

The Blessings of Forgiveness, Part 3

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 2:5-11

Code: 47-10

We have had the privilege for a number of months now to be studying in 2 Corinthians, a wonderful epistle Paul wrote to the church for which he had such great love. We find ourselves in chapter 2 verses 5 to 11, a section dealing with the matter of forgiveness. You remember the story, I'm sure, if you've been with us. Paul had made a visit to the Corinthian church, a brief visit. At that time he ran into some false teachers who had come there and led a mutiny against him. One of the deceived members of the Corinthian church had no doubt confronted Paul face-to-face, embarrassed him, shamed him, denigrated him publicly. Paul told the church you need to deal with that man, you need to discipline that man for the sake of unity, for the sake of holiness. And they did. It is apparent from the text that the man repented. And Paul now writes this text to invite the Corinthians to take that man back fully into fellowship.

Let's begin at verse 5 and I'll read this text. "If any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me but in some degree, in order not to say too much, to all of you. Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him lest somehow such a one be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. For to this end also I wrote that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. But whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, in order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes."

It was time for the Corinthian church to forgive the man. No doubt there were some in the congregation that were saying, "Well wait a minute, the man repented, he repented a little soon, maybe," but would have wanted to inflict a little more pain. They had wished he hadn't repented quite so quickly so they could have abused him a little longer, after all, he spoke against the Apostle Paul. And so the Apostle Paul is writing to say in verse 5, it's no issue with me, I'm not taking this as something personal. Down in verse 10 he is saying, if I forgave anything, that is to say it's such a small issue that there really didn't need to be much forgiveness from me, if I forgave anything it was just for your sakes. So please, don't continue to inflict pain on this man for my sake, this is not an issue to me. Forgive the man, affirm your love to the man, embrace him and bring him back into the fellowship, give him full reconciliation or Satan is going to be able to succeed in creating division in the congregation. It is a plea for forgiveness.

And those people who wanted to turn the screws a little bit and add pain to pain to the man were probably going to lean on the Apostle Paul and they were going to say...Well, we need to inflict more pain on him, after all he offended Paul and I'm sure Paul is greatly offended and in order to compensate Paul for this tremendous embarrassment publicly, we really need to make this man pay. And Paul is saying forget that all together, the man repented, he owes me nothing, I am not the issue, love him, reconcile him.

It's a wonderful, wonderful chapter on forgiveness. Now we've gone through this text all the way to verse 11. We might well move on to the next text, but I'm not going to do that and there are a couple of reasons. It has been a great encouragement to my heart that over the last two weeks while preaching these texts it has come to my attention that many of you have gone to one another and expressed forgiveness. Oftentimes people have met and with tears asked someone to forgive them or granted forgiveness that was withheld. These stories have come back to me and they've been a tremendous encouragement to my heart. And if God is working, and He is, in this area of forgiveness, then whom am I to leave too soon the theme?

Secondly, others of you are coming to me and asking me questions about the things I didn't say regarding forgiveness and could I fill in some of the blanks? So in order to accommodate what the Holy Spirit may be well doing in our congregation in regard to forgiveness and in order to bring about even more conviction on those of you who as of yet have not gotten the message, and in order to fill in the blanks that some of you may still be querying about, I will speak this morning about forgiveness.

What makes forgiveness perhaps more difficult in the culture in which we live is that this society sees forgiveness not as a virtue, not even as a necessity, but as a demonstration of weakness. We live in a society that is totally on the road to self-destruction, not just American culture but it seems to be even around the world, because we have an utter and complete disregard for forgiveness. We exalt vengeance, retaliation. Consequently people are filled with bitterness, anger, hate and vengeance. And retaliation is sought on many fronts. Such attitudes are approved. It's a frightening world really to live in.

We've had chaos in the past. We've had racial problems in the past. This world has never yet seen the kind of animosity, bitterness, hate, retaliation, racism it is going to see in the future, because forgiveness has been turned into a sign of weakness, rather than a virtue. People make heroes out of the vindictive, they make heroes out of the vengeful, the Rambos, the Dirty Harrys who find joy in the kill. In America we have 250 thousand law suits a year. We have 70 percent of the world's attorneys just to keep up with them. People are after every single pound of flesh that they can possibly get. And even the people helpers, the sociologists and the psychologists say it is not healthy to forgive. A new book on psychology has a chapter, the title of that chapter is, "You don't have to forgive." The writer of the book says you should place the blame for all your present problems strictly

on the people who have the blame who have victimized you. Guilt for everything is pushed off on somebody else and left there until vengeance finally exhausts itself. Forgiveness is seen as a sign of weakness.

