

### **Before I Die, I Want To... 3. Experience True Forgiveness**

**Matthew 18:15-17, 20-21**

**May 15, 2022**

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I want to begin with two stories. The first involves Jim and Sarah. They had been married for twenty five years. It was an average marriage – not so good, not so bad. But over time, the love between the two of them gradually dissolved. He had an affair and that pretty much ended the marriage. They divorced, and she was left to raise their three children. She ended up much poorer than she thought she was going to be. There just wasn't enough money to pay all the bills, causing her a constant inner turmoil. Jim soon remarried, *too soon* so it felt. But it was the wedding day of their youngest daughter that got to Sarah.....when the other woman was escorted down the aisle, now seated *right behind* her. The inner rage started to burn. And when Jim came down the aisle, smiling ear to ear with their daughter. That was just too much. Feelings of bitterness flooded into her heart, forming a pocket of poison within - that she continues to carry.

The second story involves Dan. He had been hired by his company right out of college. He had done well for himself, gradually climbing to the top. Through the years, his company had gone through a couple of buy-outs, but he always landed on his feet, and landed on top. But in the latest reorganization, he was caught by surprise when his name wasn't on the chart. He couldn't believe it. They gave him a severance package, but now he was out on the streets without a job. Too young to retire; too old it seemed to get another *good* job. And the anger was building inside, anger towards the company, in particular anger towards his old boss. And he wasn't sleeping at night – and at the bottom of his heart, a pocket of poison was forming.

There are dozens of stories that I could tell – and one might be your story. Forgiveness is a struggle, and yet without it there will be no enduring joy, no depth of relationships. This is a series in which I'm looking at those things God might put on my bucket list, and I think one of them is forgiveness. Before I die, I want to experience forgiveness, how to show forgiveness to those who harm us, how to ask for forgiveness, and what forgiveness accomplishes in us.

Withholding forgiveness has negative consequences. It affects our spiritual lives. It affects our relationships with others. Last week, I noticed that the Mayo Clinic website has a section devoted to forgiveness and the physical consequences of withholding forgiveness – increased stress level, hypertension, heart disease. When we do not forgive, it is like drinking poison, holding this pocket of poison inside and hoping the other person will get sick. I think of the words of Jesus to the sick man in John 5: "Do you want to be well?" Do we? If so, forgiveness is absolutely essential.

Over the years, I've used rocks to help us understand what forgiveness feels like. The rocks represent the wounds that we carry, the unresolved guilt we carry and the burden on our soul. These wounds are small, medium and large. The reason we carry such a burden is that we humans struggle with sin. In the New Testament, the Greek word is hamartia. It means "to miss the mark." We learn from scripture that God has a preferred path – to do justice, love kindness, to walk humbly with God, to love our neighbor. And when we stray from the path, when we miss the mark we hurt others and we hurt ourselves and in the process we distance ourselves from God. Sometimes these are small things that we do or we fail to do. We get home at the end of the day and we are both tired – and maybe neither one of us had a great day. Amanda says something like, how was your day – hoping I will really ask about her day. And I snap. And she responds and suddenly neither one of us wants to be at home. We experience this separation

over something that really has nothing to do with either one of us. What I could have done was recognize that her having a bad day has nothing to do with me and let it go and give her space. Or maybe you are driving to work and someone cuts you off and by the time you get to work, nobody wants to be around you. Or maybe you get to church and someone is already sitting in your seat! It's these little things (handful of gravel) – the hurt feelings, harsh word from a stranger. It's like getting a stone in your shoe. If you try walking around all day with it in your shoe it's going to impact everything you do – and it will also impact everyone else in your path. But if you would just sit down, take off your shoe and get rid of it, the day would go so much better.

