

The Freedom of Forgiveness – Ephesians 4:32

Scripture Reading – Matthew 18:23-35

Introduction

Old Joe was sick and he knew his days were nearly over. For years he had been at odds with his neighbor, Bob, who had once been one of his best friends. Wanting to straighten things out before he shuffled off this mortal coil he sent word that he wanted Bob to come and see him.

When Bob arrived, Joe told him that he was afraid to go into eternity with such bad feelings between them. Then he proceeded to very reluctantly and with great effort to admit and express repentance for all the things he had said and done over the years. He also assured Bob that he was willing to forgive him for all of his offenses.

It was a touching scene as both men tearfully shook hands, pledged their forgiveness of one another, and buried the hatchet between them. All was well until Bob turned to go when Joe called out, “But, remember, if I get better, this doesn’t count!”

Forgiveness is a difficult thing for most of us and even when we bury the hatchet we often leave the handle sticking out so we can take it up again and use it to our advantage if we feel we need to

I believe if we were to take a poll, it would show that we all want others to forgive us even though we find it difficult to forgive others

But I suspect what we really want isn’t forgiveness at all – we just want our offenses to be forgotten

Because in our culture we tend to practice a kind of pseudo forgiveness that really isn’t forgiveness at all

What we do instead is substitute an apology for confession and repentance in anticipation of the other person absolving us for whatever we’ve done

The accepted and expected exchange is one where we say, “Sorry” and they say, “Don’t worry about it”

But as we are going to see that isn’t forgiveness in the biblical sense because forgiveness requires so much more from both the offender and the forgiver

People I’ve talked to have a great number of questions about forgiveness that is born out of some pretty basic misunderstandings about just what forgiveness means and what it entails

Questions like:

“What if they don’t deserve forgiveness?” or “If I forgive doesn’t that excuse what they did to me and give the impression that it’s okay?” or “Does forgiving someone mean I have to develop a sort of amnesia and forget what they did?” or “If I forgive them does that mean I have to let them continue in my life?”

And I have heard questions and confusion on the other side of the equation – from those who want to be forgiven:

“I said I was sorry but they won’t forgive me” or “I’ve told them I’m sorry but they won’t accept it; they just seem to want their pound of flesh” or “They say they have forgiven me but they won’t return my calls”

True forgiveness is hard whether you are the person seeking to be forgiven or the one from whom forgiveness is sought

And that’s because our emotions get all tangled up in forgiveness

Seeking forgiveness requires a great deal of humility and transparency while granting forgiveness requires a great deal of grace and mercy – and both require one to take a measure of risk

So, whether it’s because we see our own trespasses as trivial or because some things just hurt so deeply that we find forgiveness to be nigh onto impossible we settle for the fake forgiveness or just continue to nurse our grudges

Pride is a powerful motivator that is tough to set aside

This morning we will be looking at many passages from God's Word but our main text is **Ephesians 4:32** which says – *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.*

Clearly, what we see in this verse is a command and what that tells us is that forgiveness isn't optional for the Christ-follower – no matter how difficult it is

My hope is that we can use God's Word to clarify just what forgiveness entails so that forgiveness becomes easier and more effective for us as God intends for it to be

As we do, we will be seeking to find the answers to the three questions you find on your note sheet

1. What on earth is **forgiveness**?
2. How does **God** forgive?
3. What does forgiveness **not mean**?

I. What on earth is forgiveness?

If we are going to be obedient to this command and forgive one another as God has forgiven us the first thing we need to do is know what it means to forgive

Webster's defines forgiveness like this: To cease to feel resentment against someone on account of a wrong committed; to give up claim to requital from or retribution upon an offender; to absolve; to pardon

Forgiveness by definition always exists and operates in the presence of sin and without sin there would be no need of forgiveness

Forgiveness then is the act of pardoning an offender – it is letting go of an offense without expecting any form of personal compensation or satisfaction

As we saw last week when we considered the carrying and nursing of grudges many people today consider forgiveness to be a sign of weakness

