

New Year's Eve sermon - 2017

Forgiveness

Over the past 4 weeks we've been discovering the names and titles of Jesus. We've looked at total of 24 different names and titles. But I believe the most significant name would be "**Jesus**" and the most important title would be "**Savior**" because they both emphasize the most important aspect of Jesus' life in relationship to us and that's that he came so that we might have **forgiveness of our sins** resulting in a restored relationship with God.

So, kind of as a recap to our Advent series and as a way of looking forward into 2018, I'd like to spend some time this morning focusing on this very important aspect of forgiveness. Also, because in our culture today we see a lot of finger pointing and accusations constantly being thrown out there, but we've rarely seen public examples of forgiveness given.

Forgiveness is very important to God all throughout the Bible.

In the Old Testament God offers two very visual illustrations of His forgiveness of sins.

- He says as far as the east is from the west has he forgiven our sins (Psalm 103:12)
- He says that He as part of the process of forgiving us he has cast our sins into the sea (Micah 7:19)

In the New Testament:

- Jesus taught that if we expect to be forgiven by God for our sins, we must forgive those who have sinned against us (**Mt. 6:14-15**)
- And Jesus taught that we should pray for those who hurt us (**Mt 5:44**)
- Jesus linked the power of prayer to forgiving others (**Mark 11:24-25**)
- Jesus demonstrated the ultimate in forgiveness when while dying on the cross he asked His father to forgive his accusers (**Luke 23:33-34**)
- We are called to forgive others to the extent Christ forgave us (**Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:12-13**)
- Paul points out that Satan often uses unforgiveness to destroy our relationships with others and even with God Himself (**2 Cor. 2:10-11**). And some of you have experienced the truth and power of that personally.
- Sadly, churches often split because of unforgiveness. Someone within the church body hurts someone else and then rather than meeting and seeking to resolve the issue, the various sides rally support for their side and then eventually one side gets the majority of support and the others side leaves the church – and ultimately Satan is the winner.
- Forgiveness isn't often a one time event, it's more often a series of small daily decisions.
- Forgiveness isn't motivated by feelings but by an act of the will in obedience to God. (if you wait until you feel like forgiving, it often will never happen. You need to act in obedience to God and then trust the feelings will eventually come).
- The Greek word for forgiveness (aphesis) means "*the voluntary release of a person or thing over which one has legal or actual control.*" And as Christian author, **Lewis Smedes** once wrote: "**When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is us.**"

For the remainder of my sermon this morning I want to focus our attention on one of Jesus' teachings on forgiveness and especially on one sentence that Jesus spoke in which he gives us a powerful strategy in how to deal with the pain and hurt caused by others in our hearts.

Please turn in your Bibles this morning to Luke 17:1-5

Many of us here this morning can relate to these disciples. They realize how hard it would be to continually forgive someone who keeps hurting us and then keeps coming back and asking for forgiveness. Jesus says that even if this happens 7 times in the very same day we are required to forgive them each and every time. Note: Jesus said, "**You must forgive them.**"

In a parallel passage, Peter approached Jesus and asked Jesus how often we need to forgive someone who sins against us and Peter thought he was being mighty generous and threw out the number of 7 times – to which Jesus replied not 7 times but 70 times 7 times!! (Mt 18:21-22). In this passage Jesus says that if someone sins against 7 times in a single day and asks for repentance then we must forgive them and my guess, based on Mt 21 passage, is that if this continues to happen day after day, Jesus' response would be the same – “*you **must** forgive them.*”

And the disciples' immediate reaction is the same as many of ours would be – “*Lord, increase our faith.*” They were recognizing that in their current level of faith, this would be impossible.

Next, Jesus gives them and us a powerful strategy in how to deal with hurts and pains and offer forgiveness to others and at the same time gives us tremendous insight into the challenge of forgiveness and releasing the pain in our lives. And it's this one sentence from Jesus that I want to spend the remainder of this sermon.

Luke 17:6 (NIV) He replied, “*If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.*”

First Jesus says that you don't have to have giant faith to forgive someone. He uses the example of one of the smallest seeds known to mankind, the mustard seed, to demonstrate to the disciples and us that it doesn't require an increase in your faith to accomplish this. It requires being obedient to what God is calling us to do. And that's where this principle of forgiveness is an act of the will versus a response based on our feelings. If I wait until I feel like forgiving someone, then it likely will never happen. And so you begin to the process of forgiving someone over and over again, and also ask God to change your heart in the process. It also will likely be helpful to remember, through this process, how many times God has continued to forgive you and the cost Christ paid to offer you forgiveness of sins (his death on the cross).

