

*Christmas Is Forgiving*

It's the first weekend in December, Thanksgiving is past, and we're officially into the Christmas season. The big news last week was how much money people spent on black Friday and cyber Monday. Apparently that story was so big it even eclipsed the Tiger Woods saga for a while.

I heard from someone who shopped at 3:00 AM on Friday that Toy-R-Us was so packed it took 45 minutes just to get to the register with your purchase. They said there were people with shopping carts piled high with toys.

Christmas is certainly about buying stuff but according to Gallup's October polling figures most Americans plan on spending less this year than last. Of course, they've found over the years that people tend to lie in those polls. They traditionally end up spending significantly more than they said they would.

So, unless you're a small child who is on the getting end, most of us look at Christmas time as a time for giving.

The truth is, as we approach this season where we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, this is a spiritual time of the year. It's a time of remembering God's greatest gift to us, His Son Jesus.

It also happens to be a big family time. Many of us, as we go into the holidays, will reflect on the past, and for a lot of people, there's good reflections of what all God has done.

For others, this can be a season of disappointment and hurt and regret, and a lot of pain can surface during the holidays.

It's like the Christmas season intensifies any sense of loss and pain. Oftentimes, especially in family relationships, where there have been strains, the holidays have a way of magnifying those strains.

This morning I'd like us to think about Christmas giving in a little different way. I'd like us to think about Christmas forgiving. Not for giving, two words, but forgiving, one word.

## Open your Bibles with me to Luke 17 pg 926

The reason Jesus Christ came into the world was explained by the angel who announced to Joseph that the virgin he was engaged to was pregnant.

*But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." (Matthew 1:20-23)*

Notice, we celebrate the birth of Jesus because He came as God with us, to save us from our sins. Jesus Christ was God taking on humanity so that He could be our sin bearer. Speaking to believers in Jesus the Bible says, *I write to you, little children, Because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake.* (1 John 2:12)

The reason for Christmas is, we sinners needed a Savior. Jesus had to be born, so that He could live a perfect life, and then to die and rise again to pay for our sins.

The Bible says , *By Him everyone who believes is justified from all things.* (Acts 13:39)

Now here we are at this very special time of year celebrating the birth of our Savior. At the same time here we are at a time when relationships can be particularly strained. How does God want us to respond?

### *I We Must Not Cause Others To Hurt* **Read vs 1 & 2**

Jesus starts off with an unavoidable reality. "Offences are going to come." If your reading in NASB you'll notice that the translators rendered it, *It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come.*

The word translated "offences" or "stumbling blocks" is a very picturesque one. It's the word *skandalon* in Greek. Our English word "scandal" comes from this word.

Literally in Greek, *skandalon* referred to a trap that was baited so that, when the bait is touched, the stick holding the bait springs the trap.

The Book of James explains: *...each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.* (James 1:14-15)

Sin doesn't lead to life. Sin promises that we'll really enjoy life if we jump into it. Sin makes a lot of promises, but it doesn't deliver. What it really, ultimately brings is pain, heartache, dejection, and death.

Notice what Jesus is saying here. "There are going to be death traps. We can't get away from it."

Larry Sarver has written: I could paraphrase what Jesus is saying like this, "Things that trip people up spiritually speaking are inevitable." There will always be things that will cause people to lose faith in God, become neglectful in obedience to God, and stunt spiritual growth. The spiritual stumbling blocks, these negative influences are bound to come.

We cannot avoid this truth in a fallen world but Jesus wants us to make sure that our lives, behaviors, and attitudes are not part of the problem. This is why Jesus says, "Watch yourselves" and "Woe to the person through whom they come."

We have a responsibility not to cause offenses. In fact, if we trip other people up spiritually, If we cause others to stumble from finding God and His truth it would be better if we weren't even around.

It would be better for the one who causes the offence to have a big heavy grinding wheel from a grain mill tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea.

Do you get the idea that this is like a really major issue with Jesus?

We tend to think, "How I live is my business. I'm not my brother's keeper." God says, "No one lives to himself..." Every one of us has a responsibility to others.

We have a responsibility to those who haven't trusted Christ. That responsibility is to not to stand in their way of their finding God. We have a responsibility to one another too. Not to cause a brother or sister to stumble. Not even a hard-to-get-along-with family member.

*I. We Must Not Cause Others To Hurt*

*II. We Must Be Committed To Forgiving Those Who Cause Us To Hurt*

**Read vs 3**

C. S. Lewis wrote: *We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it.*

Any counselor, Christian or otherwise, will tell you that the number 1 issue they deal with in peoples' lives is bitterness, unresolved anger, lack of forgiveness.

It's like a millstone. It's like a ball and chain. It robs us of vitality - of the ability to deal with life itself. Unforgiveness can color every thing we think say and do till we loose all perspective. It will rob us of peace, joy, and contentment.

Talk about a holiday downer! Unforgiveness totally distorts the message of Christmas that we claim to believe.

