

Giving Grace: offering forgiveness

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If you want to be in any meaningful, lasting relationship you better get good at saying, "I'm sorry" and also, "You're forgiven." Even in our best relationships, we sin against each other all the time even when they are not trying to.

When Korby and I first got married I didn't know how much she loved sleeping in on the weekends. I remember so vividly our first normal weekend as a young married couple. It was a beautiful, summer, Saturday morning. Being the early bird that I am, I was up and at 'em in those early morning hours. After awhile I started wondering, "When is my beautiful new bride going to get up?" I would peak in to see if she was stirring. Nothing yet. So, I tried keeping myself busy.

Eventually, I came to believe that Korby had slept in enough. I don't remember the time of the day; Korby would probably tell you it was 6AM; I might tell you it was around noon. But I went into our bedroom with a smile on my face and nothing but loving intentions and announced it was time to wake up. Korby pulling the covers over her head was not going to deter me; I was committed. It did not take long for me to realize I wish I never would have went into that bedroom. That was the start of me getting quite good at saying, "I'm sorry" and Korby saying, "I will eventually forgive you."

Forgiveness has been an absolutely essential practice for Korby and I keeping a meaning, lasting relationship. Nothing can replace it. Without it, our relationships will stay broken. And maybe that's where some of you find yourself today. Your relationships are fractured. The ugliness and hurt of sin has damaged a friendship. Maybe it was a big, earth-shattering sin that turned your world upside down; or maybe instead it is this mountain of little sins that have added up over the years that have slowly deadened your heart to any hope for something more and you are bitter. Either way (or combination of the two), you find yourself at a crossroads. You believe all that we've talked about in this series: that forgiveness is the right thing to do. But there's something holding you back; you just can't figure out how you can forgive. Forgiveness feels too far away; it's out of reach. Let's see if we can find some help from the scriptures today; turn with me to Matthew 18 (READ vs. 21-35).

This story from Jesus unlocks the most important aspect of offering grace to others. There are many considerations in our journey towards forgiveness (and I'm going to share some of them with you in a moment), but I'm pretty comfortable saying this one is the most important one. Because at the heart of what we see in Jesus' teaching is the love of God. That's most important. Your struggle with forgiving the person that hurt you is ultimately a struggle of faith believing in the forgiving love of God. That's where the real battle of unforgiveness lives; we address our unforgiveness on the vertical dimension with our relationship with God and not on the horizontal dimension with the person who hurt us. We'll get to the sin that did the damage

and your perpetrator, but we first have to talk about God and how keeping him and his grace front and center will keep moving you forward towards grace. Let me show you.

A key detail of this story is the debt that both of these servants owe. As the stories says, the king was owed an enormous debt. We see in vs. 24 that the king was owed 10,000 talents. Now, a talent was a unit of monetary measurement and 1 talent equaled 20 years of labor. So, turn on the calculator in your brain; 1 talent equals 20 years of labor. This servant owed 10,000 talents; 10,000 units of 20 years of labor. If you make \$50K a year and you work for 20 years, you will earn \$1M. If you take that times 10,000, that equals \$10B! That's a lot of money, isn't it? What was this servant getting himself into to fall in a hole of \$10B! I think it's safe to say that's a debt this man will never, ever be able to pay. And that's the point. The point of this portion of the parable is the lavish, merciful, forgiveness the king offered to his servant with a debt he could never repay.

That debt that he owed the king represents our debt of sin to God. Our debt of sin is so great it's like the debt of this servant; it's so large we can never pay God back. Now, you might think, "Wait a minute! How can you say I owe that big of a debt to God? I mean, sure, I've done some bad things, but not that bad?" One of the things we have to remember as we judge our sins and ourselves in relation to God is that the cost of our sin isn't measured by how bad we think it is. No, instead, the debt of our sin is weighed in comparison to the perfection, beauty, and holiness of God. When we sin against a perfectly infinite God it carries a perfectly infinite debt. It is always a 10 on the Richter scale. We might look at it and think, "oh, well it's only a lie; only an angry outburst; only a lustful thought." But in reality it is a cosmic crime of the first order. It produces a debt we could never repay, but in Christ God forgives us this debt.

Compare that to the debt of the second man. Vs. 28 says he owed the king's servant 100 denarii. A denarii wasn't worth as much as a talent. A denarii was worth 1 day's labor. One day. Not 10 years, not even 1 year; 1 day. That's about 4 months worth of work. That's doable, right? At the same hypothetical rate of \$50K/yr, that's about \$16K. You could do that with a little bit of diligence. But the servant of the king had no mercy; he wouldn't offer any grace, any forgiveness.

What's the point? How can we who have received such lavish forgiveness and grace from God not give grace to others? The king expected that his lavish display of mercy would produce in his servant a similar display of mercy in him for others. And it didn't and because of that the king's servant paid a high price.

