

## The Foundation of Forgiveness

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Where do we begin our journey towards forgiveness? Because that's what it is; it is a journey. Forgiveness isn't some switch that we can just flip and turn on. It doesn't quite work that way. It's a process that includes many steps. God's forgiveness of us happens in a decisive act of his grace; the Spirit of God blows new life in us when we are born again, but our awareness and even belief in the full measure of our forgiveness may not be experienced that way. I've had a lot of conversations with people struggling with forgiveness, either finding it or giving it. And at first, when the pain is fresh, when the wounds are exposed, or when the guilty conscience speaks, forget about it. Forgiveness feels like a dream (or maybe a nightmare). But over time God works for those who are seeking him. He works healing, understanding, and perspective. And eventually, only by his mercy, we believe in grace and we give it. There are highs and lows; sometimes progress is made quickly (like driving on the freeway in perfect weather conditions) and other times progress is slow (like driving through a blizzard.)

That's how it's most likely going to work for you. Yes, there will probably be some defining, pivotal moments when the light bulb turns on or when God's healing balm of mercy makes a life-saving impact. But those moments will be one among many and all of them are important.

So, where do you begin this journey? You have to start somewhere, right? Well, it shouldn't be too surprising that we start with God. Forgiveness is always a work of God... always. The forgiveness we receive for our own sins is a work of God; the forgiveness that we are able to extend and offer to others is a work of God in us. So, let's start at the beginning, at the foundation of forgiveness by turning to Col. 2 (READ vs. 13-15).

This is a great passage of scripture because it really covers many of the essential aspects of forgiveness that will serve as a foundation for us. Notice towards the middle of vs. 13 the most important information provided in these 3 verses - I say most important because it's the big idea Paul wants his readers to see and celebrate. The most important *actor* and the most important *action* are stated; do you see it? Who's the *actor* in vs. 13 [God]? And what *action* does God perform or do [he makes alive]? We'll see how in a minute, but that's what forgiveness produces; that's what forgiveness does. It brings life. It rips off the cords of death that are wrapped tightly around our throats choking the very life from us. And that's not even exactly how I should say it. *God* brings life; *God* rips the cords of death off of our throats so we can find life and he does that by granting forgiveness.

So, forgiveness isn't even the ultimate goal, is it? Being made alive is the goal. Life; Life is the goal. Everything we observe, everywhere we turn, shows us that is true. Everything - plants, animals, cells, humans - we are all reaching for life. We claw our way towards it everyday. I always love how marketers have a way of, oh, let's just say, over-exaggerating the

benefit of the product or service they are promoting. Mazda is the latest example that I've come across. Their new ad campaign slogan is "feel alive" (PIC). Their commercials show people with their arms (PIC) stretched wide basking in the joy of finding life. The conclusion, of course: you'll *feel alive* when you drive a Mazda. Don't buy it, friends. When I turned 14 and got my driver's license, my father purchased for me a 1984 Ford Escort wagon (PIC). And friends, at 14, I never felt so alive.

But here's a difference: you don't just feel live with God, you *are* alive because of God. As you so often hear me say: don't settle for feelings. They are momentary, they are deceiving. Use the eyes of faith to see rightly what brings real life whether you feel it or not. God makes us alive and he does so by forgiving us of our sins.

Can I digress on this issue of feelings for a minute just to try and persuade you to live and assess you life on the truth of God's word rather than on how you feel? Consider this comparison as an example: The man taking a financial swan dive into a crater of debt so he can take his family to Disney or Cancun is careening towards death. I know all those pics on the beach with a Corona in his hand on Instagram looks like he's found life, but he hasn't; he's going to pay for his foolish decision shortly. But his neighbor who says no to trips he can not afford to avoid credit card debt, so he can save for retirement, so he can give generously to the work of God, maybe even to have some money to help his kids go to college is far more alive than what his facebook account might show. When we compare these two with these eyes, the spring break partier who is headed for financial disaster looks more alive. But with the eyes of wisdom, with the eyes of faith, eyes that look beyond today, but into tomorrow, believing what God's word teaches about money, is the one truly alive. Friends, if you are going to be any kind of follower of Jesus you have to learn to look at the world with the eyes of faith and the eyes of faith see true life, enduring life coming from God himself, which as we will see, is given through forgiveness.

Before I show the explicit reference to forgiveness, let me show you one more important factor. Look at the beginning of vs. 13, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh." What Paul is doing with those phrases is telling you that God makes the most unlikely people alive. Look at those two phrases. First, you were dead in your trespasses. Trespasses just means sins. And that's what sins do, they bring death. That's what we are without the forgiving grace of God that makes us alive; we are dead whether it feels like that or not. That is our condition. And how likely is it that dead people are made alive? Not likely at all. Everyone alive will eventually die, but dead people don't find life.

That second phrase, "uncircumcision of the flesh" is way of saying, "people who are not a part of the family of God." God has signs or symbols that represent his people; circumcision was that sign for his people in the OT. So, those nations that were not included in God's family, who were not circumcised, were cut off from the life and blessing of God. And that's who Paul says God makes alive; the ones who are on the outside; the ones who are dead. So, just how incredible is it that? God making alive the dead; God giving life to his uncircumcised enemies.

It's beyond comprehension! It is utterly unpredictable. The most unlikely band of scoundrels God graciously makes alive.