The price of vengeance, by the way, is very, very high. It fills culture with hatred, bitterness, animosity, wrath, retribution. And beyond what it does to the society is what it does to the individual. First of all, it imprisons people in their past. They can never get on with life. As long as you fail to forgive the offender, the one who offended you, as long as you fail to forgive you are shackled to him. You are shackled to that past act. The pain is kept alive and you are picking at the open sore, keeping it from healing. You are sentencing yourself to feel as bad now as you did then with no relief in sight. You are choosing to love to hate.

Not only are you being imprisoned in your past, but you're becoming a victim of bitterness and bitterness is an infectious cancer in the heart, it is devastating, it is malignant. It produces harassing thoughts and memories that distort your whole life. Anger dominates rages, comes out of control, emotions are unchecked. You entertain desperate ideas for revenge. Every conversation becomes a forum for slander. Every conversation becomes an opportunity for defamation and lies and joy is gone and peace is gone and life is filled with turmoil.

On the other hand, forgiveness is freeing, liberating, peace-giving, joy bringing. Scripture gives at least 75 word pictures of forgiveness. Here are a few. To forgive is to turn the key, open the cell door and let the prisoner walk free. To forgive is to write in large letters across a debt, "Nothing Owed." To forgive is to pound the gavel in a courtroom and declare not guilty. To forgive is to shoot an arrow so high and so far that it can never be found. To forgive is to take out the garbage and dispose of it, leaving the house fresh and clean. To forgive is to loose the anchor and set the ship to sail. To forgive is to grant a full pardon to a condemned and sentenced criminal. To forgive is to loosen a strangle hold on a wrestling opponent. To forgive is to sandblast a wall of graffiti, leaving it looking brand new and no memory left of what was there. To forgive is to smash a clay pot into a thousand small pieces so that it can never be reassembled. Forgiveness is a marvelous virtuous liberating, loving attitude and act.

It makes sense to forgive. It is healthy. It is wholesome. It is sensible. It relieves tension. It produces joy. It brings peace. It solicits love. More than that, as I said last time, forgiveness is the most noble thing one saint can do for another. It is hum...it is Christianity at its highest level, Christian to Christian. And over the last couple of weeks we have tried to look at this text and let it unfold for us the magnanimity, the greatness of forgiveness.

But in order to sum it all up and perhaps to encompass some things that we didn't cover, I want to give you a list of things that express the sheer virtue and nobility of forgiveness. I'm going to give you ten of them this morning, I know you don't believe it but I did it in the first service. We'll get through.

Some of this will pull together elements of what has been said. Some will be brand new to you.

First of all, the virtue and nobility of forgiveness can be seen in that forgiveness is the most godlike act a person can do. Not is it...not only is it the most noble act man to man, or woman to woman, not only is it the most noble act that one Christian can do for another, but it is the most godlike act a person can do. Nothing that you can possibly do is more like God than to forgive. Never are you more like Him than when you forgive. God is a forgiving God. Who is a pardoning God like you? Says the prophet. Who but God overlooks a transgression, passes by an iniquity? God is a saving God. God is a forgiving God. Forgiveness is a verbally declared personally given promise, you remember, that the sin will never be remembered, never be brought up again. Forgiveness affirms that there is no anger, there is no hatred, there is no desire for vengeance, there is no retaliation because there remains no guilt, no blame. The sin is forgotten, removed, eliminated, never to be entertained again. It is the promise that the issue is gone. And that is precisely what God does to the repentant sinner, and never are you more like God than when to one who comes to you and repents you offer forgiveness.

The beauty of that kind of forgiveness and the nature of it and the character of it is demonstrated most aptly in Luke 15 in the wonderful parable of the prodigal son. You remember the story of the boy who took what belonged to him by way of inheritance, not by way of achievement or earning. He took what he had not earned and he went away and spent it, as the Bible says, living wildly. Human foolishness at its greatest extent. He fell in with some people who took advantage of him. They exploited him until they drained him of all that he had and when he had nothing, he stood in his own misery eating pig slop.

