria, a foreign power, will have power over them because they have refused to return to Me.

The sword rages in their cities. It consumes their priests, devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from Me.

Well, that's the consequence of the principle, the kind of dynamic dynamic that governs our culture and our society.

[14 : 38] It's a breaking away all the time. And it goes on and on and on. It doesn't end because that's the scale.

But you see, the way this story ends is in verse 8 when God, in a kind of soliloquy with Himself, says, in His own care and compassion, how can I give you up?

How can I hand you over? How can I ignore you? My heart recoils within me, the Lord says. My compassion grows warm and tender and I will not execute my fierce anger.

I will not again destroy. Because I'm God, not man. I'm going to work it differently. You may find, as human beings, that this breaking process has to go on and on and on and nothing can interrupt it.

But God says, I'm not a man. I'm not humanity. I'm God. And something different is going to happen. And so, when you come to the idea of forgiveness, you recognize that God has established and is establishing and is at work on an entirely different basis.

[16 : 00] And that's represented by the prodigal is welcomed home, the Garden of Eden is reopened, the ransom is paid, the debt is forgiven, the record is destroyed, the demands of justice are met by Him, the reconciliation is established, and the redemption process is begun.

Now, you see, that's what, that's what we're saying when we say the Lord's Prayer. We're saying that there is an entirely different world which is present to us by faith.

And that is a world in which God's name is hallowed, His kingdom will certainly come and be the final and ultimate authority. His will will be done, finally.

Our bread will be given and we will forgive because God has forgiven us. And that's the, that's the basis on which forgiveness happens is that God in His sovereign purpose has determined that the ultimate basis of human society will be forgiveness.

It won't be this constant fracturing, fracturing, fracturing that goes on all the time. A whole new basis of people relating to one another.

[17 : 35] Now, in a book by Fitzsimmons Allison, he quotes Sigmund Freud, who in turn quotes William Shakespeare.

But he says, this is Freud, and he says, it faithfully corresponds to my intention to represent the sense of guilt as the most important problem in the evolution of culture, and to convey that the price of progress in civilization is paid in forfeiting happiness through the heightening sense of guilt.

And in Shakespeare sums it up with, conscience doth make cowards of us all. There's a God whose purpose it is to establish forgiveness as the basis on which people relate, and then I'm quoting Freud, who is pointing out about human beings, that the fundamental reality of human beings is their guilt.

And they recognize that that has to be dealt with. And he quotes a university chaplain. He says he has never, now this is a broad statement, but I'm not going to argue the truth of it with you, but it certainly points something out, which I want you to consider.

The chaplain said of students in his university, none of them ever failed an exam for academic reasons. It was because of their own sense of inadequacy, their own sense of guilt, their own sense of failure that they took to that exam.

[19 : 24] Now, and that's how human beings live their lives. They live their lives with this sense of guilt, this sense of failure, and in a world where the world in which they live does it to them so that, and he cites the example of the wife whose husband is being unfaithful to her, but she will not say a word about it because she in her history has past failures, and therefore she is in no position to criticize her husband.

guilt, and so both of them are living in a relationship of guilt, which is unresolved, and forgiveness is not part of the equation, nor do they conceive of it ever being part of the equation.

Fitzsimmons Allison goes on to say that one of the most acute symptoms of unresolved guilt is depression, that we withdraw from friendships, from lively participation in marriage, from life itself.

We do this in part because our guilt has injured our sense of deserving, and that we just don't think we deserve anything better than we have, and we accept the misery of our own condition simply because of our sense of guilt, unforgiven guilt.

And you see, it's for that reason that what is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, what is at the heart of the intention of the Lord's prayer, is that God has decided not to play our game, and he has decided to forgive us totally and unconditionally and completely.

[21 : 21] Now, if there's somebody you need to forgive, you will recognize that the cost of forgiving them is too high and you're not prepared to pay it. And when God comes to forgive us, the same cost is involved, and he is prepared to pay it because he is God and not man, as it says in Hosea.

man, and so he does what we would never do. He assumes the cost of forgiving, and his assumption of the cost of forgiving is, of course, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

that is God accepting the ultimate break between him and his beloved son.

He accepts that as the cost out of which ultimately comes the forgiveness of our sins. And that we who are bathed in, live by, understand, relate to, guilt and the need for forgiveness, find forgiveness through faith in God, the God who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ.

So that, and I'm quoting from the theological word book of the New Testament, he says that what God has done, what's at the heart of the Christian gospel is not the fact that by reading the New Testament your doubts will be overcome and you will believe.

[23 : 18] At the heart of the New Testament, deeper than that, is the awareness that your sins will be forgiven. and that that's the reason that you will come to believe, because you recognize, you search the scriptures until you recognize the reality of your forgiveness.

And that's the only way to go as far as I know, is recognizing through the witness or testimony of the New Testament that God has forgiven you.

But once you've recognized and accepted that fact, you no longer are very happy in a world which doesn't accept forgiveness.

And that's why the process that Christ says is to be the heart of our life and the object of our prayer is that in the life and the ongoing life experience of being forgiven by God, we will then try to forgive other people.

And that's the only basis on which you might ever do it. Knowing that you have been forgiven, you then can begin tentatively and cautiously and carefully and anxiously to move out into exposing yourself to the possibility of forgiving other people.

[24 : 52] And that's a dangerous place to go. You know, because I know, because I know that a lot of you can come up to me after this, after I shut up and say to me, I have a situation in my life that I cannot forgive.

And that's no surprise. You know, I mean, we could have a meeting over here, probably be more people than there are here, if we went and got everybody who had reasons had people whom they couldn't forgive.

And nobody is telling you to go and forgive them. All we're telling you is that God has forgiven you.

So what are you going to do about it? And that's all we can say. What are you going to do about it? And if you become profoundly aware of it, give me one minute out there.

I ran into this in a Roman Catholic Catechism. He said, Roman Catholics don't take sin too seriously because confession is so easy. This was written by a Roman Catholic.

[26 : 08] Protestants think of sin more seriously than Roman Catholics do sometimes. But I think the great wisdom of that is that all of us are really in the position of the Roman Catholics because we talk forgiveness all the time as though it was easy.

And we don't recognize the cost that is involved in God taking you and saying to you, you are unconditionally loved and you are unconditionally forgiven and I am God who is saying this to you.

I have forgiven you. And then I am leaving you with the responsibility of doing what you want with that. But what you need to pray is that having been forgiven, you will forgive others.

and in that God establishes the basis for a whole new world, a brand new and totally different kind of world of those who profoundly aware of the forgiveness and the cost of it are working, know that their life's business is to find out how they can pass on to others the forgiveness which they themselves have discovered.

Let me pray. Our God, help us to understand the fact that you have chosen to cancel our debt, to win us back by your love, to forgive us our sins, to heal our wounds, to indwell us by your spirit, to make us joyfully aware of our own forgiveness before you, that we may in the response of love begin to be able to reach out to others and forgive them as we ourselves have been forgiven.

[28 : 21] We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.