

Nov 16: Forgiveness (part 3)

Here's a biblical reality we need to embrace: Forgiveness is supernatural. As such, any wisdom that attempts to apply forgiveness without a context rooted in God and His character will invariably miss the mark. Let me begin by making this as clear as I can: forgiveness, apart from God's divine grace, is IMPOSSIBLE. Not hard. Not challenge. Not complicated. It's hopeless, helpless, impossible. As humans, we lack the right thinking, right desires, and right will to extend and receive forgiveness because all forgiveness, not some, ALL forgiveness, comes from God's divine grace. His forgiveness of my sins, my forgiveness of your sins against me, all of it. It's not that we contribute nothing. We do, actually, but what we contribute is IMPOSSIBLE apart from God's grace.

If we are going to make any attempt to apply biblical forgiveness in our lives, in our faith, in our relationships, then we need to begin with the right lens. You ask, receive, and extend forgiveness only because of God's divine grace. Period. End of story. In a very real sense, when you say or hear someone say, "I can never forgive that person," that's actually a true statement. YOU can't forgive without God's divine grace, because when forgiveness is done with God's divine grace, you're not actually the one doing it but rather Christ in you.

The clearest and truest determination proving you belong to God is love demonstrated through forgiveness. Not through kind gestures. Not through service. Not through preaching. It's forgiving others. Forgiving others PROVES you have embraced and received the forgiveness offered to you through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Since God in Christ forgave you, and you have embraced and received this forgiveness, then you will be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving of others. Forgiveness, as it is with God, will be part of your character. Remember Moses's encounter with God on Mount Sinai.

Exodus 34:6

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..."

If you refuse to forgive, then you are either not embracing or haven't received this divine grace from God, and His character, the character of Jesus Christ, isn't manifesting in your life. There is no clearer demonstration of the authenticity of your faith than this because it PROVES God's divine grace within you because forgiveness is impossible without it. There isn't an attitude or action in all of your existence that displays the biblical foundation of dying to self more than forgiveness because you can't do it. Not by willpower. Not by repeating a mantra each morning. Not by all worldly wisdom combined. And certainly not through any popular Disney songs about letting go.

After multiple conversations this past week, I am calling an audible on our format for this topic. This would normally be our third and final week discussing forgiveness, but it's too important to rush through this application, so at a bare minimum, we will be taking an extra week. Today our application will focus on forgiveness when we are sinned against, and next week will examine the struggle of embracing God's forgiveness and the faulty thinking that comes with it regarding forgiving ourselves.

First let me clarify a few things from last week. Using Scripture, I made the point that because God's forgiveness towards us is infinite, meaning God does not keep score, He doesn't run out of forgiveness, our attitude of forgiveness towards others must be limitless. It's important we make the concrete distinction between attitude of forgiveness versus action of forgiveness because this will help us see the differences and relationship between forgiveness, reconciliation, and trust. The attitude of forgiveness is not the same as the action of forgiveness.

Pastor Lloyd and I wrestled this week with the right terminology to define forgiveness, because biblically speaking, forgiveness and reconciliation are the same thing. In other words, for forgiveness to be complete, it requires both parties agreeing. The offended tells the offender, you did wrong, and the offender replies, I did wrong. Confession means I repeat back to you the offense you have accused me of and I agree with you. I take responsibility for sinning against you.

It's been awhile since I used a prop, so I figured it was time. Imagine this tennis ball Pastor Lloyd is holding is forgiveness. I know this is hard to believe, but imagine that I have sinned against Pastor Lloyd. He brings me that ball and says you have sinned. The courage to do that comes from God's divine grace. The contrition I feel is the work of God's divine grace upon my receptive heart. I then respond by agreeing with him and begging for his forgiveness. Perhaps there are things I need to do to make restitution, or perhaps even some legal ramifications, but we work those things out and he then accepts my plea for forgiveness by the power of God's divine grace, and now I am forgiven.