The prevalent attitude is to not get mad but to get even and if you forgive you are allowing yourself to be a doormat or a patsy because no one who has wronged you deserves to escape retribution

But forgiveness isn't given on the basis of merit – it's not given because a person deserves to be forgiven

Forgiveness is an act of **mercy** and **grace**

It's a deliberate act of the will that says, "I choose not to hold this matter against this person and I relinquish my right to any form of satisfaction for it"

And forgiveness is granted out of **love for God** because God has first forgiven us for our sins against him and then commanded us to forgive those who sin against us making forgiveness also an act of **obedience**

In bookkeeping terms, when we choose to forgive we wipe out the debt the person who harmed us rightfully owes us

As I was studying this week I came across a list put together by another pastor of seven things the Bible says define forgiveness

Forgiveness means:

1. From **Romans 12:19** – Refusing to take opportunities for or to entertain thoughts of revenge against them

Biblical forgiveness means forgoing the tit for tat mentality that seeks to get even and that includes fantasizing about getting back at them

2. From **1Thessalonians 5:15** – Not returning evil for evil which would include even speaking ill of them

This one is tough because our natures want everyone to know how much we've suffered and what a rat our opponent is

3. From **Luke 6:28** – Actually wishing them well and asking God not to withhold blessing from them

This one kind of goes along with the next one

4. From **Proverbs 24:17** – Not celebrating their misfortune

The one who has sinned against us is almost certain to suffer misfortune at some point – we need to be careful not to displease God by getting inward pleasure when it happens

5. From **Matthew 5:44** – Loving them and praying for them

Sin divides and we should want nothing more than for them to be reconciled not just to us but to God

6. From **Exodus 23:4** – Not withholding common courtesies from them

To do so is just to extract revenge in a passive aggressive way

7. From **Romans 12:18** – Being open to reconciliation with them (We will talk more about this in a bit)

Those seven actions run contrary to our natural tendencies don't they?

The urge for revenge and retaliation is strong and our fallen natures want to see the same type of injury and suffering as we have suffered come to those who have wronged us

But we need to take heart and be confident that we can succeed because God's Word tells us he never commands us to do anything that he won't do alongside and through us

2Corinthians 9:8 tells us that – *...God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work*

And we read in **Joshua 1:9** that when God gave Joshua his marching orders for taking the land he told him – *Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.*

We need to be careful to read that verse correctly

The command is not to be strong and courageous

The correct way to understand this verse is that God has commanded Joshua to take the land therefore Joshua can be strong and courageous because God will see it come to pass if he only does what God has told him to do

And this promise is as true for us today as it was for Joshua as we read in the New Testament that God will never leave us or forsake us in **Hebrews 13:5**

God not only provides us with his presence and his power; he also provides us his example to follow as we will see next

II. How does God forgive?

Our passage tells us to: *forgive one another as God in Christ forgave you*

This means that we, as believers and Christ-followers are to forgive each other as Jesus has forgiven us

Assuming we want to obey this command the natural question we are faced with is: “How has Christ forgiven us?”

And by looking at God’s Word we can find out certain truths about how God forgives

The first thing we see is that God prepared the way for forgiveness before forgiveness was sought

Look with me at **Romans 5:6-8** –

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Not only did God not wait until forgiveness was asked for; God didn’t wait even until mankind was through offending him before he made forgiveness available

He took the initiative and prepared the way for the offender to receive forgiveness and we need to do likewise as we open the door to and prepare room in our hearts for the forgiveness of those who have wronged us

Second, we see that God paid a huge price in forgiving us

Forgiveness cost God the Father the humiliation and death of his only begotten Son

John 3:16 tells us God so loved the world that he gave his Son that no one need receive the penalty their guilt deserves

Most of the things we will be called upon to forgive will pale in comparison to the price God paid but that doesn’t mean that forgiveness won’t be costly because true forgiveness runs so contrary to our natural tendencies

We must be willing to pay the price of forgiveness if we want to forgive as God forgives because forgiveness means not expecting the offender to pay

Third, we see that God forgives us even though we don’t deserve forgiveness

Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us that God’s forgiveness is not on the basis of merit but is based solely on his grace toward us

If someone has to earn our forgiveness then we are not forgiving as God forgives – as a matter of fact, earned forgiveness by definition isn’t forgiveness at all because the offender has paid the price for their offense

So if we want to forgive as God forgives we have to give up on ideas of compensation or penance

Fourth, we see that God’s forgiveness is complete

Look with me at **1John 1:9** which says –

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Have you ever known someone who repeatedly brought up all your past sins against them?