Dying of hunger in a pig sty he came to his senses and said, "My father's servants live better than this, I'll go home and become one of them." In his humiliation he sought only to be the lowest slave on the list of slaves. He sought the bottom, not the top. He never really expected forgiveness, to say nothing of restoration. He just wanted a chance to get a meal and have a roof over his head, that's all. He knew he had forfeited the privilege of a son. He knew he had no claim to anything noble, lovely, beautiful, comfortable, or generous. All he wanted was a place to put his head and some food better than the pigs were eating and so he started on the road back.

It is precisely at this point that we move from the penitent sinner to the father and we see how God forgives. Jesus tells us how to forgive like God forgives in the story. The father did not wait for the sinner to arrive. When the father saw him a long way off, his response was...Oh-oh, no, no, here he comes, I know what he wants, he wants a place to stay and he wants a meal and I'm going to make him pay for what he's done. That wasn't the attitude.

You remember the story, the father sees the approaching son a long way off and what does the father do? He runs to him. He falls on his neck with tears. He kisses him. He embraces him. And before the young man can even really understand what is going on, he is literally smothered in forgiving love. He's embraced. All he wanted was a little better than a pig's sty. All he wanted was a place to put his head and a simple meal to eat. But what he got was a ring on his finger and robe and what he got was a feast and a celebration and a festival and nobility and privilege and elevation and exaltation. And that's how God forgives. And that's how we're to forgive.

When we see the approaching sinner a far off, we run. The first signs of repentance are enough for us. The first of sorry is sufficient to elicit the embrace and the kiss and the love and the ring and the robe and the feast. The forgiving father shows us how to forgive and never are we more like Him than when we forgive like that. Not reluctantly but eagerly, not indifferently but passionately.

Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, after having been tried at Westminster and condemned to death with no just cause, said this to his judges, and it is a great statement, About to die at the hands of unjust men, he said this, quote: "As St. Paul held the clothes of those who stoned Stephen to death and as they are both now saints in heaven and shall continue there friends forever, so I verily trust shall most heartily pray that though your lordships have now here on earth been judges to my condemnation, we may nevertheless hereafter cheerfully meet in heaven in everlasting salvation," end quote.

The man was praying for the eternal fellowship in glory of those who were unjustly executing him. So prayed Jesus, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." So prayed Stephen, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." That is godlike. God has been so overtly, so blatantly, so unjustly offended, blasphemed and dishonored, yet does he magnanimously, eagerly, passionately and comprehensively forgive and so are we to forgive. This is a call to be like God. Forgive the way that God forgives.

In Matthew 5 verse 44 and 45 Jesus said, "I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." As you embrace your enemies, you are godlike.

Secondly, the virtue of forgiveness is manifest also in the recognition that the sixth commandment does not just forbid murder, the sixth commandment, Exodus 20:13, does not forbid just murder. It is not murder alone which is involved in the prohibition, "Thou shalt not kill." But rather in that prohibition is the murderous attitude. All anger, all wrath, all malice, all lack of forgiveness, all desire for revenge, all vengeance is forbidden in the intent of that command, and that by the very words of Jesus Himself who said you have heard that the ancients were told you shall not commit murder, Matthew 5:21, and whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court. And that, by the way, was the rabbinical teaching. The ancients said don't murder someone, if you do you're going to be liable to

the court. But I say to you, that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court. And whoever shall say to his brother Raca, shall be guilty before the supreme court. And whoever shall say you fool shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. If you think by not killing someone you have therefore demonstrated your righteousness, you're wrong. For if ever you have hated you have violated that command. First John 3:15 says, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer."

Jesus then strips the Jewish leaders in that text of their self-confidence. He shatters the illusion of their righteousness. At that point of the law He swept away, He unmasked all their murderous vice and unforgiveness. If you say to someone "Raca" we don't know what the translation of that word is, we don't know any modern equivalent that would be an exact translation of it. It is some kind of slanderous epithet that was thrown at someone you hated, a term of derision, a term of abuse, a term of arrogant contempt, a term of hate. And then to say "you fool, you stupid, you godless one" was to curse and that is so serious that one doing that would be guilty enough to go to hell. You don't have to kill to go to hell. You don't have to kill to violate the sixth command, all you have to do is not forgive and carry bitterness, hatred, and venomous animosity. The one who won't forgive, who won't love his neighbor as himself violates the sixth commandment clearly. If you're angry with someone else and it turns to bitterness and hostility and vengeance, that too is a murderous heart.

