

*Matthew 18:23-35; Psalm 32

With Malice Toward None

Psalm 32

¹ Blessed is the person whose disobedience is forgiven
and whose sin is pardoned.

² Blessed is the person whom the LORD no longer accuses of sin
and who has no deceitful thoughts.

³ When I kept silent about my sins,
my bones began to weaken because of my groaning all day long.

⁴ Day and night your hand lay heavily on me.

My strength shriveled in the summer heat.

⁵ I made my sins known to you, and I did not cover up my guilt.
I decided to confess them to you, O LORD.

Then you forgave all my sins.

⁶ For this reason let all godly people pray to you
when you may be found.

Then raging floodwater will not reach them.

⁷ You are my hiding place.

You protect me from trouble.

You surround me with joyous songs of salvation.

⁸ The LORD says,

“I will instruct you.

I will teach you the way that you should go.

I will advise you as my eyes watch over you.

⁹ Don't be stubborn like a horse or mule.

They need a bit and bridle in their mouth to restrain them,
or they will not come near you.”

¹⁰ Many heartaches await wicked people,
but mercy surrounds those who trust the LORD.

¹¹ Be glad and find joy in the LORD, you righteous people.

Sing with joy, all whose motives are decent.

A bully turned on his neighbor and bitterly criticized his neighbor's way of life. He kept at it, taunting and teasing and pushing and shoving until he had drawn his neighbor into a full scale fight. What a bloody fight it was; between two of the largest families in the area. And before the feud was over there were more men killed over the span of years than all the other fights in which the clan has engaged, before or since, all put together!

You can imagine the bitterness from both families, having to tolerate such a costly fight that took their young men, their best members, never to return. It was a time of despair, outrage, and the worst animosity ever experienced in their land!

It would be impossible to “*forgive*” the bully for starting such a war. Forgiveness is hard. It's illogical. Forgiveness doesn't make sense! If I've been hurt, I don't just naturally *want* to forgive. My first instinct is to attack, and to hurt you back!

But the head of the northern household, Abraham Lincoln, responded to the bully during his Second Inaugural address on March 4, 1865, just thirty-six days before General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse. Mindful of the war's

impending end, President Lincoln's final remarks on that day prepared the nation for the kind of reconciliation he had in mind: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

Forty-one days after his inaugural address, with Lee surrendering on Sunday, April 9, five days later – Friday evening of that week – President Abraham Lincoln was murdered.

But before he died – could we not say he was familiar with the prayer: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

Can you tell me Abraham Lincoln didn't know this great prayer? "With malice toward none; with charity for all..." And he was talking about those who had divided the country with their hate.

I don't know if we can appreciate how utterly difficult it is to forgive those who hurt us so deeply; to restore relationships with an enemy! The adulterer who leaves you; the friend who betrays you; the neighbor who humiliates you; the thief who steals from you – are all violations that ravage our souls.

Of all the acts Jesus performed, the most difficult for us to practice is found in His dying words, "Father, forgive them."

Forgiveness is such a radical departure from who we were. We're used to the cycle of resentment or *retaliation*. In fact, we find the counterattack a biblical idea! You gore my ox and I'll gore your ox. You hurt me, and I'll hurt you. You strike me and I'll strike you back! You kill my people, and I'll kill your people. **An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth.** (Ex. 21:24)

You argue with me and I'll argue with you! Isn't that how it's played out in your home? If you fight with me I'll fight with you! If you criticize me I'll criticize you! If you get louder with me I'll get louder with you! And the escalation of words and anger puts wives and husbands toe to toe in the center ring!

We often treat one another with a vicious cycle of retaliation.

Richard Foster writes: "as long as the only cry heard among us is for vengeance, there can be no reconciliation."

One has to ask: Are we so narrow as to see only the hurt others have brought to us, that we can't see how we've agonized and offended God – so as to need *His* forgiveness? You see, if we're so wounded by how our rights or feelings have been hurt that we fume with hate, we will not be able to pray the prayer of our Lord, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

And listen: First of all, we're asking God to forgive us *our* sins!

Is God willing to forgive you? *Yes!*

What a cleansing, liberating experience God's forgiveness can be, to know deep in your soul that the past is covered over with mercy and love and the future can be pure and good! Isn't this the theme of Charles Wesley's hymn we sang:

He breaks the power of canceled sin, He sets the prisoner free,

His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me.

I want God to make my mind and my heart pure!

Leslie Weatherhead: Forgiveness of sins is the most therapeutic idea in the world! If you really believe God has forgiven you, then the burden of guilt and fear will disappear!

