

## THE GREATNESS OF FORGIVENESS Luke 7:36-50

When it comes to forgiveness, there is nothing else that is such a blessing to receive, and such a challenge to offer. When I have forgiven others, they have been given new life, free of the infraction that breeched our relationship. When I am forgiven by someone I injured in some way, I feel like I can soar again. In certain situations before, when I could not decide to forgive someone who hurt or betrayed me, I also was kept from being forgiven by my Lord. You too will face that issue in the same circumstance. In Matthew 5: 23-24, Jesus said: “If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go to you them. Be reconciled to them, *then* come and offer your gift.” That’s why, in the Lord’s Prayer, the phrase “forgive us our debts,(sins) [to the same degree as] we forgive our debtors (those who sin against us) makes it foolhardy to confess our sins to God without asking for forgiveness from the one we have sinned against first. Still, when a person has sinned against me (stealing, bearing false witness, or breaking other commandments) when remorse is demonstrated I can move toward forgiveness more easily.

It is wonderful to be loved and to hear the words, “I love you.” Almost nothing makes a person’s heart fill with joy like those words. But at least with me, hearing the words “I accept your apology” or “I forgive you” carry a different kind of relief. It all goes back to the healing and wonderful words of Jeremiah 31:34- God said: “I will forgive their sins, and I will no longer remember their wrongs.” Few words of God are as healing as those are. No words from the mouth of another are as healing to me either. To have someone forgive my sins and no longer remember my wrongs are like having the tether of a hot air balloon, staked to the ground, set free. All of a sudden, I can live again; even soar. Forgiveness is the greatest. But in order to

receive it fully, a person generally does three things: Acknowledge the sin, admit that it was wrong, and sincerely ask for pardon. Can forgiveness be offered without those steps? Let's see. Is forgiveness the beginning of healing for the one doing the forgiving even if the other hasn't expressed remorse? Let's consider that as well. Does a person heal more quickly if she or he forgives an attacker without knowing if he is sorry or not? We'll ponder that too. We have examples of extraordinary forgiveness in our day. One comes from the heinous massacre of 9 persons in a Bible study, including the senior pastor, at a church in Charleston, South Carolina. The shooter, a white supremacist, was innocently invited into the church where he shot members of the African American congregation in cold blood. With the killer showing no remorse for his actions, the members of the church still publicly announced their forgiveness of him. It was unbelievable. *You see, forgiveness offers not only hope for the sinner, but it also frees the human heart of the injured ones from the tentacles of bitterness.* The father of a girl who was murdered in the Marjory Stoneman Douglass high school terrorist attack visits her grave regularly and asks her for advice. His daughter's killer is coming to trial, and the father clearly stated that he cannot wait for the man to die. He still is consumed by anger and grief. Still, though it may seem impossible, the power to forgive and be forgiven is one of the most freeing acts that exist. We are helped by being forgiven, forgiving others, and ourselves. Forgiveness is best if the one who has broken the relationship expresses remorse to the other. Nothing can build a new bridge between the two persons as well as a confession of failures. Words like "I want to make things right again" encourage the meeting that might lead to peace. When a relationship is damaged by something said or done, the bridge between the two people is often irretrievably broken if no action is taken. The wound festers and becomes filled with bile, and poison, and bitterness. When the person asks for forgiveness, or you receive words of remorse from the one who sinned against you, it begins the process of making a

new bridge, next to the old one that is now in ruins. That's why we read in Jeremiah about the new covenant God made with us. The old covenant—or bridge—got broken. God didn't offer old covenants again. God built a new one. You can build a new bridge with the one you have wronged, or the one who has wronged you.

Sins can be so crippling. In Jesus' day, religious people believed that sins caused someone to be blind, or deaf, or incapacitated. In Luke chapter 7, we find a woman described as being "a sinner." What had she done? Years of armchair commentary have named her as a harlot. No. Our bibles don't say she was a harlot. Jesus only says that "her sins, though many, have been forgiven." Jesus knew that accusations of sins could shackle a person's soul.