And recognize that it expresses selfishness and you're going to have to kill your selfishness because it is exactly that that

aggravates you about the faults of others. If you're humble enough, no one can really offend you because you see yourself as unworthy of anything any way.

Thirdly, another principle that speaks of the virtue of forgiveness is that whoever has offended you has offended God more. Whoever has offended you has offended God more. Now follow my thinking...and if God who is the most holy has forgiven the offender against Him, can you the least holy forgive the offender against you? It's a reasoning from the greater to the lesser. Let me say it again. Whoever has offended you has offended God more. And if God who is the greater can forgive, can you who are the lesser forgive?

Any wrong done against me is a small thing. See how Paul discounts it in the text? If this has caused sorrow, he says in verse 5, it certainly hasn't caused it to me, why should I take it personally, I'm no one. In verse 10, "If I've forgiven anything," it's as if it's not even an issue to be thought of or regarded, if I've done anything, some small forgiveness I might have given, it was certainly for your sakes not for my own, I don't take this personally. I certainly am not personally offended. This isn't some vendetta on my part. You don't need to turn the screws on this guy to make me happy.

Paul could readily forgive someone else a small offense because he had been forgiven such a massive offense by God who was before a blasphemer and injurious and a murderer and decides to call himself the chief of sinners, him having been forgiven he found it in his own heart rather easy to forgive those who mildly offended him. The most holy, the most supremely offended is God. You remember the psalmist prayed in Psalm 51, "Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned and done this iniquity." The sin offends God. That's the...that's the issue. It is only incidental that it might have offended us. And since we are really incidental to the sinful offense, it certainly should be within the realm of our ability to forgive when God who is the object of that offense can himself forgive. Who are we, unholy, unworthy, undeserving, to imagine that we should not be offended? And if we are, we have some right to unending vengeance or lack of forgiveness?

So, we forgive because God forbids anger and He forbids hate and He forbids attitudes of vengeance. We forgive because He has forgiven the one who most offended Him and cannot we forgive the one who offends us? And we forgive because it is godlike and we're His children.

Fourthly, and this expands on the third point, it is only reasonable that those who have been forgiven the greater amount of sin can forgive the lesser. And that takes us back to Matthew 18, doesn't it? In Matthew 18 in that tremendous parable that speaks to the issue of forgiveness, tells about a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his slaves, his regional governors, no doubt, and he began to settle and one came in who owed him ten thousand talents which would be an utterly unpayable debt, just a vast amount of money that in a lifetime could never be paid. But since the man didn't have the means to repay, you remember the lord said, "Well a proper punishment is to get anything I can to get out of you, so sell his wife, sell his children, get everything he has and take what you can get." The slave fell down in verse 26, prostrating himself before the man who was king and said, "Have patience with me, I'll repay you everything." It was ignorant penitence, he couldn't really pay it all but his heart was right. So the man forgave him. He had compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. And that's the picture of God, the penitent sinner comes, doesn't really fully understand the vastness of the debt, comes in ignorant but genuine penitence and God in His mercy and grace forgives the man.

Then inexplicably, unbelievably the slave goes out, finds one of his fellow slaves who owes him a hundred denarii, that's a few months work, grabs him, chokes him. Says, "Pay what you owe." Throws him in prison until he pays everything, even though the man pleads for forgiveness.

The incongruity here is obvious to anybody who reads. Here is a man forgiven an unpayable debt, he won't forgive a man a small debt. And that is the whole point of this fourth point, God has forgiven a massive incurred debt. From the time that you were born into the world you were an affront to God. Everything you thought, everything you did, everything you said fell short of His glory. Everything offended Him. And He is infinitely sensitive to every iniquity. You and I can't even keep track of our

own sin, yet...let alone the sins of others against us. God feels every blow against His glory.

