

Session 1

FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

Luke 23:34 (Matthew 18:21-35)

Memory Verse

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." And they divided his clothes and cast lots.

– LUKE 23:34, CSB



Father, Forgive Them

THEOLOGICAL THEME: The forgiveness Christ modeled on the cross is to be the mark of those who follow Him.

Forgiveness, when witnessed by others, has the power to simultaneously fill the heart with wonder and stop it in humility. Stories of those who exhibit extraordinary levels of forgiveness spread quickly and leave indelible marks on those who retell them. The reason for such impact is the divine reality that every created human being is so desperate for forgiveness. In an article published by listverse.com in June 2014, several such scenarios were recounted. One of those instances was the incredible grace exhibited by Corrie Ten Boom at the end of World War II.

Corrie Ten Boom is a remarkable woman who risked her own life to save the lives of others during the Holocaust. She worked in her family's business as a watchmaker. After the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, Ten Boom and her family became involved with the Resistance, providing shelter for Jews. A false wall was built in her bedroom to provide a hiding place for those seeking shelter.


On February 28, 1944, the Gestapo, on the basis of information obtained through an informant, raided the Ten Boom home and the family was arrested. Those who were hiding in the home at the time were able to avoid detection and escape. Sadly, Ten Boom's father died a few days after the arrest.


Ten Boom and her sister, Betsy, were deported to the Ravensbrueck concentration camp in September 1944. It was there at Ravensbrueck that Betsy died in December of that same year. Later that same month, Ten Boom narrowly escaped death herself when she was mistakenly released from Ravensbrueck due to a clerical error. Her release came just days before all the women her age were killed.

While at a church service in Munich, she came face-to-face with one of the former Ravensbrueck prison guards. Ten Boom had just delivered a message of God's forgiveness and the former guard, not recognizing her, asked Ten Boom personally for forgiveness for the atrocities that he had committed. Ten Boom struggled within herself and found that she could not forgive him, but she quickly prayed and found the strength to accept his extended hand.¹

Of all the incredible aspects of the account, perhaps this most helpful for readers is the fact that forgiveness was not simple. There was no quick prayer that led to a sudden evaporation of hurt, hostility, resentment, and rage. Forgiveness is a commitment to follow the example of Christ in unspeakably difficult circumstances.

 What do you think the public perception of forgiveness is in our society today? Why do you think so?

 How does it impact you to know that, even in the life of a celebrated Christian leader like Ten Boom, forgiveness was not easy or immediate?

 How do you respond when forgiveness is difficult for you? Who in your life encourages you and challenges you to be faithful in following Jesus this way?

Session Summary

In this week's session, Jesus' first saying from the cross was a prayer for the forgiveness of those that tortured and crucified Him. As a way of understanding Jesus' concept of forgiveness, Matthew's recording of the parable of the unforgiving servant clarified the

extent to which forgiveness should be offered. The forgiveness Christ-followers are to offer is the result of realizing the immeasurable forgiveness they have already received.

1. Forgiving an Impossible Debt (Matthew 18:21-27)

Hot on the heels of His teaching on the biblical manner of resolving conflict in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus answered a question from the ever-beleaguered Peter. The familiar question asked by Peter regarding the number of times he should offer forgiveness to someone who wronged him was pitched in such a way that his self-provided answer—"As many as seven times?"—was to be a display of unimaginable grace and long-suffering. According to Michael Wilkins, the Jewish teaching of the day was that "three times was enough to show a forgiving spirit. Rabbinic Judaism recognized that repeat offenders may not really be repenting at all."² Peter's magnanimous offer, then, more than doubled what even the strictest rabbi would have suggested.

As so frequently occurred, Jesus responded in such a manner that demonstrated an entirely different level of grace. His response of "seventy times seven" was not meant to be a literal 490 times, as such exacting of grievances would be contrary to the nature of God's grace. Rather, His response emphasized that the forgiveness of the apostles should be in

? How does the notion of repeated forgiveness to the same person measure up with the ethic of our culture? Do you find forgiveness or revenge to be more commonplace?

? Application: When you are hurt or betrayed by someone, how easily do you forgive? Is it an immediate decision or one you slowly have to arrive at? How do you determine if someone is worthy of forgiveness?

