

Fundamental Christian Attitudes: Forgiveness

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 90-121

Today we have the great joy of coming to the Lord's Table, sharing in the remembrance of the cross, His death for us. We also have emphasized the wonderful reality of prayer and our access to God. And I want us this morning, as we come to the Word of God in preparation for coming to His table, to continue our discussion of the anatomy of the church, and something that I think fits wonderfully into the themes that we've already enjoyed this morning. We have continued to look at what the Bible teaches about the church, particularly focusing on internal attitudes, motives, convictions, those things that carry the life of the body. We started out by talking about the skeleton, those things that are non-negotiables, foundational, that give it its structure.

And then we began to look at these internal systems in the body of Christ, the things that carry the life of the church, the life forces that flow through the church that make it what it is. And those internal systems, those motives, and convictions, and attitudes, that we've already discussed, are things like faith, and obedience, and humility, and love, and unity, and then last Lord's Day, growth. And today I want us to look at another component, another crucial internal motivation, internal attitude, that is absolutely essential in the life of the church. We have emphasized holiness when we talked about the skeletal elements of the church, the necessary pursuit of holiness and purity that is characteristic of life in heaven.

We looked at that process, in Matthew, chapter 18, and we talked about how crucial it is for the church to examine itself, and to deal with sin, and to root it out, and to confront it, and discipline it, and maintain purity. But along with that, there is another very necessary component in the life of the church, one that we will be called upon to exercise at all times in the life of the church. It is none other than the attitude of forgiveness – forgiveness. So you can add to your list of things like faith, and obedience, and humility, and love, and unity, and growth, another component of life in the church, and that is the spiritual attitude, the motivation of forgiveness. This must be a companion alongside the pursuit of holiness, or the church becomes very harsh, very bitter, and very rigid.

The church is no place for grudges. The Christian life is not to be characterized by grudges, or vengeance, or bitterness, or pride. All of that is destructive, and must be dissolved in a forgiving attitude. This is absolutely essential, because as much as we want to bring heaven down, as much as we want to do on earth what is being done in heaven, as much as we want to be heavenly, we can't quite make it. We would long for the perfections of heaven, but we don't have them, and therefore in the life of the church there will be imperfections, there will be errors, there will be misjudgments, there

will be wrong attitudes, there will be sins, and they will occur at every level of the church.

They will occur in the lives of those in leadership, they will occur in my life, and in the lives of other pastors and elders, and they will occur in the lives of all in this church, and in any church. The apostle Paul, looking at himself at the pinnacle of his life, at the very climax of his life, at the very end of his life, after having become the great stalwart Christian that he was, identified himself as the chief of sinners. There will always be imperfections, and always be errors, and we will always be saying to ourselves, "O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of this death?" In fact, the more we mature in Christ, and the more we grow, and the more we become that spiritual father that we addressed last Lord's Day, the more our sin becomes manifest to us, because the greater our sensitivity to it becomes; thus the more likely to see our failures.

And so because there will always be imperfections, and always be errors, and iniquities, and sins, and transgressions, and misjudgments. There will always be a great need for the exercise of forgiveness in the life of the church. And wherever there is an unforgiving attitude, there will be a fracturing of the fellowship, and there will be a limiting of the usefulness, and there will be a stealing of the joy that we should experience. There will be a robbing of the peace that the Lord has given us through His Spirit.

Probably I should remark briefly that in today's psychologically-seduced culture, in today's culture bent on exercising and glorifying the sin of self-esteem, forgiveness is mocked, and vengeance is exalted. This is just the opposite of what the Scripture teaches us. We must express an attitude of forgiveness. And I want to address that briefly this morning before we come to the Lord's Table, just to give you several points to contemplate. First of all, forgiveness is the most godlike act a person can do – forgiveness is the most godlike act a person can do. Nothing is more godlike than forgiving someone, and never are you more like God than when you forgive.

If it is your heart's prayer to be like Christ, to be as God's children, beloved children who manifest His character, then you must necessarily be characterized by forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a marvelous thing. Forgiveness is a promise. Forgiveness is a pledge. Forgiveness is a statement of undeserved, unearned love, that says no matter what you've done, there is no anger, no matter what you've done, there is no hatred, no matter what you've done, there is no desire for vengeance, no matter what you've done, there will never be any retaliation. I pass by that transgression completely. I do not hold you guilty. I do not blame you. I feel no self-pity for myself because I've been offended; rather, I pass by that transgression completely, and extend my love to you fully. That's forgiveness, and that's godlike.

