

# Forgiveness

## 1. Overview of our series “Finding Freedom”

- 1.1. Last week we began a new series titled “Finding Freedom.”
- 1.2. Many of us are living our daily lives with weights and burdens that God did not intend for us to carry. We’ve become accustomed to the pain, or the weariness, or the fear, or the insecurity, or the anxiety that fills our souls.
- 1.3. Some of us may not want to admit that we’re carrying these burdens around with us or we may not even recognize that we have them. But the good news is that Jesus has come to bring us freedom.
- 1.4. In fact, He told the people of Nazareth:

*18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

*Luke 4:18-19*

- 1.5. He told the Pharisees:

*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

*John 10:10*

- 1.6. He told a group of followers:

*31 ...“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

*John 8:31-32*

- 1.7. Last week we began this series by discussing the voices that imprison us. We're shaped by the voices we hear, and some of us have been deeply impacted by the voices of disappointment, the voices of criticism, and the voices of rejection. In order to walk in freedom we need to lock in on the voice of God.
- 1.8. This morning we're going to turn our attention to the subject of forgiveness. Let's begin by reading two verses in Matthew 18.

*21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"*

*22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*

*Matthew 18:21-22*

## **2. Of all the principles that Jesus teaches concerning our interactions with one another, few are more important than forgiveness.**

- 2.1. No substantial relationship can survive without forgiveness.
- 2.2. How many of you are married? Marriage is like one big exercise in forgiveness.
  - 2.2.1. I'm still learning how Jennifer's soul works; what she values, what affects her, what she needs from me. And sometimes she doesn't get what I, her husband, should provide for her.
  - 2.2.2. Some of you have thought, "How could he be so unloving?" or "Why would she do that to me?"
  - 2.2.3. Without forgiveness, our marriages will not make it.

2.3. Some of you have children. Having children will make you want to spend a week apologizing to your own parents.

2.3.1. I'm sorry for my lousy attitude.

2.3.2. I'm sorry for lying.

2.3.3. I'm sorry for being ungrateful.

2.4. If you spend a significant amount of time with other people in relatively tight quarters, you are either going to learn to extend forgiveness to them or you are going to go crazy.

2.4.1. I shared an office with a guy who would sneeze without warning, and it sounded like a canon going off.

2.4.2. Every time he sneezed I thought I was going to have a heart attack. I remember saying to him, "Bro, you gotta give me some kind of warning that that sneeze is coming."

2.5. No substantial relationship can survive without forgiveness. Every one of us needs to seek and to grant forgiveness.

2.6. John the Baptist's entire ministry was centered around forgiveness. And people flocked to him. Mark writes:

*4 ...John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*

*Mark 1:4-5*

2.7. When John was able to create a space where people felt they could genuinely receive forgiveness the multitudes came.

2.8. Jesus similarly put a great deal of attention on forgiveness. In fact, it was because Jesus spent time with people in desperate need of

forgiveness and because He extended forgiveness to them on behalf of God that He drew the ire of the religious leaders.

2.9. The religious leaders led with the law, but Jesus led with forgiveness.

2.10. In Jesus' most significant sermon on how we are to live, the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 5-7, the theme of forgiveness surfaces repeatedly. In Matthew 5 we read:

*21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.*

*23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.*

*Matthew 5:21-24*

2.11. Note a couple of things here. Firstly, Jesus connects anger and an unwillingness to forgive with murder. It's the same spirit. And it will eat us alive.

2.12. Secondly, Jesus teaches that being reconciled with our brother or sister is so important that even worshiping at the altar should be put on hold until we can make amends with the person we have treated wrongly.

