

Fellowship, Forgiveness, and You, Part 2

Selected Scriptures

TMC269

Thanks to all of you who serve and minister here around the campus in so many, many ways to make our life rich and enjoyable and full and blessed. We are the richest of the rich because, as we were saying on Wednesday, we are a part of the fellowship of those who are in Christ, who are one with Him and with the Father, and one in the Spirit. We talked a little bit about that fellowship, and it is a very unique reality that we enjoy as believers. We enjoy it in a way that is especially unique to the environment of a Christian college because we have this intense union in Christ, which we celebrate 24/7 for four years together. You will never experience that prior to coming, and you will never experience it once you leave.

This intense four years of your life is the richest and the deepest and the most far-reaching and intimate opportunity you will have for fellowship in the body of Christ at the level that you have it, at the breadth you have it with this many people. What an amazing gift from God it is, and how precious this fellowship is. We celebrate that. We love that. We understand that this is not just an academic institution. While it is that for sure, it is not just that. It is not just a place where we prepare for something in the future. It is not just a place where we develop our skills, where we play games, where we interact socially. It is a massive living experience in the fellowship of those who are in Jesus Christ. It is a portion of the body of Christ that is enriched by a common, eternal life of the living Christ in each of us. It is this fellowship that we have to take advantage of and celebrate and enjoy and develop. So, on Wednesday we talked about the importance of fellowship, and we ended up by saying, there has to be an honesty and an integrity in fellowship. And that means that we can't isolate ourselves and cover up our sinfulness and our failings and our weaknesses, but we need to be honest and open about that. We looked at some of the things that Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book, *Life Together*. How important it is that if we're going to have life together and have an integrity and an honesty and a reality to it so that we don't hide who we really are, but we embrace the realities of our failures, and we are honest about them before the Lord and before one another so that we can have true and real fellowship. If we're going to have an honest fellowship, if we're going to genuinely confront sin, if we're going to genuinely confess our faults to one another, if we're going to be that kind of open and honest, there has to be a dominating reality because if it doesn't exist, then that integrity and that honesty will go away. That's kind of where we left off. We talked about how important it is for us to have honesty and to not be hypocrites, and to not hide and not cover the things in our lives. I don't mean by that that we're supposed to expose every thought we have that's out of bounds or every word we've spoken or uncover everything in our past. But just an honesty about our failings will help us to have the strength that comes from others holding us up and bearing us up in the midst of our mutual weakness. But there is a commodity that becomes then critical to the life of the fellowship. In a word, it is forgiveness.

The only way that it is possible to have an honest fellowship is when forgiveness prevails. In fact, at the end of every broken relationship is an unwillingness to forgive. I don't care what that relationship

is. I don't care whether it's a friendship, whether it's a dating relationship, whether it's an engagement, whether it's a marriage that breaks up, whether it's conflict between parents and children. At the end of that, if it finally shatters, it is not because people were weak and not because people were failing and said things they shouldn't have said or did thing they shouldn't have done. It is because people can't forgive. That's the end of every relationship that ends.

We all understand that we must live in an environment of forgiveness to survive any relationship, any relationship. Even when you're madly in love with your spouse, two sinners are going to collide for life. What will sustain that in the midst of those collisions is an eagerness to forgive. The fellowship will always be precious and sustained and rich and joyful when there is magnanimous forgiveness in that fellowship. That's what allows people to be honest. That's what allows people to be genuine, to be real, to be unafraid, to be open. It's forgiveness.

We live in a world that is really reluctant to be forgiving. In an egotistical, self-centered, narcissistic, me-first environment, forgiveness won't prevail. So what we're talking about is very counter-culture. People are filled with bitterness, anger, hate, and vengeance, and they think it's noble. Rebellion is celebrated. Retaliation is celebrated. Vengeance is celebrated. Attitudes like that are not only celebrated in general, but they're sort of ennobled in a fixed form in the literature of the culture, the films of the culture. People make heroes out of the vindictive, the vengeful, those who kill and maim in acts of supposed noble vengeance. People sue each other in acts of vengeance to exact every piece of flesh they can. Seventy percent of the world's lawyers live in the United States, and they all have plenty of lawsuits to keep them busy. Even the people helpers in our culture, the psychologist say vengeance is good and forgiveness is bad.