We humans respond, but the power to do any of this comes from God's divine grace. Biblically speaking, this completes the picture of forgiveness. Lloyd forgiving me includes reconciliation, or at the bare minimum the start of the journey towards it. This is what Jesus came to do. As part of His infinite greatness, God maintains an infinite attitude of forgiveness. Jesus comes to be the means whereby we are forgiven, where forgiveness is both extended and received. You cannot, will not, be forgiven by God apart from Jesus.

Again, this picture does not mean part of this forgiveness won't include restitution or even consequences if there are legal ramifications. It also doesn't mean the offended is biblically required to extend trust at the same level as before, but completed forgiveness means there's an opportunity to regain that trust through relationship and reconciliation.

But what happens if you toss the ball to someone, meaning you have been sinned against and you approach the person and tell them so, and they can't respond or don't respond well? That's where our conversation will take us today.

Let's start with a question: Does God ever forgive someone who has not confessed and forsaken his sin? In other words, does God ever forgive someone who has not asked for His forgiveness? If the Holy Spirit tosses you the ball and says you are guilty, and instead of contrition you respond with indifference, will God the Father still forgive? Some believe that the biblical commands of forgiveness, for us, apply even if a person has not sought forgiveness. Others contend that the Bible endorses a forgiveness that occurs only after someone requests forgiveness. Our forgiveness is supposed to look like God's standard of forgiveness, so which is it?

Well, the biblical reality is that God's attitude of forgiveness is infinitely applied to all, but His action of forgiveness is not. Remember Exodus 34: forgiveness is part of God's character. If we are going to think and respond biblically, we need to really examine God's forgiveness of us. One immediate implication of this is that God forgives only those who have sought His forgiveness through a humble confession of sin. Back to Exodus 34.

Exodus 34:6-7

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty..."

Remember, we are talking about the action of forgiveness, not the attitude of forgiveness. God does not forgive an unrepentant person's guilt if that person never tosses the ball back. Let's make this as clear as possible: God will not absolve you of the eternal consequences of your sin without you believing in your heart and confessing with your mouth that Jesus Christ is LORD.

If God's action of forgiveness was applied to everyone, then hell would be empty and all would be saved. This is called universalism, and it's spectacularly unbiblical. If the model of our own forgiveness is supposed to mirror God's forgiveness of us, and it is, then this rules out extending the action of forgiveness to someone who will not admit guilt or does not seem interested in pursuing reconciliation or cannot because of death. If I toss the ball to you by saying you sinned against me, and you don't toss the ball back by asking for my forgiveness, I have no action to give back to you because the ball is literally in your court.

God will not hold you to a standard He doesn't hold Himself. This forgiveness, then, is what? Incomplete? Interrupted? Broken? Do you see the difficulty in trying to accurately describe this concept? Here's why attitude is so important.

Even when someone is not interested in confessing sin, even when they toss the ball away or have already left this earth and can't catch it, we are not allowed to become embittered.

Ephesians 4:31

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

A lack of contrition on the part of the offender does not give us divine permission to harbor anger and bitterness because now we have used the pain of being sinned against as an excuse to sin against God. Remember that all sin is against God, even my bitterness towards you.

Since bitterness is not an option, how are we to respond when we are sinned against and the offender doesn't, or can't, give a rip? What are we to do when the exchange cannot be completed? What does this look like? Folks, that incomplete space, by God's design and divine grace, is the most fertile soil upon which personal sanctification, Christ-likeness, will ever grow.

In order to answer these questions, we need to examine how Jesus did it. How did Jesus respond to the pain of being sinned against?

Jesus did not avoid sorrow; He bore it.

Isaiah 53:3-5

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. <sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

Don't miss this. Jesus didn't just bear His pain; He bore all pain. All the pain that has or will ever exist was poured out upon the Lamb of God because upon Him was poured out all the wrath of God as payment for sin. All pain, folks. Let that sink it.

Please here this: I am not advocating, nor would I ever advocate, that you minimize your pain. I want to remind you, perhaps for the first time, that when you righteously bear the sorrow of being sinned against and there is no reconciliation, no forgiveness, in that moment you are the most Jesus-like you can be in this life. Did you know that?