Some people are like that as they keep a laundry list of past offenses that they can whip out at a moment’s notice to bludgeon their opponent with

But not God

Look again at what 1John 1:9 says – when we confess the sins we know about God cleanses us even from those the Holy Spirit hasn’t yet convicted us of yet – God takes our confession and repentance and applies it to all our sins

If we want to forgive as God forgives we aren’t allowed to hold the sins of others in reserve saying, “I’ll forgive this but not that.” – Forgiveness must be complete

Lastly, we see that God’s forgiveness is final

In **Hebrews 10:17** God says: *“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more”*

Our criminal justice system allows for certain convicted criminals to have their records expunged which means the charges and convictions against them are wiped clean in the eyes of the criminal justice system

And that's an image of what God does with our sins – he willingly sets our sins aside and doesn't count them against us in a legal sense when he forgives

Likewise, we need to dismiss the case against our offender and refuse to bring the matter up again if we want to forgive as God forgives

Honestly, when we hear a command like we find in Ephesians 4:32 and we take the time to understand just how much and how thoroughly we've been forgiven we can despair at ever being able to meet the standard

I have heard from many people who struggle with forgiving largely because they have added expectations and aspects to forgiveness that go beyond a biblical concept of forgiveness

So let's take a few moments to look at some of the things that forgiveness doesn't mean

III. What does forgiveness not mean?

Forgiveness doesn't mean that we need to be okay with what was done to us

We don't have to condone or accept as right the wrongs done to us and the Bible actually condemns those who claim that sinful actions are acceptable

Look with me at **Isaiah 5:20** which says:

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

God never condones sin or accepts it as okay and he doesn't expect us to do so either

Forgiveness doesn't mean there are no consequences for the offender

King David engaged in a pattern of sin when he first laid eyes on Bathsheba and those sins were all forgiven by God

But there were still serious consequences for David's sinful behavior as 2Samuel 12 records

Look with me at **2Samuel 12:13-18**

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die." Then Nathan went to his house. And the Lord afflicted the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and he became sick. David therefore sought God on behalf of the child. And David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. And the elders of his house stood beside him, to raise him from the ground, but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. On the seventh day the child died.

David not only confessed his sin but also fasted and prayed for seven days in contrition but his child still died and we know that David's household was forever in turmoil after this time and David's sin is recorded in God's Word for all time

Those were the consequences David suffered for his sin even though his sin was forgiven

Forgiveness doesn't mean that the offender is let off the hook scot free

Forgiveness also doesn't mean that all is forgotten from a practical point of view (legal yes, practical no)

Let's say you were to loan someone a sum of money and he doesn't pay you back as he promised he would

And out of friendship, you determine to be gracious and not carry on about the matter, not to continue to bring it up, to not hold a grudge about it, and maybe even to forgive the loan altogether

Still, you might well choose to not lend him any more money

That would just be the natural consequence of him reaping what he has sown as we see in **Galatians 6:7** by having proven to be an untrustworthy debtor

Out of love we shouldn't keep a record of wrongs for any malicious or retaliatory purpose but we don't need to be like baby ducks where every day is a brand new day and walk into the same difficulties over and over again either

Sometimes it's better to admit we really have nothing that we need to forgive

Turn with me to Proverbs 19 where we are going to look at verse 11 (**Proverbs 19:11**)

Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.