In one particular book by psychologist Susan Forward is her name; she has a chapter titled, "You Don't Have to Forgive." She says, "We should place the blame for our present problems on our parents where it belongs because they poisoned us. We had toxic parents." The new cry is, "I'm a victim. It's not my fault. I'm not responsible. Either my parents did it to me or my friends did it to me or those who were close to me did it to me." Guilt for anything and everything is pushed off on others and left there until vengeance exhausts itself, and that's supposed to be healthy?

By the way, the price of vengeance is extremely high. Unforgiveness will imprison you in your present and in your past. As long as you fail to forgive, you are shackled to the past. You are shackled to the offense. You are shackled to the wound. As long as you will not forgive, the pain is kept alive. You pick at an open sore. You sentence yourself to be in the future as miserable as you are in the present and you were in the past. You choose to love hate. Unforgiveness will produce bitterness and infectious cancer in the heart. The Bible calls it a root of bitterness and bitterness, of course, becomes devastating and malignant. It provides harassing memories. Anger rages out of control. Emotions are unchecked. You entertain desperate ideas for revenge. Every conversation becomes an opportunity for gossip and slander, defamation, and that eventually becomes lies because everything gets embellished out of proportion.

Unforgiveness will make you a slave to your past, but Scripture gives us at least 75 – and I'm not going to go through all of them this morning – at least 75 word pictures of forgiveness. Seventy-five very graphic and wonderful word pictures. Just a few of them. To forgive – and these are all biblical analogies. "To forgive is to turn the key, open the door, and let the prisoner walk free. To forgive is to write in large letters across a debt, 'Nothing owed.' To forgive," says Scripture, "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, leaving the house fresh and clean. To forgive is to lose the anchor and set the ship free to sail. To forgive," in Scripture, "is to grant a full pardon to a condemned and sentenced criminal. To forgive is to loosen a stranglehold 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 1,000 pieces so it can never be put together again."

Well, those are just some of the 75 biblical metaphors of what it is to forgive. Forgiveness is a marvelous, virtuous, liberating, loving attitude and act. Really, only the bravest and noblest know how to forgive. It is the most refined thing you can do. It is the most kind thing you can do. It is the most generous thing you can do. It is the best element of human virtue to do that. Cowards will not forgive. Cowards love vengeance. Cowards never forgive. It's not in their nature. It's not in their heart because they are driven by self-love. "The power to forgive," one writer says, "flows only from a strength and greatness of soul, conscious of its own humility and security, and able to rise above all the little temptations of resenting every fruitless attempt to steal its happiness." End quote.

Well, all of that is just kind of a broad look at forgiveness, so set our thoughts on that. It may be the most bold, the most brave, the most heroic, the most wholesome, the most beneficial thing you ever do for someone else.

But apart from just that noble talk about it, there are some compelling biblical and consequently theological and spiritual reasons to forgive. I am going to give you a few of these, all right? biblical and theological and therefore, spiritual reasons to forgive. Again, the point of all of this is to let you know that it is forgiveness that sustains the fellowship.

Number one, and I don't know how much time we'll have to give you as many as possible. Number one, forgiveness is the most God-like act a person can do. Forgiveness is the most God-like act a person can do. When our Lord was giving instruction about how to behave in the world, how to live in the world, He told us in the Sermon on the Mount that we are to love our enemies, those who hate us, and therefore demonstrate that we are sons of our heavenly Father. Jesus went far enough to say, "It's easy to love your friends, but you shall love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," Matthew 5:45, "so that you may be sons of your Father, who is in heaven, for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

In other words, God is merciful. God shines His sun and pours His rain on those who love Him and those who hate Him. No act is more divine than forgiveness. Never are you more like God than when you forgive. When God demonstrated who He was to Moses back in Exodus 34, He said, "I'm going to show you that I am a forgiving God." The prophet said, "Who is a pardoning God like You?" The psalmist celebrates the forgiveness of God in Psalm 32 and Psalm 51. God is, by nature, a forgiving God.