In Matthew 18, we read: **Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?”** Because seven seems like a lot, especially if it's about the same thing. **Jesus said, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy times seven.”** And what Jesus is really saying to Peter is that we should forgive an infinite number of times. Your life should be characterized by grace and mercy. How many of these little sins do you commit – things you've done or things you've not done. The psalmist says: *If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?* But we often hold on. Some days I can accumulate this much, and I carry it around with me waiting for someone to ask for my forgiveness. The problem is they don't even know they sinned – and maybe they didn't, I just took what they said as offensive when it wasn't even about me. These little things – let them go, just let them go – and when we do that the power over us is gone. Isn't that what we pray when we say – forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us? Our willingness to do that is tied to whether we are also able to let God forgive us.

We face a greater challenge when it comes to the medium and large stones. Imagine this backpack represent your soul. When these things happen and we don't or we can't just brush them off, we carry them around with us. Serious betrayals, confidence is broken, stealing, lying, cheating – things that have a significant impact. Those things that keep us awake at night. We are hurt, wounded, angry – and if we never let go, they accumulate, and we end up carrying this burden. And as a result, every part of our lives is harder. What we carry robs us of the joy of living. When it comes to these medium and large stones – we've got to learn to let them go.

The problem is that we have this urge to retaliate. (take other backpack) That thing you did last week – here take that. Remember that other thing – take that... Here, let me help you put that on. You hurt me, I'll hurt you. But do we feel better? Not for long, because we still carry our own wounds. Jesus says, forgive. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Is forgiving condoning? No. It is letting go of the pain in my life. It is setting aside the stone. You are not saying that what the other person did doesn't matter – because it did matter. Rather, you are choosing not to let that person's action have power over your life.

Does forgiveness dismiss the consequences? Again, the answer is no. There are still consequences. When our children were young and one of them did something wrong. I forgave them but there was still a consequence. “Dad, I'm sorry. I won't do it again. Do I still have to stay home this weekend?” “Yes.” Even obvious remorse did not remove the consequence because we wanted them to learn certain behavior was wrong. Our goal was not punishment but redemption. What does redemption look like? Awareness of wrong. Regret – I am sorry. Confession – I go to you and say I hurt you. Change – we turn, we change directions, we live a different way.

Sometimes, there is no repentance. For many years, one of my sisters worked in the area of domestic violence and what I learned from her is that extending forgiveness too quickly can actually enable a spouse's violent behavior. He beats her up and says he's sorry and won't do it again. She forgives him. She extends mercy and returns, but he beats her up again. Ultimately, forgiveness is necessary so she can let go of the burden that she carries – but his repentance was not complete – there was no change. There are other times when forgiveness is immediate because there is only one shot. When Jesus was on the cross, he looked down on the Roman soldiers who had put him there and said, "Father, forgive them." Jesus had just one shot and he extended mercy – and what we learn is that when Jesus breathed his last, one of the soldiers cried, "Surely this man was the Son of God." Sometimes extending mercy can affect redemption but we can't control that. Our forgiveness may not change that person, but forgiveness can remove the burden that we carry.

In Matthew 18, Jesus says: **If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together.** Jesus doesn't say, tell others about the person, but go directly to the person who wronged you. Talk to them directly. That may require courage, and it also requires prayer and humility because there may be truth in the other person's response. Maybe both of you are to blame. **If they listen to you, then you've won over your brother or sister.** The goal is redemption and reconciliation. This thing happened. It hurt me and I feel like I'm carrying this stone with me. You may not have meant it or I may have misunderstood. You may not even remember. And either the person will say, I'm sorry. Would you please forgive me? Or they will say, I don't care how you feel. I was right and you were wrong. And if that happens, Jesus says, **If they won't listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses.** Take one or two people that both of you respect but again with humility because they may see you in the wrong. And only if that doesn't work does Jesus say: **If they still won't pay attention, report it to the church. If they won't pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector.** But even that is not the end, because with whom did Jesus spend much of his time? With Gentiles and tax collectors! So we continue to pray. Paul tells us to continue to extend acts of mercy and kindness. In Romans 12:20-21 – **If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of fire upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.** God can still affect change through acts of love and mercy.

