

## **The Key to Maintaining Family Unity**

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Now I said this morning that I was going to continue in our discussion about the fulfilled family and talk about the most important virtue in any relationship, the most important ingredient in holding a marriage together or keeping a family united, something that is absolutely crucial to the success of a marriage and a family. I know that some of you were guessing this afternoon, some of my family were making suggestions about what they thought the subject was going to be.

What is it most importantly that causes relationships to be sustained over the long haul? In a word, it is forgiveness...it is forgiveness. Why do I say that? Well first of all, no matter who you're married to, they're going to fail you, they're going to offend you, they're going to misunderstand you, they're going to misinterpret what you mean by what you do. You are going to offend them, you are going to sin against them, you are going to disappoint them. This is true in any kind of relationship because we are sinful creatures, we are fallen creatures. And what essentially keeps that from destroying relationships is forgiveness...forgiveness.

In fact, in Proverbs chapter 19 and verse 11 it says that it is a man's glory to overlook a transgression. Never is a man more lofty or more noble than when he forgives. And, frankly, we live in a society that would not accept this, would not acknowledge it. And consequently relationships are flying apart all over the place. We live in a sad, pathetic society on the road to really total self-destruction. And one of the main contributors of that self-destruction is a disdain for forgiveness.

People are filled with bitterness, filled with anger, filled with hate, filled with vengeance toward others. They believe that retaliation somehow is a virtue, that getting back is somehow right and healthy. Such attitudes are approved in our culture, approved on every front. They're approved by counselors and psychologists who tell us we need to vent, we need to tell people what they need to hear. We need to make sure we don't keep our anger in but we explode when necessary, we don't carry it around. Such attitudes are exalted in the heroes of our culture who have an "in your face" kind of mentality.

People make heroes out of the vindictive. They make heroes out of the vengeful, the Dirty Harrys, the Rambos, the Terminators, or whatever else you want to call them, those types who find joy in killing for the sake of vengeance.

There are those in our society who go around killing people because they feel that they have been somehow mistreated or abused by cultural inequities and so they get their pound of flesh by random execution. The worse case, of course, is those kinds of vengeance which takes lives.

Coming along behind that are the lawsuits, about 300 thousand lawsuits a year in America for every piece of flesh that people can get. Anyway and every way that people can seek vengeance they will seek it. We have 70 percent of the world's lawyers just to keep up with the number of lawsuits. Even the people helpers, the counselors and psychologists will tell us it is not healthy to forgive.

In her popular book called Toxic Parents, one that I'm sure you haven't read but it's quite an interesting book, Susan Foreward wrote the book and she presents what is really the prevailing attitude toward forgiveness in our culture. She has a chapter in the book entitled, "You don't have to forgive." She says we should place the blame for our present problems on our parents because that's where it belongs. They poisoned us. We all had toxic parents. And the new cry is, "I am a victim, it's not my fault and I'm not responsible." Guilt for anything and everything is pushed off on others and left there until vengeance exhausts itself.

And there's really no place for forgiveness. In fact, it's often suggested that forgiveness is unhealthy. It's sort of wimpy, sort of cowardly. We've all been oppressed, abused, victimized and we aren't about to forgive anybody.

But the price of vengeance is extremely high. The price of unforgiveness is really severe. Let me tell you some of the things that unforgiveness does.

Unforgiveness imprisons people in the past. You say, "What do you mean by that? Well as long as you are unwilling to forgive offenders and their offenses, you are shackled to them both. As long as you are unwilling to forgive the offender and the offense, you keep it alive...the pain is there, you're picking at an open sore, keeping it from healing. When you won't forgive you are sentencing yourself to go through life feeling as bad now as you did in the past when the offense was committed with no end in sight. You choose to love hate and cultivate it through your life. Unforgiveness imprisons you in the pain of your past.

Secondly, forgiveness inevitably produces deep bitterness. The book of Hebrews calls it a root of bitterness, bitterness deep down, an infectious cancer in the heart. Such bitterness is malignant, it is devastating. It brings those malignant thoughts, those harassing memories that distort how you see life, anger rages out of control, emotions become unbridled and unchecked and you entertain desperate ideas for revenge. Every conversation becomes a forum for slandering the person you hate or defamation and even for lies. No, unforgiveness is a very, very severe thing.

