

“The Power to Heal the World”
The Family of God
Downtown
February 21, 2021

This series is about the relationships we have with the people closest to us. The last year or so has included for many of us, more time spent with the people who are nearest to us. So it seemed like a good plan to directly address those relationships, provide some vision for them, and address particular issues that our pastors have noticed seem to be patterns.

Last week I tried very hard to help us see how antagonistic we can be towards each other. How since the Garden of Eden there is a temptation to assign negative motives towards God and others, to overly trust our perceptions of reality, and to lack grace towards others.

Today we are talking about the solution. And while there are all sorts of practicals and tools we could discuss that are helpful, I want to talk about something underneath all of this.

There is something you can do to potentially make the sermon more powerful. You don't have to do it if you'd rather not. Either way is fine. If you'd like to do it, here is what to do. I want you to get something to write with, or type into. And I want for you to write down the name of someone you hate.

Someone you just absolutely can't stand. Now, I can already see you trying to convince yourself that some other word would be better suited for that person, but don't play that game. It can be someone you severely dislike, that counts too. Just write the name of the person who popped into your mind when I said to write down the name of a person you hate.

It may be because of something they've done to you, something they've not done for you. It may be because of what they believe, what they stand for. It could be someone you know very well or someone you've only seen on TV.

Okay, I know that there is likely a wide variety of categories represented in the names that are written down here. Some of them are just people you vehemently disagree with, some are especially bothersome to you, some have personally failed you, some have done atrocious things to you that the wrath of God rightfully rests on. If you happen to be in that last category you may need some nuance in how you apply what we talk about today. But our names are written down in stone because hatred is hatred. It doesn't lie.

Think about all of the things you consider to be this person's fault. How much damage they have caused in the world. In your life. Think about the chaos they have contributed to. Think about what might be different about your life if they didn't have the failures and weaknesses they do.

Reflect on all of that rolling around in your mind. Many of those things could just be black and white. They are fair and accurate data points about that person that deals in reality. But like we said last week, some of that may be the product of perception. Where the legend of their badness has blossomed as the story lost solid footing in your mind. We need the Spirit's help to find clarity on all of that, but regardless, our action steps for today are the same.

Luke 17:3-6

Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."

In Judaism at that time, it was considered honorable to forgive someone three times. They believed it showed you had a sufficiently forgiving spirit. So, 3 strikes and you're out. But here, Jesus says if someone sins against you 7 times in a day. That's a bad day. 7 times in a day would give me pause as to whether or not this person is actually repentant at all. Elsewhere Jesus says that the fruit in our lives reveals whether or not we're actually repentant. So the genuineness of their repentance is a valid concern. But here, Jesus isn't talking about the validity of someone's claim of repentance. Here he is talking about forgiveness. And the point is crystal clear and wildly challenging. He said what he said. Even if your brother or sister sins against you an inordinate amount of times in one single day, "you must forgive him."

Luke 17:5

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

Think for a second, of all the things Jesus has said to them so far. About being from heaven. Being able to forgive sin which Jewish people knew only God could do...therefore claiming to be God himself. Claiming that he would die and then rise from the dead. I mean, by this point Jesus has said some outlandish-sounding things. And not always, but often, when the disciples hear these things their response is some form of "ok cool. I'm into it." but this, this is something the disciples' sense will require more faith than they currently possess. To forgive someone who hurts them. And to do so in a way that could be accused of being reckless. Their response is, "Ummm, Jesus, if this is the case I'm gonna need some help here. You're gonna have to do something because I don't have what it takes to do what you are saying. I don't have the resources."

Luke 17:6

And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

The point is not the amount of faith. The point is the object of your faith. Have you heard the example of the hikers? It's one of those preacher go-to's so you might've heard it. Two hikers come to an impasse. They will have to jump down from the path onto a rock to try to make their way forward. There seem to be two options. Hiker A looks at the first option and says "that's the right rock. It's secure. I'm sure of it." He confidently jumps down onto the rock, but the rock gives way, and the man and rock both tumble down the mountain. Hiker B looks over at the second rock and thinks "I am really not sure what is about to happen. I am not confident at all. This could go very badly for me." Eventually, he summons the courage to jump, lands on a sturdy rock that doesn't budge at all. He proceeds to make his way forward. The decisive factor is not the amount of your faith, the decisive factor is the object of your faith. If you jump, the only thing that matters is whether or not it holds.

