

Generous Forgiveness

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[0 : 00] It was in October 2006. A gunman took a bunch of hostages in a one-room Amish school in Pennsylvania, USA.

The result was of that moment that he shot 10 children, all between the ages of 7 and 12, 13, five of whom died before he himself took his own life.

Within hours of that tragedy happening, the Amish community visited both the killer's immediate family and his parents to express sympathy for the loss of their father, brother, son.

The Amish, as a community, the uniformly expressed forgiveness for the murderer. And this amazed America.

Numerous voices called on America as a nation to follow suit and to be a country that is more forgiving. Others commented that, no, no, no, justice must come first here before forgiveness.

[1 : 24] Others commented, in fact, that the secular society in which they were existing here can't produce people who handle that level of injustice and suffering without some form of retaliation.

You see, their culture, like ours, is committed to self-realization and self-assertion with a profound sense of self-entitlement.

We are consistently told that our happiness, our individual happiness, our individual interests, our needs come first. And yet, there's something in it that says we cannot live without forgiveness.

No society can, in fact, survive without forgiveness. When it's absent in a society, in any sort of community, with any family, the results are horrifying.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, he who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power of love.

[2 : 32] And we cannot live without love. We crave a more loving, a more generous society. But instead, what we are existing on, in right now, in our culture, is from the schoolyard to the lounge room to the office, to institution and politics, we exist in cancel culture, not forgiving culture.

And so, if you just joined us, our theme for this term is generous God. What I've been saying consistently throughout this series is that generosity in the Bible is not less than what we do with our money, but it's much more than that.

Radical generosity means to be pervasively generous. It's characterized by our spirit of unselfishness, of service and generosity in every single area of life.

And there's a very specific form of relational generosity that must characterize every Christian, and that is generous forgiveness.

And so, grab your Bibles, Luke 17, St. Paul's app has got an outline. You'll see the journey there. We're going to start with the difficulty of forgiveness, how to practice forgiveness, and then how to unlock forgiveness.

[3 : 52] That's our journey this morning. So, every one of us have people out there who, if you like, owe us in some way because of the way they've treated us or because of the way that we have perceived that they've treated us.

And we tend to hold that thing over them relationally in some kind of way. We might be demanding of them or we might just keep it bottled up inside and we don't speak about it.

Either way, it's not a radical generosity towards them. Forgiveness means that we release it. We need to let it go. Does that sound hard?

Does it sound hard? Well, the disciples said, yes, this is really hard. They thought it was too. You see, when Jesus starts talking about forgiveness, the response of the disciples is an emphatic, increase our faith.

Increase our faith. It's another way of saying, how on earth is this possible? How can we possibly live like this?

[5 : 04] Verse 4 is the enormity of the challenge Jesus puts before the disciples. He says, if your brother sins against you seven times in a day and seven times they come to you repentant, you must forgive.

Now, he's not encouraging them in any way to calculate how many times someone sins against you in the course of one day. The number seven was symbolic for Jewish people.

It's the number that means completeness, fullness, perfection, beyond which no more is possible. So what Jesus is saying here is a lot worse than we think it is.

Someone put it like this. If a person would wrong you as completely and as fully as any person could wrong another human being, you must forgive them.

Imagine the worst thing that anyone could ever possibly do to you. Something so bad that there's nothing beyond it that's possible.

[6 : 21] Jesus turns to his disciples and says, you must forgive them. That's why they're going, increase our faith. Increase our faith.

That's impossible, Jesus. It's an enormous challenge and yet it's one that we should not shrink back from because Jesus says there's an enormous danger for you if you don't forgive.

There's a little phrase right at the very beginning of our passage read out for us. It's easy to ignore. Verse three, it says very simply, watch yourselves.

We are called to watch ourselves when we are sinned against. Which is the exact opposite of what normally happens. Normally when someone wrongs us, we pay a great deal of attention to them.

Think about how much they've wronged us, how much they've hurt us. Jesus says we are to pay attention to ourselves because there is so much damage to ourselves if we don't.

[7 : 37] Watch yourselves. Watch yourselves because it is so hard to admit how angry you are at the people that have wronged you.