And finally, there are some stones that almost too much to carry. Pastor and Author John Claypool tells the story of a man who had come to him, broken and guilt ridden, seeking some words that would bring about forgiveness. This man had become involved in a bitter argument with his wife. The argument built to a point where he stormed angrily out of his house, jumped into his car, and began backing hurriedly down his driveway. The car suddenly lurched over something in the driveway. The man hit the brakes and got out of the car only to discover he had run over and killed his three-year-old son, who had followed him out of the house. What would you say to this man if you were in John Claypool's position? How does someone find forgiveness from something like that? Claypool says this man eventually found forgiveness. A stone like this does not go away in a day or a month. Sometimes it takes years, but we chip away at it one day at a time. And slowly the weight disappears and forgiveness takes hold.

Every one of us has hurt someone. They carry rocks with our name on them. Can you think of someone from whom you need forgiveness? Would you help them let go of the stones? Are you carrying around stones with someone else's name? Before I die, I want to experience true forgiveness. Forgiveness is essential to be free.

## Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 15, 2022

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I'm so grateful for your love and forgiveness. Teach me how to seek forgiveness from others, how to offer it even to enemies—and how to do both in healthy ways that heal, rather than just suppress, my pain and hurt. Amen.

### Monday, May 16

#### **Scripture: Matthew 5:38-48**

"You have heard that it was said, *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor* and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

**Observation:** Rewards for friends and revenge for foes are so woven into our culture that Jesus' words may seem a recipe for self-destruction. What company, political party or law firm always deals with friends and foes this way? Yet Jesus said this is how God works. And he called us to live out of the same heart: "No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously." (*The Message*)

**Application:** In Jesus' day, many rabbis quoted Lev. 19:18 ("Love your neighbor as yourself"), and then added, "and hate your enemies." Jesus said that love to the just and the unjust, to evil and good alike, is God's way. Do you understand "love" more as a feeling or a set of actions? Can you "love" someone even if you don't like them?

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, that in Jesus we see how to love even as he was the target of hate, even when he was treated unjustly. Remind us again of the greatness of your love, your unconditional love for each of us. Grant us the courage to love as Jesus loved. Amen.

### Tuesday, May 17

#### **Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-32**

Therefore, after you have gotten rid of lying, *Each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor* because we are parts of each other in the same body. *Be angry without sinning*. Don't let the sun set on your anger. Don't provide an opportunity for the devil. Thieves should no longer steal. Instead, they should go to work, using their hands to do good so that they will have something to share with whoever is in need. Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

**Observation:** “We are all members of one body,” Paul said. It’s clear he was talking mainly to those in the Christian community. Even in church it’s quite possible to meet “bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil.” Even with fellow believers, we need the call to forgive each other; just as in Christ God forgave you.

**Application:** This passage says that Christians should be “forgiving each other.” Again being as honest as you can, in what ways do you at times see yourself being unloving and hurtful to your brothers and sisters in Christ? What steps can you take to grow in these areas, and to seek relational healing by asking for forgiveness? Ask God to help you to find practical, realistic steps to “be kind and compassionate,” in ways that are healthy for you and for them.

**Prayer:** Lord, renew in me the awareness of your constant love and readiness to forgive. As you continue to do for me, may I also do for others. Let others see in me a person who is generous in grace and forgiveness. Amen.

**Wednesday, May 18**

**Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22**

So remember that once you were Gentiles by physical descent, who were called “uncircumcised” by Jews who are physically circumcised. At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God’s promise. In this world you had no hope and no God. But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God. When he came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were far away from God and to those who were near. We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit. So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God’s people, and you belong to God’s household. As God’s household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

**Observation:** Almost all conflict happens because of some kind of difference. As Jesus’ message spread through the Mediterranean world, the early church became more and more diverse. But Jesus pulled off an amazing feat: he “broke down the barrier of hatred that divided” different groups. Our differences still create hostilities today—and Jesus’ power is still at work.

**Application:** The main issue the Ephesians faced was the distrust and contempt between Jews and Gentiles. In a global society, what are some of the differences that trigger hostility in your heart? How can Jesus’ forgiveness help make you willing to tackle the hard work of changing long-standing attitudes, feelings and actions?