Jesus told many parables that illustrated the nature of God and the essence of salvation and elements of life in His kingdom, but none was more reflective of the person of God than the story of the prodigal son. It was a number of years ago now that I wrote a book called – first, it was called *The Tale of Two Sons* and then switched to *The Prodigal Son* so people would know what it was really about. In the study of the parable of the prodigal son, I remember going through that in Luke 15, verses 11 to 32. It's a long, the most powerful, extensive parable Jesus ever told. Going through that parable, I think I spent five hours of preaching on that one parable.

When it was all said and done, going through all of the elements of that parable, the thing that stood out most was the nature of the father. The father in the parable is God, of course, as represented in the Lord Jesus Christ, God in human flesh. The father is looking for this wretched son, and this is the son invented by Jesus to be the worst sinner imaginable to the Jewish mind. The parable was told to the Pharisees and the scribes. They were destructive in their hatred toward Jesus, and they accused Him on hanging around with prostitutes and thieves and petty criminals and tax collectors and all the scum and the riff-raff that have been booted out of the synagogue.

Jesus confronts them and says, "Let me tell you a story about the Kingdom of God." He paints this wretched son who hates his father, wants his father dead, takes the inheritance before he's entitled to it, which is tantamount to saying, "I wish you were dead so I could have my money now." Father gives it to him. Leaves Israel, goes to gentile land, wastes his money on prostitutes, ends up eating pig's food and can't even digest that kind of stuff, stumbles back home. This is an eye-roller and a head-shaker for the Pharisees because they can't even imagine a young man like this, a man who hates his father, resents his father, who wants to dishonor his father, thus dishonor the family, wastes the heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation, spends it on prostitutes, lives in a gentile land, a Jewish boy who goes out and eats with pigs. This is the ultimate worst person Jesus could invent in their minds.

Then he comes stumbling back, and the most outrageous thing yet is not the outrage of that wretched sinner; it's the outrage of the father. The father actually in the story is the most outrageous person. Why? Because the father who should resent the son, hate the son; the father who should punish the son if he ever comes back; the father who should require the son to spend the rest of his life working at the wages of a day laborer, the lowest wages until he earned back the entire heritage, which he wasted. Maybe then if there was full restoration, there could be reconciliation.

The father, who at the beginning when he saw the son, should have slapped him across the face in an act of preserving his own dignity, should have made him fall on the ground and cover himself with ashes and sit in the middle of town while everybody heaped curses on him for what he did to dishonor his father and the village. The father who should have done all of that, does none of that. What the father does do is he sees the boy coming afar off. He knows that when he reaches the village, it's not going to take long before everybody is going to know he's back. And he's going to be attacked and assaulted and brutalized for the wretched young man that he is that's brought such shame on his father, who is an important man in the village, as evidenced by the size of the party he threw.

He's going to be heaped upon with curses and vitriol because he's dishonored his father and therefore, the village. He doesn't want the son to experience that. So, before he reaches the village, the father runs to him. That is the most outrageous scene in the whole story. Middle Eastern noblemen don't run. They glide. They have robes that go to the ground. They do the moonwalk. He's running! In fact, the Middle Eastern word for robe means "that which brings me honor." They don't show their legs. Middle Eastern men; you can look at them now. Whenever you see men from the Middle East in their Middle Eastern garb, the robe will go all the way to the ground. They don't show their legs.