He therefore has the accumulated mass of all iniquities that you have ever committed that have offended Him, from the time of your birth till the moment now. The full accumulation of the wicked wretchedness of our lives is felt by God...all of it. That is the unpayable debt. Before you were a Christian everything in your life offended Him. You hated Him. You were an enemy. There wasn't anything good in you and there wasn't any of you who were good. Everything about you was an offense to God. And yet in spite of all of that accumulated offense, that massive uncountable debt incurred against the holiness of God, in one moment of faith in Jesus Christ He forgave you all of it, purely on the basis of the mercy and the grace of His own character.

Shall you who have been offended once, twice, three times or four times by somebody not forgive? What incongruity. What reprehensible conduct. What insensitive gratitude. What mockery of forgiveness. Somebody offends you once and you say, "Boy, I'm not going to take that." And somebody talks you into forgiveness and you say, "Well, once maybe, but if they do it again, I don't know." And then somebody reads you rabbinic law and the rabbis said, "Forgive three times," and you say, okay, okay, I'll go three. And the fourth offense comes and you say, "Well that's the end." And the somebody takes you to Matthew 18 and you hear Peter say, "How many times shall I forgive? Seven?" And you say I'll go for it, seven, that's as far as I'm going though. And then you hear the words of Jesus, "No, seventy times seven." And you say "Whoops, 490 times I have to forgive?" Not only that, would you please remember how many times God has forgiven you, keeps on forgiving you and will forgive you? And God is of a holier standard than you will ever know. God has comprehensively and completely forgiven you, it is absolutely inconceivable, it is the worst kind of ingratitude when you have been forgiven the greater amount of sins to find that you won't forgive the lesser ones. What an ugly and disgusting attitude that is.

Number five, the one who does not forgive will not enjoy the love of other Christians. If you have unforgiveness in your heart, bitterness in your heart, animosity in your heart, anger in your heart toward someone, you're going to forfeit fellowship because as soon as the other believers find out and whether they find out the specifics of just read your attitude, they're going to alienate you. In verse 31, in this account of Matthew 18, in the parable, when the fellow slaves, the friends of this guy who wouldn't forgive saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved, came and reported to their lord all that had happened. That's a sort of parabolic way to describe church discipline. They took this guy to the Lord. They went to heaven with this guy. They put him on the top of the prayer list and it wasn't for physical healing. They wanted the Lord to do something. Why? Because he was leaven, he was poison, he was leavening the whole lump, he was staining the unstained garment of the purity of the church. He was a bad influence. They didn't want other believers seeing this kind of attitude. That's...that's the imagery here. And they went to the Lord and they said, "Lord, You've got to do something about this guy." And all of a sudden, instead of becoming those who restore and hold up and pick up and lift up and comfort, encourage, they become those who go to the Lord and ask the

Lord to do something harsh in order to bring him out of his sin.

One of the things that should happen in the church is when there is someone who carries a heart of unforgiveness, the believers should see that individual as leaven, as something that stains the church, something that destroys its unity, something that will...someone that will cause a rift and a fracture and generally speaking that kind of anger is never self-contained, it spreads to the people that they talk to and it becomes the thing that fractures and destroys the unity of the church. And so the church knowing that is eager to go to the Lord and say, "Lord, You've got to deal with this man."

Do you ever pray prayers like that? Do you ever find yourself in the imprecatory psalms praying that the Lord will come down and crush the people that are violating the standard of purity? You can and you should. We pray for people all the time, we pray somewhat superficially for them. I don't know how often you've prayed that the Lord will somehow come into the life of someone in sin and crush that sin out of them by whatever means God would choose. That's a prayer for their good, isn't it? They no longer are able to be a part of the stimulation of love and good works that Hebrews 10:24 talks about, they're rather stimulating to hate and bad works and they don't help the process of the church. As I said last time, unforgiveness tears the church to shreds cause it escalates and it spreads like a prairie fire, the bitterness of one heart to many.