We do well to consider whether there is really anything we need to forgive

Far too often we have the tendency to bear wounds of our own making rather than consider whether whatever we think was done to us is an offense that actually needs to be forgiven or just one of those bumps of life than can be overlooked

Take a moment to consider whether that look, that slight, that word uttered in an unkind tone was directed at you and meant to hurt you or whether it may well have been the product of distraction or preoccupation

We're all guilty of so many of those types of "offenses" that we need to give each other a great deal of grace

There really is a great deal of freedom in being difficult to offend

There are just two more helpful distinctions I want you to recognize when it comes to forgiveness that will make it easier to forgive those who sin against you

First, there is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration of relationship

When one person sins against another trust is broken and the relationship is damaged

Forgiveness can be readily and freely given but it takes time for the trust to be restored because, unlike forgiveness which is a matter of grace, trust must be earned through demonstrated integrity and perhaps steps of rehabilitation

Take for instance a case of marital infidelity

The offended spouse may freely forgive the offender but that doesn't mean they readily trust them and that's perfectly okay

It's not contradictory to say, "I forgive you but I don't trust you" as long as it is done in the right spirit

Restoration of relationship requires both confession and demonstrated repentance that gives assurance of a heart change in the offender that merits trusting them again

Second, there is a difference between forgiving someone and telling them you have forgiven them

We are to forgive as God has forgiven us so we need to ask, "Is God's forgiveness unconditional?" and the answer is "no"

God has made provision for the forgiveness of the sins of the unsaved but they still have to confess their sins, repent of them, and accept Christ's death as payment for them for that provided forgiveness to be effective for them

Then when Christians sin God stands ready to forgive the instant that the sinner repents but God doesn't forgive sinners until they repent

Look with me at **1John 1:8-10** I know we turned to this passage once but turn there once more because you might want to make a note in your Bible's margin on this one and we'll see this is true

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

I want you to notice the three inclusions of that little modifier, "if"

If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us

If we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar and his Word is not in us

But *if* and only if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness

God's forgiveness is conditional so I believe those who say we must express forgiveness unconditionally are wrong

But we need to remember that God determined in advance to forgive and made provision for forgiveness while we were still his enemies

So we need to do likewise

We must forgive in our hearts whoever has wronged us for however they have wronged us and we must stand ready to apply that forgiveness to them the moment they repent and seek forgiveness

Jesus shows how this works in the parable of the prodigal son where we see the father watching and waiting for his errant son's return so that he can rush to him and lavish forgiveness on him

But to say to that person, "I forgive you" when they haven't come to you to confess, repent, and ask for forgiveness produces cheap grace and it short-circuits the process of confession and repentance that leads to forgiveness to the detriment of the offender

Conclusion

A lack of forgiveness results in a heavy burden whether you are the unforgiving or the unforgiven

Because refusal to seek forgiveness or to grant forgiveness chains a person to the past making it impossible to truly move forward with any sort of freedom because it remains something necessary that is left undone

Perhaps God has used this message to bring to your mind instances for which you either need to seek forgiveness or grant forgiveness

If so, let me encourage you to leave the ball and chain behind as quickly as possible

In **Romans 12:18** Paul commands believers - *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

Perhaps the person you need to forgive is unrepentant – that happens

But you can still determine to forgive them in your heart and leave vengeance for what they have done to the Lord

You can decide to leave all bitterness and malice behind and trust God with the eventual outcome

You can begin today to pray for the repentance of the other person and the eventual restoration of your relationship

You can have a heart that is ready to make your forgiveness known the instant they repent

Those are all choices every offended person can make and when they decide to do those things they will become unchained from the hurt that has held them prisoner

And if you need to be forgiven you can determine today to go the person you have sinned against and acknowledge what you have done, repent of it, and ask them to forgive you

And whether they do or don't you will have the freedom that comes from doing what God would have you do

While we know that forgiveness doesn't undo whatever wrongdoing was done it does remove the guilt of it and that is a very liberating thing for all who are involved

Like the servant from our Scripture reading this morning every believer here has been forgiven a debt they could never repay

How can we, in good conscience deny anyone who has sinned against us forgiveness for their comparatively meager trespasses?

Let's pray