**Prayer:** God, we live in a world where distrust and hostility seem ever-present. Even family relationships and friendship have been wounded by lingering division. I know that is not what you want for any of us. Help me to be a bridge-builder of forgiveness. Amen.

**Thursday, May 19**

**Scripture: John 3:14-21**

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son. "This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. All who do wicked things hate the light and don't come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God."

**Observation:** John said Jesus did not come to condemn the world. What amazing possibilities open before us when we are told that God does not have a condemning attitude toward us. It frees us to let go of our condemning attitude toward ourselves and others. It is natural to condemn an enemy. Jesus came to offer us his supernatural way of life.

**Application:** John was a realist. Though Jesus did not come to condemn, some chose to remain his enemies. "Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (v. 19). How do you as Christ's follower treat those who reject you, or Jesus? What can Jesus' example teach you?

**Prayer:** Loving God, help me to cling to the assurance John offered that your love is for all. I want to live in your light. Help me to work each day to push back the darkness by reflecting your love. Amen.

**Friday, May 20**

**Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35**

Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?" Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. Because the servant didn't have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. But the servant fell down, knelt before him, and said, 'Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.' The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan. "When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, 'Pay me back what you owe me.' "Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt. "When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. His master called the first servant and said, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn't you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?' His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt. "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

**Observation:** Peter thought he could guess what Jesus would teach. The rabbis said you should forgive three times. Peter stretched it by more than doubling it. And Jesus said, “Not even close.” For Hebrews, the number seven meant completeness. Seventy times seven was vast beyond imagining! Forgiveness is not about counting. It’s a continual way of life.

**Application:** Forgiving the same person seven times (even three) can seem a great plenty! How many times have you needed God’s forgiveness? At the end of this passage, Jesus said you need to “forgive a brother or sister from your heart.” Think about times when you might find it useful to forgive outwardly, but hold in bitterness or a longing for revenge. How do such buried feelings affect you? What emotional growth steps are needed to help you truly forgive from the heart?

**Prayer:** God of second chances – and third and seventy times seven: Keep me ever close to you, knowing that you are ready to forgive. Let that same mind that was in Jesus become my way of living in this world. Amen.

## **Saturday, May 21**

### **Scripture: Luke 23:32-46**

They also led two other criminals to be executed with Jesus. When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing.” They drew lots as a way of dividing up his clothing. The people were standing around watching, but the leaders sneered at him, saying, “He saved others. Let him save himself if he really is the Christ sent from God, the chosen one.” The soldiers also mocked him. They came up to him, offering him sour wine and saying, “If you really are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” Above his head was a notice of the formal charge against him. It read “This is the king of the Jews.” One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus insulted him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” Responding, the other criminal spoke harshly to him, “Don’t you fear God, seeing that you’ve also been sentenced to die? We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus replied, “I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise.”

It was now about noon, and darkness covered the whole earth until about three o’clock, while the sun stopped shining. Then the curtain in the sanctuary tore down the middle. Crying out in a loud voice, Jesus said, “Father, *into your hands I entrust my life.*” After he said this, he breathed for the last time.

**Observation:** Jesus taught a lot about forgiveness. We’ve heard too many stories, though, about religious people whose actions don’t match up very well with what they say. Jesus, under the awful stress of the cross, lived the forgiveness he taught. He prayed for those who mocked and tortured him. He offered paradise to a thief, whose only credential was asking to be included.

**Application:** Jesus asked God to forgive those who nailed him to the cross and insulted him as he hung dying. What do you learn about how Jesus could do this from the words Luke reports: “Father, into your hands I entrust my life”? What spiritual and emotional growth do you need to move closer to Jesus’ model of forgiveness? What are the next steps for you in the challenging work of understanding all that is at play in your heart?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I'm so grateful for your love and forgiveness. Teach me how to seek forgiveness and to extend forgiveness to others so that I am living in ways that bring health and wholeness to my relationships. Amen.