

## The Need for Forgiveness

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Brian R. Wipf

I want to start this morning by telling you about two people - Joanie and Stewart. Joanie is your typical working mom and she does all her work and service with a pleasant smile on her face. Nobody would call Joanie the life of the party, but everybody loves being around her. She has a very normal life and she loves it. But Joanie has a secret. When she was in college she discovered she was pregnant and it wasn't a happy discovery. She said to herself, "This is going to ruin everything!" Her boyfriend at the time thought the same thing. And as Joanie ran the scenarios through her mind, she felt her best option was to terminate the pregnancy. So, with the encouragement from her boyfriend that's what she did. She got an abortion.

That decision has haunted her since that day. She always believed abortion was wrong, but in her own moment of crisis she ignored her conscience and moved forward with it. That decision didn't make life easier like she hoped; in fact, it only got harder. She broke it off with her boyfriend. She quit college. She started wondering what life would be like if she would have had the baby. And she couldn't shake the thought: God will never forgive me. Meeting her husband was a dream come true; he accepted her and was willing to start a life with her. So, she's tried her best to move on. She works so hard in life to do the right thing hoping those good works can atone for the decision she made. But it's not working. She can't get past the guilt she feels and is convinced she can never be forgiven.

Stewart has been married for 5 years. And after 5 years his marriage is starting to feel pretty ordinary, almost boring. But isn't that normal, he thinks? Life isn't as exciting as it once was, but that's the way things go, he thinks. So, Stewart dutifully remains a faithful, loving husband and just accepts this change in life. But his wife, Jessica, doesn't feel the same way. While Stewart commits himself to his marriage, Jessica begins exploring what she hopes become better options.

Stewart will never forget the day: he comes home from work to find a note on the kitchen table with his name on it. What he reads stops the rotation of his world. Jessica says she's leaving him. When he finally tracks her down (or maybe it's better said, "When she finally answers her phone") she tells him she's moved into the apartment of one of her coworkers, Steve; her new man. He can't believe it. He knows Steve. He's been friendly to him at office parties; he would shoot the breeze with Steve when he would stop by Jessica's office. And now she's left him for Steve?

A year later, nothing is the same. With no kids the divorce was free from drama. He hasn't had contact with Jessica for months; all he knows is they she and Steve are still together. And he hates it; and he hates them. His mom tells him to forgive and forget, but he says, "I won't forgive and I can't forget."

It wouldn't surprise me much if many of us identify quite strongly with either Joanie or Steve, maybe both of them. On the one hand, it's quite common to think like Joanie - "God would never forgive someone like me." You look at who you are and what you done and think, "no way, no how." You just don't believe there's any hope for someone like you. And so you've settled into a kind of life that either works really hard to make up for what you've done or a life of despondency and despair because you don't believe it can ever get better. Or on the other hand, maybe you can identify with Stewart. You've been hurt so badly, you were betrayed so callously that you are filled with contempt and rage. You can't escape your bitter thoughts. And it infects every aspect of your life. Before the pain, before the betrayal, you were happy-go-lucky, but now, all you see is darkness. You don't want to forgive; you can't think of a scenario where you would forgive. Withholding forgiveness feels like your way of getting back. If you forgive it's like saying everything was ok, and it's not; if you forgive it's like saying it never happened and it did.

Forgiveness is one of the most important things in life, but it's also one of the hardest things in life. Today, we are beginning a 4 weeks series called *Forgiveness: finding and giving grace*. No matter who we are we need to hear God's word concerning forgiveness. If you're not feeling that need, let me try and help you see how important it is for all of us to find and give grace. Let's turn in our Bibles to Matthew 6:14-15 (READ).

If we can't find and give grace, we are not going to be the people God is calling us to be or the people we want to be. We're going to be incomplete. In the Lord's prayer, the passage right before ours, Jesus teaches that forgiveness is so crucial to our lives we must make it a part of our routine of prayer. And then after Jesus is through teaching on prayer, he circles back forgiveness and says, "Let me stress how important forgiveness really is;" I'm guessing you caught that when we read vs. 14-15. So, these two verses teach 3 critical aspects to forgiveness that I want to highlight for you now.