Here is an older gentleman, who pulls up his robe, runs through town exposing his legs, bringing shame on himself. That is not done. Middle Eastern men don't run. By the way, the Greek word in

Luke 15 is sprint. So the Lord has this man sprinting through town. That in itself is a shame, but the purpose of his sprinting is the greater shame. He comes to his son before his son can receive the animosity of the village, and he does an unthinkable act. He throws his arms around that pig-stinking boy, kisses him all over his head, puts a ring on his finger, a robe on him, puts sandals on him, and has a party. This is the outrage of that parable.

What's the parable trying to tell the Pharisees and the scribes to whom Jesus told it? That you have no idea what makes God happy. You have no idea what brings joy to God. He had just told a story about a man who lost a sheep and found a sheep and there was a party. Then He said at the end of that story, there's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents over 99 who don't.

Then He told a story about a woman who lost a coin, found the coin. She had a party. Then He said the same thing. "Heaven rejoices when a sinner is found." This is the big story to show you how heaven rejoices. It's not just the angels that rejoice. It's the God of heaven who rejoices, and that is illustrated in the joy of the father when he offers and gives forgiveness to this wretched boy. That is the statement of God's longing to forgive the most wretched sinner. So I say to you, you are never more like God than when you forgive.

So if you're going to call yourself a child of God, you're going to want to be like your Father, then you need to forgive. Ephesians 4:32, "Be ye kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you." That's the high ground.

It was Sir Thomas More, who was the Lord Chancellor of England, who was tried at Westminster and condemned to death with no just cause. He said to his judges, and this is a quote, "Saint Paul held the clothes of those who stoned Stephen to death, and as they are both now saints in heaven, Paul and Stephen, and shall continue their 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." He prayed for the salvation of his executioners. That is God-like. That is God-like.

Let me give you a second compelling reason why we are to forgive. We are to forgive because 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 does prohibit murder. "Thou shalt not kill." That's the sixth commandment, but Jesus said that that is not all that it implies. All anger, all wrath, all malice, all lack of forgiveness, desire for revenge, and vengeance is folded up into that command. Matthew 5, again, verses 21 and 22. Listen to what Jesus says, "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder.'" That's the sixth commandment. "'And whoever commits murder shall 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 says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell."

You're guilty enough to go to hell if you just hate somebody, let alone kill them. The rabbis and the scribes and those who were the devisers of Jewish tradition limited that command from Exodus 20, verse 13 to, "Don't murder. Don't murder." But Jesus said, "Wait a minute. There's more to that command than the act of murder. I say to you if you are angry, you're guilty."

First John 3:15, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer." And so our Lord took that command along with many others on the Sermon on the Mount, and pressed that command all the way to its internal point of origin. The death penalty is not just for murderers. It's for haters. The great commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and the second command, which is like unto it is to love your neighbor as yourself. It is important to understand that that hatred that's in the heart of a human being, short of murder, but nonetheless hatred is enough to send a person to everlasting hell. Any lack of forgiveness is a sin, a serious sin.

Let me give you a third principle. Whoever has offended you has offended God more. Whoever has offended you or me has offended God more, and if God, who is the most holy has forgiven the sinner, the great offense against Him, cannot I the least, forgive the lesser offense against me? That's the argument from the lesser to the greater.

Do you remember in Psalm 51 when David said, "Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned"? Well, you could argue that he had sinned against Bathsheba because he had violated her, committed adultery with her. He ended up sinning against the child of that union, who died in infancy. He probably ended up sinning against his own children, and some of that kind of behavior showed up in the disaster called Absalom, who ends up hanging himself by his hair in a tree and losing his life. David mourns over the loss of that life.

Certainly, he sinned against Uriah, violating Uriah's wife, and thus violating Uriah, and then putting Uriah in a position in the battle to be killed. So you might say that David's sin went in every direction imaginable. You could even say that he sinned against the nation, but David looks at it this way, "Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned and done this iniquity." He understands that God is always the most offended because He is the most holy, but he cries out in that same Psalm 51 as he does in Psalm 32 over that same sin for forgiveness. God provides him that amazing and wonderful forgiveness.