It will shackle you to the pain of your past and it will provide for you a deep bitterness. On the other hand, forgiveness brings complete freedom from the past and from bitterness in the present. When you study the Bible there is a lot in it about forgiveness. In fact, there are 75 word pictures for "forgiveness" in the Bible. Let me give you just a few of them.

To forgive is to turn the key, open the cell door and let the prisoner walk free. That's one metaphor.

To forgive is to write in large letters across a debt, "NOTHING OWED."

The Bible says that 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 it can never be found again.

To forgive is to take out the garbage and dispose of it once and for all, leaving the house fresh and clean.

To forgive is to loose the anchor and set the ship free 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.

To forgive is to smash a clay pot into a thousand pieces so it could never be put back together again.

Those are just some of the word pictures in the Bible about forgiveness. Forgiveness is a marvelous, virtuous, liberating, loving attitude and act. It makes sense to forgive. It is healthy. It is wholesome. It is liberating. It is sensible. It relieves tension. It brings peace. It solicits love. And again I say, it is man at his noblest. It is his glory to overlook a transgression.

And I'll tell you something. No relationship can survive the absence of forgiveness. If you don't forgive continually, you will accumulate bitterness that will destroy that will destroy any and every relationship.

Now there are some compelling biblical theological and spiritual reasons why we are to forgive and I want to talk to you about them tonight. Beyond the sheer virtue of it, beyond the sheer nobility of it, let me show you a few of the compelling motives for forgiveness.

Number one, and time will dictate how many I'll be able to give you tonight, but number one, and this is really right where it belongs at the beginning of the list. Forgiveness is the most godlike act a

person can do. Forgiveness is the most godlike act a person can do. No act is more like God than forgiveness. Never are you more like Him than when you forgive someone who has offended you.

Forgiveness is a verbally declared, personally granted promise. It is a statement of undeserved, unearned love that affirms to an offender that there is no anger, no hatred, no desire for vengeance, no retaliation because guilt has been removed, blame has been removed. There is no self-pity and there is no bitterness. And that is precisely the attitude of God toward sinners. God grants to us in Scripture a verbally declared, personally given promise of undeserved and unearned love that affirms that He is no longer angry, no longer carries hatred or a desire for vengeance, that there will be no retaliation, no condemnation because guilt and blame and shame have been removed. That's the attitude of God toward those who have put their faith in Him.

Listen to this character of God extolled in Scripture. Exodus 34 verse 6, "Then the Lord passed by in front of him," that is Moses, "and proclaimed the Lord...the Lord God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in loving kindness and truth who keeps loving kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin." That is characteristic of God.

And so, we say never are we more like God than when we forgive. Psalm 132, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity." Psalm 85 says essentially the same. Psalm 130...all throughout Scripture we read of God's forgiveness. He remembers our sins no more. He buries them in the depths of the sea. He removes them as far as the east is from the west.

But if you want the epitome of testimony to the forgiveness of God, you need only to read the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15. That son was not unlike many sons...greedy, anxious to get his hands on wealth he had not earned, humanly foolish in the way he spent it, he disdained his father, really hated his father. Went out living with those who exploited him and left him in the misery of his own sin. When the money ran out, slowly he came to his senses while feeding the pigs. And his experience in a pig sty was kind of a mirror of his life. He awakened one day and said, "My father's servants live better than I." And he said, "I will go to my father." He didn't expect forgiveness really. He just wanted to say what a bum he had been and ask if he could be a slave. He didn't want to ask to be a son, he figured he had forfeited that. All he wanted was a roof over his head and a little better food than the pigs were getting. So he started on the road back. And you remember the story. Jesus uses that story to teach us how to forgive. You don't wait even for the sinner to arrive. When you see him far off, you run to meet him and when he starts to say he's sorry, you silence him with an embrace and a kiss and you embrace him and love him and put him into the best garment and put the best ring on his finger and get the best meat out of the freezer and cook up the best meal you've got. Start the music, get the friends there and the family and proudly invite him to be indeed to be your returned son. That's how God forgives, lavishly, grandiosely. The Lord also warns us that acting this way will be greatly misunderstood and it will be greatly unappreciated, even by one's own family. You remember the son

who didn't run away, the one who stayed home, pouted. He called his father a fool for forgiving his stupid wasteful brother who ought to be sent back to the pig sty of his own foolish making and not forgiven.