First of all, we need God's forgiveness. We need it. Jesus says in vs. 14, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." Notice how God forgiving us our sins is somewhat like a carrot on a stick; it's motivation for us to forgive others. And that's because we need God's forgiveness.

I'm hoping this doesn't confuse you (and I'm going to try my best to explain what I mean), but there's a sense in which being forgiven by God should feel impossible. There's a perspective that should make us think that being forgiven by God will always be out of reach. Now, let me state this really clearly and emphatically: God does forgive. And he can forgive you. No one is beyond the reach of God's forgiving grace. But, there's a sense in which forgiveness should feel impossible. There is an angle at looking at our sin where we should rightly conclude, "Well, I'm never going to be forgiven."

Forgiveness is a miracle that should always feel outside of our own grasp. Forgiveness is a miracle of God's grace! And because forgiveness requires the miracle working power of

God it should feel as unlikely as a blind man seeing, a lame woman walking, a dead person being resurrected from the grave. True forgiveness is part of the realm of God. When the paralyzed man is dropped in front of Jesus by his good buddies to be healed and Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven!" Jesus' enemies are incredulous. Who do you think you are to say that? Nobody can forgive sins! That power belongs to God alone!

Our need for God's forgiveness should look like a mountain we could never climb, because it is a mountain we could never climb. I know some of you are struggling to believe that God can forgive (and I'm going to help you in a minute), but some of us here this morning might have the opposite problem, thinking, "Of course, God will forgive me. I didn't do anything *that* bad; my mom always forgave me, why wouldn't God?" We're not seeing ourselves or God accurately if we think such things. We minimize our sin when we think such things and we are minimizing or ignoring the holiness of God. God is perfect and pure; God can not tolerate anything impure. He's not worthy of our worship and praise if he doesn't always punish sin. And that's a problem for us because we are sinners.

But while being forgiven is a mountain too great for us to climb, it's not too great for God to climb. And that's where our hope for forgiveness comes from. Our hope for forgiveness isn't based or grounded in our ability to overcome or cover our sin, it's based in God's ability and grace to overcome and cover our sin. And why do we have love in our hearts, FBC? Why do we gather week after week with joy in our hearts? Because Jesus has paid it all, all to him I owe. Sin has left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow. Know, friends, we need God's forgiveness.

The second thing we learn from Jesus' teaching on forgiveness is we need to forgive others. Vs. 15 says that if we fail and refuse to forgive others, we will not receive the forgiveness of God. But we just got done talking about how much we need God's forgiveness. We need it. But without forgiving others, God won't forgive us. So, what's the conclusion we should make? That we must learn how to forgive and be willing to forgive.

Did you notice how I phrased that? Forgiveness is a matter of our will, but also something we must learn. Some of us don't forgive others because we don't know how to; we haven't learned what it means to forgive. We have all these ideas or thoughts of what we think forgiveness is, but we're wrong. We can't really forgive unless we learn what it means. But it's also a matter of our will. Many of us don't forgive because we don't want to. But that, too, must change. The good news, of course, is that God will change us by his grace. That's truly where forgiveness to others comes from; it comes from the grace of God.

The last thing I want you to see from vs. 14 and 15 is that there is a direct correlation between God's forgiveness of our sins and our forgiveness of others. When we talk about giving grace we're going to spend a lot of time talking about this. Forgiveness is a package deal. We either receive and celebrate God's forgiveness of our own sins, which will in turn produce a heart and life of forgiveness for others, or we pridefully refuse to receive God's forgiveness,

which closes our hearts to giving grace to others. I'm going to try really hard to help you see that direct connection in the coming weeks.

Now, what I want to do with the remainder of our time is briefly discuss some misunderstandings we have about forgiveness. Here are a few.

Forgive and forget. How many of us have heard that one before, right? Boy, this is probably the motherlode of bad advice on forgiveness. And, quite frankly, it's one of the reasons we don't forgive others. We just can't imagine ever forgetting that terrible crime that was committed against. How could ever forget the hurt that we experienced? In many grievous situations, it's impossible to do. And when we can't forget we presume we can never forgive. But that's a mistake; forgiveness is not forgetting what happened.

