

## **Life's Big Questions (Week 3): Can I forgive & be forgiven?**

### **Key Concept**

Understand how to forgive yourself, others, and be forgiven by God

### **Bible Study**

Mark 8-12

### **Recap**

Last week we looked at two different solutions to life's big questions. First, we considered the religious solution, which says, "If you keep a particular set of rules offered by our religious community, then you will be golden in this life and in the life to come." On the other hand, we considered the irreligious solution to life, which says, "Who are you to tell me to keep your set of rules? I'm the master of my fate and I'm the captain of my soul. I'll make my own set of rules to live by, and I'll break any of your rules or God's rules that don't work for me."

Jesus challenged the solutions offered by both groups and completely leveled the playing field of humanity, putting both the religious and the irreligious in the same camp. He said that all of us, without exception, are flawed, broken, and in need of one thing: forgiveness. Therefore, we'll pick up this week on that very topic, the topic of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a big question that all of us must answer in life. While there are many big questions surrounding forgiveness, we'll consider three:

1. How does forgiveness work in human relationships (horizontal forgiveness)?
2. How does forgiveness work in our relationship with God (vertical forgiveness)?
3. How do we forgive ourselves?

### **Introduction**

In our time together today, we're going to begin by thinking about how forgiveness works in human relationships. Then, we'll build on that by thinking about how forgiveness works in our relationship with God. The rationale for beginning with forgiveness in human relationships is, for starters, because human relationships are easier to wrap our minds around, and, secondarily, because forgiveness in our relationship with God mirrors forgiveness in our relationships with others.

## **1. Horizontal Forgiveness: Forgiveness in our Relationships with Humans**

Think about the last time someone really hurt you. Not just a little paper cut, but deeply. You had, at that moment, two options: vengeance or forgiveness. If you chose vengeance, then you figured out a way to get even. Maybe you slandered them in the same way they slandered you. Maybe you talked about them behind their backs or made a nasty post on Facebook. Somehow, somehow, you made it very clear to them, "I am going to ruin you, just like you ruined me."

Despite the short-term pleasure you feel in the moment, intuitively, you know there is a problem with this option of seeking vengeance, mainly that you are becoming hardened and bitter in the process. The evil perpetrated against you has now taken root in your own heart. Rather than extracting the poisonous arrow through the painful surgery of forgiveness, you held on to it, replaying the tape over and over and over in your mind. Sadly, you're no longer simply a victim; you're now a perpetrator of the same crime committed against you.

### **Illustration: The Interpreter (Netflix: 39:00—42:20):**

There is a film that captures this dynamic of forgiveness vs. vengeance really well called *The Interpreter*. Nicole Kidman plays the lead. Her family was killed by an evil dictator in Africa named Edmond Zuwani. As a result, she went through phases of being a militant radical who opposed the regime, and then, finally, she reverted to diplomacy through the U.N.,

largely as an interpreter. In a twist of fate, Edmond Zuwani is scheduled to speak at the UN and in the process receives a death threat on his life. Kidman becomes a suspect. Sean Penn, as a detective, finds out her family history and becomes suspicious that Kidman might be responsible. He probes into her feelings towards Zuwani and Kidman responds,

*“Everyone who loses someone wants revenge, on God if they can’t find someone else. In Africa, in Motobo, the Ku believe that the only way to end grief is to save a life. If someone is murdered, a year of mourning ends with a ritual that we call the drowning mantra. The killer is put in a boat, and bound, so that he can’t swim. He is then pushed overboard, and the family of the dead has to make a choice; they can let him drown or swim out to save him. The Ku believe that if the family lets the killer drown, they’ll have justice, but spend the rest of their lives in mourning. But, if they save him, and admit that life isn’t always just, that very act can take away their sorrow. Vengeance is a lazy form of grief.”*

Kidman says the family who has been wronged has a choice—they can seek vengeance and let this guy drown, and if your system of justice is balanced by a death for a death, then justice is achieved through vengeance. Yet, “You may have “justice,” Kidman wisely points out, “but spend the rest of your lives in mourning,” You have just committed another injustice, leaving you with the turmoil of a guilty conscience.

Kidman notes, however, the existence of another option. The family who has been wronged has the option of swimming out and saving the very person who murdered their family member. She doesn’t use the word, but the word is forgiveness. Herein lies the point the film makes so well: forgiveness doesn’t merely happen by mechanically mouthing the words, “I forgive you.” Forgiveness is costly. Always. To forgive requires you to suffer.

In the movie, the wronged party swims out and saves the life of the one who took their family member's life. Can you imagine the emotional costs associated with doing so? When you decide to suffer emotionally and psychologically for your wrongdoer, doing so is incredibly difficult and emotionally expensive, but in doing so, forgiveness is born, and, as Kidman says, you won't spend the rest of your life in mourning, full of bitterness and rage.