Verse 7

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

Jesus didn't complain. He did scream for justice. He didn't demand the right to plead His case, at least in this world. He entrusted Himself to the Father's justice. Carrying this weight isn't about silencing the pain; it's about directing it toward God because His justice, and the timing of His justice, is perfect. We only temporarily carry the consequences of being sinned against. There's no such things as "he got away with it" because Creator Almighty God will ensure the offender answers to Him for what he did even if he refuses to answer to you. The question becomes, and always is, do you trust Him with this? Even this? Do you trust Him to carry the pain with you? Do you trust Him to bring about perfect justice as He sees it, not as you see fit? There is a powerful dynamic tension at play here.

On the one hand, we need to maintain an attitude of forgiveness because of the reminder of the magnitude of our sin against Holy God, driving us towards humility, contrition, and dependence. On the other hand is the confidence and trust in God's justice, the One who sees all things and to whom we all must give account. Like Christ, we submit ourselves, by faith, to the Father's justice because He sees our pain and the consequence we currently carry because of being sinned against. When God the Father sees our attitude of forgiveness in the midst of that pain, when He sees the injustice of carrying the consequences we didn't earn, He sees His SON! "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!" Don't miss how huge this is! None of this is possible apart from God's divine grace.

If this reality doesn't impact you at the heart level, then you will struggle to respond in a biblically faithful manner at the behavior level. What does a Christ-like, biblical response look like?

Let's talk about lament. Mark Vroegop, in the opening lines of his book *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, writes the following:

Who taught you to cry? The answer, of course, is "no one." Although you don't remember it, the first sound you made when you left the warm and protected home of your mother's womb was a loud wail. A heartfelt protest. Every human being has the same opening story. Life begins with tears. It's simply a part of what it means to be human – to cry is human. But lament is different. The practice of lament – the kind that is biblical, honest, and redemptive – is not as natural for us, because every lament is a prayer. A statement of faith. Lament is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God's goodness.

It's an honest expression of sorrow, confusion, or injustice before God while maintain trust in His character. That last part is rather important. Psalm 13 is a fantastic example of lament. David exclaims:

Psalm 13

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?  
<sup>2</sup> How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? <sup>3</sup> Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, <sup>4</sup> lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. <sup>5</sup> But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. <sup>6</sup> I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Notice with me the structure of this. A lament is addressed to God. It's a prayer addressed to the Lord God. This prayer is expressed through a cry, and not just any cry, but a righteous cry. What makes it righteous? The right attitude. "How long, O Lord? How long, how long, how long..." Insert your cry. How long will I have to carry this pain? How long before I see justice? How long before you do something? The unbiblical notion that we need to stuff it down deep rather than express it is absolutely toxic. But so is the notion of screaming in anger at God. This cry will only be righteous if, in your pain, you don't question God's character or accuse God of wrongdoing.

This cry transitions into a specific, and righteous, request. "Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes," meaning give me strength, lift up my spirit because it's crushed to death and I just don't have it in me. The lament goes from a cry of pain, confusion, and sorrow to a cry of need. "God, I need you to hear me, I need you to acknowledge me, I need your strength, presence, and hope. God, don't forget about me. I can't do this without you." How incredibly un-American. How weak and needy. How humbling. Right where you need to be and exactly how you are to approach the God of the universe.

The world will tell you this is where self-empowerment needs to happen, and it's the biggest lie of them all. Recognizing and confessing your neediness to God rightly places Him upon the throne of the universe and the throne of your heart, otherwise that throne will be occupied by the lie that you are enough. You're not. That you can do this with the power within you. You can't.

And then the rubber hits the road. How long, God? I'm hurting, God. I need you, God. Verse 5.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

"God, I trust you with this. Even with this, I trust you." Why? Because I remember your salvation. I remember that who you are and what you have already done is enough. You saved me! In the midst of the pain, confusion, and sorrow, I choose to remember the fact that you have saved me, and this, only this, is why I can sing to the Lord. Why?