Notice the command of Jesus. If some one sins against you, take action. Don't go to your friends. Don't go to your spouse. Don't go to your coworkers. Go to the person who sinned against you.

Jesus doesn't give us all the details here but He does in Matthew 18 so lets look there for a moment. (We'll be back)

### **Matthew 18 pg 867 Read 15-17**

The goal of Matthew 18 is restoration. God's goal for our relationships is always restoration. Notice, what your trying to do is "gain your brother."

You're not there to beat him up. Your there to mend a broken relationship when someone has sinned against you.

God's plan is that we go through the process trying to keep things at the lowest possible level.

If we've sinned against someone the Bible says we're to go to that person and seek to be reconciled to them. If some one sins against us we're to go to the person and seek to be reconciled. The responsibility to go is always ours.

### **Back to Luke 17**

When Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you rebuke him..." He doesn't mean attack him. He means be honest, open and try for reconciliation.

If your brother recognizes he's done wrong and seeks your forgiveness, your responsibility is to forgive.

Obviously the question would come to mind, is there limits to this forgiveness thing? Jesus anticipates that question and here's what He says: **Read 4**

Now obviously this is a bit of hyperbole. (huper - above & ballow - to cast: to pile it on for emphasis) No one would come back 7 times a day to seek forgiveness. But the point is forgiveness has no limits.

I don't know about you, but that one really sets me back. Jesus has some disconcerting things to say in the Gospels and this is right up there at the top of the list.

*I. We Must Not Cause Others To Hurt*

*II. We Must Be Committed To Forgiving Those Who Cause Us To Hurt*

*III. We Must Use the Faith We Have To Really Forgive*

### **Read vs 5**

Can you identify with that? I can. I understand exactly how the disciples were feeling, because that exactly how I feel when I read Jesus' words.

No wonder His own disciples, who had traveled with Him for almost three years still said, "Increase our faith Jesus. Help us because what your asking sounds impossible."

Now here's Jesus' answer: **Read vs 6**

A mustard seed is very tiny. Several places in the writings of the Rabbis you find the phrase "the size of a mustard seed."

The roots of a mulberry tree were used to picture something that was deep and hard to dislodge. It was thought that the tree could stand 600 years in the earth.

So Jesus combines these two proverbial ideas and says, with the very tiniest faith you are able to uproot the most tenacious tree and plant it, and make it grow where no tree can possibly grow.

In other words forgiveness is hard. Jesus acknowledges that it can be like a tree who's roots are deep and tenacious. But as believers if we use the faith we already have we can do it.

In Matthew 18 Jesus gives a parable. He says a servant was in debt for millions of dollars. He was unable to pay. He asked his master for more time and *Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.* (Matthew 18:27)

But then that same servant went out and found a man who owed him \$75.00. The guy couldn't pay up so he had him thrown in debtor's prison.

When the master found out what had happened he was absolutely livid. He said to his servant, "Shouldn't you have the same compassion on your fellow servant that I had on you?"

The point of the parable is this:

A holy, righteous God graciously forgives our debt of sin because of Jesus Christ. If we fail to forgive others, we've made a mockery Christmas and the whole reason for Jesus' entrance into our world.

If we can believe that we're forgiven of our sin debt by the almighty God of the universe, then we have enough faith to forgive someone who's wronged us.

It's not that we need more faith. It's that we need to use the faith we already have.

*I. We Must Not Cause Others To Hurt*

*II. We Must Be Committed To Forgiving Those Who Cause Us To Hurt*

*III. We Must Use the Faith We Have To Really Forgive*

*IV. Forgiveness Is An Act Of Obedience*

### **Read vs 7-9**

What's the point of this parable? Why does Jesus include it with His teaching on forgiveness?

Remember this was written in a day when Rome ruled the world and the Romans used people as slaves. Slavery would have been something that all of Jesus disciples would have understood.

He says this: "Suppose you had a slave." (Obviously they wouldn't, but they understood what He was talking about.)

Suppose you had a slave who was out in your field working. When he came in after a brutal day of labor, you wouldn't say, "Sit down here and let me make you dinner."

The master would say, "Fix my dinner, and when your finished serving me you can eat."

Does the master thank the slave for fixing his dinner? No way. That's the slaves job. He was only doing what was required.

### **Now look at the application: read vs 10**

It's our responsibility to act in obedience by forgiving. If any time of year is a reminder to us it ought to be this time. There's no pat on the back. There's no "What a wonderful person we are for forgiving others." Jesus is saying, we are servants who have only done what was our duty to do.

Forgiveness isn't an option. It's our duty.

Let me make a couple of observations here:

1. *Forgiveness is not a feeling.* In fact, sometimes it can be just the opposite of our feelings.

When the slave came in from the field he felt tired and hungary. While he cooked his masters meal he felt like feeding himself and letting his master get his own food. But he did his job.

God commands us to forgive. Forgiveness is a response to an command of God, not a response to a feeling. Forgiveness is an action.