So, Jesus says that *if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea”, and it will obey you.*”

I actually want to correct something in this translation that I believe is incorrect. The Greek word for this tree is “**sukaminos**” which would refer to the sycamine tree not the mulberry tree, although they are very similar. You may remember that it was this type of tree that Zacchaeus climbed into when Jesus came into his town. Jesus uses this sycamine tree to compare to bitterness and unforgiveness and I don't think he could have picked a better example of this. This sycamine tree was a very common tree that grew in the Middle East and everyone who heard Jesus talk about it would have been very familiar with it.

Sycamine tree characteristics:

- **It was very large** (up to 50 feet tall) with wide spread branches that go in all directions. It always stayed green and had low growing branches that made it very easy to climb. Similarly, bitterness and unforgiveness can become huge in our lives. When someone hurts us, and in Jesus' scenario – hurts us over and over again, our lives can easily become consumed with their actions and our reactions. It can become all we think about and as we continue to think about it the pain becomes deeper and all consuming and establishes deeper and deeper roots. Which leads us into the next point.
- **It had an extensive root system.** Of all the root structures of trees in the Middle East, this tree was famous for it's deep and extensive root system. Therefore, because of it's extensive root system, this tree was very difficult to kill. You could chop it all the way to the ground, but if you didn't remove the entire root system, it would just grow back. Similarly, bitterness and unforgiveness can grow an extensive root system in your life that becomes all consuming and difficult to kill. And while you might try to deal with it on a superficial level and even tell someone you forgive them – unless it's dealt with at the deepest root level, you'll never really be free from it. And to deal with it at this

deepest level you'll need God's transformative help. Now, you can begin to ask the Lord to bless this individual and while you may not mean it to start with, ask the Lord to bring you to that point. And it's helpful to try to think of this person outside of the specific times they've hurt you. Way too often we let an act or acts of this person hurting us to define, to us, who they are as an individual. And I'm sure glad that God doesn't base His opinion of me on the times that I've sinned against Him. His view of you and me transcends the individual sins we've committed – and we can benefit well by adopting God's approach.

- **The sycamine tree grew best under dry and barren conditions.** So also, bitterness and unforgiveness grow best when we are spiritually dry and barren. And in fact, bitterness and unforgiveness will tend to lead us down the path to spiritual dryness because as long as we focus on the hurt someone has caused us we are taking our sights away from God and onto us and that other individual. One author wrote: *"If you permit bitterness and unforgiveness to grow in your life, it won't be long until these attitudes have killed your joy, stolen your peace, and canceled out your spiritual life?"*
- **The sycamine tree's wood was the preferred wood for building caskets.** This reminds us that bitterness and unforgiveness produce the right spiritual conditions to slowly kill our walk with the Lord. Satan is all about either distorting our image of God or getting our attention and affection off of Him and onto anything or anyone else.
- **The sycamine tree produced a fig that was very bitter to eat.** The sycamine tree and the mulberry tree were very similar in appearance and they produced a fruit that looked identical. However, the fruit of the sycamine tree was extremely bitter. It's fruit looked just as luscious and delicious as a mulberry fig. But when a person tasted the fruit of the sycamine fig, they quickly discovered that it was horribly bitter. The same dynamic exists with bitterness and unforgiveness. We may justify not forgiving and releasing someone because of how deep the pain they caused us goes. And so we may feel very justified with not releasing them. It might feel right and even look right in our eyes, but it's actually slowing killing us and wrapping us in a prison of our own doing. Often when we refuse to forgive someone we think we're holding them hostage but the reality is that most often they move on with life, and we become the real prisoners of our bitterness and unforgiveness.
- **The sycamine tree was pollinated only by wasps.** The pollination process was only initiated when a wasp stuck its stinger right into the heart of the fruit. Thus, the tree and its fruit had to be "stung" in order to be reproduced. Often people will refer to them being hurt by someone else as "being stung" by them. A harsh word or a betrayal or ill advised advice can feel like you've been stung by someone and your reaction, instead of forgiving them and seeking reconciliation is that you allow that hurt to keep stinging you over and over again. You relive that hurtful word or experience over and over again and as you do it continues to pollinate the pain you felt. And as it continues to sting yourself the bitterness continues to grow as you feed it.