Reminding ourselves of that, we go back to Exodus chapter 34. In Exodus, chapter 34, we read this, in verses 6 and 7: "Then the Lord passed by in front of him" – that is, in front of Moses, who had

asked, you remember, to see His glory. And the Lord is identifying Himself here, as He passes by Moses and lets a small portion of His glory be manifest. The Lord introduces Himself, in verse 6, with these words: “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness” – that’s another word for grace – “and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin.” There is the characteristic of God that we want to identify. He is by nature a forgiving God.

Earlier in the time of worship, I read Psalm 32, verse 1, “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 further expresses God’s forgiving heart when it says, in verses 2 and 3, “Thou didst forgive the iniquity of Thy people, Thou didst cover all their sin. Thou didst redraw all Thy fury: Thou didst turn away from Thy burning anger.” Again and again in the Psalms, the theme of forgiveness is brought up. Another one that is worth noting is in Psalm 130 and verse 4: “But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared.” Feared meaning worshiped, treated with awe, and respect, and honor. God gains worship from those whom He so graciously forgives.

In Isaiah, the prophet – among other prophets, but notably Isaiah – speaks about God’s forgiveness in the 43rd chapter of his prophecy. You remember that much of his prophecy has to do with judgment, and then it sort of turns in the middle, and the latter part is all about forgiveness and a glorious future. In Isaiah 43:25, we read that God speaks and says, “I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins.” What a great statement. “I wipe out Your transgressions for My namesake.” What does that mean? That I might put My character on display as a forgiving God, and therefore be worshiped as such by those who are grateful for such forgiveness.

And then that great text in Isaiah 55, verses 6 and 7, “Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.” The prophet Jeremiah spoke much of the same way. Just one passage, a marvelous one, Jeremiah 33:8: “I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, by which they have sinned against Me; I will pardon all their iniquities, by which they have sinned against Me, and by which they have transgressed against Me.” God reiterates the significance of the transgression, and then repeats twice His attitude of forgiveness.

Jesus taught many parables. When we come, of course, to the New Testament, they dominate much of His teaching. None of those parables is as well known, perhaps, as the one that we call the parable of the prodigal son. It is actually not the parable of the prodigal son; it is the parable of the forgiving father. That would be a better title for it, I think. It is that most familiar of all stories, recorded in Luke 15, where God is seen like a father who totally forgives an unworthy and undeserving son. The son in that parable was not unlike many sons; greedy, self-centered, indulgent, anxious to get his hands on

the wealth he had not earned, foolish, wasteful in the way he spent it on fast living with those who, by the way, exploited him, and left him in misery when his money ran out.

Slowly coming to his senses, dying of hunger, eating pig slop, he was in a condition that really mirrored his life, and said to himself, "My father's servants live far better than I; I'm going to go home." He didn't really expect forgiveness; in fact that was the last thing he expected. He said, "I'll just go home and be a slave, just to take the chance to say what a bum I've been, what a terrible son I've been. I don't expect to be a son, but I will go back and ask if I can just be a slave. All I want was a roof over my head. All I want is a decent piece of food to eat, something better than pigs get." And he started on the road back.

When he arrives near the house of his father, Jesus teaches us what it means to forgive. Because what does the father do? The father doesn't wait for the sinner to arrive. As soon as he sees him coming, he runs to meet him. While he's yet far away, the father runs. When he starts to open his mouth and speak, before he can even say the "ssss" of sorry, before he can get a sentence out of his mouth, the father throws his arms around him, and starts to kiss him and love him; calls for him to be dressed in the best outfit, for a ring to be put on his finger, calls for a festival, a party, a celebration, to get the best meat, cook up the best meal that anybody could ever imagine, start the music, call the friends. That's the lavish character of forgiveness.

You say, "Well how did the Lord know he wanted forgiveness?" Well, He knew that because he had come back. Obviously, he had started in that path. When God sees the sinner moving in His direction, and hardly having said the "sss" of sorry, God throws His arms around the sinner, and hastily lavishes His forgiving love on that sinner – that's forgiveness the way God forgives. I'll tell you something as a pastor. I grieve deeply over people who carry bitternesses. It is so ungodlike. It is so unlike the character of Jesus Christ. I grieve over people who think they have to retaliate for every wrong that was rendered against them. Somehow, they've got to get their pound of flesh. Somehow, they have to react back, to preserve their ego and their pride. They become divisive.