We say I'm fine. You know, I'm just a little upset. And we have to say that in order to maintain the image that we ourselves are good people.

and so we deny how embittered we actually are. And then we say things like, well, I forgive them but I don't forget.

Forgive but don't forget. Which translated means I'm not actively seeking their revenge but I'm hoping they do get some payback.

Okay. We should always assume this is what Jesus is saying here we'll watch always assume that you are more resentful and less forgiving and more controlled by what other people think of you than you are.

[8 : 57] Than you think you are. Jesus says watch yourself because it will destroy you. Watch yourself when you are wronged against it will destroy you.

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy I'm going to mention him I think in a couple of weeks as well a bit more extensive illustration but to simply say he had an extremely over over inflated view of himself is probably a good way to put it.

He was a notoriously difficult individual. He was married to a lady named Sonia and on the eve of his wedding to Sonia he gave Sonia his diaries for her to read which included his many many sexual experiences including one of which was with the servant who was currently living and working with them and the child that she had was his.

Now that should have raised a whole heap of alarms for Sonia in that moment but they went on into marriage anyway and the early days of their marriage were relatively happy but later on in life Sonia herself was known to launch into jealous rage and tirades when she was 80 years old she was writing in her own journal very very bitterly about how she had read those diaries decades before one historian wrote this about her for half a century for unforgiveness blamed her and in the process destroyed all love for her husband and herself Hebrews 12:15 says see to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many that's why

Jesus is here watch yourselves watch yourself because our anger will always call itself justified it will always call itself truth and righteousness and if we keep a hold of it it will defile us it's interesting that in the English language there are four words that all come from the same core root meaning wrath which is rage fury anger wreath which is a twisting together of flowers and vines and branches writhe which is to be bent out of shape and contorted and wraith which is a ghost like image of someone just before or after death Jesus says watch yourself watch yourself for the low level spiritual fever called self pity it will give you a sense of entitlement that because of what you've gone through you deserve a break you deserve a good treatment from other people watch yourself because if the good treatment does not come you will quickly slide into cynicism a joyless cynicism about people and life watch yourself because you will pull yourself back from people for example watch yourself if you can't forgive your parents for things that they've done it will distort your relationship with every single authority figure in life watch yourself if someone snubs you put yourself on high alert watch your heart because their snub of you is in fact the least of your problems the least of your problems beginning of this year

[13 : 05] I said that I told you my new year's resolutions one of which was to run a marathon and second of which was to set a PB running that marathon it was my first ever marathon and to set a PB doing it so providing I did the first I would achieve the second so two in one go and so I did that Matilda's didn't get one of these but it's too soon isn't it yeah there's a lot of pain there a lot of pain this achieving this was grueling it was grueling it was hard work and I will never ever do it again the cost was enormous another new year's resolution

I won't put it there I'll put it back another resolution was to not purchase any new clothing except for underwear which I don't bear second hand I failed in that one I bought this shirt this week do you know the hardest hardest hardest new resolution that I've had to really wrestle with not running a marathon but this issue I said one of my new year's resolutions this year was to grow in self forgetfulness forgetfulness and do you know you cannot grow in self forgetfulness without watching yourself ironically without watching yourself so all of this year since early January this year I have slowly and slowly been working through this book called

Forgive Forgive by Tim Keller I commend it to you I commend it to you and how hard it is to truly forgive and how essential it is to forgive in this past week I've come across four people from my past and every time the first thought in my mind was how those people had wronged me Steve watch yourself watch yourself so how do we practice forgiveness there are at least three things that we must do if we are to avoid becoming twisted and distorted by bitterness the first thing we must do is refuse to caricature the wrongdoer but we must instead identify with them if someone wrongs us the first thing we do is emphasize their faults and their failings

Jesus is making an important point here when he says if your brother sins and he's talking in this context about Christians wronging Christians he's reminding us that we are part of a common family when our temptation is to highlight the differences Jesus says no no no emphasize the unity in whose you are however the Bible doesn't just say Christians are to forgive Christians Mark 11 25 Jesus says when you stand praying if you hold anything against anyone forgive them anyone it's the same principle we must stress what we have in common with the other person every human being is a complex individual made in God's image with great dignity and worth normal practice when someone wrongs us is to reduce them down so that their status is attached to what they've done someone lies about us and we respond with they are a liar when human beings sorry we're human beings