If God, against whom every sin is most violently enacted can forgive, God who is the most holy, and the most offended cannot I, the least holy and the least offended, also forgive? So we forgive because it's God-like. We forgive because God forbids anger, hate, and attitudes of vengeance. We forgive because He forgives, who is most holy and most offended, and we are least holy and least offended.

It is only reasonable, a fourth principle, to forgive because we have been forgiven. It is only reasonable to forgive because we have been forgiven. One of the most dramatic parables I think our Lord ever told is in the 18th chapter of Matthew. I'll just make a few comments about it because we're just kind of covering things generally, but this is a really remarkable and important story. Peter comes to Jesus in Matthew 18, verse 21, and he's really feeling sort of superior. He's a follower of Jesus. He's getting it now. So he says to the Lord, "How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?" And he says, "Up to seven times?" He thinks that's really a heroic extension of the normal approach. The rabbis used to say, "The third time, you don't have to forgive him. Once? Okay. Twice? Okay. Three? You're over the line."

So, Peter, feeling good about himself says, "Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me?" This is life, by the way. This is just life. You're going to get sinned against. "Seven times?" Jesus said, "I don't say to you up to seven times, but up to 70 times seven." How about 490 times? But that is just ridiculous?! What? 490 times?

In a parallel account of this, seven times a day. The point is endlessly, endlessly. As often as you're sinned against, that's how often you forgive. Well, you know the story. Jesus illustrates it. Why would you ever forgive like that? Why would you forgive endlessly? Why would you forgive limitlessly? Why would you forgive 490 times, as if you could count, or seven times every single day? Why would you do that? He tells a story. It's like the kingdom of heaven.

A king wished to settle accounts with his slaves. This is a situation where you have a king who oversees an area of land in the picture Jesus draws, and he establishes some tax collectors, some satraps, some officials, some of his own IRS agents around the land. They have a responsibility to collect a certain amount of tax from that area in the various ways taxes were collected, and bring that tax back to the king. This is nothing new. This is how nations have operated all the way back into the book of Exodus. So, this is a guy who establishes with these slaves; they are elevated slaves, as many slaves were in the ancient world, and they owe the king the money they are to collect from their segment of the kingdom.

So he calls them in, "Settle accounts," all right? "Give me the money you've collected." "When he had begun to settle with them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him." Now, that would be like the national debt of Galilee. That's a lot. So this is what he owed, and this guy comes, and he owes him ten thousand talents. He said, "I don't have the money. I don't have the money. I don't have any means to repay." So he collected it, and must have spent it on himself or whatever. He can't pay his debt. So, the king decides to sell him, get what he can out of him, sell his wife, sell his kids, and exact out of that sale, a portion of what the man owes him.

The slave falls on the ground and he prostrates himself before him, and he says, "Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything." Then verse 27 is a shock. Jesus shocked the Pharisees again and again with His stories. "And the lord of the slave felt compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt." What? Forgave him ten thousand talents? Massive, incalculable debt. Well, you say, "That's a nice king." That's a picture of God and His complete forgiveness. The man was willing to earn his way to God. "Just give me some time, and I'll earn it." No, you can't earn it. Salvation is not going to be by merit. It's going to be by grace. You're forgiven. You're forgiven. That's what God does. That was foreign to the Pharisees or any legalistic system that hates grace and hates this kind of magnanimous forgiveness.

Anyway, the rest of the story, "The slave went out and found a fellow slave," another one of these officers, "who owed him one hundred denarii." Now, that's like three months' work wages, denarius a day. "Seized him, began to choke him, and said, 'Pay back what you owe!'" while he's strangling the guy. This fellow's slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him. He gives the same speech, "Have patience with me, and I'll repay you," but he was unwilling, went out, threw him in prison until he should pay back what he owed.