But the forgiven father...the forgiving father can only say that he loves and will always love the son. Even though the son has committed gross offenses against him, he will forgive him fully and completely for the sheer joy of reconciliation, for the sheer exhilaration of restoration.

Jesus so godlike, being executed on the cross says, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Stephen so godlike, being crushed beneath the bloody stones that pummeled his body said, "Father, lay not this sin to their charge." Sir Thomas More was the Lord Chancellor of England, after having been tried at Westminster and condemned to death with no just cause, said this to his judges as he stood before them, and I quote, "As the Apostle 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 therefore 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. That's godlike, to have such a forgiving spirit toward your executioners. God has been overtly, blatantly, unjustly offended, blasphemed and dishonored and yet longingly, eagerly forgives just for the sheer joy and glory of reconciliation.

That is, by the way, Paul's salient point in Ephesians chapter 4 verse 32, "Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other just as God in Christ also has forgiven you," chapter 5 verse 1, "therefore be imitators of God." You imitate God when you forgive. This is a call to godlikeness, be a forgiving person.

It's hard to destroy a relationship if you continually forgive every offense. Colossians 3:13 Paul says, "Bearing with one another and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone, just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you." It is godlike to forgive.

Back in Matthew chapter 5, you remember the familiar words of our Lord Jesus, "I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, when you do that...verse 45...you may be sons of your Father." He forgives. When you forgive, you're like Him.

Beloved, in your marriage you are headed for major disaster if you continually accumulate hostility because of offenses, if you continue to allow those bitternesses to develop. But whenever there's an offense and immediate forgiveness, it's disappearing, it's gone. That's the key to any relationship. Children, the same toward your parents. Parents, the same toward your children. Brother and sister, brother and brother, sister and sister, it's the same situation...forgiveness, forgiveness, because that is like God. Practice the godlike virtue.

Second in thinking about motives for forgiveness, it is not murder only which is forbidden by the sixth commandment, it is not murder only which is forbidden by the sixth commandment. The sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," involves much more than just the idea of murder. You say, "Well how do you know that?" Because Jesus made that very clear. Matthew chapter 5, listen to verses 21 and 22. "You have heard that the ancients were told you will not commit murder, you shall not commit murder," that was the command, "and whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court." In other words, if you commit murder, you've committed a crime and you're liable to the court's verdict against you. "But...Jesus said...I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court." In other words, the point is not only that God says don't kill, but implied in that is the motive or the attitude that results in that, namely hatred. Jesus says, "I'm telling you, don't even be angry with your brother, don't even say raca to your brother, don't say you fool." Raca was some kind of an epithet. We have a number of those kinds of curses that we put on people when people are angry. Raca was one from ancient times. You fool, another one. Jesus said, "When I refer to the commandment you shall not kill, I'm referring to all of that...all of that." Anger, wrath, malice, lack of forgiveness, desire for revenge, vengeance, it's all included in the sixth commandment. And I say it again, it's not murder only which is forbidden by the sixth commandment...all anger, all wrath, all malice, all evil intent, all bitterness, all of that.

The rabbis and the scribes of old, the devisers of Jewish tradition simply said...Don't murder, Exodus 13, don't murder. And yet they were filled with hate, animosity, ugliness, bitterness toward one another and Jesus says everyone who is angry with his brother deserves to be hauled before the court. In fact, 1 John 3:15 says it this way, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer...is a murderer."

From time to time we hear about marital murder, we hear about a wife who kills her husband, a husband who kills his wife or has her executed, or concocts some supposedly accidental death. And it's becoming more common now than perhaps it used to be as this hatred runs unchecked and is fed by the culture. But it's not just that that is despised by God, it is an attitude of hate. It is an attitude that says...I wouldn't kill him but I'm sure leaving him. It's the attitude that says...I wouldn't kill him but I wish he were dead.