Here's the correct intuition behind "forgive and forget." When we forgive another person, the sin and pain we experienced is swallowed by grace where what defines our new relationship is no longer the sin that separates us, but grace given by God. Do you see the difference? True forgiveness doesn't forget what's been done; instead, it adds a layer of grace, truth, and healing that we didn't have before that's more powerful than the sin that created the pain.

This is a picture of Rachael Denhollander (PIC). Rachael is a survivor of the hideous sexual abuse perpetrated by Larry Nassar from Michigan State. Rachael gave a spellbinding testimony at Nassar's sentencing hearing that last 40 minutes long. Rachael is trusting in Jesus for her own forgiveness and to give forgiveness to Nassar. Listen to a portion of her testimony and as you hear her words remember where she's at and who's she's talking to. She's talking to the man who robbed her innocence as a teenage girl and she's talking in a court of law before a watching world. And notice how she remembers very vividly what happened, but at same time offered forgiveness (VID).

Grace has covered sin, but not in a way that the sin is forgotten. Rachael is willing and able to offer grace, but she has a keen awareness (and always will, I'm sure) of what Nassar has done. What's happened instead of forgetting sin is that what man meant for evil, God has turned and meant for good as now the light of Christ shines more brightly in Rachael's life and in this world.

Forgiveness ≠ Reconciliation. Forgiveness and reconciliation is linked pretty closely together, but they are not identical. And there are times when forgiveness should be granted, but reconciliation won't necessarily take place. I think one of the reasons why people struggle forgiving is that they wrongly think this means the relationship will be restored just like it was before. Sometimes, this can happen, but not always. The example I like to give has to do with church and money. Imagine a church treasurer entrusted with managing a church's finances is caught embezzling money. Such things happen (that's why we work hard at finding people of integrity and set up appropriate checks and balances). Such things are really traumatic for churches; a trust has been violated and healing comes slowly.

Should forgiveness be given? Yes, of course. How can we not forgive others when God has forgiven us? Should we make that person the church treasurer again after they've said they are sorry? Nope. Not going to happen. Truthfully: that person will never be church treasurer again. They will never be reconciled or restored to that original position. But you might argue and say, "But haven't you forgiven your church treasurer? If you've forgiven him, why wouldn't you let them serve in that role again?" It's because forgiveness and reconciliation are different. Sometimes, sin is going to change the nature of the relationship forever. It's not that we can't offer grace, but the relationship is now forever changed. So, please take this into account as you think about forgiveness.

The final error we make about forgiveness is thinking it's merely a decision we make. It is a decision, but it's not only a decision. When we think that forgiveness is only a decision we wrongly think it's only a matter of our will power and strength. But it's not just that; forgiveness is a work of God. It is a miracle of God's grace to receive the forgiveness of our sins. We've broken the law of God; we've spit in God's face, yet out of love and mercy for his people, God extends the gift of forgiveness to us so that we can enjoy his favor, we can enjoy his presence and power. It's a completely unilateral gift; we do nothing to receive it except rejoice in sure faith that God gives it to us in Christ. He's the worker of this forgiveness; he's the one who paid the price so sins could be forgiven.

And it is a miracle of God's grace when we extend that forgiveness to others. Do you know why? Because the grace we give to others in forgiveness was worked and produced by God in our hearts. It came to us and flows through us because of the work of God.

So, here's what I want to ask you to do this week. Would you take time every day this week asking God to help you believe that God wants to perform this miracle for you. He wants to grant you forgiveness for your sins. He also wants to work grace and healing in your hearts where you extend forgiveness to others. Even those who have hurt you quite badly. Would you pray for that this week? Will you get on the path towards knowing God so you can find and give grace?

Key verse: Matthew 6:14-15

#### Questions for the week

- Are you struggling to believe God can forgive you or that you can forgive others? What did you hear today that helps you the most? What are you still struggling with?
- What error or misunderstanding about forgiveness was most helpful for you to hear? Why?
- What are you praying for to God? How would you like him to help you? Share that with someone.