

## 2020 Forgiveness

I would like you to think of someone who, if they walked in the room right now, it would make things awkward, uncomfortable, it would make you angry. Think of someone you just can't stand. Their voice makes you cringe, that look on their face makes you scowl, the things they say and do make you shake your head. Now I want you to think about how they hurt you. How did it get this way? What did they do to you?

Were they, supposedly, your friend but then they turned their back on you? Maybe they told a lie about you. Maybe it wasn't just one lie, but several over time – habitual wrongdoing. That hurts. It does. Maybe it was irreconcilable differences, or a business deal or partnership gone wrong. Maybe they took something from you, maybe they owe you something. Maybe they passed a policy you didn't like. That hurts. Maybe it was verbal abuse, maybe it was a pastor – spiritual abuse. Maybe it was physical abuse. These all hurt. They do.

The fact is, there is plenty of hurt in this world. There is no shortage of pain. So it is therefore a fact that we all have plenty of reasons for justifiably holding bitterness and anger against others. There are some bad people who do some bad things and we have every reason to be angry at them. But doesn't that mean that there are people out there who have every reason to be angry at us? That guy you

cut off on the highway, intentional or not, for that angry outburst or the lie you told? “But it’s different for me!” We say. Ah, but wouldn’t that person you hate say the same thing? And so we are left with the world we live in, a world where people have every reason to be mad at each other. And we see that played out in our lives with our broken relationships.

And if that weren’t enough, we Christians have another problem. We Christians who look to Jesus for forgiveness for our wrongs, praise God we find great and abundant forgiveness in him. That’s not the problem. The problem is in that act of faith which clings to the forgiveness of Jesus, we renounce our justification for hating others, because we have taken forgiveness for ourselves. Our readings are clear today: the Christian is to release others from bitterness and vengeance that they deserve because we have been released of the vengeance we deserve in Jesus.

And that’s a problem for us sinners because man it isn’t fun to release others from the vengeance they deserve, right? It feels so good when someone gets their come-up-ins. A story of revenge is a wonderful, delightful story we can all relate to.

When that person finally realizes they were wrong you were right the vindication is so sweet! But... we as Christians are asked to renounce this. We confess, “Vengeance belongs to the Lord.” He will use his proper channels and authorities to set it right or, at the very least, on the last day when our wrongs are before us and shouted from the rooftops, with no excuses, then all will know who was right

and who was wrong. Sweet vindication belongs to God's people on the last day, yes. But a warning that our wrongs will be known too. So should we thirst so much for vengeance, knowing we deserve some of it too?

Thankfully our God is not simply a God of vengeance, but also mercy. And thank God that he has given it to us in Jesus. Taking upon himself a debt that we could never repay, not in a thousand lifetimes. But he has paid this debt with the blood of the lamb, and the lamb is risen and reigns and his command is clear: share his mercy.

Forgiveness is a choice we make, and it is not an easy one. But we actively seek the good of the other, even that person we cannot stand. And as we make these decisions, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to forgive sometimes the feelings don't come right away but we are called to do it anyway. Neither does this call to forgive mean we are permanent pushovers. Jesus was no pushover. He stood for the truth in the face of great opposition. He judged rightly according to the Word of God, may we do the same. Neither are we called to be suckers. There are things people do that bring about consequences, disqualify them from offices, or require our interaction with them to look different. Yes, it is good to leave the abusive relationship. But let us still push back against the idea in our culture that anyone you disagree with or who has given you some slight needs to be surgically removed from your life. Not so, but let us seek to reconcile with them.

But as you know, that isn't always possible in this broken world. I think this is why Paul says in Romans 12, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Because we can apologize, we can forgive, we can seek reunion, but sometimes they don't. That's tough, but it also not an excuse to stop trying.

Because forgiveness is also a confession. To forgive someone else is a confession that you are a person that needs forgiveness too. To say to that bad person "I forgive you", is a confession that you too are a bad person that needs the forgiveness of Jesus. And is that not a humble but beautiful reflection of the truth? To forgive a hypocrite is to confess that you too are a hypocrite but you are choosing to not be a hypocrite with the forgiveness given you. To confess we are hypocrites is to fight against that same hypocrisy. Why would we take the forgiveness from Jesus and deny it from others? Jesus' parable today is clear. And make no mistake our Debt to Jesus is far greater than the most heinous crimes perpetrated against us. Because we have turned our backs on him, and his will, and ways and deserve vengeance to be upon us.

And so when we turn our back on him, or when we fail to forgive as our Lord calls us to, run back to that merciful master for more forgiveness. It will be there. Think of how others have wronged us, we talked about it at the beginning of the sermon. But now think of what the scriptures tell us. Joseph's brothers sold him as a slave! And that was a mercy because most of them wanted to kill him. Do you think that

came out of the blue? Or from years and years of hatred and bitterness building between those brothers? So much unhealthy anger bitterness wells up until they throw him in a well and sell him as a slave. Oh and he has the perfect opportunity as a leader in Egypt to take their heads off, or to send them away to starve to death. Joseph's story could be the ultimate revenge story - but in a reflection of God's mercy – he forgives them.

Speaking of God's mercy, look to our King, Jesus. Peter, the supposed best friend of our Lord, lied about him and disowned him more than once! He deserved vengeance, but Jesus forgave him. Our Lord is lied about by the chief priests, abandoned by his followers, he is abused physically and verbally, the government washes their hands and hands him over to die, he is stripped, he is shamed, he is killed... "Father, forgive them" He says. And what of us? We don't forgive as we ought, we follow after the world's ways thinking the Bible is out of touch, we don't pass it on to the children as we ought, we don't exemplify it, we don't have time for it, it isn't a priority, we don't know it as we ought, or we think we do and we are blind to our need. How faithful a servant have we been? "Father, forgive them." How merciful and loving is our God that he would die in our place? How mighty that he would rise again not to bring forth vengeance upon those of us who have wronged him, but to forgive us, reinstate us, strengthen us.

And this is the point. We've talked about how we are compelled to forgive, we've talked about how it is a choice, how it is difficult, how it is often spurned. But here is the point: forgiveness brings about healing and joy. God doesn't tell us to forgive solely to whip us into submission or something. Look at our story from Joseph, that broken family embraces! They weren't doing much of that before. But Joseph forgives, he doesn't kill them, and there is joy and healing, and they reunite and survive the famine. That healing is there for us too. We don't need the blood pressure, the awkwardness, the ulcers. Forgiveness can heal those wounds. Even if others spurn our forgiveness we can let that anger go, we don't need it. And maybe it will make a little room for some joy. But of course the healing forgiveness offers is best shown on the last day. When those sins are shouted from rooftops and we cower in fear, deserving death, but then a Savior speaks for you. "They are baptized in my name, they confess my name, they are washed in my blood, their debt is paid." Talk about healing, as death is stayed. Talk about joy as we are brought to the reunion festival. Each time we forgive, we show the slightest glimpse of this reality that is ours in Jesus our merciful Savior. Amen.