Jesus, you see, when He said if you even are angry, if you even say a curse word toward someone or call someone a fool, you are a murderer at heart. When He said that He swept away all self-righteousness, He unmasked the heart. Raca was a slanderous thing to say, a common epithet with no modern equivalent except that it seems as though those kinds of epithets always like to use hard consonants, a term of abuse and derision and arrogant contempt and hate. "You fool," was to call someone godless, to curse them, to say you're guilty enough to go to hell.

That kind of attitude is involved in the sixth commandment. And if you look at the person that you hate or resent or have this built-up hostility and animosity toward and you feel those things in your heart, you're as good as a murderer. Jesus said, "Love your enemy as you love yourself." You need to see the one you won't forgive as the creation of God. And love and forgive that person just for that of God which is in him. If he is a Christian, he bears the moral image of God, if he is a non-Christian, he bears the natural image of God somehow conveyed to him. See the image of God in that person. Look for that which is noble, no matter how sometimes hard to see that might be.

If you are angry with someone, confess it as an iniquity. If you seek vengeance toward someone, confess it as a sin. Recognize that your lack of forgiveness is sinful, it is selfish, that you must put your selfishness aside because it is exactly that undeserved affection for yourself that makes you aggravate the faults of others who offend you. You understand that? The reason you're so mad about what someone did to you is because you have an elevated opinion of yourself. If you really want to know what you deserve, it's hell. Anything else is just benefit. Be humble enough so that no offense against you is worthy of hate. No offense against you is worthy of forgiveness because you see yourself as nothing. It's the opposite of self-esteem. And the self-esteem cult does feed this monster by giving permission to have an elevated view of themselves so that anything against them in any way, shape or form, however trivial or minimal, is cause for great aggravation and justifiable offense. Kill your selfishness. I say it again, it is exactly that undeserved affection for yourself that makes you aggravate the faults of others who offend you. And be aware of the fact that God has commanded not only that you not kill, but that you not have a murderous attitude.

Thirdly, and this is a very important point when you talk about forgiveness. You must remember, thirdly, that whoever has offended you has offended God greater...whoever has offended you has offended God greater. Sometimes I hear somebody say, "I'm getting out of this marriage, I have had it, I am up to my ears in this, I'm not going to take this another day. I'm not living with this." And they think that that's the ultimate offense against them when the reality of it is that if there has been sin in the life of that person who has offended you, it has offended God far greater than it has offended you. And listen, if God who is the most holy has forgiven him the greater offense, can't you the least holy forgive him the lesser? Whatever it is that that sinful spouse has done against you, he or she has done against God. And God forgives fully, totally, freely, completely. And if God who is the most holy and most offended can forgive, can you the least holy and the least offended not forgive?

You remember when David sinned by engaging himself in an liaison with Bathsheba, making sure that because he lusted after her, her husband wouldn't come back into the picture, he got him in a compromising situation in the battle where he basically lost his life so there was murder as well as adultery. And you remember when David was reciting before God his penitence, he says in Psalm 51, "Against You and You only have I sinned." He had the right perspective. Yes, he had offended Bathsheba, he had offended Uriah. He had offended the family. He had offended the nation over which he was king. He had offended his own family. He had offended his own friends. But more than

anything else, he had offended God by his terrible, terrible iniquity. He says in Psalm 41:4, "heal my soul, for I have sinned against You."

Now, God is the one most severely sinned against in any situation. Any sin is most severely against Him. We, frankly, are somewhat incidental. So what if it offended me? That's really incidental to the main issue. And God who is so severely offended forgives so readily, how can we so minimally offended not forgive?

So we forgive. We forgive because we are never more like God than when we forgive. We forgive because God forbids anger, hate, and attitudes of vengeance. We forgive because who is most offended has forgiven and we who are least offended can surely do the same.