Jesus says the smallest amount of faith in the correct object (HIM) gives you power that on your own you do not possess. The power to forgive in ways that most people would be unable to.

Jesus taught that He came to heal the world. He came to redeem it from sin and rebellion against Him. Free it from the grip of lies and deceit. He does this by shedding his own blood to forgive us. And it appears, upon reading His words in the gospels, that a defining mark of the people united to Him by grace will be how we forgive. He means to truly, authoritatively free us from bitterness, resentment, anger. He thinks it is actually possible. In fact, He expects it.

Jesus explains how it works elsewhere when this same subject is brought up. Turn over to Matthew 18.

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

Which is a way of basically saying, “forgive so much you couldn’t really even keep a count of it. Remember what Paul says in 1 Corinthians? Love keeps no record of wrongs. You know how in musicals there is dialogue and then someone breaks into song? Well with Jesus it’s dialogue and then he breaks into telling a story or parable.

“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.”

A talent was worth about twenty years’ wages for a laborer. So this debt is absurd. Twenty-years of wages times 10,000. It would be somewhere around 6 billion dollars. It’s preposterously large and unpayable.

“And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.”

His entire family would now be enslaved, for generations, to pay for this debt.

“So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.”

This is meant to describe you and me, by the way. Or Peter, who is asking the question. Jesus is saying that God has forgiven a debt in our sins against Him that could not possibly be measured. An absurd debt. An unthinkable sum.

“But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii,”

A denarius was about a day’s wages for a laborer. So this was still a large debt. A hundred day’s wages. But the point is, it’s nothing compared to what this man was just forgiven for moments earlier. He’s fresh off of his knees begging for his life and that of his family. He has no hope outside of the king’s undeserved forgiveness.

“And seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’”

Is that familiar? It’s the exact line he just spoke to the king. The only difference is that this guy’s debt is way less than the debt he owed the king.

“He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Jesus creates a hyperbolic scenario as he often does to make a point. He describes a situation so outlandish that no one thinks it could actually happen. Jesus is not teaching that if we forgive others it will cause God to forgive us. What he's doing is showing how there is no way that a man can be weeping in front of a king, begging for his life because of a debt he owes but couldn't possibly pay, and experience being forgiven. Get his life back. Get his family back. Yet then turn and have someone say the exact same phrase to him but hold that man's debt against him. It couldn't possibly happen. Jesus says there will be a necessary connection between our being forgiven and our willingness to forgive. If we've truly received it, we will be enabled to give it.

To truly see yourself as a beggar before God, unable to make things right with him, to plead for your life. And to see him forgive you in Christ, welcome you to his family, eliminate your debt through Jesus's work on the cross. It necessarily enables us to become forgiving people. Forgiving in spirit. Understanding in spirit. Gracious in spirit. Giving the benefit of the doubt as a life posture.

And notice a fascinating dynamic here. Jesus is such a master storyteller. The servant, who does he think he's putting in prison? He thought he was locking up the guy who owed him the debt. He thought he was forcing him to make right the wrong he had done, repay the debt he owed. Ironically, in the process, he put himself in jail. And this is what unforgiveness and bitterness and resentment do to us. We think we are making the other pay for what they've done, but in reality, we are the ones who are trapped. you are jailing someone who well deserves it inside your heart, but you are actually the one who is trapped.

I'm sure you've heard the quote that says "Refusing to forgive someone is like drinking rat poison and waiting on the rat to die."

I've seen this play out, I don't even know how many times now. I've seen people be so angry with another person. Holding a grudge if not nursing it. They think about it all the time. But the person they are mad at never thinks about them. They are free, you are trapped.

I'd guess that some of us in the room wrote down a name, and it's a person we think about often. We think about what they did to us, we think about how hurtful it was. That person is an ongoing presence in our thought lives. But that person? They don't think about us at all. So who is trapped?