I grieve over those people who want to undermine the church of Christ and undermine the work of God, undermine the life and ministry of faithful servants. The forgiving father can only say that he loves the unworthy son. He can only say that he will always love that son, who has committed such gross sins. And sins committed directly against that father. And he will do nothing but rejoice over that son, and lavish him with the expressions of forgiveness, and he'll do it not for any personal gain, but for the sheer joy of reconciliation, and the sheer love of virtue. And that's why I say forgiveness is the most godlike thing you can do.

It's very hard to divide a church full of forgiving people, because you can't get anything started. No matter what failures your pastor may make, or your leaders may make, or you might make, or somebody around you might make, when there's a rush to forgive, it's very hard to bring about those

divisions that so dishonor the Lord. Jesus hanging on the cross looked out over the people who were taking His life, the sinless Son of God, and lifting His eyes to heaven on their behalf He said, “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.” And Stephen, being crushed under the bloody stones of those who were smashing his life away, looked up to heaven, saw Jesus Christ in a glorious vision, and said, “Lay not this sin to their charge. O God, don’t hold them responsible for what they’re doing.”

It was Sir Thomas More, the lord chancellor of England, after having been tried at Westminster, and condemned to death for no just cause, Thomas More said to his judges this, and I quote: “As Saint 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 and death, we may, nevertheless, hereafter cheerfully meet in heaven in everlasting salvation,” end quote. He prayed for the salvation of his executioners – that’s forgiveness – that’s godlike. God has been overtly, and blatantly, and unjustly offended, and blasphemed, and dishonored, by all of us, and yet eagerly lavishes us with the expressions of His forgiving love.

Now, this is Paul’s salient point in Ephesians, chapter 4. Turn to it, if you will; Ephesians, chapter 4, and verse 32. In Ephesians 4:32, we read this: “And be kind to one another.” We ought to stop and talk about that for a moment. Ours is such an unkind world, such an unkind society, so angry, so hostile, so merciless. Simple kindness, overlooking errors, overlooking misjudgments, overlooking failures, overlooking weaknesses, overlooking sins, and treating people with kindness, overlooking self – self-centeredness, selfishness, one’s own agenda, one’s own expectations – and just being kind, whether people conform to all your supposed standards or not. And that kindness includes being tenderhearted. That’s a simple phrase to understand, tenderheartedness – treating people tenderly. And here is one way to do it: “Forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

And again I say, you are never more like God than when you forgive, when you express kindness, when you are tenderhearted, and forgive just as God has forgiven you. And it’s not a shallow forgiveness, it’s a deep forgiveness, it’s a lavish forgiveness. In Colossians 3:13, Paul unfolds the same great truth: “Bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone: just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.” Forgiving with the same kind of magnanimity, and the same kind of generosity with which the Lord forgave you, from the heart. Remember the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5: “But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”

See, that manifests a forgiving heart. Why? Verse 45: “In order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” And again I say, you’re never more like God, you’re never more evidently His son, than when you forgive. And back to that text of Ephesians 4 for just a moment. It says in verse 32, as I read: “Forgiving each other, as God in Christ also has forgiven you,” and then I wish there wasn’t a

chapter break there, because immediately in verse 1: “Therefore be imitators of God.” And again, you imitate God when you forgive. By the way, Paul wrote Ephesians, and Colossians, those two letters that call for forgiveness, from a jail where he was unjustly and hatefully imprisoned. He was practicing the very virtue he was exhorting the believers to manifest.

A second thought as we think about forgiveness is this: whoever has offended you has offended God more – whoever has offended you has offended God more. You say, “What’s the point? The point is, if God can forgive when He has received the greater offense, can’t you forgive, who have received the lesser? You say, “What do you mean by that?” I mean by that what is clearly indicated in Psalm 51. Psalm 51 was written by David, as was Psalm 32, which we read earlier, both of them at the time when David was overburdened with the iniquity of his sin with Bathsheba and the death of her husband Uriah. And in the midst of his penitence, he wrote Psalm 32 and 51. But in Psalm 51, and verse 4, he makes this very important point about his sin.

Remember now, he had violated Bathsheba by engaging himself in sexual relationship with her. He had violated Uriah by making sure that Uriah was put in a compromising position on the battlefield, so that he lost his life. So he was guilty of adultery, and he was guilty of murder. He had certainly sinned against those people. But notice, in verse 4, what he says in this prayer. Verse 3 he says, “I know my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned.”