Let me take you to a fourth point that just builds on the third one. It is only reasonable that those forgiven the greater sins forgive the lesser ones. Now this, I know, if you think about it, will bring to mind Matthew 18, so turn to Matthew 18. And I want to remind you of something that you and I both need to be reminded of periodically and that is this, that when we stand before God before our salvation, we are worthy of eternal hell, right? Because we are the enemies of God. We have ignored God. We have denied God. We fail to be thankful to God. We have pursued iniquity. And we deserve eternal hell. But God in His mercy forgives us damning iniquities. He forgives us sin that is at a level that it would send us to hell to suffer forever and still not be expiated. Somebody might think, "Well, 50 thousand years in hell should be enough to sort of pay for my sin." Somebody else might say, "Well 50 million years in hell might be enough to pay for my sin." But the answer is, eternity won't be enough to pay for your sin, you'll be there forever suffering, that's how serious the crime is.

We have crimes in our country and we have varying sentences for those crimes. If someone commits a misdemeanor, they might go into jail overnight. If someone commits a petty crime, they might go into jail for 30 days, or 60 days. If they commit an armed robbery, they might be there for five years. If they commit a second-degree murder, it might be twenty. If it's premeditated first-degree murder, it might be life. And we think about that as a serious crime. But what kind of crime is it that can only be paid for by eternal punishment? It's a staggering thing. And so, that any of us no matter how we may assess ourselves, any of us if we are not in Christ, forgiven by God, have so greatly offended God as to pay for that offense with eternal punishment, that's how serious our iniquity is. You measure the seriousness of it if no other way by the penalty attached to it, right?

So when you came to Christ and you were forgiven, it wasn't some small thing. It wasn't like the judge said, "Well, you deserve 60 days in jail but I'm going to commute your sentence." Or, "I'm going to put you on probation." It wasn't like the judge saying, "Well you deserve...you deserve 20 years but because it's your first offense I'm going to put you under probation and I'm going to put you in a sort of half-way environment," it wasn't that at all. It wasn't as if you deserved a life imprisonment and because some extenuating circumstance of some illness or something you were remanded to your



family for care until you die, it wasn't that. It was that you had this massive debt of iniquity that couldn't be paid for in eternity of suffering. And God in a moment forgave it all. That's the magnanimity of forgiveness.

So you have to go back to remembering what you have been forgiven in Christ. And now back to the fourth point. It is reasonable then that those forgiven the greater sins should certainly be able to forgive the lesser, right? Somebody offended you...oh really. Somebody offended you, your husband offended you, or your wife offended you, or your parents offended you young people, or somebody else offended you. Oh I see, so you're going to be bitter and you're going to carry a vengeful, hateful, resentful attitude around and you're going to make those people pay for what they did to you, and you're a Christian? You're going to be making sure that your spouse feels the pain of your anger of what he or she did to you? You, who stood before God with a weight of sin that even an eternity of pain couldn't eliminate, and you were forgiven all of it in a split second, you're going to hold this trivial offense against somebody else? That's the whole point of the parable at the end of Matthew 18.

Some people are brought in before the king. They owe him a massive debt that they could never pay. He forgives them. One of these guys is forgiven this massive unpayable debt which is the picture of eternal punishment and our weight of sin and he is forgiven, he accepts forgiveness, goes out, finds a guy who owes him a few weeks wages and strangles the guy. Says, "I want my pay, I want my pay," and the guy can't pay so he throws him in prison. It's unimaginable. And the disciples are really incredulous over this. They can't believe this. I'm sure, as Jesus outlined the story, it would absolutely shake them to the core that anybody could be forgiven so much and turn around and not forgive somebody so little. And isn't that exactly what we do all the time? All the time?

We have been forgiven by God an unpayable, inconceivable debt. Shall we not forgive the small debts that others owe us? In your marriage you need to be in a hurry to forgive as fast as you can forgive, even when the offense is going on, all your thoughts should be geared toward forgiveness. What insensitive ingratitude this servant in Matthew 18 demonstrates who was forgiven this unpayable debt and then ran right out and got somebody and wouldn't forgive him. Are you a higher court than God? Are you more worthy than God? Do you have a right to hold your hostility and your anger that God doesn't have? Do you have a more demanding law? Are you worthy of greater treatment than God? It's unthinkable.