### **Forgiveness Takes Time**

Suffering, therefore, is the way forgiveness happens, which means forgiveness normally takes time. For example, in any marriage, you make a covenantal commitment to forgive one another for most things. This does not mean, however, forgiveness must be offered instantaneously.

My wife, unfortunately, has had plenty of opportunities to practice delayed forgiveness. I'll share one relatively minor offense of mine that gave birth to the phrase, "*I will forgive you, but not yet.*" We were pursuing a second adoption and had a really long day. We took at nine-hour training class and had a really emotional lunch with the birth-mother of our oldest son from a previous adoption. I was exhausted and emotionally drained, but Bradford was still churning out a letter to my oldest son's birth-mother. I callously said, "Baby, wrap it up. Sometimes you get a little wordy." I tried to catch the words before they went into her ears, but they slipped through. Damage done. I've said worse, and the offense was minor, but the rub came because I knew she feared getting wordy and I intentionally used words to sting.

Reflexively, like a hammer to the knee, I said, "Oh, I'm an idiot. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Will you forgive me?" She looked at me and said, "I'm going to forgive you, but not yet." I learned a valuable lesson from her that day. Forgiveness takes time. Given the expensive and painful process of forgiveness, we have to prepare our hearts and minds to pay such a heavy price.

## **No Delete Button In our Brains**

The mind is a key battleground for forgiveness. When you make a decision of the will to forgive someone who has wronged you, then you must make an ongoing choice every time the offense resurfaces in your mind. This is one of the many reasons forgiveness is so challenging. Much to our chagrin, we don't have delete buttons in our brains. Every time we remember the wrong done to us, we have to renew the offer of forgiveness made in the past to activate forgiveness in the present. Therefore, ongoing, costly, forgiveness means eliminating the phrase, "See, I told you so. There you go again."

Yes, but what if the wrongdoer persists in their behavior and provides noticeable patterns of deviant behavior? On the one hand, Jesus answered this question when it comes to forgiveness when he commanded us to forgive a person in perpetuity (77x7 times). On the other hand, offering forgiveness doesn't mean we can't (or shouldn't) lovingly point out patterns of behavior to help people who are caught in a rut of sin, nor does it mean that the previous relationship will always be restored as it formerly way. Reconciliation and restoration are another matter altogether, but one thing is clear: forgiveness is always required.

## **The Greater the Offense, the Greater the Suffering**

One dynamic to keep in mind with forgiveness is the level of offense. When it comes to forgiveness, the greater the offense, the greater the suffering required for forgiveness to occur. When we're painfully hurt and deeply wounded, forgiveness requires a great deal of emotional suffering. All that is within us will want to send them a nasty email or make a Facebook post slandering them or call them and give them a good old-fashioned tongue-lashing.

Forgiveness, however, happens when you make the choice to suffer by holding your tongue rather than make them suffer.

## **Putting Forgiveness in Economic Terms**

Maybe it will help to think about forgiveness in economic terms. If you have a mortgage on a home, then you owe a debt to the bank. If you can't pay the debt, somebody has to pay your debt: you, the bank, or the federal government. Debts don't just vanish into thin air. Someone must absorb the loss. Someone must suffer the financial loss. If you are not able to pay your mortgage, the bank can't just say, "I forgive you," without paying your debt out of their financial capital. In other words, in order to forgive the loan, the bank must be willing to suffer financially on your behalf to forgive that debt.

## **Vertical Forgiveness: Forgiveness in our Relationship with God**

Jesus also cast forgiveness in economic terms in the very famous teaching we now call, "The Lord's Prayer." He said, "Forgive us our **debts**, as we forgive our debtors" (Lk. 11;4). Sin, according to Jesus, creates a debt that must be paid horizontally and vertically. According to the Bible, we all have wounded God's heart deeply by our sin. We saw this the first week when we looked at how we have all built our lives around something other than God. And, when we pool all of our sin together collectively as the human race, is it any wonder that a tremendous amount of suffering would be required from God to forgive humanity?

Murder, treason, character defamation, stealing, self-righteousness, pride, anger—you name it, we have done it. And remember, the greater the offense, the greater the suffering required to forgive. Herein lies the answer to a San Diego State student who once said to me, "I know I'm not perfect, but why can't God just say, 'I forgive you.' I just don't see why the cross is necessary." The cross is necessary because God made a willful choice to forgive the gargantuan debt of humanity, knowing that His suffering would be far greater than any suffering imaginable.

In the cross, you have the ultimate suffering for the ultimate forgiveness. Tim Keller said it well, "The currency of forgiveness is blood, sweat, tears,

and thorns.” God couldn’t just say, “I forgive you,” anymore than a bank or any of us can—forgiveness from Him meant that He would have to suffer. In fact, Jesus explains why He had to suffer on the cross in Mark 8:31-34. “And He began to teach them that the Son of Man **must suffer** many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days, rise again.” Notice Jesus says that He (the Son of Man) **MUST** suffer and be killed. Not maybe, not might—He *must* suffer and be killed.