Unforgiveness, bitterness, resentment, grudges have the power to entangle us in a way that seems hard to break free from.

But it is also true that forgiveness, and graciousness, and kindness, and charity have the power to bring healing.

I've also seen this play out. For example, a married couple comes to meet with me. And their marriage is a mess. They are so angry with each other. So hurt. So cold. Hardened. Can literally see their anger and pain and bitterness and the pain on their faces and in their bodies. Their muscles are tense, their brows are furrowed, their jaws are clenched. It physically manifests itself. That's how strong and powerful this stuff is. They are both miserable as they hold the other's sins against them. The grudge is toxic, literally poisoning their relationship.

But if just one of them, through faith, will soften towards the other. Sometimes just a little bit. And say something like "I'm sorry for the pain I've caused you. And I forgive you for the pain you've caused me. Will you forgive me?" More often than not, the other one almost can't let the first finish before saying "no no I'm sorry! I don't know what came over me. I can't believe I let it go this far. Please forgive me!" They might even start making out right in front of me. Forgiveness. Mercy. Grace. Kindness. They bring healing. Just the littlest bit of faith, in the right person, has a lot of power.

Some of the names on the lists in this room, I would imagine, are names that you have personally given a lot to. People you have devoted time and energy and resources to that have hurt or betrayed you. And I can't help but think about how Jesus can relate to that. He poured his life into twelve disciples. He ate and laughed and slept near them on whatever ground they could find. He heard them snore. He smelled them after a hot day. He put up with their eccentricities and bothersome quirks.

All the while knowing, they would scatter when he was arrested. They wouldn't stick up for their boy. They just abandoned him. One of them would deny Him. Jesus knew that Judas, whom He protected and taught and loved, would backstab Him, sell Him out for 30 pieces of silver, betray Him with a kiss of all things.

And Peter. Peter, would deny Jesus 3 times within a few hours. Even after Jesus told Him he was going to do it! To save his own hide and save face, Peter denied knowing Him in the hour of His deepest need.

Do you know what Jesus did for all of them before he was arrested? He washed their feet. Do you remember what Jesus did for Peter after He raised from the dead? He cooked him breakfast. While He graciously forgave and reinstated the humiliated Peter in front of the other disciples.

I sat in my office crying one day this week as I was prepping for this sermon because there are people in my life who I have not forgiven. People who have lied about me maliciously. People who have betrayed me and turned on me. And if I'm honest with you, I want badly for them. I want them to pay for it. I want people to find out what they did and I want them to be exposed for who they really are and I want to be vindicated.

So I related very much to the disciples when they responded to this by saying "increase our faith please!" Because when someone really hurts you, I mean REALLY hurts you...I think I'm incapable and I know I'm unmotivated to forgive.

And I know for sure the last thing I want to do is serve them. Comfort them. Reassure them. Cook them breakfast.

But you wanna know the one that gets me most of all? At the point where this happens, Jesus has been betrayed and abandoned by His friends. He's been wrongly accused of a crime, mercilessly whipped and beaten, humiliated, mocked, spit upon, a crown of thorns thrust on His head. He's hardly recognizable, flesh turned inside out all over his body, burning in agony. His hands are nailed to the outer beam of a cross, his feet nailed below. He can barely breathe while He dies of asphyxiation.

And do you know what He says??

Luke 23:24

And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Father, forgive them? Forgive...them? For they know not what they do.

Even writhing and suffocating on the cross, Jesus is able to extend unreasonable graciousness to the people who have done it to Him. With the limited words His body had left to give, He chose to use 10 words to petition heaven for their forgiveness, and to charitably assert that they actually don't know what they are doing.

Presumably, they thought they were doing the right thing. They thought they were executing a blasphemous, deranged criminal who claimed to be God, who would lead people astray and was bad for the world. They thought they were executing God's judgment. And it turns out they were, it's just that the judgment wasn't on Him but them. They were acting off of a tragic false perception that we balk at now, but seemed right to them.