A fifth reason to forgive. The one who does not forgive will not enjoy the love of other Christians...the one who does not forgive will not enjoy the love of other Christians. Let me tell you what happens in a marriage, and it happens all the time. The wife says, "I've had it with this guy, that's all, I'm done, I'm not taking it anymore, I'm fed up and I'm not going to forgive him. I've forgiven him enough, I'm not going to forgive him anymore. I'm done with this guy. I have nothing but resentment, hostility, hatred, bitterness and I'm maintaining it and I'm feeding it."

You know what happens? Immediately there's a severing of the marriage and instantaneously the loss of Christian fellowship. You're on the outs with the church immediately, right? And in a matter of a few months, guess what? At a communion service your name gets read by me or another pastor, is that not right? Because you've left your marriage without any grounds for that. You forfeit the fellowship. The church becomes really your judge.

That's exactly what happens in the parable of Matthew 18. Look at verse 31, the man tries to get his money out of this guy who owes him a few months wages, really. Throws him in prison. And verse 31 says, "And when his fellow slaves saw what happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened." You know what? They couldn't believe the guy would do this, they couldn't believe such unforgiveness. It was staggering to them. And where did they go? They went right to the king, they went right to the lord. You know what happens? When you will not forgive you forfeit the fellowship. And the fellowship, as it were, goes to heaven to turn you in. You cut yourself off from the fellowship. You're distanced from the body. You are leaven, you are sinful, you're a bad influence. The church doesn't want you around if you're going to behave like that. And alienation from others in the life of the church leads to more sin.

The sequence goes like this. "I've had it, I'm not living with her anymore, I'm out of here. I will not tolerate it. I'm at the end of my rope. I'm out of this thing." Immediately you split out of this thing and then the church turns to God and starts to call out to God on your behalf, discipline is enacted, the church pursues you, you don't repent and the next thing that happens is outside the fellowship you are turned over to...whom? Satan, 1 Corinthians 5, and the next thing you know you're in an affair and the spiral starts down.

Alienation from others in the life of the church results in serious sin. Hebrews 10:24 says that we need to be together for mutual stimulation. You need the life of God's people. And these friends turned against the unforgiving man and they turned him over to God. They prayed, literally, they enacted church discipline, they turned him over to the Lord who then turns him over to the tormentors.

And that takes us to the sixth point, failure to forgive results in divine chastening. What happened to this guy? Verse 32, the king or the lord calls him in, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you asked me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave even as I had mercy on you?" It's incredible that he didn't. "And his lord now moved with anger, turns him over to the tormentors until he should repay all that was owed him. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you if each of you does not forgive his brother from the heart."

What's it saying? If you will not forgive another, then the Lord is going to turn you over to the tormentors. What's that? Chastening, serious chastening, torturers, tormentors...might be stress,

hardship, illness, difficulty. James 2:13 says the same thing. "Judgment will be merciless to the one who shows no mercy." "Blessed are the merciful," Matthew 5:7, "for they will obtain mercy." If you don't have the mercy of forgiveness, God's going to turn you over to the tormentors.

So what happens? You destroyed your marriage. You've destroyed your relationship with the church. You spiraled down into iniquity. And now comes divine chastening.

I've had several people in my life say to me, "I'm not going to live with this person anymore. I'd rather take my chances with God than live with this person." Well you're not really taking any chances with God, it's pretty guaranteed what's going to happen...chastening...chastening.

A seventh reason for forgiveness. The one who does not forgive will not be forgiven. The one who does not forgive will not be forgiven. Go back to Matthew chapter 6 and this ties in with the point we just made from that parable, that if you don't forgive another the Lord is going to chasten you, this is another way to look at that but emphasizes a little different aspect. The one who doesn't forgive will not be forgiven. Look at Matthew 6, the disciples have asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. And in verse 12, part of what He teaches them is pray this, "And forgive us our debts, or forgive us our trespasses, as the other gospel records it, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Now there you have a statement that is pretty clear. You forgive us, God, as we have forgiven others.

Go down to verses 14 and 15, "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." Boy, this is some powerful stuff. If you forgive, you'll be forgiven. God's going to deal with you the way He deals with others.