When we receive God's forgiveness, friends, the love of God flows in us and through us towards other people. We offer grace to others the way God offered grace to us. That's why I said earlier that our battle with forgiveness starts with God; it's ultimately a matter of our faith in the Lord. Seeing, recalling, meditating, remembering our great debt of sin to God and his lavish, awe-inspiring mercy and forgiveness to us in Christ produces and inspires an additional miracle of grace where our hearts our changed to one of love for others the way God has loved us.

This how forgiveness is always a work of God in us before it's a work by us. We can not will forgiveness on our own. That's why forgiveness might always feel outside of your reach; why it's always so elusive to you. You might be trying to offer forgiveness in your own power and strength. But you can't. God does it in you by giving you grace. So, here's what I want you to do: as you consider the hurt and the pain that you've suffered at the hands of another, and as you wonder if you could ever offer forgiveness, start by reminding yourself of how much God has forgiven you. Like we talked about last week: remind yourself of how great your debt is to God. Remember your sins against God and even against others. And then look at Jesus' sacrifice on the cross so you could be forgiven. Let your heart be filled with joy as you see the great love of God for you. And here's what will happen: God will work grace in your heart for others, even your enemies who hurt you. Did you notice how I said that? I said *God* will do that work in you. You don't even have to worry about doing that work; God will do it. Let him surprise you by his mercy. So, look to God. Trust in him. Believe in him for the strength and the courage to do the impossible... to give grace. That's the most important information, but not the only information you need.

Now, let me try and put legs to this. What does it actually look like to forgive someone? And what do you do if you're still struggling to forgive as you look to God for help? Let me introduce you to what I call the *Forgiveness Pathway*.

In our first sermon on forgiveness, I said one of the reasons why we don't forgive others is because we misunderstand the journey we have to take to get to our final destination, which is a genuine offer of grace for the sins committed against us. Too often we either think or we are wrongly told that there is this direct path from sin to forgiveness. No intermediate steps. No reflection. No healing. No grieving is necessary. You're sinned against; now just go forgive right now. We will never be able to offer forgiveness that way.

We can forgive quickly with minor offenses, where the cost that must be absorbed is small. What would that look like? Well, consider this: you have a friend. She's your bestie; you have a high degree of mutual trust. You've gone through a lot together and she's consistently demonstrated a great love for you. But one day, in a moment of weakness, she impatiently snaps at you for an innocent mistake. Totally out of character; it takes you back and you're hurt. You go home and it's bothering you. But before you even have a chance to pout, she calls you up and says, "You know, I was wrong to be harsh and unkind. I'm so sorry; will you forgive me?" I hope you could forgive that sin relatively quickly. It was a sinful response that was out of character. In the grand scheme of things, all you had were hurt feelings.

Other times, our relationships are deeply wounded by sins, which require a more extensive journey involving many steps. And every step is important. Take a look at this picture (PIC) of what I call the *Forgiveness Pathway*. Let me walk you through the steps and why they are important.

It starts, of course, by being on the receiving end of **sin**. That's where the damage comes from; that's where we get the wound. Sin creates a debt; once the sin is experienced the question then becomes, "Who's going to pay for this debt?" When we forgive someone, we pay the debt; we absorb the cost just like Jesus absorbing the cost, paying the debt of our sin on the cross. When we refuse to forgive we try to make them pay the debt.

When the sin is significant (either the one sin or the accumulation of many sins) there is this initial response of **shock**. We're taken back; we think, "I'm stunned that he would cheat on me?" "I can't believe after all these years he still won't listen!" This experience or step of shock is involuntary; it just happens. That's important to remember at this early stage. We don't choose our experience of shock; it rushes upon us in a variety of ways. Maybe we lose sleep at night; maybe we stop eating or can't function at work very well.

Eventually, the initial shock wears off and we face our first crossroads in the forgiveness pathway. We can either **bury the hurt feelings** or we can progress towards **understanding**. Now, why might we want to bury our hurt feelings? The answers are obvious. We don't want to feel the pain. We don't want to face the reality of what happened. Or maybe we're too afraid of what we might lose if we stay on this path. Burying our hurt feelings is ultimately a strategy to try and keep the reality of the situation away from us.

But there are two considerations you need to know about this plan. 1) It doesn't work. Sure, you might avoid the immediate pain and discomfort of facing the full scope of the sin committed against you. But if you bury your feelings, the pain will remain inside your soul and will grow like a cancer, eating you from the inside out. It will change you for the worse. You will not be the friendly, joyful, fruitful, patient person you want to be. You will grow cynical, unhappy, and rude. 2) This decision takes you off the forgiveness pathway. Instead of staying focused on God, you turn your back to him and go a different path. You believe your strategy to deal with the pain is better than God's. Friends, God has grace for your pain; trust his grace for you and keep walking this journey.

You want to progress towards **understanding**. Understanding seeks answers to these kinds of questions: What actually happened? And why did it happen? And what has this changed in my relationship? And what does this mean for the future? Because here's the deal: you can't offer forgiveness if you don't understand what happened; if you don't understand the impact in your relationship or for the future. Because when you offer forgiveness, it's not just that you offer grace for the bad thing that was done, but you also offer grace for how it changed everything. And you need to figure that stuff out.