So what these friends are doing is basically saying is we don't want anything to do with this guy, we're turning him over to you to discipline him. Like the Apostle Paul who came into the church at Ephesus prior to Timothy, took Hymenaeus and Alexander, turned them over to Satan so they'd learn not to blaspheme. Like the man in 1 Corinthians 5 who was having a relationship with his father's wife, an incestuous relationship, and the Apostle Paul says you have to deal with that man. He's destroying your fellowship. And so immediately the sinner is alienated from the fellowship. There must be that price. That's why church discipline says that if a man doesn't repent, you put him out, you treat him like a pagan and a tax gatherer, like an outcast. There's a price to pay for an unforgiving attitude and it is the alienation from the fellowship.

Number six, not just the alienation, that's sort of a negative side, what you can't enjoy, but there's a positive side, failure to forgive results in divine chastening...failure to forgive results in divine chastening. Not just absence from fellowship, but presence in suffering. Because what happens in verse 32 in the parable, then summoning him, after the lord has heard this from those who came and told him about what the man had done, he calls him in. He says, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me, should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?" and it was absolutely unthinkable the way the man was acting and his lord was moved with anger. And here is God with a holy anger against a sinning saint who willingly will accept all of his forgiveness and won't give any to anybody else. That kind of double standard, that kind of ingratitude, that kind of iniquity is very serious. The Lord is moved with anger and he hands him over to the tormentors, literally...to those who will apply stress, hardship and difficulty against

him, those who will chasten him until he has rendered the true forgiveness is what I believe is meant by the last phrase in verse 34, "Until he should repay all that was owed."

What did he owe? I really believe before God he owes forgiveness. Remember James 2:13, judgment will be merciless to those who show no mercy. The unforgiving brother will satisfy God only when he forgives...until then he will feel chastening. If you are struggling in your life and you're not seeing the hand of God and the joy of God and the blessing of God in your life, and life is a real painful struggle, it may well be that you have an unforgiving heart. That is crucial.

Let me give you a number seven in our list. Number seven, the one who does not forgive, and here we come to the heart of the matter, the one who does not forgive will not be forgiven. The one who does not forgive will not be forgiven.

You say, "Now wait a minute, I thought in the parable the man was forgiven everything." He was, and that's in the justifying sense, in the salvific sense. That is at the point of salvation your sins are forgiven, past, present and future, forever. Your life is secure in Christ in eternity as well as in time. That can't change. But there is beyond eternal forgiveness, which is an issue of justification, there is temporal forgiveness which is an issue of sanctification.

Let me put it to you this way. I love my wife, I love my children. In fact, it would be impossible, inconceivable to me that they could ever go beyond the bounds of my love. They could go beyond the bounds of my will, and occasionally do through the years, of course. They could go beyond the bounds of my advice, and occasionally do. But I cannot imagine they could ever go beyond the bounds of my love. In fact, the further they go beyond the bounds of my will and my desire for them, the deeper the pain, right? They would never...they would never reach a point where they would be beyond my love. It is my love that pains me out there. They could never go beyond my love because I am unconditionally committed to love them. It is not only a choice, it is all wrapped up in who I am and the emotions that I carry as a human being. Plus I think I love them with more than a human love because I love them at least in some small way with a love of Christ that is in me. So it would be inconceivable that my children could ever go beyond the pale of my love, no matter what they did in life, no matter how far they went away from the things that are precious to me, all they would do would be wound me deeply because my love would be as strong as ever.

The same would be true with God. You could never go beyond the limits of His love. You could never get outside His love and His love is that ultimate encircling that keeps you in the kingdom. They would never be...they would never cease to be my children, they would never cease to be the children of my love, no matter what they did. But, they could take themselves not...well not out of my comprehensive love, they could take themselves...themselves out of the joy of our relationship, right? They could sever that.

And that, I believe, is what you have here. You have an eternal forgiveness wrapped up in justification. And you have a temporal forgiveness wrapped up in sanctification. And while on the general sense my sins are all forgiven, yet as I live my life day in and day out, if I don't forgive others, the Scripture says God doesn't forgive me. Matthew chapter 6 verses 14 and 15, Mark chapter 11 verses 25 and 26, if you don't forgive others, I won't forgive you, and it couldn't be more clear cut.