Once again, let's revisit forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer. Jesus wove forgiveness into that teachable prayer: "Forgive us our debts (sins, trespasses) as we forgive our debtors (those who sin against us; those who trespass against us.) That's the hook: If we forgive others, God will forgive us; but if we do not forgive others, our stubborn self-will can keep us from being forgiven by God. Our relationship with God gets ruptured when our human relationships get ruined. God says he will forgive our iniquities and remember our sins no more. What God promises to do is to "forgive and forget." In the original Hebrew, the two ideas are tied together; unbelievably, there is no such thing as saying "I'll forgive, but I'll never forget." Still, I've heard people say that. Not forgetting still nurses the wound. If we truly forgive, we make the pain of the injury no longer have power over us. It can keep our angry and obsessive souls from nursing a grudge.

The pathway to reconciliation with God lies through restoration of our relationships with others. That is easy enough to say, but harder to carry out. Many in our world

harbor reserves of anger and bitterness. Our nation seems to be a powder keg of unforgiveness. We may smile, but underneath we may feel like getting even. Some turn to God in their anger, while others turn away from God. John Watt of Harvard speaks about this issue:

People in this state need to be reminded that God too can feel the pain of rejection and betrayal. Jesus experienced this anguish in Gethsemane and the cross. Whose rejection hurt him most? Not the crowd who turned on him, for whom he asked God's forgiveness while they were reviling him. No: it was betrayal of his closest companions that caused so much pain, that made him fear for a moment that God had abandoned him. But God does not abandon those who repent and open their hearts. To the Israelites, The Lord proclaimed that despite all their iniquities [sins], "I have loved you with an everlasting love."

Forgiveness and unforgiveness take us down different paths. Our self-will causes us to choose one path or another. Let me give you a final example to consider:

In the novel *Mr. Ives' Christmas*, Pulitzer Prize winning author Oscar Hijuelos tells the story of an ordinary man living in New York City. He was part of a Madison Avenue ad agency, had a beautiful wife, and two children, a boy and a girl. He was also a religious man, and the author just refers to him as "Ives." His son Robert announces that he wants to go into the seminary to serve God, and his father is so pleased. But at the age of seventeen, at Christmas time, Ives' world is shattered as his son was gunned down by a teenage thug, who stole the money Robert had on him as he lay dying: \$10. For ten dollars, Ives' thought, my son died. He was inconsolable. Mr. Ives not only started to doubt his foundational beliefs, but also his belief in God. His grief made him lose faith in humankind too. Peace was illusive day and night. Life was so difficult. In the twilight of his life, Ives got a call from a Father Jimenez from upstate New York. He was calling from the home of his son's killer. "Mr. Ives," he said, "I don't want to take a lot of your time, and I know it's

probably a bother, but would you consider meeting with Danny ,” (the boy, now a man, who had been in prison all these years for the murder of Robert Ives.) “Really, he’s a changed man, and as I’ve said before, a little forgiveness and goodwill would go a long way.” Can you imagine what you would say in that situation? Before you answer, listen to the rest of the priest’s request: “It’s Christmas; you don’t know how dark his holidays have been; sick about all these things for years.” All of a sudden, the astute reader gets it; *two* men have actually had dark holidays and felt sick about the incident for years. Ives decided to meet Danny. They both come into the room expecting to see someone different looking. Ives has aged; Danny has aged. Both men had eyes that filled with tears as they shook hands. From that point, both men faced life differently, with slates that had been washed clean by the forgiveness of the other, and then by God.

God wants to give you and me clean slates too. But sometimes, we refuse to give God our slate to clean; we clutch it to our chests, even though it has all words of anger and sorrow written on them. I have given God my slate now. Give God yours too; it releases anger when you go to the one you hurt and ask for forgiveness, or you decide to forgive the one who hurt you. Mr. Ives’ Christmas became a holiday again instead a painful reminder of his human sadness. If you have someone you have not forgiven, you can find peace too. And if you have someone who has not forgiven you yet, go to the altar of God and say so. There, may you find peace.

*Jeffrey A. Sumner*

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