You say, "Now is this talking about the fact you might lose your salvation and go to hell?" No, no eternal forgiveness we have in our justification. That settles the issue of our future. Temporal forgiveness we need in our sanctification and that settles the issue of our blessing in the present. The issue here is simply this. That God will not forgive your sin in the sense that you're free from chastening and the recipient of blessing.

You know what happens to you as a believer when you sin. When you get involved in prolong sin, it's not that you're all of a sudden going to lose your salvation and go to hell, but I'll tell you what happens, you begin to be chastened and you forfeit blessing. The eternal forgiveness is taken care of, but the here and now temporal forgiveness that withholds chastening and pours out blessing is not going to be yours.

I've watched this through the years as a pastor. I've watched lots of people. I've seen people with emptiness in their lives, with terrible dryness, insipid dullness, people with a lack of joy, a lack of power, a lack of meaningful marriage relationship and I really believe that very often it is due to the

fact that there is no forgiveness sin their hearts toward a person in their family. And when they will not forgive, God continues to chasten and life is miserable and blessing isn't there.

If there's anything I want out of life, it's God's blessing. I mean, I suppose I would go so far as to say I would live with anybody if I could have God's blessing. That's what I would seek most of all. And to humble myself and accept some difficulty in human life to have the joy of heaven is a simple choice for me.

Now, we are to forgive because it is like God whose children we are. It is forbidden not to forgive in the command not to murder. We are to forgive because the most holy forgives, shouldn't we the least holy also forgive. We are to forgive because we have been forgiven the greater sins against God, should not we forgive the lesser ones against us? We are to forgive because we will otherwise forfeit fellowship and the love of the brethren and be chastened. And if we don't forgive, God won't forgive us.

Number eight, I'll give you a few more, the absence of forgiveness renders us unfit to worship...the absence of forgiveness renders us unfit to worship. In fact, worship becomes a form of hypocrisy. Matthew 5 again, 23 and 24, "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar," you're coming to worship God, of course, in a Jewish context in this gospel, "but if you're coming to worship God and you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go your way, first be reconciled to your brother, then come and present your offering." Very, very basic. Don't draw near to God with the intention of worship if there's an unsettled grudge with another Christian. Reconciliation must precede worship, even if we hold no anger. If he holds anger against us, we must freely forgive in the heart and do all we can to make it right. See, if there's any iniquity in you it says in Psalm 66 the Lord will not hear you. So you come to worship, heaven makes no response if your heart isn't right. The absence of forgiveness renders you unfit for worship. Boy, this is serious...really serious.

Number nine, and just one more after this, number nine, not to forgive is to usurp the authority of God. And I suppose this is the ultimate ego trip. If you won't forgive, then you're setting yourself up as the one who holds the sword of divine judgment. You're saying...Well, God, You may be willing to forgive, but I'm not. You rip the sword out of God's hand and you decide you're going to wield it yourself. You take private vengeance. What audacity in the light of Romans 12 where God

says, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay." You leave that to God. You don't have to get your pound of flesh out of everybody. You don't have to give back what you feel they deserve, that's not your job.

If your enemy is hungry...what?...feed him. If he's thirsty, give him a drink and just pour burning coals upon his head, coals of conviction, by the way. Overcome his evil with good and remember this, never take your own revenge, Romans 12:19. Leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written,

"Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord." God will take care of the vengeance.

What audacity it is for you to take the sword. "I'll give that guy what he deserves. I'm going to inflict the pain. I'll be the judge. God's too slow. God's too tolerant. God's too patient. He's too unjust. He's too indifferent. He's too weak. He isn't doing anything. Give me that sword, I'm after this myself." What a blasphemous attitude. God alone is able to deal with sin. He has the perfect and true understanding of the offense and you don't, you're limited. He has the highest standard. Your's is lower. He has the authority without limit. Your's is non-existent. He is impartial. You are not. He is omniscient and eternal, He sees the end from the beginning. You're short sighted and ignorant, seeing nothing beyond the moment. He is wise and good and acts in perfect holiness and you're blinded by anger. Now you tell me who ought to have the sword. It makes no sense for you or me to be the judge. We're not qualified. And when you tear the sword, as it were, out of God's hands, and will not forgive, you usurp His authority.

