

Nov 30: Forgiveness (part 5)

Just another quick reminder that you can find Equipping Hours notes on the Church Center App as well as the audio recordings for the past couple of months. Last week we discussed the difference between a peacemaker and a peacekeeper and how this fits into our biblical understanding of forgiveness, specifically conflict resolution. The week before we discussed the importance of an attitude of forgiveness even when the action of forgiveness has not occurred, then last week we went further by examining the responsibilities we have within the family of God for holding each other accountable to the faith we profess. Gary Nobis has an amazing story of how this can and should be done, so he is going to share that story this morning as our recap from last week.

[Gary]

This morning we are going to dig just a little bit deeper into the heart of forgiveness. Our attitude of forgiveness needs to mirror God's attitude of forgiveness. Since God's attitude of forgiveness is infinite, our attitude of forgiveness needs to be limitless. Peter asked Jesus how many times he needs to forgive his brother, throwing out the number seven, which was above and beyond the rabbinical teachings of the day that taught forgive someone of the same offense three times and then be done with them. Jesus blows up his faulty worldview then proceeds to share a parable for how we are to apply the reality of God's forgiveness of us in our earthly relationships. Forgiveness between people, whether the attitude or the action, is impossible apart from God's divine grace. And as we will examine today, that grace has an observable impact upon our hearts. That grace unlocks a particular door we must traverse in order to practice forgiveness in a manner consistent with God's way.

This morning we are going to examine God's forgiveness of us. Folks, if we get this wrong, we won't be able to go through that door and practice forgiveness in our horizontal relationships. You won't be able to live in the assurance of your position as being made right with God and therefore miss out experiencing the freedom of becoming both unoffendable and entirely filled with love.

One of the greatest challenges you will face as a disciple of Jesus Christ isn't believing that God forgives you in the general sense, but believing that God forgives you personally, fully, and right now. Many Christians carry a strange contradiction in their hearts: we cognitively believe forgiveness is available, but we struggle to live as if forgiveness is actually. Meaning real, that forgiveness is real as part of our reality. Cognitive faith versus functional faith. If your cognitive faith does not line up with your functional faith, if those don't line up, then we need God's Word and the Holy Spirit to expose our hearts to see what's disconnected and then make choices in our willful hearts accordingly. Otherwise we'll carry guilt long after God has removed it. We'll rehearse sins God has already buried. We'll hold onto self-condemnation even though Scripture says it does not exist.

We have two more discussions to cover in this topic of forgiveness. Today we will examine what it means to believe God's forgiveness. Next week we will wrap up with what it means

to embrace God's forgiveness. So what do I mean by these. Believing means it's settle in your heart. Embracing is the action you take to lean into this in your daily life.

These two ideas are mutually inclusive, meaning you cannot have one without having both. If you try to have one without the other, it doesn't actual work and you'll walk through this journey incredibly frustrated and confused as to why you can't see Christlikeness developing in you.

So let's start with what it means to believe God's forgiveness. There's nothing new here. We've been hitting this idea for three weeks in a row. Believing God's forgiveness begins with believing that forgiveness flows from God's character. The starting point is not your sin; it's God's nature. When God revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 34, He declared, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..." Forgiveness isn't something God has to be talked into. He doesn't have to be bribed or bargained with. Forgiveness is part of who He is. Psalm 103 echoes the same truth:

Psalm 103: 8-10

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

God's character of forgiveness moves Him to action, orienting and orchestrating all of reality leading up to, and extending from, the cross. All of reality hinges upon the person and work of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness was purchased through the cross. God's forgiveness isn't sentimental kindness. It's paid for in blood, and not just any blood, but the blood of divine innocence. The blood of Jesus Christ. Back to Isaiah 53.

Isaiah 53:4-9

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ 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. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 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. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? ⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Innocent. Divine. And necessary. There was quite literally no other way, otherwise don't you think God would have chosen it rather than the Father pouring out His entire wrath against

sin upon His Son? Jesus even pleads to the Father in the garden before His arrest, “If there’s any other way, let this pass from me.” But there wasn’t. This was, and had always been, not just the way, the ONLY way, to pay for Adam and Eve’s sin. To pay for Moses’s sin. To pay for David’s sin. To pay for Paul sin. To pay for your sin.

Ephesians 1:7

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace...

Redemption, the forgiveness of our sins, could only and still is only possible because of the blood of Christ, and this grace He lavishes on us. Folks, this is really important. Don’t miss this. On the cross Jesus didn’t just take your sin, He became your sin. He became your pornography addiction. He became your jealous heart. He became your fear of man. He became your angry outbursts. He became your bitterness. He became your idolatrous heart.

2 Corinthians 5:21

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

On the cross, Jesus became your sin because there was no other way for you to be made right with God, which means “your sin” is no longer yours. He owns your sin. He bought your sin, signed, sealed, and delivered. Stew in the magnitude of this for a moment. See your deceitful, desperately sick heart seeping with sin, then gaze, then fix your eyes upon Jesus who became your sin and replaced your heart with His. God does not forgive by turning a blind eye to sin – He forgives by the power of the blood of Jesus because nothing else can.