This is just ridiculous! This is absurd! The point that Jesus is making is how can you receive from God absolutely unlimited forgiveness, and then strangle somebody to get your pound of flesh out of them over the small incident in which they offended you? How can you do that? "His fellow slaves," verse 31, "saw what happened. They were deeply grieved, came and reported to their lord all that had happened." The outrage of this! If God, the most holy, the highest court can forgive you, the least holy, the greatest offenses, how can you not forgive those who have offended you?

I mean the whole act is disgusting. It's revolting. What insensitive ingratitude. That leads in the same parable to another point, number five in my little list. The one who doesn't forgive will not enjoy the love of other believers because in verse 31, "His fellow slaves saw what had happened, were deeply grieved, came and reported to their lord all that happened."

You're going to isolate yourself from the fellowship if you will not forgive. You will cut yourself off from the fellowship. If you are known as a person who holds a grudge, holds vengeance, seeks retaliation, cannot forgive; believe me, nobody wants to get close to you. You're going to be reported to God repeatedly. You may become the subject of people's prayers, but you're not going to be the object of their trust and their affection. Alienation from others in the life of the fellowship will take place.

Then, sixth, in this parable something else happens. Failure to forgive results in divine chastening. Now we're getting not only are you going to be alienated from the fellowship, but God's going to get after you as well. Verse 32, The lord says to this guy who was forgiven the unpayable debt and wouldn't forgive the small debt, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave in the same way I had mercy on you?" And his lord moved with anger, handed him over to the delictors," the discipliners, "until he would repay all that was owed to him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if each of you doesn't forgive his brother from the heart." Wow. You don't forgive, you put yourself in a very difficult position because you're going to be alienated from the fellowship and even beyond that, you're going to be handed over to the torturers.

"Judgment," James 2 says, "will be merciless to those who show no mercy." You're going to have the judgment of God. Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful. They will obtain mercy." So lack of forgiveness isolates you from the fellowship and brings you under the discipline of God. Another way to say that is in Matthew chapter 6 in the same Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is teaching us how to pray and He gives the disciplines prayer. And then at the end says, "If you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."

I don't know about you, but I would like to be before God in a condition of forgiveness. I'm not talking about salvation. We're talking about the discipline of God over unforgiveness in your own life. I don't want to live like that. I don't want to live alienated from the fellowship. I don't want to live under the judgment of God.

Why do we forgive? For all these reasons that we've given to you. Just a couple more I will suggest, and I'll stop. The absence of forgiveness renders you unfit to worship. The absence of forgiveness renders you unfit to worship. Listen to Matthew 5:23, "Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar coming to worship, remember your brother has something against you, leave your offering before the altar. Go, be reconciled to your brother, then come present your offering." No one should draw near to God with an intention of worship if he has unsettled grudges with another believer. Reconciliation must precede worship.

Two more that you can think about. Not to forgive, number nine, is to usurp the authority of God. Not to forgive, is to usurp the authority of God. If there is to be vengeance and discipline on the sins of another, that belongs to God. Romans 12, "'Vengeance is mine. I will repay,' says the Lord." You

don't need to take over His job.

Finally, and this is a very important thing to realize. The offenses against you are the trials that perfect you. The offenses against you, all the difficulties, criticisms, injustices, offenses, persecutions, mistreatments, misrepresentations; all those offenses against you are the very trials that perfect you. "Count it all joy when you fall into those various trials." "Cast all your care on Him in the midst of all of that."

Forgiveness is the heart and soul of a living, growing, joyful fellowship. You want to cultivate that in your heart. You'll never be more like God, as we said at the very beginning, than when you forgive. You will never put yourself in a place of more blessing than when you forgive.

Father, we thank you for our time to look into Your Word this morning, such a foundational and important subject for us. It's so easy to let the flesh get its upper hand and give way to feelings of bitterness and animosity. Free us from that. Fill our hearts with love even toward those who offend us. Give us the heart that You have of forgiveness that You might be honored. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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