Faced with the consequences of his massive debt, the servant fell to the ground in a position of great humility and desperation. His only source of hope was the mercy of the king; no schemes or efforts would ever be able to pay back the debt. Even still, in the delusion of his own indebtedness, he begged for mercy with an impossible promise to eventually pay back the debt. The amount was equivalent to several lifetimes of work, so the king would have known immediately that the promise was empty and could never be realized.

Incredibly, no negotiation occurred on the heels of the promise of the debtor. Instead, the king immediately and compassionately canceled the entirety of the debt and set the servant free. However, he did not only set the servant free, he set the servant's entire family free. They were no longer forced to bear the weight of his indebtedness with their enslavement. The level of sheer grace on display in this one act could never be overstated. The debt was impossible, the available help was nonexistent, and the likelihood of anything other than justly deserved enslavement was nil. Trying to understand the feeling of life-changing relief in that moment would stretch the boundaries of the imagination for Jesus' hearers as He told the parable.

2. Forgetting Desperation Leads to Ingratitude (Matthew 18:28-30)

Understanding the degree of indebtedness and the magnanimity of the grace that led to its forgiveness, one would expect the newly freed servant to express an equally transformed view of everyone around him. That was precisely the expectation Jesus set the parable up to elicit. Verse 28 begins with "that servant" to ensure that the connection was made between the man so lavishly forgiven and the events that would immediately follow. The same scenario unfolded as the newly forgiven debtor encountered one who owed him money. The denarii would have been equivalent to a day's wage. The amount owed in this second scenario would have been slightly over three months wages. While certainly not an insignificant amount in its own right, the amount was miniscule in comparison to what the king had forgiven the first servant.

The newly forgiven servant grabbed the man who owed him money and began physically assaulting him, demanding that payment be made. Already the contrast between his earlier encounter with the king and his treatment of this man was

glaring and disturbing. Intensifying the matter was the response to a plea for mercy and leniency. When the second servant asked for mercy to pay back his own debt—a debt that actually was capable of being paid back, incidentally—the first servant refused. The second servant was thrown in prison until the debt could be paid.

? When you read about the ingratitude of the forgiven servant, what is your initial gut response? Why do you think that is so?

? Application: What has been the best way you've discovered to not forget the desperation and hopelessness Jesus delivered you from? Why do you think it is so easy to lose sight of that gratitude in the course of daily living?

The first servant fell into the trap of being a recipient of grace without being a conduit of grace. His self-absorption, focusing only on his own debt-induced plight, closed him to the magnitude of the one that extended grace to him in the first place. Where his appropriate response should have been to imitate the character of his master out of gratitude for his mercy, his selfishness confined him to merely moving onto the next relationship in which he might better himself. As Jesus would make clear in the continuing parable, the consequences for living in such a way are dire.


3. Forgiveness Modeled Leads to Forgiveness Offered (Matthew 18:31-35; Luke 23:34)


Jesus' hearers would have mimicked the response of the other servants in the parable in their emotional turmoil over the events of the narrative. In the parable, the other servants were "deeply distressed" over witnessing the treatment of their fellow servant. There was nothing to indicate that they had a particularly fond relationship with the servant who had been choked and thrown in prison, so their distress was purely over the unspeakable treatment of one servant to another. The servants were moved enough to go and inform

the king of what had occurred. Again, there was no indication in the parable that the servants were privy to the events between the king and the forgiven servant. The witnesses were simply disturbed and felt that someone had to do something, so they did.

When the king discovered the treachery of the servant he had just extended such mercy to, he was enraged. Summoning the servant back to his presence, the demeanor of the king changed dramatically. The emphasis in the original text was on the word “all,” emphasizing the degree of forgiveness that the wicked servant had been offered. Because of the extravagant grace the wicked servant had received, he ought to have shown similar compassion.

Because the king was exceedingly angry, he not only revoked the offered forgiveness, but he handed the man over to the jailers to be tortured. This was a grim response but completely in keeping with regal behavior of the day to torture someone that had severely angered a ruler. The second sentence was even worse than the first. Prior to the offer of grace, the punishment was being sold into slavery and perhaps hard labor. Having spurned the offer of grace, the second sentence was not simply going to jail, but with the additional descriptor of being there for the purpose of torture. Just like his fellow servant whom he had sent to prison, the wicked servant was placed in prison until his full amount could be paid. Since there was no way to make money while being tortured, the implication was that he would never be free.