And this divine forgiveness is complete. God’s forgiveness is complete. One of the most beautiful truths in Scripture is how God describes the completeness of His forgiveness. Back to Psalm 103.

Psalm 103:11-14

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. ¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. ¹⁴ For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

He knows we are weak and completely and utterly incapable of dealing with the problem of sin on our own, so He does the action of removing it, and that remove is complete. Why? Because your sin belongs to Jesus. Back to Ephesians 1.

Ephesians 1:3-4

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

Before the foundations of the world were created, this was always the plan, that Christ would die for the undeserving so that we should be holy and blameless before God. Does anyone here feel blameless before God? Did you know that's how God's forgiveness works? God is not holding your sin in reserve. You are not on probation. Your salvation isn't on condition you never sin again. You are blameless in His eyes. You are blameless!

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Hebrews 10:14

By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

No condemnation. You are blameless. Perfected for all time. When we sing about the power of the cross, this is what we mean.

Oh to see the dawn of the darkest day, Christ on the road to Calvary. Tried by sinful men torn and beaten then, Nailed to a cross of wood. This the pow'r of the cross, Christ became sin for us. Took the blame, bore the wrath, We stand forgiven at the cross. Oh to see the pain, written on Your face, Bearing the awesome weight of sin. Ev'ry bitter thought, ev'ry evil deed, Crowning Your bloodstained brow. Now the daylight flees, now the ground beneath, Quakes as its Maker bows His head. Curtain torn in two, dead are raised to life, Finished the victory cry. This the pow'r of the cross, Christ became sin for us, Took the blame, bore the wrath, We stand forgiven at the cross. Oh to see my name written in the wounds, For through Your suffering I am free. Death is crushed to death, life is mine to live, Won through Your selfless love. This the pow'r of the cross, Son of God slain for us. What a love what a cost, We stand forgiven. We stand forgiven. We stand forgiven! At the cross.

But then the lies show up.

Lie #1: "My sin is too big."

The lie isn't the magnitude of your sin; the lie is the insufficiency of the cross. My sin is too big for Jesus. You say, "If you knew what I've done, you'd agree with me that there's no way Jesus could forgive me." And I would agree with you. Your sin is too big...it's way too big of a problem for you to handle! But do you actually think you can out-sin Christ's redeeming blood? You are literally making yourself more powerful than Jesus with this lie. You are more impressed by your capacity for sin than you are impressed by the God of grace who saves even the foremost of sinners. You're literally boasting about your sin at this point. No amount of proof can confront this lie because the issue isn't a lack of proof. It's pride. Instead of looking at yourself, look at the cross.

Lie #2: “I must punish myself.”

In other words, what Jesus went through wasn't enough. If God won't crush me, I'll do it myself. Self-punishment is unbelief disguised as humility. It's a refusal to accept the finished work of Christ upon the cross, therefore I have to do something more in order to be forgiven. Folks, believe it or not, this is the most common lie brought to me in counseling. It's self-righteousness clothed in self-loathing. I have to DO more in order to make this right. I have to earn my righteousness. There's no way it's a free gift from God. So I'll work harder. I'll serve longer. I'll give a tenth of everything I earn. I'll do more good than bad. Whatever it takes to tip the final scale in my favor in order to be and do enough. That's Islam. That's Mormonism. “I must punish myself” is self-righteousness. Once again the issue is pride. Instead of looking at yourself, look at the cross.

Lie #3: “God forgives me, but I can't forgive myself.”

In other words, God's verdict is wrong. His justice is wrong. I know better than Him. I won't actually be absolved until I forgive myself, and I just can't do that, so even though God forgives me, I am still condemned. Several lies are buried within this thinking, beginning first with the notion that self-forgiveness is possible. It's not. It's a complete fabrication of the secular world that has radically infiltrated the church. I can't maintain an attitude of forgiveness for myself in order to then perform the action of forgiveness with myself. Me says, “Do I forgive me?” And me says, “Hmmm, not yet.” Forgiving yourself isn't possible because you cannot absolve yourself of sin. Imagine how amazing it would be to go around sinning, but each time you immediately say out loud, “It's okay, I forgive me.” And then you're all clear. Since I can't forgive myself, it's not part of the exchange and therefore that thinking needs to die.

A refusal to “forgive yourself” is an attempt to control something you cannot control, essentially playing God by refusing to trust His control. It's a misidentification of grief and remorse as unforgiveness of self. Here's where the biblical definitions of forgetting and remembering are crucial. Biblically forgetting means my past no longer has any bearing on my present and future reality. Yes, I may have done awful things, and my heart breaks for the people I've hurt and the God I betrayed, but believing God's forgiveness is perfect and complete means I trust that my sinful past has no bearing on my current and future standing before God. Biblically remembering means my past profoundly impacts my present and future reality, and the only reality in my past that has that kind of power is the blood of Jesus Christ that washed away my sin. THAT'S what you must remember, not the sin which is no longer yours.