I'm a human being but my enemy becomes some sort of cartoon character a villain we also share a common sinfulness with all people it's impossible to stay angry with someone unless we feel in some way superior to them when we say things like I would never do that we elevate ourselves over others in such a way that it makes us feel morally superior to them we might not sin in the same way but we are all just as sinful and instead of caricaturing them the enemy we must identify with them we must bring ourselves down and we must lift them up the second thing we need to do is to inwardly surrender the right for repayment and pay the debt ourselves the word that the word for forgive that Jesus uses in this passage is a very specific word that means to release a person from a financial debt it means in fact to absorb the debt yourself we can only forgive if inwardly we forego the seeking of repayment now this is exact opposite of how I've reacted on so many occasions especially with the people that

[19 : 12] I'm the closest to if someone makes me unhappy we want to make them unhappy if someone rejects me I want to reject them if someone destroys my reputation I want to destroy their reputation we trade hurt for hurt hurt for hurt for hurt and it spirals down and down and down not just destroying them but you in the process we might do it we might do it directly and tell them off and make them feel incredibly bad or we might do it behind their backs and gossip about them and ruin their reputation do it subtly because you've always got to get behind someone before you can stab them in the back the less obvious way we do it is through an inward nurturing of the hurt we replay the hurt over and over in our minds in order to stay angry whichever way we do it we feel like we're getting some kind of repayment but instead it's robbing us it's robbing us of joy and peace and contentment and we become harder we become bitter we become twisted a lack of relational generosity destroys us over the long term and for eternity we become the victim relational generosity might hurt in the short term because we refuse to repay and instead absorb the debt but it leads to joy and peace and freedom for eternity the third thing we are to do in verse three is if your brother or sister sins against you rebuke them that is it's not loving this is to answer the justice question it's not loving to let someone go on doing anything they want let's be frank though let's be frank with this one and with this verse it is so much easier to rebuke someone

I've always found when I'm particularly angry with them and want to give them a peace of my mind much easier then the purpose of the rebuke is not to put the other person down the purpose is to lift them up it is not to win an argument it is to win them over into relationship it is to restore relationship not to further break the relationship if that's the case it's not just what we say it is how we say it and it's particularly the motivation of why we are saying it the truth must be spoken in love for the other person if we have not inwardly forgiven the other person before we rebuke them then why are we rebuking them in other words what this passage is saying is we must seek the good and we must will the good of the person that we perceive to have wronged us if we do not seek their good then we haven't forgiven them and therefore watch yourselves so how do we unlock this kind of forgiveness my assumption is that if you've been listening and feeling some of this and potentially got some people in your mind already we're back to the plea of the apostles here increase our faith this is very hard where's the power to live like this now fortunately

Jesus has given us a great answer to that question in what follows in verse 5 what we have in verse 5 and to 10 is a parable and a metaphor connected together the parable starts in verse 7 suppose you were the lord the master and the owner of a farm and you had people plowing the paddocks and looking after your livestock at the end of the day would you say to them hey it's time to finish up come on in have dinner would you say oh thank you for the way that you've taken care of my sheep and looked after the cows really really appreciate that would you say that now us modern people would say well yeah I probably would say that you know it's good for staff morale to affirm them and you know it's a good HR principle we would do that sort of thing but this is first century Palestine it is not western world and rampant individualism and fragile egos the apostles hearing this would say no Jesus we would never say that no one would say that no land owner would say that these people in this parable are servants they're not slaves they're not slaves traded in the marketplace who have no rights at all but on the other hand they're not equivalent to your modern employee either these servants were people who fell into debt they became bankrupt and instead of being put into prison they were given an opportunity to work for the person who owed them who they owed the money to in order to work off their debt and it could be in first century

