

Offering Grace

Part 6 - Good News About Grace

Matthew 10:8

Rev. Jean Smith

Last week as I shared with you about God's liberating grace, I told you that grace can be defined in four little words: **GOD IS FOR US!** God has so many reasons to be against us because of our sin, but because of Jesus Christ, **GOD IS FOR US!**

Over the past six weeks we've been looking at God's grace. I told you that the only failure you need to worry about in life is the failure to receive God's grace. God freely offers you his grace and he wants you to freely offer grace to others. If you've experienced God caring for you, then he wants you to care for others. If you've been forgiven by God, then he wants you to forgive others. If you've received the love of God, then he wants you to show that same love to others. Jesus said it like this in Matthew 10:8, *"Give freely as you have received."*

The greatest, clearest, most unmistakable way we offer grace to others is by **FORGIVING** them. That's what I want to talk with you about today. I want us to look at what forgiveness is, but first let's look at what forgiveness is **NOT**.

First, forgiveness is not conditional. It's not saying, "I'll forgive you if...." It's not saying, "I'll forgive you when you ask for forgiveness and not until." Or, "I'll forgive you as soon as you admit what you've done wrong." Or, "I'll forgive you as soon as you pay me back." Or, "I'll forgive you as soon as I see you mean what you say." Real forgiveness doesn't attach any conditions to it.

Jesus showed us this on the cross when he cried out, *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* —Luke 23:34. At that point, nobody had asked for forgiveness. Nobody had bargained or bartered for it. Nobody had made any effort to pay anything back. Nobody had demonstrated a change of heart. Jesus was requesting of His Father an unconditional pardon for the very people who nailed Him to the cross. Real forgiveness is unconditional.

Second, forgiveness is not minimizing the seriousness of the offense. It doesn't require us to say, "Oh, that's ok. It's no big deal." Offering forgiveness doesn't require us to act like nothing's wrong. It doesn't ask us to deny the pain we may be feeling because of what someone did or said to us. It doesn't require us to say something was no big deal when it was a big deal. Forgiveness is made for the stuff that is a big deal. If someone hurt you, if someone seriously wronged you, that's what forgiveness is made for. That's what you need to forgive and let go of, by giving it to the Lord.

Third, forgiveness is not resuming a relationship without change. Forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. These are two different issues. Forgiveness is not the same thing as rebuilding and restoring a relationship. You can forgive someone in an instant but to rebuild and restore a relationship takes trust and trust is only built over time. There's a big difference between forgiving someone and trusting someone. When you forgive someone, it opens the way for the relationship to be restored. Once you forgive someone, in order for the relationship to be restored they have to do a few things before the relationship can be restored. First, they have to repent. That means they have to acknowledge their wrong doing and ask for forgiveness. Repentance also involves the decision to stop doing what is wrong. Second, they have to make restitution where and when it is possible. Third, they have to rebuild the trust by being trustworthy and that takes time. It takes time for someone to show you they have truly repented of your wrong doing. Only then can the relationship be restored.

God is not asking you to resume a relationship like nothing ever happened. When you forgive someone, you need to see repentance, restitution and rebuilding of trust before that relationship will be restored. You don't wait for those things to be offered before you offer forgiveness. But those things will need to happen before the relationship can be restored.

Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world, enabling God to forgive all people everywhere. But **not** all people everywhere are restored to a right relationship with God. That takes repentance, restitution where possible and commitment to obeying Christ.

Fourth, forgiveness is not forgetting what happened. Some of you have a hard time with this. You think that in order to forgive someone you have to be able to forget and there's no way you can ever forget some things that have happened. I know you've heard the cliché "*forgive and forget*". That sounds so good, but there's only one problem. You can't do it. It's impossible to forget something that has been really hurtful or traumatic.

Scientists have proven that your brain is like a giant warehouse, filled with thousands and thousands of file cabinets, and you never really forget anything. The more important an event is in your life, the more likely it is you'll remember it. You may block some things out, some things that are too traumatic for you to handle, but those memories are still there. Through therapy you can begin to recall them and work them through. Even when you block them out they are still working on you because you can't forget what has really hurt you.

When we forgive, we don't feel the pain so sharply. The pain eases when we see how God worked in and through our pain. We heal when we see how God brought good out of the bad that happened to us, how it grew our character and made us more sensitive to others; how it changed the direction of our lives at a crucial point in our lives; how things we have today would not be there if what happened hadn't happened to us.

Fifth, forgiveness is not your right to do when the wrong wasn't done to you. If you weren't the one hurt, then it's not your place to forgive someone for what they did. So many people in our society today just don't understand this. They think we're all obligated to forgive everyone for whatever they did so we can all feel good. We are too quick to get rid of the shame and guilt so we can all feel better about what happened. The truth is, only the person wronged has the right to forgive the wrong doer.

You may recall the horrible shooting spree that took place Dec. 1, 1997 at Heath High School in Paducah, KY. The gunman, Michael Carneal opened fire on a group of classmates meeting for prayer one morning, killing three of them and wounding five. I remember one headline that read, "We Forgive You, Michael." The problem is, the people who said that didn't have the right to forgive Michael Carneal. The added tragedy of murder is the inability of the killer to be forgiven because the one killed is gone. We have no right to forgive someone of something that wasn't done to us. Forgiveness isn't something we can offer on behalf of someone else. It can only come from the one who has been wronged, the one who has been wounded.