Why? Why must he suffer and be killed? Because there was no other way for mankind to experience forgiveness. A man, as our representative, had to pay our debt, but only the God-man, Jesus Christ, could do so because His perfect life is the only thing that would create the spiritual currency (i.e. righteousness) to pay the debt.

### **A Spiritual Bank Account**

Picture a spiritual bank account under the name of Jesus Christ. Every act of obedience to God the Father credited his account with spiritual capital. Every sinful thought, desire, or action debited his account. Thankfully, Jesus went the distance, living 33 years on earth without encountering a single debit to his account. As a result of his sinless life as a man, he built up the spiritual capital to write a check that would clear for our sin.

Jesus knew all along this was the plan to pay our debt. He repeatedly emphasized the need for him to settle the debt of humanity on the cross. Anyone, including Peter, who tried to prevent him from paying this debt on the cross was playing into the hands of the enemy, which is why Jesus sternly rebuked Peter and said to him, “Get behind me, Satan!” (Mark 8:33). Ouch! This seems a bit harsh. After all, Peter was his right-hand man. Yet, by trying to prevent Jesus from going to the cross, Peter was functioning as a pawn for Satan. He was, as verse 33 says, thinking about human concerns, like maybe his own power and privilege that might accrue if Jesus made a more sensical decision to take hold of worldly power and

assume an earthly kingship. I can hear Peter saying, “Jesus, I would make a great Vice-President. At the very least, Secretary of State, but I think VP would fit me better.” Jesus, indignantly, puts him in his place, “Get behind me Satan!” He was essentially saying, “I am going to pay your debt; don’t try to stop me.”

In case we miss this, Mark circles back to the economic concept of forgiveness in our vertical relationship with God when he says, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a **ransom** for many” (Mark 10:45). A ransom. That’s what Jesus says He came to do, “to give His life as a ransom for many.” What is a ransom? It is an exchange. Typically a person is held hostage, and when the ransom, or payment, is made, then the hostage is released. That is what happens to us. Unwittingly, we’re being held hostage by Satan. We’re under his influence and control until Jesus ransoms us.

Therefore, the cross is the ransoming of mankind. Without the cross, there is no ransom and no forgiveness. This is why the biographies of Jesus are so unlike any other biographies. 1/3 of the gospels (the biographies of Jesus) focus on His death and the cross. Contrast that with the biography of Winston Churchill that was over 1300 pages, with only three pages about Churchill’s death. Not only that, but Christians never stop talking about the cross. In fact, the cross is THE symbol of Christianity. Why? Because this is how forgiveness happens!

Certainly no other religion celebrates the death of its founder. Not Islam. Not Buddhism. Not Hinduism. Those are all religions built on a religious system of works. Totally different from the way Jesus says God deals with the wound that we have dealt Him. Forgiveness doesn’t come by us being good, but by God taking on skin in the form of a man and living the life we should have lived and dying the death we should have died.



Theologians call this substitutionary atonement. We can just as easily call it forgiveness. A gritty, true-to-life forgiveness, bought and paid for with the precious blood of Jesus. Oh the wonder and joy of the good news we call the gospel; it's good news of a God-man who was willing to suffer on our behalf, offering His life as a ransom. Our debt is paid, paid in full, and forgiveness is now possible!

So possible, in fact, that the forgiveness we receive from God is intended to spill over and into the lives of all those around us. The vertical now empowers the horizontal. We can do for other humans what God did for us. Because of the cross and resurrection, we now have an inexhaustible supply of forgiveness to share.

### **Forgiving Myself**

Yes, but what about forgiving ourselves? How do we do pull that off? Sometimes it seems as if the mountain of regret is simply too high to scale? Here this. God forgives you, and God's actions in history can change your capacity to forgive yourself in the present. The cross says your debt is paid, and the Resurrection says you now have the power to forgive yourself and others, if you want it. If the Resurrection is true, then we all have a new hope and a new power to forgive ourselves. Faith is required, but we're not quite there yet. For now, take heart: forgiveness abounds!

### Discussion Questions

1. What 2 options do you have when someone hurts you?
  
2. Using financial terms, how would you define forgiveness?

3. Describe an example in your life where you said, “I forgive you, but not yet.”

4. Respond to the statement, “I know I’m not perfect, but why can’t God just say, ‘I forgive you.’ I just don’t see why the cross is necessary.”

5. Read Mark 8:31-34. Why is Jesus so harsh with Peter?

6. Read Mark 10:45. How does this text enlighten you about the necessity of Christ’s death?

For next week, read Mark chapters 13-15.