God can not and does not command us to show feelings. We can't manufacture feelings. What God can and does command is obedience.

So let me give you a biblical definition of forgiveness:

Forgiveness is a promise to the other person that you won't bring up their transgression again.

It's promising, I won't bring up your transgression to you to use as a weapon in the next argument because I Corinthians 13:5 says "*Love keeps no record of wrongs suffered...*"

It's promising I won't bring up your sin to others. I won't gossip to my friends because Ephesians 4:29 *Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.*

And the third aspect of the promise is the hardest of all. It's promising that I won't bring up your transgression to myself.

So many times we want to keep that other person's offence going in our thoughts. We relive it over and over again. For some reason we seem to take some perverted pleasure in thinking through all the details again and again as if that's going to change what happened to us.

You've been there right? You lay in bed at 3:00 AM. You can't sleep because all you can think about is how that person wronged you.

Listen, true forgiveness can make the promise.

*2. Forgiveness is not pretending that you weren't hurt or saying that the other person didn't do wrong.*

The very fact that forgiveness is needed validates the fact that an offence took place.

*3. Forgiveness isn't a promise that you'll immediately start trusting the other person.*

Forgiveness is based on grace. Trust is earned.

When we receive Jesus Christ as our Savior God immediately forgives us. But He works over time to bring about maturity before He entrusts us with spiritual responsibility.

In Luke 16:10 Jesus said, *He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.*

Trust has to come through experience. Forgiveness is a command that can be carried out at any time.

*4. Forgiveness is not relieving other people of their responsibility.*

Our thinking usually goes this way: "That person really hurt me," or "that person really offended me. If I forgive them they're walking away scott free."

We want to make sure they're held accountable for their actions.

Listen; forgiveness doesn't relieve the person of their responsibility for their actions. You can't do that. You can't relieve them of their responsibilities and the reason you can't do it is because they're responsible to God. A major step in the process of forgiveness is releasing the person who hurt us, giving up control of revenge and retribution. In a sense, cancelling out the debt owed to us, and committing them into the hands of God.

Listen to this command, from the Bible, *And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.* (Ephesians 4:32)

How has God forgiven us?

The Bible tells us:

a. God was ready to forgive while we were still His enemies. Romans 5:8 *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

God was ready to forgive before we were ready to ask.

b. God forgives out of his mercy and grace, not because we deserve His forgiveness. Ephesians 2:4-7 *But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

c. God's forgiveness costs Him very much. It costs us nothing. The next 2 verses in that Ephesians passage say: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.* (Ephesians 2:8,9) It didn't cost *us* anything to purchase our salvation. Jesus was God's gift to us. It doesn't cost the person we forgive. Instead, you know who it costs?

If God bore the pain of our forgiveness, then who do you think bears the pain when we forgive others? It's us. We bear the forgiveness of the other person.

See here we are and we want them to pay. But amazingly God calls us to pay the price of obedience to Him.

d. God forgives by promising not to remember our wrongs. *I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins.* (Isaiah 43:25)

You say, "Well that may be OK for God, but I can't forget." Either can God right? He's omniscient. He knows everything. He doesn't forget, He chooses not to remember.

He makes us a promise. Remember, we said Biblical forgiveness is a promise. Listen to God's promise:

*Psalm 103:12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

*Isaiah 38:17 ...You have cast all my sins behind Your back.*

*Micah 7:19 ...You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*

If we've been hurt, we can't just forget that hurt. But what we can do is promise not to bring it up again. We can cease to charge the guilt of that other person's sin to their account.

By God's grace we are to forgive.

Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship held a banquet in Seattle, Washington. A woman named Ruth Youngsman spoke that evening. This is how she started: "The man I ate dinner with tonight killed my brother."

She went on to tell how a man named John had murdered her brother during a robbery, served 18 years at Walla Walla, then settled into life on a dairy farm, where she had met him, 20 years after his crime.

Ruth Youngsman said she was compelled by Christ's command to forgive. Amazingly she had gone to her enemy and pronounced forgiveness. Then she had taken him to her father's deathbed, and a father was reconciled with his son's murderer.

Some might not call this a success story because John hasn't trusted Christ yet. But at that Prison Fellowship banquet, his voice cracked as he said, "Christians are the only people I know that you can kill their son, and they'll make you a part of their family. I don't know the Man Upstairs, but He sure is hounding me."

John's story's unfinished. But just like Christ died for us regardless of our actions or

acceptance, so Ruth forgave him without qualification. Even more so, she became his friend.

She didn't do it overnight. Even though forgiveness is commanded we still often have to work our way through the process and that can take some time. But we have to start the process.

By God's power and God's Holy Spirit, we have to start the process.

Is there someone that you need to forgive this Christmas season? Is there someone that you've been holding things against, maybe for years. There's freedom in forgiveness.

When the angels heralded Jesus' birth to the shepherds, they made this declaration.  
*"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"* (Luke 2:14)

Is God being glorified by your life? Is His peace reflected in your life?