When you really look at sin, you must agree that sin is primarily against God, for God is the holy standard whose law it is that we violate. “Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned.” Although it would seem to us a major sin against Bathsheba, and a major sin against Uriah, it is really a minor infraction against them, and a major infraction against God Himself.

Psalm 41:4, also attributed to David: “As for me, I said, ‘O Lord, be gracious to me: heal my soul; for I have sinned against Thee.’” Listen: God is perfectly holy. He is thrice holy – holy, holy, holy. He is of purer eyes than to behold evil, cannot look upon iniquity. He cannot tolerate sin. He despises sin. He hates sin. And while He is forgiving, there will be an end to His patience, and He will not endure sin forever. There will come a time of judgment and justice. He says that all the way back in Exodus 34, and verse 7. At the same time that God is forgiving, there is an end to His forgiveness, because ultimately His holiness will take over where there is impenitence.

He is perfectly holy, and ultimately, ultimately does require a just punishment for sin – either from the sinner, or from a substitute for the sinner, namely His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. To say that is to say that God is holy, and sets a holy standard, so much so that ultimately, sinners unforgiven will be damned to an eternal hell of punishment. There’s no question about the extent of God’s holiness. And that in itself makes His forgiveness all the more astonishing. God, then, who is most holy, God, who is most supremely offended, forgives. We, who are unholy, shall we not forgive? What is it, some kind of God complex people have who won’t forgive? Indeed it is. You have an elevated opinion of yourself

who will not forgive. You have exalted yourself to a standard higher than God.

Now, let me say as a footnote at this point, I believe that, from the heart, we are to forgive all offenses, all the time. My enemies and those who persecute me and hate me are unlikely to ask for my forgiveness, and yet Jesus said, "Love your enemies, and do good to them." And that manifests an attitude of forgiveness. And there are going to be Christians who offend you and me. There are going to be Christians who are bitter, and full of vengeance, and want retaliation, and want their pound of flesh, and are going to do things that hurt us, because they've been hurt by us, or imagined they have. And I really believe that, from the heart, it is essential that we extend to them a kindness, a tenderheartedness, and a forgiving love, with the understanding that there can never be a restoration of the relationship until there is a real repentance on their part.

The relationship can't be what it ought to be until there is a real seeking, on their part, of that restoration through forgiveness. But let me tell you something. You can't wait for that in every situation. I mean look at it in your own home, look at it in your own marriage, look at it in your own family. Are you just going to accumulate a whole long litany of iniquities that someone may have committed, or offenses they may have committed, and they haven't come and confessed them all, and pled forgiveness for each and every single one of them? Are you just going to accumulate that, and accumulate that, and accumulate that? I think not. I think in the magnanimity of your love, you pass by those things. "Love covers a multitude of" – what – "of sins."

There may be a breach in that relationship until forgiveness is sought, but from the heart, that forgiveness has to be proffered and offered, or you will accumulate bitterness. We are so incidental to sin. Sin is not primarily against us, it is against God. And God forgives it in His children, shall not we? He who is most offended forgives freely, shall not we? Another point that I want to make – and I think this is all that I'll have time to make, and it is an important one. By the way, if you want another text to attach that to, Matthew 18. Matthew 18, that story about the man who came before the king, you remember, verses 21 to 35, and he was forgiven such a great debt, and then went out and strangled another man, who owed him just a small debt.

And the point Jesus is making is how can you accept the forgiveness of God for all your sins, and not forgive someone else? When God, who has forgiven you the most, and God, who was most offended, and God, who is of the highest and holiest standard, has given you complete forgiveness, should you not forgive others? Matthew 18, very important text, I wish we had time to look at it. But one final point, and it takes us into the place of preparation for the Lord's Table. And it is this: the one who doesn't forgive won't be forgiven – the one who doesn't forgive won't be forgiven. You say, "What do you mean by that? Are you talking about the fact that we're going to die and go to hell?"

No – no. In the big picture, all your sins are forgiven if your faith is in Jesus Christ. We're not talking about that which has to do with your eternal destiny. We're talking about that which has to do with

your joy, your peace, your usefulness, your fellowship. We're talking about what Jesus talked with Peter about, when Peter said, "I want a bath," and the Lord said, "You already had a bath; you just need your feet washed." It's not a question of you being clean; you're clean. You just got some dirt on your feet that makes you a foul fellow for sitting at the table with us. In Matthew 6, very important portion of Scripture, Jesus said this: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

And then down in verse 14, "For if you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." That makes the point about as clearly as it could ever be made. God will forgive you if you forgive others. Eternal forgiveness – that's a settled issue. We have that in our justification, and that settles the issue of future blessing. But temporal forgiveness – rather than eternal forgiveness, temporal forgiveness we need in our sanctification, and that settles the issue of present blessing. You understand the difference? Eternal forgiveness we have in our justification, settles the issue of future blessing; temporal forgiveness we have and need in our sanctification, settles the issue of present blessing.