Some of you don't know how to offer forgiveness because you're stuck right here; you don't quite understand all that's taken place. And that's understandable to some degree; you just got over the shock or you've tried to bury the hurt and it didn't work. Now is the time to start understanding. Two things you should consider about this. 1) Understanding is hard word. Chances are you are going to have to think diligently about all this stuff and that's painful in

itself. So, buckle up and get ready for work. But remember, God has grace for you. 2) You probably won't be able to do this alone. You'll try to do it alone, but chances are you won't get far. Most likely, you'll need a trusted sister in Christ, an insightful brother in Christ to help you. And praise God, the Lord has provided many of them right here in our body.

After you've sufficiently learned what happened, you'll be at another crossroads and here's why: your journey in understanding will make you more upset and more hurt. You know more now. You better understand what happened; are you're more aware of the ugliness of the sin. And that's going to make you angry and hurt. And if you give yourself to your anger and get off the forgiveness pathway, you'll find yourself in **bitterness**. Generally speaking, bitterness is holding an angry grudge; it's a desire to harm someone for what they have done. It makes sense; someone needs to pay for what's happened and everything inside of us says they need to pay. When we take the path towards bitterness, we get off the forgiveness pathway, rejecting God's grace, and look to treat people harshly rather than graciously like God has treated us.

Some of you have taken this alternate path. In a way, you're right. That's why you feel justified in your bitterness. And what you are right about is this: what happened to you was wrong. It shouldn't have happened. And someone should pay for it and not you. But here's where you're wrong. You're wrong to think you are the one to execute that justice. You're wrong to forget that Jesus died to forgive that sin, too, just like your sin. And you're wrong to forget that God tells you to offer forgiveness and let him take care of the justice part. You can trust God, friends.

Instead of making someone else pay because of the sin, you need to step towards **grief**, grieve your losses and pain. Understanding asks, "What actually happened? And why did it happen?" Grief asks, "What has this sin done to *me*? How has this sin impacted *me* and *my* future? What have *I* lost due to this sin?" Grief acknowledges and then mourns the personal side of the pain.

Grieving is expressing the hurt and pain that you feel for what's been done. That's what grief is. Grief is looking at the pain and loss that you've experienced and being willing to touch the pain. Grief is facing the reality of the loss, acknowledging it, and then weeping over what has happened.

Some of you are right here on the forgiveness pathway; you're discouraged that you're not farther along, but you've avoided grieving your pain. Again, I understand why. It hurts touching the pain. We are so desperate to do something to fix what happened, but we can't. The loss can't be fixed; it needs to be mourned. Let me give you some encouragement; your loving Master and Savior Jesus said in Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

That's the next step in the journey, **comfort and healing**. This really isn't a step to take, but instead, it's the reward of grieving in faith. You will receive comfort and healing when you

grieve your loss with faith in Christ. I'm not going to say a lot about this, but trust that God will provide the comfort you need through mourning your losses. Yes, you may weep. That's ok. Tears shed in faith will cleanse your heart and soul.

There's still a little further we need to go. Comfort and healing isn't the ultimate goal (though, they are a blessing). There's one more crossroads. So, here's what happens. The sin we've experienced has changed us. It has changed our relationships. It has changed our future. We need to accept this reality, though some will not. Why wouldn't you want to accept this reality? Well, maybe because it's a painful reminder of the sin. Maybe because we don't like the change it's created. We remember what our relationship once was like and wish it was like that again. Even with forgiven sin, the loss and pain has changed us and changed our reality. We need to accept that reality rather than refuse to accept it.

A key part of accepting our new identity and reality is trusting the sovereignty of God. He's been serving us with grace and working his mercy in the situation the whole time. Everything has worked according to his plan. And he's been planning good for us in this, even in the saddest, hardest times of our journey. And the future he's laying out for us is good for us, even better than what we could have made for ourselves. So, **accept this new identity** rather than **refusing it**.

After taking this long journey, we are now poised to offer **forgiveness**. But it's not automatic. You have to be willing to give this gift of grace. And that's what it is: it's a gift. That's what you're offering the one who sinned against you. You're giving them a gift they don't deserve. And you're doing it for them; you're not doing it for you. Yes, forgiving others has therapeutic benefits for us when we do it, but that's not the goal. You'll hear people say that from time to time: I needed to forgive for me; it wasn't for them. Well, that's not biblical forgiveness. God forgave us to give us a gift; he wasn't looking to give himself a gift. He receives the glory and honor as the gift giver, but forgiveness served our need; it didn't serve God's need. And that's what we are doing when we forgive someone else; we are giving them a gift that serves their need. Their sin needs to be covered and by God's grace, we choose to cover their sin.

Key verse ~ Matt. 18:32-33

Questions for the week

- What's the most important word you heard today? Why was it so impactful for you?
- How important is it to be regularly reminded of God's rich grace for you? Why?
- Who do you need to give grace to? Ask someone to pray for you to keep on the forgiveness pathway.