Palestine in Jewish law it could be for up to seven years but in that seven years this servant was never off duty until the debt was paid and so the master of the house would not thank them for helping so much you owe them you were simply doing your duty to pay down a debt and so Jesus got the apostles to imagine themselves as the masters helping them to see that it would be inappropriate for a servant to demand thanks from their masters and the apostles go yeah that's exactly right totally inappropriate especially when the master in this case has been so gracious as to not throw them into prison but has given them an opportunity to get out of debt that's the parable and then

Jesus flips it in verse 10 so you also when you have done everything you were told to do you should say we are unworthy servants we have only done our duty when you have done everything that you are told to do including forgive you should simply say I am doing my duty the self righteous moralistic religious person says I've done my duty God you now owe me the religious person is a servant acting like a master you owe me Jesus saying that when we refuse to forgive we are forgetting who we are we are servants acting like a master he says roundabout way what he's saying here is the

[27 : 44] Christian knows that they owe God everything he gives us life he has brought us back to himself at great cost to himself he is the king and we are the servants and when we say I'm not going to forgive that person we are swapping roles we are playing God we think we know what people deserve when in fact we hardly even know what they've been through in life what they've done in life or what their motives are Jesus also uses a metaphor to help us see how we can live a life of forgiving verse 6 if you have a faith as small as a mustard seed you can say to this mulberry tree be uprooted and plant in the sea and it will obey you Jesus saying that if you have even the smallest understanding of what has been done for you in Jesus even the slightest understanding that you are a sinner saved by grace if we understand the good news of the radical generosity of God in the gospel to us he said you can forgive you just need a little you can just forgive just the smallest understanding of that is enough to change your heart the only way of getting out of the behaviour and the attitude of being a servant acting like a king is in fact to marvel at the king who became a servant it's the only way we will never be long suffering until we marvel at his suffering on the cross for us we will never be able to forgive other people's tiny debts towards us until we marvel at

Jesus dying on the cross to pay an incalculable debt that we owe against God Jesus is the judge of the universe who left the judgment seat and got judged for us for our sin in such a way that it would transform our hearts that we stop being judges of others even as he was dying on the cross even as he was painfully dying on the cross his words were father forgive them because they don't know what they're doing forgive them only as we look to the cross look to Jesus him there for us can we be changed to people who radically generously forgive and we're going to do that now as we share in the Lord's Supper it's a great way to I think to lead from this message into a response to the gospel

Matthew 26 we read when they were eating Jesus took bread and when he given thanks he broke it and gave it to his disciples saying take and eat this is my body then he took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them saying drink from it all of you this is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins and so I invite you to come to Jesus Matthew 11 come to Jesus who says come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls come to the one who should be holding our sin against us but whose heart is humble and gentle towards us always grace

I'm going to invite my helpers down they're going to come and distribute this to you quickly I emphasize the word quickly there for a reason not that I want to rush the process of your reflection at all but the Lord's Supper is an outward and a visible sign of the grace shown to us in the Lord Jesus Christ and as we share these elements together we are visually confronted with God's love for us his gentle and lowly heart towards us for us who are unworthy it's also an opportunity for us to be strengthened by faith in the one whose body was given his blood was shed for our forgiveness so let's pray Father you are worthy to receive all glory and honor and allegiance because you are the one who created all things and sustained all things by the power of your word we thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ that through his sinless life his sacrificial death and his powerful resurrection he paid the complete debt of sin and that he has forgiven and eternally delivered those who trust in him from your judgment we thank you for these small gifts of the wafer of the juice and we pray that we who take them now in remembrance of the cost of

Christ's forgiveness of us his love for us that we might relish in his forgiveness for us particularly as we look forward to his sharing in his eternal inheritance we thank you father that you spiritually feed us you nourish us through your son Jesus may we be strengthened and comforted as we remember that your heart towards us is always gentle and lowly sorry Lord Jesus that we hold snubs that we have received against others and that you have forgiven us an incalculable debt we thank you that in the gospel you are assure us of your goodness and your love we pray that you might renew us by your holy spirit and unite us together in your son transform our hearts that we might treasure

[34 : 06] Jesus above all things and it's in his name we pray amen you