Now if we make that an issue of salvation, then salvation comes when you forgive someone else's sin. So if I forgive you your sins, I'm saved by that. That would be salvation by...what?...by works, that's not possible. So we're not talking about a salvation related, or a forgiveness related to justification or salvation but one related to sanctification. Not settling the issue of future blessing, but settling the issue of present blessing. Jesus said in the disciples' prayer, He said, "Forgive us our...pray like this...forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," and then followed that up by saying and if you don't forgive others, then I'm not going to forgive you. I don't know about you, but I don't want to be living under God's...without God's forgiveness. I don't want to be going through life knowing that I'm accumulating a temporal debt of sin against God, not that's going to cause me to lose my salvation, but that's going to cause me to lose my blessing, my joy and my peace, God's power in my life.

Sometimes you...as a pastor, I look at a lot of people, I talk to a lot of people, I meet a lot of people in the life of the church, and as I go through that, sometimes I find empty, dry, insipid, dull, joyless, powerless kind of weak Christians and very often in my heart I wonder whether all of that is because God has not forgiven them because they have not forgiven someone else. That's tragic. Forgiveness is such a wonderful, liberating thing to give. If for nothing else it frees God to forgive you and to put you back in the place of bountiful blessing.

We're to forgive then because it is like God whose children we are. We're to forgive because it's forbidden not to forgive in the command not to murder. We're to forgive because the Most High forgives, shouldn't the least? We're to forgive because we've been forgiven the greatest amount of sins, can't we forgive a few against us? We're to forgive because we will otherwise forfeit the joy of fellowship and the opportunity to experience the love of the brethren. We're to forgive or we will be chastened. And we're to forgive or we won't be forgiven and God will hold our iniquities against us in this world and we will forfeit blessing.

Just a few more, number eight, the absence of forgiveness renders us unfit to worship. The absence of forgiveness renders us unfit for worship. In Matthew chapter 5 again, familiar words coming from our Lord, "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go your way, first be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your offering." To put that in modern terms, if you pulled into the parking lot at 8:15 and you arrive at the door of the auditorium at 8:25 in time for

the early service, or you arrive here at 10:15 in time for this service and you remember that there's something between you and a brother that is not resolved, there is some lack of forgiveness in your heart toward that individual, stop...go back...find him in the patio, or get in your car, go there, make that right and then come back. That's what it's saying.

Don't affront God by a hypocritical kind of worship because the fact of the matter is you don't have any business worshipping God because if you're not forgiving someone else, then God's not forgiving you and you're not here with clean hands and a pure heart that's required for one who enters the holy hill, right? Don't draw near to God with the intention to worship Him if you have an unsettled grudge with someone else. Reconciliation has to proceed...precede worship. Whatever that animosity is in that relationship, if you know it's there either because you have not repented, or because you have not forgiven one who has repented, go make it right. In worship, as in prayer, if you regard iniquity in your heart according to Psalm 66:18, the Lord will not hear you. So if you want to have an unforgiving heart, your sins won't be forgiven, you can't worship and God won't answer your prayers. Now I don't know about you but that doesn't sound like a very inviting condition.

Number nine, not to forgive is to usurp the role of God. Not to forgive is to usurp the role of God. It is this, folks, is the ultimate ego trip. When you say in your heart I won't forgive, you then are saying two things...one, you're saying, "Well, God might forgive you but I have higher standards," right? You're saying, "I know, God's an easier deal than I am. God's law is not as demanding as mine." What blasphemy, what unimaginable pride.

Secondly, you're not only doing that but you're also saying, "Give me that sword, God, give me that sword." And you're taking the sword of divine judgment out of the hand of the Almighty and saying I'm going to wield this deal myself. You're rejecting Romans 12:14, 17 to 21, where it says, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord." And you're deciding God is too slow, too unjust, too indifferent, too weak, or too tolerant and you're saying, "Give me that sword, I'll do some hacking on my own." That's a blasphemous thought, isn't it?, that the absence of forgiveness is the presence of pride to the degree that you literally are usurping the role of God.

God alone can deal with sin. He has the perfect and true understanding of the offense, you're limited. He has the highest standard, your's is lower. He has the authority unlimited, you have none. He's impartial, you're not. He's omniscient and eternal, sees the end from the beginning, you don't see anything, you're short-sighted and ignorant, so am I. He's wise and good and acts in perfect holiness, and we're blinded by anger. Better keep that sword out of our hands or lots of folks are going to get hacked up and it's not going to be just. It makes no sense for me to be the judge, makes all the sense in the world for Him to be the judge. So you just say, "Vengeance belongs to the Lord," we just go about our business, forgive from the heart. And if God wants to bring some retribution, if God wants to bring some chastening, if God wants to act against that individual, let Him act.