I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Because he has dealt bountifully with me. His forgiveness of my mountain of sin was both gracious and complete. His forgiveness of my sin overflows, and it is with a heart filled with gratitude that I can remember to call upon Him in the midst of that unreconciled situation. This attitude of forgiveness is IMPOSSIBLE without embracing, celebrating, and worshipping the forgiveness God's has extended to me.

The cry reveals the pain; the request reveals the need; the confession reveals the hope. Folk, all of this comes together to form the word faith. And faith is the heart of worldview. From this foundation will your beliefs be rightly ordered, your values rightly prioritized, your behavior rightly edifying. For instance, in Matthew 23, Jesus laments over Jerusalem. His heart breaks for them in spite of the fact He knows they will reject Him and call for His unjust crucifixion. But the clearest and truest determination proving you belong to God is love demonstrated through forgiveness. Even when the offending party never asks for it, because your attitude of forgiveness demonstrates trust in God's characters, and His character includes keeping His promises. What does God promise?

Deuteronomy 32:35-26

Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly.' <sup>36</sup> For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free.

Proverbs 25:16

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, <sup>22</sup> for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.

Paul brings these passages together in Romans 12.

Romans 12:19-21

<sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup> To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The most human response to being wronged is to be overcome by evil, to respond with evil. But the reality is suffering and satisfaction coexist in God's redemptive plan. Back to Isaiah 53.

Isaiah 53:11

Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Our attitude of forgiveness participates in that same redemptive hope. Hope in God's justice. His presence. His healing. Hope that God can and will redeem this pain. If your soul is not satisfied by this hope, then you need to examine your worldview for the disconnect because this hope also includes the hope that God can redeem the person who sinned against you. This, perhaps above everything else, is the truest test of the attitude of forgiveness. If I say I forgive but have no hope in God's redemptive power to penetrate the offender's heart, then my pain has grown bigger than God's power, and now I stand guilty before Him. If in your heart you say, "That person will never change," you have literally condemned that person to hell. If you immediately dismiss the possibility that the Holy Spirit can change that heart, you have judged with a judgment reserved exclusively by God. I have been guilty of this. I have fallen into this trap. I was even a pastor at the time.

Luke 6:37

Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven...

None of this is abstract for me. Folks, this is a big deal. Don't miss this warning. Deal with this unbelief in your heart as quickly as possible. God promises to deal with wrongdoing; our peace comes from trusting His justice based on His character, and often this will involve waiting. We are called to wait upon the Lord's justice because we will frequently not see it in this lifetime, but we are called to hope in the promise of this in the future.

Revelation 21:3-4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

If you have embraced this hope as your reality, then you will, by God's divine grace, demonstrate a tangible attitude of forgiveness in the following ways.

First, pray for the one who wronged you. Not for comfort, but for God's transforming mercy to reach his or her heart. When you can do this, and do it regularly, then you will know you have adopted an attitude of forgiveness.

Second, guard your narrative. Refuse to rehearse your pain as self-righteous ammunition. Oh boy, have I done that! Replace "what they did to me" with "what Christ has done for me."

Third, find redemptive community. Allow others to bear this burden like it says in Galatians 6:2. Redemptive community, not wallowing, commiserating community. Community that will speak life into your pain, not match you story for story. That might bring a temporary comfort, but it completely lacks redemptive power.



And fourth, practice lament regularly as a spiritual rhythm of healing. When reconciliation isn't possible or hasn't happened, lament becomes the bridge between our pain and His peace.

Prayer for the one who wronged you. Guard your narrative. Find redemptive community. Practice lament regularly. This is hard stuff. Some final thoughts: When emotions don't follow obedience, remember that forgiveness is a choice before it's a feeling. Feelings of pain are not proof of unforgiveness; they are invitations to return to the Cross. The goal is not amnesia but redemption of painful memories into a story of His faithfulness. Folks, that incomplete space when an attitude of forgiveness hasn't had a chance to become the action of forgiveness, that space, by God's divine grace, is the most fertile soil upon which personal sanctification, Christ-likeness, will ever grow because God the Father looks upon the weight you carry by His grace and sees His Son. You can carry it because He already has.