 What does the wicked servant’s response to grace indicate about the proper effect of grace on a person’s life? How did Jesus’ parable answer Peter’s question about how often to forgive one who wrongs him?

 Application: How does the recognition of what Jesus has forgiven you for impact your readiness to forgive others? How have you seen that change over the course of your walk with Jesus?

Remembering what was happening to Jesus when he uttered, “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing,” is astonishing. Nails had been driven through His hands and feet, securing Him to a splintered tree, after hours upon hours of beatings, mocking, torture, and abandonment. Even the thieves that were crucified alongside Him targeted Him with their jeers. Still, in the midst of unspeakable spiritual, emotional, and physical pain, as His clothes were divided among the soldiers for keepsakes, Jesus pled for their forgiveness. Jesus pled for a forgiveness they did not deserve and never even asked for. Certainly such a forgiveness, that demanded immeasurable sacrifice, also warrants that those who are impacted by it to demonstrate proportionate grace out of unceasing gratitude.

Conclusion

Biblical forgiveness always changes people. That message is underscored again and again in Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant. Here are some key points to consider when pondering one’s own forgiveness.

First, the debt that Jesus paid was a debt that we could never pay ourselves. The atonement that He secured on the cross was precisely the one humanity’s sin demanded, but because of that sin humanity could not provide it. The cost of humanity’s freedom was Jesus satisfying God’s righteous wrath toward humanity’s sin. St. Athanasius explained it this way, “He became like us to make us like Him.” Divine grace extended to humanity cost Jesus His life, and He paid it without hesitation.

Second, when believers fail to remember the depth of grace extended to them, forgiving others grows more difficult. One of the great litmus tests for a believer’s spiritual health is the readiness and willingness to forgive those who have wronged them. That is not to say, of course, that doing so is easy. It is to say, though, that the desire and commitment to demonstrate the love of Christ to others through forgiveness is a vital part of what it means to follow Christ. When believers are healthy, forgiveness is a discipline. When believers lose sight of what they have been forgiven of, entitlement and unforgiveness creep in.

Third, meeting with God regularly through Scripture and worship helps the believer remain attentive and open to the grace extended to them. Doing so places the believer in a posture of humility before God that makes forgiveness a priority. When a believer realizes the depth of his or her own forgiveness, the idea of not forgiving another repentant person creates spiritual dissonance.

? If someone were to ask you why Jesus had to die in order for you to be forgiven, what would you say? How does understanding the depth of what you were forgiven of help the explanation?

? How do you distinguish between forgiving someone who wrongs you and repeatedly leaving yourself vulnerable to the same mistreatment? Why is that distinction important?

? Describe a time in which your willingness to forgive someone else restored a relationship that was previously irreparable. What moved you toward being willing to forgive that person?

CHRIST CONNECTION: In the midst of His torture and crucifixion, Christ prayed for His persecutors to be forgiven. In this light, there is no one so treacherous that Christ-followers are not to offer and intercede for forgiveness.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: In a society in which personal offense and outrage are continuously escalating, the model for Christ-followers is to offer forgiveness to others in light of the forgiveness that they themselves have received.



FOR NEXT WEEK

Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise

Main Passages

- Luke 23:43 (Luke 19:1-10)

Session Outline

1. The Least Likely Suspect in the Least Likely Place
(Luke 19:1-2; Luke 23:43)
2. Recognizing the Need for Jesus (Luke 19:3-6)
3. From Desperation to Salvation (Luke 19:7-10)

Memorize

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." And they divided his clothes and cast lots.

- Luke 23:34, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - 2 Peter 3:9
- Tuesday - Luke 15:1-7
- Wednesday - Luke 15:8-10
- Thursday - Luke 15:11-32
- Friday - Titus 3:4-5
- Saturday - Acts 1:8

References

¹Garcia, Ana. "10 Extraordinary Examples of Forgiveness." Listverse.com. June 20, 2014, updated. Accessed 12/09/19. <https://listverse.com/2013/10/31/10-extraordinary-examples-of-forgiveness/>

²Wilkins, Michael J. *Matthew*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.