One final point, this is very important, one final point. Your injuries and your offenses, the injuries and offenses against you, listen to this, are what mature you. The offenses against you are your trials, folks, they are your trials. All the difficulties, all the criticisms, all the injustices, all the offenses, all the persecutions, all the mistreatments, all the unkindnesses of life, all the things that people do to violate you and victimize you and whatever else, all those things all wrapped together constitute your trials. Would you agree? You say, "Oh these are the trials of life, what a trial that child is, what a trial that guy is..." They're all your trials.

Now I want to remind you something about your trials. Listen to this, James 1:3...or 1:2, "Consider it all...what?...joy, my brethren, when you encounter various...what?...trials." So you rejoice in all those sins against you. It is the opposite of an unforgiving attitude, it is a rejoicing attitude. You say, "Why am I rejoicing?" Because the testing or the trial of your faith produces endurance, and endurance has a perfect result. So, when I am assaulted and battered and abused and victimized and mistreated, and maltreated, and whatever it might be, I embrace that as God's means to my spiritual maturity.

After you have suffered a little while, 1 Peter 5:10 says the Lord make you perfect. The end of that wonderful text in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul says, "I am well content with weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions and difficulties..." Why? "For Christ's sake because when I'm weak then I'm strong." Out of all those debilitating assaults in my life, out of all of those iniquitous actions against me, all of the unjust trials, all of the beatings with rods, all of the whippings, all of the stonings, all of everything that I've endured, in it all I see the hand of God making me strong. So a proper response to sin is not bitterness, anger and revenge, it is to embrace that offense, see it as a trial that God intends to use to make you strong as you respond rightly to it.

These are the reasons why we forgive. The model of forgiveness is summed up magnificently in 1 Peter chapter 2, turn to it...1 Peter chapter 2. Verse 19 says that we should bear up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. It's going to happen in life. People are going to offend us, sin against us. Go down to verse 21, you've been called for this purpose since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example to you to follow in His steps. Here's how he handled suffering...unjust sin, violation. He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth, so He didn't deserve the treatment He got. But listen, verse 23, "While being reviled He did not revile in return, while suffering He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously." He just gave Himself to God and said, "God, vengeance is Yours, You'll do whatever is right, You'll do whatever is just, I will not retaliate, I will not strike back, I will not utter threats, I commit Myself to You." And He even went beyond that, verse 24, He just Himself bore the very sins in His body on the cross of the people that would put Him to death. What grace, what love, and He was being wounded and offering those wounds to heal the very ones who inflicted them. That's the attitude.

He knew the purpose of God was working out in His unjust suffering. They were sinning vilely against Him. But in it all He didn't take the offense personally. He turned over the vengeance to God and sought to redeem the very people who had brought Him that unjust pain.

Summing it up, an anonymous saint long ago wrote, "Revenge indeed seems often sweet to men, but it is only sugared poison and its aftertaste is bitter as hell. Forgiving, enduring love alone is sweet and blissful. It enjoys peace in the consciousness of God's favor. By forgiving it gives away and annihilates the injury, it treats the injurer as if he had not injured and therefore feels no more the smart and sting that he inflicted. Forgiveness is a shield from which all the fiery darts of the wicked one harmlessly rebound. Forgiveness brings heaven to earth and heaven's peace into the sinful heart. Forgiveness is the image of God, the forgiving Father. Forgiveness is the advancement of Christ's Kingdom in the world."

And now, our Father, we can only ask as we conclude that what we now know about forgiveness might pass from our heads to our hearts. What we understand to be true of forgiveness and to be commanded might become the way of life. Fill us with forgiveness who have been forgiven so much. May we see the atrocities of an unforgiving attitude. And, Father, may this fellowship be a fellowship of forgivers and may we be ever and always running eagerly, passionately to embrace the penitent and not with a marginal tolerance but with a ring and a robe and a feast. May we forgive the way You forgive that the world may know that we are Your children. We pray for the glory and the honor of Your dear Son who gave His life for us, our Savior even Jesus Christ. Amen.

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