The point is, if you're not forgiving others, regularly, and consistently, and completely, then God is not forgiving you in a temporal sense, and if you're not being forgiven in a temporal sense, several things will happen. You will forfeit blessing, and you will come under chastening. Remember in the parable of Matthew 18, the man who wouldn't forgive, he had been forgiven, notably marking out that he was a believer. That's what it's saying in the parable. He was a believer who had been completely forgiven by God. He wouldn't forgive a man, so the king brought him in and whipped him. God chastens those who do not forgive others. Sometimes he chastens them even, perhaps, to death.

Through the years as a pastor – I've been at it for a long time now – and I have found the emptiness, the dryness, the insipid dullness, the lack of joy, the lack of power, the lack of usefulness in the lives of people often related to an unforgiving heart. It's due to God's blessing being withheld because of an unwillingness to forgive. Sometimes a person will sit down with me and say, "They're saying this about me, and they're saying this about me, and I've heard this about me, and I'm really angry with all of this, and I'm upset about all of this." And my question is, what do you think the Lord's trying to do in your life? Do you think there might be some reason why you're experiencing all of this?

In other words, the implication is, could this be a chastening? Have you looked at your heart? What I hear coming out of your heart is anger and what I hear coming out of your heart is bitterness, and maybe it is the lack of forgiveness that is causing the escalation of all of these trials. We are to forgive, because it is like God, whose children we are. We are to forgive, because the most holy One forgives, and shouldn't the least forgive? We are to forgive, because we have been forgiven the greater sins against God, and should be able to forgive lesser ones against us. We are to forgive, because not to forgive is to forfeit fellowship and the love of the brethren, and it is to be chastened. And furthermore, if we don't forgive, we're really not fit to come to the Lord's Table. We're not fit to

worship.

In the same Sermon on the Mount where Jesus taught us how to pray, and included the idea of forgiveness, back one chapter in Matthew 5, He said this, in verses 23 and 24. "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, then come and present your offering." Now, this is very basic. If you have an unsettled grudge with somebody else, settle it. Reconciliation needs to precede worship. Where there is bitterness, and anger, and unforgiveness, you need to do everything you can to resolve it. Where there is the iniquity of unforgiveness, God will not receive your worship. Such is the centrality of forgiveness.

Summing up, a statement from an anonymous saint: "Revenge indeed seems often sweet to men, but oh, it is only sugared poison, only sweetened gall, and its aftertaste is bitter as hell. Forgiving, enduring love alone is sweet and blissful; it enjoys peace and 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 had 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, and the advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world." Never are you more like God than when you forgive.

Father, we thank You now again for this reminder. And as we think about this whole matter of forgiveness, we, of course, go to the cross, where that forgiveness which you have granted to us in Christ is so clearly manifest. We come now before You to take of the bread and the cup, and we don't want to do so in an unworthy manner. We don't want to bring this, our offering of praise and worship, before You if there is bitterness or vengeance or anger in our hearts. We want to make sure that everything is right. It may well be that in some cases we can't partake until we go to some brother and make it right. We pray, Lord, for those who are carrying bitterness and grudge, attitudes that displease You.

O Lord, we ask, of course, that You would lead them to repentance, and that You might not have to chasten them, and that they might not be instrumental in disrupting the unity and the joy of others as well. Give us a totally forgiving heart. Flood us with that forgiving love which You've promised to shed abroad in our hearts through the Spirit. And now, Lord, as we prepare for Your table, we ask that You might give our thoughts over to matters of personal concern. May we not think of others, but look at our own hearts, and use this as a time of confession. Point out the sin, that we might confess it openly before You. Cleanse us and wash us, for we would not come to this table unworthily and eat and drink judgment to ourselves, chastening.

And, Lord, for those who don't know Christ, this table is not for them, because they cannot worship the Savior, they cannot celebrate the death of Christ, whose death means nothing, unless even now

they would open their hearts and embrace Jesus as Savior, accept His forgiveness and His mercy. Holy Spirit, lead us as we examine our own hearts and prepare to partake.

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