The strategy for forgiveness

Jesus says the strategy for getting rid of this deeply rooted tree of bitterness and unforgiveness is to command it go replant itself in the sea, roots and all. Jesus is recognizing that it's critical that in replanting this tree that all of it, roots and all is picked up and replanted in the sea. If you allow a portion of the bitterness and unforgiveness to remain behind then Satan will use that to continue to remind you of that hurt and attempt to take you down that destructive path of reliving it all over again.

Important note: **To forgive someone doesn't necessarily mean that you forget about it.** That's virtually impossible. But forgiveness is a conscious and often reoccurring choice you make to not bring that memory back up and use it against someone else. When God promises to *forgive our sins and remember them no more (Hebrews 8:12)* that doesn't mean that God has erased them from His memory and He

couldn't ever bring them back up. God isn't forgetful. But what it does mean is that He's promising that once He forgives our sins, He's intentionally choosing to not bring them back up and use them against us in the future.

We need to ask God to completely cleanse us of our felt need for revenge. We need to ask God that when that hurt resurfaces in the future that we instantly recall God's great forgiveness of us and the cost He was willing to pay for it. We need to remember and live in God's grace so that it produces grace freely flowing through us.

Transplant it to the sea: Why the sea? Why not the city dump? Because if you threw it into a dump, it has the possibility of reestablishing a root system in the ground and regrowing itself. But if you replant it in the sea, the salt in the water will kill the plant. Likewise, we need to completely remove the bitterness and unforgiveness from our lives and not just relocate it to somewhere else where it can possibly regrow itself. Jesus doesn't want us to be temporarily relieved from bitterness and unforgiveness – he wants us to be permanently freed of them. He wants them to become dead issues that never stalk or hound us again. Once you've commanded bitterness and unforgiveness to leave, don't ever allow them to take root in your life again. Even if your flesh would like to dwell on those old hurts again, don't allow that bitter tree to come back to life. But in the sea of forgetfulness so its roots can never regain a foothold in your soul.

You've got to take control of your emotions, your feelings of bitterness and unforgiveness. Notice the timely instructions in **Hebrews 12:14-15 (NIV)** *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*

You do this by taking authority over your emotions and command those feelings of bitterness and unforgiveness to be uprooted from your life and heart forever. A couple of weeks ago I was taking my granddaughter, Audrina, to Cabellas. And on the way she started whining from her car seat in the back seat because she was hungry. After a couple of minutes of that I repositioned the rear view mirror so that I could see her and she could see me and I said, somewhat sarcastically, "Really, that's worth whining about?" I doubt she understood anything I said, but apparently the tone of my voice convinced her that this whining wasn't going to get her any food and she promptly quit. A couple of minutes later she briefly tried the same tactic, got the same response from me and that was all the whining she did. That's the same approach we need to take toward the hurts that have been caused in our lives. We need to not allow our emotions control us but live our lives in obedience to God and with our God given authority and through the power of the Holy Spirit, command those feelings to be replanted into the nearest sea, and allow the Holy Spirit to permanently replace those feelings with God's grace and forgiveness and refocus our hearts and minds back on God. Allow God to use every hurt to remind us of His unconditional love for us and reform us to be more and more like Jesus who at the most painful moment of His physical life asked the Father to forgive those in front of Him. That wasn't something any of them had ever witnessed from a crucified victim before and just like the Roman centurion guard took notice of Jesus that day, so also, others who hurt you and those who witness your reaction will sit up and take notice and then that gives you the opportunity to tell them about the God who has continued to love and forgive you throughout your life. To live this kind of life in 2018 would be a resolution worth making and keeping.

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- God casts all our sins into the depths of the _____ (Micah 7:19)
- If we expect to be forgiven by God we must _____ (Mt 6:14-15)
- We are supposed to _____ for those who hurt us (Mt 5:44-45)
- Jesus linked the power of prayer to _____ others (Mk 11:24-25)
- Jesus demonstrated forgiveness on the cross (Lk 23:34)
- We are called to forgive others to the extent Christ _____ us (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13)
- Satan often uses _____ to destroy our relationships with others and God (2 Corinthians 2:10-11)

Lewis Smedes: *"When we forgive, we set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner we set free is _____."*

Sycamine Tree Characteristics:

- It was very _____
- It had an extensive _____ system
- It grew best under _____ and barren conditions
- It's wood was the preferred wood for _____
- It produced a fig that was very _____ to eat.
- It was pollinated only by _____

Strategy for removal: Command it to be replanted in the _____

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