2.13. Now listen to what Jesus goes on to say in the next chapter of the Sermon on the Mount.

*9 "This, then, is how you should pray:*

*“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
10 your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
11 Give us today our daily bread.  
12 And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
13 And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from the evil one.’*

*14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

*Matthew 6:9-15*

- 2.14. Extending forgiveness to other people is so important that Jesus says that failing to do so will actually preclude us from receiving God’s forgiveness.
- 2.15. There is no greater hypocrisy than to presume to receive from God forgiveness of our sins while withholding forgiveness from those who have wronged us.
- 2.16. **Unforgiveness will destroy you.** Anger and bitterness will eat you apart from the inside. You’ll be cut off from the people around you. You’ll be unable to connect with God. And the stress and tension connected with unforgiveness will destroy your physical health.
- 2.17. If we are going to live in freedom, we have to learn to grant and to seek forgiveness.
- 2.18. For many of us, this is not easy. To help us we’re going to take a look at the life of a man in the Old Testament named Joseph.

### 3. The life of Joseph

- 3.1. You can find Joseph's story in the latter part of the book of Genesis, beginning in Genesis 37.
- 3.2. The account begins when Joseph is seventeen years old. Joseph's father is a man named Jacob who is married to two sisters, Rachel and Leah. Jacob really liked Rachel and he worked for fourteen years to earn her hand. But Jacob was tricked into marrying Leah, and he never loved her like he did Rachel. This obviously made for a very dysfunctional arrangement.
- 3.3. For a long time Rachel was unable to have children, and she grew increasingly jealous as Leah bore children for Jacob. But when Jacob was an older man she did finally give birth — to Joseph. Jacob, very unwisely, made no attempt to hide his obvious preference for Joseph, and this stirred up jealousy in Joseph's brothers.
- 3.4. Joseph didn't help matters when he shared dreams he had of his brothers and even his parents bowing down before him.
- 3.5. Eventually, Joseph's brothers decided to get rid of him. In anger and jealousy Joseph's brothers kidnapped him, made up a story about him being attacked by wild animals, and sold him into slavery. Joseph was taken to Egypt, and, as far as he knew, his life was over.
- 3.6. In Egypt, Joseph was sold again. And then things took a turn for the worse. Joseph was accused of attempted rape and thrown into prison. As a slave and a foreigner accused of a serious crime, Joseph had absolutely nowhere he could turn. By all outward appearances, his circumstances were completely hopeless.
- 3.7. For thirteen years Joseph suffered in slavery and prison, cut off from his family and his homeland. And then God opened a door for Joseph. With God's help, Joseph was able to interpret a significant dream for Pharaoh, the king in Egypt, and, incredibly, Joseph was

promoted to become Pharaoh's right hand man.

- 3.8. After seven years in this role famine struck, and what do you know but Joseph's brothers come to Egypt looking for grain! When Joseph makes himself known to his brothers, they are in shock. And they are afraid. If Joseph ever wanted revenge, he now has the opportunity and the power to do it.
- 3.9. To their relief, Joseph treats his brothers and his father Jacob with kindness, and invites them all to move to Egypt so he can take care of them. Eventually Joseph's father, Jacob, dies. And Joseph's brothers are once again afraid. Now that dad is gone, who knows what Joseph is going to do? Perhaps Joseph was just showing his brothers kindness for his father Jacob's sake. We pick up the story in the last chapter of the book of Genesis.

*15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" 16 So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 17 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.*

*18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.*

*19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children."*

*Genesis 50:15-21*

- 3.10. This is an amazing passage, and it shows us several things.

### **3.11. Firstly, unforgiveness can last a really long time.**

3.12. By the time Jacob dies, it has been something like 40 years since Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery! And what are his brothers thinking?

*"What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"*

*Genesis 50:15*

3.13. If we do not address it, unforgiveness can affect our lives for decades.

3.14. [Show picture of the medal ceremony for men's basketball from the 1972 Olympics]

3.15. In 1972, the U.S. Olympic men's basketball team was a serious underdog to the team from the Soviet Union. Through an absurd series of events, the last few seconds of the game were replayed several times, and the last time the Soviet team made a basket to win the game.

3.16. The team from the United States was so angry that they decided not to show up to receive their silver medals. Forty-five years have now passed, and some members of the team have decided that they would be open to receiving their medals. But not Kenny Davis, the captain of the team. He has written into his will that no member of his family may ever accept the silver medal from that Olympics on his behalf.