The question becomes, Is your view of God informed by the Word or the world? How do you view God's character? How do you view His forgiveness? Do you struggle with imagining a reluctant God, one whose approval you have to earn rather than receive? In what ways has your view of God been influenced by your worldly relational pain? Consider that for a moment. Is your view of God informed by the Word or the world? Meaning, do you believe

God is who He says He is, or have your experiences, worldly teachers, and internal desires warped, clouded, and distorted your view of God? Literally all of our worldview series is based upon this question. A faulty view of God will produce faulty beliefs, faulty values, and faulty behaviors. If “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” doesn’t describe the God you worship upon the throne of your heart, then something drastically needs to change in your heart.

Well, what do I mean by heart? Let’s take a moment and explore the heart. Scripture uses several words to describe the part of us that is not made up of material matter, such as mind, spirit, and heart. The heart is the control center of what makes you, you. The heart operates dynamically through three primary functions.

First, the cognitive heart, which is your thoughts and how you interpret the world. Jeremy Pierre, in his book *The Dynamic Heart in Everyday Life*, writes that “From the early years of a person’s life, human beings construct beliefs about their world, assembled into a complex (and often inconsistent) web of ideas. People have different spheres of beliefs about many different things, and all of these understandings are more or less important to the way people organize their experiences of the world. Some are relatively easy to change, such as beliefs about the best laundry detergent, favorite clothing brand, or which team will win the World Series. Some beliefs are more difficult to change, like what people believe about their hometown, their understanding of their identity, or their beliefs about God.”

You can say God forgives in your cognitive heart, but that won’t necessarily make it true in the other two functions, meaning it’s not a functional belief. I can go to church and Sunday school my entire life and leave this world just as lost as when I entered it even though I have all the information. That’s the cognitive heart, and it attempts to objectively make sense of the world but will inevitably be impacted by preexisting answers to worldview questions that need to be transformed. Those preexisting beliefs are called controlling beliefs, and because of our sin nature they will often be misaligned with God’s Word and hard to break.

Then you have your affective heart, meaning the part of you that has desires, your affections. As Jeremy Pierre puts it, “People feel their wants.” Your desiring heart pulls you towards the things that provide you with security, pleasure, and recognition. I want to feel safe. I want to feel good. I want to matter. That’s the affective heart, and it includes the entire kaleidoscope of emotional expressions but also extends to earthly relationships as well. I want my kids to be healthy and safe. I want my husband to be kinder to me. I want the price of eggs to go down. So we are clear, men have just as much affective heart as women. The difference is women will often feel hurt when they don’t get their way, and men will feel angry. Same part of your heart, even if it’s never expressed outwardly. Just as people have controlling beliefs in their cognitive heart, they also have controlling desires, ruling desires, in their affective heart. The deeper people value something, the deeper the emotional response attached to its loss. What are you afraid of losing that you don’t want to lose, or what are you afraid of getting that you don’t want to get? That’s your affective heart.

The last mechanism is the volitional heart. The volitional heart is the part of the heart that commits to making a choice, otherwise known as the willful heart. Again, back to Pierre: “Commitment is the heart devoting itself to something it deems worthy...People committed to the environment will make environmentally friendly choices for what car to purchase, what products to buy, or how much to water their lawn. Prisoners of war committed to their country will choose to endure brutal treatment rather than give up secrets. As people understand their decisions, they will unearth the deeper commitments that drive those choices.”

And just like the controlling beliefs of the cognitive heart and the controlling desires of the affective heart, the volitional heart contains controlling commitments. Jeremy Pierre share a story from a close friend whose father was killed in a military exercise, and at the funeral a member of the squadron shared a photo with the grieving family. The image was a candid shot of the squadron partying. In the back of the photo was a man slumped forward, head down, hands covering his eyes. He looks spectacularly out of place amongst the revelers. The figure was the friend’s dad, and unbeknownst to the dad, the entertainment for the evening included strippers. The man’s commitment to his wife and to the God he loved were greater than his commitment to his squadron and their expectations, and so he put his head down and covered his eyes during that portion of the entertainment. His commitment to love God and his wife controlled his choices. The man with the photo wanted the grieving family to know the measure of the man for whom they grieved.

Folks, when we talk about the heart in need of God’s transforming grace, this is what we are talking about. Change begins in the heart. The entire dynamic heart needs God’s transformative grace in order for us to love the Lord our God with all of it. All our thoughts, all our desires, all our commitments. As Jeremiah 17:9 states clearly, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” We desperately need a new heart. So God promises one.

Ezekiel 36:25-26

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. [When you read or hear the word “idol,” those are the controlling beliefs, controlling desires, and controlling commitments you worship on the throne of your heart above God]²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

God gives us the heart, but we have to both receive and keep receiving this heart through transformed beliefs, through transformed desires, through transformed commitments. This is what it means to embrace God’s forgiveness, so come back next week for that discussion.