"They know not what they do."

I can't help but think that some of the people who have hurt me, don't fully realize the damage they've done. They don't get it. They don't see it. They don't know.

As a pastor, I have heard a good many heartbreaking stories. I get a different sort of perspective on relationship hurt and conflict.

Many people only get one side of a story. At times I've been able to truly glimpse the complexity of families, of relationships, of communities. I've gotten more of a bird's eye view where I talk to multiple people involved, all with different data points. And I'll know that he feels this way, but he hasn't told her that. And she feels this way, but she hasn't told him that. The mom thinks this is what happened, the daughter thinks that is what happened. There is a real sense that they don't know what they are doing to each other.

Everyone says there are two sides to every story, but no one actually believes it. I've learned, if I haven't heard both sides of the story, I have no idea what actually happened.

In these chaotic situations, everyone is usually hurt, and often it feels like there is no way forward through the hurt. But this does not have to be so for followers of Jesus. It certainly wasn't the case for Him. He was full of truth and grace, as we said last week. He told the truth. When someone sinned against Him, He called it for what it was. When someone was burdened by something that wasn't sinful, He lifted that burden off them. He had the perfect vision that we don't have, but He gave us His Spirit to help us get there.

And He was full of grace. When He needed to rebuke, he rebuked. But He did so not to win points or superiority, but to swallow the offense with grace by actually forgiving it. By resolving it. So that it does not continue to linger and throw things off, but He can instead sit around a breakfast fire with Peter and cook fish for him. So He could look Him in the eyes.

I don't know about you guys, but I am weary of nursing my hurt. I'm tired of rehearsing the worst things people have said or done to me. I'm over our culture that trains me to be addicted to outrage. There is no life there. There's no joy in cuddling up to bitterness every night. And I've seen how much it can ruin. It's wrecked some of the close relationships I've ever had, and I'm disinterested in that ever happening again as much as it depends on me.

Jesus calls us to trade our mind-altering drugs of bitterness and anger for something far better. He calls us into an entirely new way to approach our relationships and all the potential for the hurt they bring.

Consider Jesus' words from Luke 6.

Luke 6:37-38

“Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”

Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over. Let me tell you what comes to mind when I hear that. And it's a little silly but it's what I think of.

Ice cream at mountain mocha. It was an inappropriately large scoop. I did not pay enough for how big it was. It was borderline an injustice. The price that I paid did not match the amount of ice cream I received. It wasn't right and it wasn't fair and I didn't deserve it.

Judge not. Condemn not. Forgive. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.

What if you and I decided, today, that we weren't going to hold grudges. Not anymore. Not after what Jesus did for us. What if we decided we were going to be campfire breakfast people, not angry people who nurse our resentments.

We are not called to be suspicious people, always assuming the worst about each other and our motives. We aren't stingy with grace after what has been lavished on us, are you kidding?

We are big, heaping, ice cream scoop people. We are more gracious than we should be. More forgiving than we should be. More charitable about people's motives than we should be. More positive in our thoughts about other people's motives than we should be. If we are wrong, we're gonna be wrong in that direction.

What if we decided we weren't going to be suspicious people, always assuming the worst about each other and our motives. We aren't stingy with grace after what has been lavished on us, are you kidding? We are big, heaping, ice cream scoop people. We are more gracious than we should be. More forgiving than we should be. More charitable about people's motives than we should be. More positive in our thoughts about other people's motives than we should be. If we are wrong, we're gonna be wrong in that direction.

What if we decided we wanted for there to be times in our lives where someone comes up to us and says "you are overdoing it with your forgiveness. You are too forgiving." And we say "I know." And they say "but he doesn't deserve it" and we say "he absolutely does not deserve it". And they say "what she did was really wrong and had to hurt you" and we say "it was really wrong and did really hurt. And some days I feel like I have a very small amount of faith. But it just so happens that my faith in is the right person. And just the smallest amount of faith in the right person has a power that's hard to describe. We might just be able to bring a little healing to a divided angry world.