3.17. Some of us have gone years without speaking to family members because of unforgiveness. You can have walls in your soul for decades because of an unwillingness to forgive.

3.18. If we do not act on it, unforgiveness can last a really long time. It can even be transferred to the next generation. Our children and their children can hold hatred in their hearts toward people they



have never met because of our unforgiveness.

3.19. You can watch this being played out in families, communities, and nations across the globe.

3.20. How long do you want unforgiveness to imprison you? How long do you want it to affect your children? What about their children?

3.21. **Secondly, Joseph makes two incredibly important statements.** The first is in the form of a rhetorical question. Joseph says:

*“Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God?”*

*Genesis 50:19*

3.22. Joseph is saying, in effect, “I gave up trying to be your judge and jury a long time ago. It is not my place to seek vengeance.”

3.23. If you try to play the role of God in another person’s life, it will destroy you. You cannot handle it. It will consume you.

3.24. James writes:

*There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?*

*James 4:12*

3.25. Earlier in the same letter James writes:

*19 My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*

*James 1:19-20*

3.26. When we withhold forgiveness, we are, in effect, deciding that we will be the judge and that we will deliver and execute the sentence.

When we are the offended party, it is impossible for us to do this objectively. And, ultimately, it is just not our prerogative.

3.27. And when we try to assume God's role, it crushes us.

3.28. King David is a remarkable example in this regard. Saul, the first king in Israel, could not have treated David any worse. Saul felt deeply threatened by David because God was obviously with David, and David had been anointed to become the next king. On multiple occasions Saul attempted to kill David. Saul sent an army of 3,000 men to capture David and destroy him.

3.29. But when David had an opportunity to kill Saul, he would not do it. Instead he said:

*9 "...Who can lay a hand on the Lord's anointed and be guiltless? 10 As surely as the Lord lives... the Lord himself will strike him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. 11 But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord's anointed."*

*1 Samuel 26:9-11*

3.30. What's David doing here? David is saying, "I will not play the role of God in Saul's life. It is not my place to avenge." In fact, David maintained a posture of forgiveness and reconciliation toward Saul.

3.31. Reconciliation is a two-way street, and David never got to experience reconciliation with Saul because Saul was unwilling. But he kept his heart clean by maintaining a posture of forgiveness.

3.32. You can't control what other people will do. But you can control what you do. And you can decide whether or not you are going to try to put yourself in the place of God.

3.33. The apostle Paul writes:

*17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. ... 19 Do not take revenge... but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary:*

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.  
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

*21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

*Romans 12:17, 19-21*

3.34. Joseph makes a profound statement when he asks, "Am I in the place of God?"

3.35. And, finally, Joseph says this:

*"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."*

*Genesis 50:20*

**3.36. Joseph here recognizes a profound reality: God is in control.**

3.37. Do you realize that no human being can ultimately ruin your life?  
"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good..."

3.38. We think other people have the power to save or destroy us. But they don't ultimately hold the keys to our future. God does.

3.39. When Jesus was facing the threat of crucifixion, Pilate was flabbergasted by Jesus' calm in his presence.

*10 "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"*

*11 Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."*

*John 19:10-11*

- 3.40. Everything about the circumstances suggested that Jesus' destiny lay in the hands of this pagan ruler. But Jesus knew better. And it completely affected His response to Pilate.
- 3.41. When we think that other people hold the power to determine our identity and success, our present and our future, we will find it very difficult to extend them forgiveness. Ironically, it is the very act of withholding forgiveness that gives them power in our lives.
- 3.42. But when we recognize that God is in control, it is much easier to forgive. As much pain or frustration or disappointment you may have caused me, it is God's plan that will prevail and I know that in all things He is working for my good and His glory. And so I can release you.
- 3.43. In the midst of the wrong you have suffered at the hands of other people, do you recognize that God is in control, and that He is a great redeemer?

#### **4. Summary**

- 4.1. Are you going to live in the prison of unforgiveness, or will you embrace Jesus' command to forgive others, even as He has forgiven you?
- 4.2. You cannot control what other people will do. But you can control what you will do.