That's what forgiveness is not. Now what is it? What is real forgiveness? The Bible says four things about real forgiveness.

FIRST, FORGIVENESS IS REMEMBERING HOW MUCH YOU HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN. In Ephesians 4:32 it says, "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.*" No one deserves God's forgiveness. No one can earn God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness is a gift offered to all because of what Jesus did on the cross. He died for the sins of the world. There is a direct connection between remembering how much you have been forgiven and your ability to forgive others.

One time when Jesus was eating dinner with the Pharisees, a woman came in and knelt down by His feet. She started crying and continued to cry until her tears covered Jesus' feet. Then she wiped the tears away with her hair, and proceeded to cover His feet with kisses. (Luke 7:44-48) Sounds crazy to us but to Jesus it was perceived as an expression of the tremendous love and appreciation the woman had for Him. Her love flowed from her understanding of how much she had been forgiven because of Him. This same dynamic is true for us as well. Our ability to forgive others flows out of our understanding of how much God has forgiven us.

SECOND, FORGIVENESS IS RELINQUISHING THE RIGHT TO GET EVEN. This step is at the heart of genuine forgiveness—relinquishing your right to get even. Romans 12:19 says, "*Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.*" To forgive someone means you relinquish the right to get even with them.

This is not something that comes natural to us. What comes natural is to push back when someone pushes us, to punch back when someone punches us, to fight back when someone picks a fight with us. That's human nature, the survival of the fittest. We are quick to think, it's not fair for them to get away with what they did to me. We want justice. But God wants us to show grace and that is what forgiveness is. Forgiveness is grace offered to others. They don't deserve to be forgiven, we argue. Neither do we, but God forgives us. Forgiveness is relinquishing the right to get even. One day God will settle the score and balance the books. One day God will right the wrongs. Justice is incomplete in this world, but one day God will complete it. We have to let go of the right to get even. Otherwise we will keep the wound open and it won't be able to heal.

THIRD, FORGIVENESS IS RESPONDING TO EVIL WITH GOOD. That's what forgiveness is—responding to evil with good. Jesus said, *"Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you."*—Luke 6:27-28. This is how you know you've really forgiven someone, when you can pray for God to bless them. This is the point of our greatest witness, when we can do good to those who have done evil to us and pray for God to bless them.

A man was having a big argument with his wife. The next morning he went to the office and said to his buddy, "Last night my wife got historical!" His friend said, "Don't you mean hysterical?" "No, I mean historical. She told me everything I've ever done wrong."

Do you ever do that? The Bible tells us we're being hateful when we do that and not showing love. The Bible says, *"Love keeps no record of wrongs."*—1st Corinthians 13:5b. God commands us to respond to evil with good. The Bible says, *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*—Romans 12:21

FOURTH, FORGIVENESS IS REPEATING THIS PROCESS AS LONG AS NECESSARY. Do these things over and over. Forgiveness is not a one shot event. How many times do you have to forgive a person? You do it as long as you have something to forgive. Peter asked Jesus the same question. *"Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy seven times.'"*—Matthew 18:21-22. The point is: we are to forgive others as many times as necessary. We are to forgive them as long as there is something to forgive.

You will know when you have forgiven someone by the simple fact that what they did doesn't hurt any more. If it still hurts, you haven't forgiven them yet.

I need to tell you, it isn't always advisable, or practical, or possible, to go to your offender and tell them you forgive them. It's not always advisable to go back to a person and ask their forgiveness. But there is something you might try. One thing you can do is use the

technique of the empty chair. In private, just you and the Lord, imagine your offender sitting in an empty chair in front of you and tell them how it felt. Tell them how it felt when they wronged you. Tell them what it meant to you and why you resent them. Pour out your heart to that chair. Then say, **"Because of Jesus Christ and because of His grace in my life, I release you. I set you free. I'm letting go of the pain you caused me and I'm no longer holding it against you. I'm giving you to the Lord. I'm setting this matter down and I will not take it back up again. I forgive you."**

Sometimes you do need to go to someone and let them know they have wronged you. The Bible says, ***"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.—Matthew 18:15.*** That kind of open dialogue can only take place between people who love and respect each other. It will only be successful between people who are willing to humble themselves before one another and trust one another, and show grace to one another.

It's a lot of work to forgive someone! Why make the effort. Why put ourselves out? I just want to mention two reasons:

First, the alternative to forgiveness is bitterness. The Bible says, ***"Be careful that none of you fails to respond to the grace which God gives, for if he does there can very easily spring up in him a bitter spirit which is not only bad in itself but can also poison the lives of many others."***—Hebrews 12:115. It's not just a private matter when you refuse to forgive others. It produces such bitterness in your heart and that bitterness can affect the lives of many others. Second, our willingness to forgive others directly affects God's willingness to forgive us. The Bible says, ***"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."***—Matthew 6:15

God's grace is offered to us in so many different ways. Let us not fail to be people who live by that grace and offer that grace to others.