We're going to talk about this more specifically next week when we focus on finding grace, but I hope that helps and encourages those of you struggling to believe God will forgive you. God forgives the most unlikely of people. The ones that think they are beyond reach; who are too dirty and rebellious and evil. He came for you. There is this gem of a verse in the OT that comes to my mind. In Isaiah 19 we read (vs. 23-25), "In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.'" It's hard to overstate just how crazy this prophecy was when Isaiah declared it. Assyria? Egypt? God calls *them*, "My people?" He calls *them*, "The work of my hands?" Has God forgotten the Egypt represents all things evil in the Bible? Doesn't God care that the Assyrians would pile up the bones of the Israelites after they conquered them? He does know; and he does care. It's just that God's reach of forgiveness is so long and his mercy so compelling that the enemies of God will one day become his children; they will be made alive. Friends, if you think you are the most unlikely candidate to receive the forgiveness of God, that makes you God's prime target of his grace and mercy. He loves you and will forgive you in Christ and I'm excited to emphasize this point next Sunday.

The direct reference to forgiveness starts in vs. 14. We discovered earlier that being made alive by God is the goal; how does he do that? Vs. 14 tells us. "By canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands." So, let's take note of a few things. First of all, we have a record of debt that stands against us. That debt includes your every evil thought, word, and action. For me, that's a really long list, I hate to say. I'm embarrassed by my record of debt; but more than that I'm fearful to stand before God with that list of sins because he's the only one that matters.

The second thing you've got to see is your record of debt carries legal demands. That makes sense, right? There are corresponding punishments for our sins. From time to time, I'll look at the Wisconsin State Statutes, our state laws. I want to make sure I am in compliance with the laws of the land. And all of those statutes carry a penalty. Break this law and get this penalty, break that law and get that penalty.

And it's the same with God. We will be penalized, punished, because we have broken God's law. I have and you have. And the penalty is the worst possible punishment. It is complete and total separation. That's so horrible the Bible calls that many things: it calls that the fires of hell. It calls that the anger and wrath of God. Banishment from everything good and glorious, which is, of course, God himself.

So, we have a record of debt; it carries with it legal demands. But look what God does to make us alive: he cancels the record of debt with its legal demands. Cancels. Another word we could use is “wipe away.” He wipes away, he wipes clean the record of debt and its legal demands. A pastor-friend of mine has a whiteboard in his office and as I was getting my new office ready I thought, “that’s a good idea.” I can keep little notes on there for myself or when I’m brainstorming with a team new ideas, we can write those things on the board. What’s the whiteboard cardinal sin? Don’t use permanent markers. Only use dry-erase markers. You don’t want to be staring at 20 year old notes.

Our sins are in permanent ink. We have all these different erasers we try and use to blot out our sins. We try and erase our sins with good works, we try and erase our sins with saying we’re sorry or maybe acting like they’re really not that bad. But nothing works. It’s in permanent ink. But God has an eraser that wipes away what we thought were permanent sins. He cancels them; he wipes them away. How?

Look at the end of vs. 14: *This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.* That’s how, my good friends. That’s why Jesus came. He came and died on a cross to be our substitute, to pay the penalty for our sins. Every hammer blow into the hands and feet of Jesus by those Roman guards on that day were hammer blows from God nailing our sin upon Jesus. He paid the price. And because of his sacrifice our sins can be wiped away... cancelled... forgiven.

There’s one more reality that I want to show you from this passage and then we’ll start applying this to our journey of forgiveness. Notice how vs. 15 tells us that this is how the powers and rulers of darkness are defeated. Vs. 15 says, “He (God) disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him (meaning, in Christ.)” So, here’s what Paul is getting at: all of this talk and discussion about sin and forgiveness for you and me is rooted in a battle in the spiritual world. The forces of good against the powers of darkness and evil. And this is how God wins the victory over darkness and sin; he triumphs over sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ where the sins that once condemned us to hell are now forgiven by God. Everything has been changed by Jesus. Death was inevitable; now life is inevitable. Condemnation was our destiny; now, in Christ, forgiveness is our reality. God’s plan of grace and forgiveness destroys the powers of darkness that have been working against us to keep us in death. God has made those in Christ alive by canceling that record of debt and setting aside its legal demand by nailing it to the cross.

I suppose the most important way I can end this is to invite you into life by encouraging you towards Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. The next two weeks we are going to talk about some of the particulars about finding and giving grace, but today I want to make sure you are on the path towards life. Jesus’ words come to mind (John 17:3): And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I’ve prayed this week that every single one of us would hear this message and deeply recognize and see our need for the life of God. So much so that you would be ready to receive Jesus. This life is only found in Christ; it’s only found when we stop trying to do life our own way, we stop thinking we know

best, and totally entrust ourselves to Jesus. We faithfully embrace all that we heard today. That we are the dead, estranged people who can't find life on our own. That we recognize the debt of sin we owe and the legal demand. But also, gladly, rejoice in the forgiving grace of Jesus.

Is God working this faith in you today? Is he making you alive? There are no hoops, no prayers, no aisles to walk to be made alive. It's certainly good to pray and it's good to declare your new allegiance to Jesus, but there's no formula. We don't offer formulas around here because we don't want you to think a formula will save you. When life starts getting hard later, we don't want you to think there's a formula for that, either. The answer is Jesus what he's done for us on the cross; his words of life. Will you surrender your life to him and find eternal life? Is God bringing you this life today? If so, would you tell me, or George, or Tim, or maybe a friend who's talked to you about the things of God. We want to know so we can celebrate your new life and help you walk with Jesus.

Key Vs. - Col. 2:13-14

#### Questions for the week

- The verses this morning highlighted the life God gives. Have you ever experienced his life? Is it clear from today's message you know how to receive that life?
- How would you summarize the importance of Jesus' death on the cross in your own words from today's message?
- What's the most impactful thing you heard today? What will you think or do differently because of what you heard?