One final point that cries out to us for forgiveness. This is a very important point. It could be a whole message, a whole series. Offenses against you are your trials...offenses against you are your trials. Listen carefully, and by those trials what is God doing? Perfecting you. "Count it all joy, brethren, when you fall into various trials because the trying of your faith has a perfect work." First Peter 5:10, "After you've suffered a while the Lord make you perfect." Second Corinthians 12, just an absolutely magnificent portion of Scripture. The Apostle Paul talks about his thorn in the flesh, his distress, insult, persecution, difficulties and he says, "I am content with all of them because when I'm weak then I'm...what?...strong." His power is perfected in my weakness. His grace is made sufficient in my infirmities.

Let me tell you something. You may think you have a difficult marriage. You may think you have a difficult situation, young people with your parents. You may think you have conflict in the home. Let me tell you this, your offenses, the offenses against you are the very trials which God will use to make you like His Son. Don't run from them. Criticisms, injustices, offenses, persecutions, mistreatments are for the purpose of your spiritual maturity. Don't run from that process. Stay in it...stay in it. Even if your whole life long you realize that maybe...maybe I could have found somebody else who would have made my life happier, if you respond to the stress and the difficulty appropriately, those trials will make you like Christ and that's the noblest goal of all.

Be little concerned about your personal injuries and much concerned about your personal holiness. Remember that in your trials God is at work making you strong and holy.

When all is said and done, what keeps a relationship together is forgiveness because we're going to fail and we're going to offend and we're going to wound and we're going to hurt. But where there is instant and comprehensive and constant forgiveness, the relationship stays together. And God is honored and blessing is poured out.

In the end, the biblical theology of forgiveness is summed up in one passage. Turn to 1 Peter 2, we'll close with this passage. First Peter 2:19, "For this finds favor," of course with God, "if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly." God really is pleased when you suffer unjustly and you endure it. "What credit is there if when you sin and are harshly treated you endure it with patience?" There's no credit for people being patient with your sin...or rather there's no credit for...for you suffering for your sin, there's no favor with God in that. But when you suffer for doing right and you bear up under it, it brings favor from God. The end of verse 20, "If you do what's right and suffer for it and endure it patiently, this finds favor with God."

You want to find favor with God? Then suffer a little. That's how life is. And then he says this, "For you've been called for this purpose." Wow, you mean it has to be like this? Yeah, it has to be like this. Fallen world, fallen mate, fallen parents, fallen children, fallen friend, fallen family, it has to be like this. You've sort of been called for this purpose. And Christ, our beloved Christ, left us an example who when He suffered unjustly committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth. In other words, they had no reason to make Him suffer, it was all unjust, it was all unfair. It was all inequitable. It was all undeserved. And yet, verse 23, "While being reviled He didn't revile in return, while suffering He uttered no threats, He just kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously." He just kept turning Himself over to God. It was all unjust but He never struck back, He just gave Himself to God and went on bearing our sins in His body on the cross.

And this is the pattern. No one ever suffered unjustly to the degree that Jesus did. Perfect, sinless, never committed a sin, never deceit in His mouth and yet He suffered more than any man and He deserved none of it. And in the midst of the suffering, never retaliated, accepted it and just committed Himself to God for the purposes which God had in mind. Let God perfect you through your trials.

Forgiveness brings heaven to earth. Forgiveness puts heaven's peace into the sinful heart. Forgiveness is the image of God. Forgiveness is the advancement of Christ's Kingdom. Forgiveness is what makes a relationship last. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you tonight for this rather hurried study and yet such an important one through the matter of forgiveness. It will be our hearts' cry and our prayer that we might have the grace to forgive like this. Grant that to those around us that they may forgive us as we eagerly forgive them. O God, fill us with the joy of forgiveness. Fill us with an eagerness to overlook every transgression. May we be those noble who eagerly overlook every offense. Never are we more like You, never will we better fulfill Your commands than when we forgive. And grant to us in the sweet, sweet communion of forgiving hearts blessed marriages and blessed families. To the glory of Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

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