I read a story recently about a Christian college professor in his 70s. He said that when he was 16, he was driving drunk one night with his friends and he wrecked his car. He was mortified to call his dad and tell him, knowing what kind of consequences were rightfully coming his way. So he called his dad, and the first thing his dad wanted to know was was he okay? He made it home that night and just wept and wept in his father's study. He was embarrassed, ashamed, guilty. At the end of the ordeal that night, out of all the possible appropriate outcomes his father could have instituted, the father looked at his son and said "How about tomorrow we go and find you a new car?"

Now I will be the first to admit that if my kid does that at 16 I'm not sure what my response will be. But that father must have been listening to the Holy Spirit in that particular moment with his particular son, because the 70-year-old son looks back in time and tells people, "That's the moment when I became a Christian. That's the moment I understood grace."

That was the moment he realized what it was like to be forgiven in a way that he did not deserve. And it changed him. A lifetime of showing others grace came from one extraordinary moment of grace shown to him.

The Christian vision of forgiveness and kindness and graciousness is unique from anything else the world has to offer. These things are superpowers that heal us and heal the world. They redeem people who are so hardened by bitterness they're hardly human anymore. They heal friendships, they restore families. They reinstate mental health for those ravished by anger and resentment. They are powerful beyond our comprehension. This is what our faith in Jesus gives to us. The supernatural ability to be charitable and gracious. The freedom from toxic grudge-holding and judgment and anger and resentment. The only question is, will we use this superpower of grace meant to bring healing to the world?

I don't know what the person you wrote down has done. I don't know what particular responses the Lord might call us all to in our different situations, and I don't pretend they are all the same.

But I do know what the bitterness and resentment are doing to us. It's not good. And I know what has been done for you and me. I know the incredibly weighty things that Jesus taught about forgiveness, and

the astounding road He personally walked to purchase it for us. I know that He's forgiven you and me for more than we'll ever have to forgive.

There are enough variance and complexity in the situations here that I won't give specific applications of this. But the Holy Spirit can do exactly that. He will guide you on any next action steps you may need to take to forgive or heal things with the person you wrote down.

But here's the thing: becoming the kind of person we talked about today is so much bigger than what to do about the name you thought of. It is far more about you than them. There will be other names. Other causes of bitterness, other temptations to anger. This is no one-time act of obedience, this is a change to the core of who you are.

The invitation is to become a people firmly tapped into the superpower of grace. To join Jesus in His mission to forgive the sins of the world. So I want to leave us today with just a few quick thoughts on how to become this.

Let's be a source of healing. Be promiscuous with your forgiveness. Take it too far. No, they don't deserve it. Do it anyway. Yes, what they did was wrong. Do it anyway.

Aggressively assume the best of others. This will stick out like a sore thumb in a culture of cynical sinners trained to assume the worst. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Be more gracious than anyone else would. Assume positive motives more than anyone else will. Not because you are naive and don't know any better. You know you're doing it. You're doing it on purpose. Let's stop analyzing others and making sure to point out flaws and weaknesses and negatives. Let's never let praise go unspoken. If you notice something praiseworthy in someone make it a point to speak up about it.

We live in a society that often leaves people feeling beat up. Feeling unnoticed. Feeling alone feeling on scene and unheard. And here we are with the power to bring healing and hope and warmth and welcome and forgiveness. power through our faith beyond what any of us have ever seen. Or I guess I shouldn't speak for you but I can speak for myself that I have never seen a mulberry tree uprooted and thrown into the sea. I don't even know what a mulberry tree is.

But what I do know, is that unforgiveness rots the human soul. Resentment and bitterness eat us from the inside. Sadly there will be many people who refuse to enter God's Kingdom because they refuse to forgive the person they are shackled to in their unforgiveness. Which means they never realized their own need for forgiveness.

Don't be one of those people, miserable now and miserable for all eternity. Jesus stands ready and willing to save you. And Christians, what business do we have acting like the gospel isn't true? What business do we have with resentment when we have a Savior who spoke forgiveness from the cross He hung on, who made breakfast for us after we betrayed Him?

How much better would it be, for us and the world, to access the superpower of grace given to us and release the people who owe us the most?