Forgiveness is the *healing* we *all* need! I'm talking about forgiveness from God – and the

willingness to forgive others! Forgiveness sets you free!

There was a story of a twelve-year-old boy in California who had witnessed the brutal murder of his mother and father. His life was ruined. He was sent to a state school for boys and became indifferent and withdrawn. He was doing poorly in his classes. Neither a psychologist nor a therapist could penetrate the wall of defenses he had built around himself.

After graduating from high school, he attended a Young Life meeting. It was here that he heard a youth testify about the difference Christ had made in his life. After this experience, he became a Christian, and his whole life was turned around. Where he had been introverted and withdrawn, he now began to make new friends.

He went on to law school, and there he did something he had wanted to do since the time of his conversion: He visited the man who had killed his parents. The man was serving a life sentence in the state penitentiary. Their first visit wasn't good; they both were nervous, and it was difficult for them to talk to each other. However, he continued to go back for visits, and finally there was a breakthrough. The young man told the prisoner, "If God can forgive me for the awful hatred I carried for you, God can forgive you for what you have done."

A few years later, the prisoner was paroled. The young man was now an attorney in Modesto, California. He helped the former prisoner get a job and start a new life.

This story may be incredible and unbelievable, but it's about the power of Christ and forgiveness. That's what it means to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

The bible tells us, "Resentment kills a fool." (Job 5:2)

That may remind some of you about the old Amos and Andy routine. An old comedy team, Amos asks Andy what that little bottle is he's wearing around his neck. "Nitroglycerine," he answers. Amos is stunned that Andy would be wearing a necklace with an explosive chemical, so he asks for an explanation. Andy tells him about a fellow who has a bad habit of poking people in the chest while he's speaking. "It drives me crazy," Andy says. "I'm wearing this nitro so the next time he pokes me, I'll blow his finger off!"

Andy's not the first to forget that when you try to get even, you really end up hurting yourself. Think about that. If you're out to settle the score, you'll never rest, because your adversary will never fulfill the conditions you demand. And you will be in constant turmoil as you pout over your own suffering.

When does retaliation end? It stops when you take seriously the prayer of Jesus. Hear it again. **Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors... For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.**

We know now that bitterness or resentment can break you down *physically*. But Jesus has a far more important reason for you to forgive. If you don't, you pay a high price *spiritually*!

Let's go back to the story of the youngster who grew up to visit and befriend his own parents' killer. *It's not possible to forgive like that* unless you're God – or you have a little part of God living in your heart. There is absolutely no greater work that any of us can do, no greater witness, than to proclaim God's forgiveness – alive in our hearts! To forgive those who have offended you: *You are forgiven!*

How someone needs to hear that from *you* this week!

What may be the most fascinating thing about this part of the Lord's prayer is that as we ask forgiveness from God, God pours His forgiveness into our lives! Not only are we forgiven people, but we *are forgiving* people. We take on the heart of God! But we shouldn't be surprised.

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...” (John 14:12)

Listen: Forgiveness is one of those greater works Christ promised!

Has your place of work been a source of trouble and conflict for you? Has your marriage relationship got you tied in knots? Do you wish you could experience a change? Well, your circumstances may not change until *you* change! We’ve all known people who ran from one job to another and one relationship to another looking for compatibility – only to ignore the incompatibility within their own lives!

READING Matthew 18:23-35

²³ “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to do this, a servant who owed him millions of dollars was brought to him. ²⁵ Because he could not pay off the debt, the master ordered him, his wife, his children, and all that he had to be sold to pay off the account. ²⁶ Then the servant fell at his master’s feet and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will repay everything!’

²⁷ “The master felt sorry for his servant, freed him, and canceled his debt. ²⁸ But when that servant went away, he found a servant who owed him hundreds of dollars. He grabbed the servant he found and began to choke him. ‘Pay what you owe!’ he said.

²⁹ “Then that other servant fell at his feet and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will repay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused. Instead, he turned away and had that servant put into prison until he would repay what he owed.

³¹ “The other servants who worked with him saw what had happened and felt very sad. They told their master the whole story.

³² “Then his master sent for him and said to him, ‘You evil servant! I canceled your entire debt, because you begged me. ³³ Shouldn’t you have treated the other servant as mercifully as I treated you?’

³⁴ “His master was so angry that he handed him over to the torturers until he would repay everything that he owed. ³⁵ That is what my Father in heaven will do to you if each of you does not sincerely forgive other believers.”

It’s arrogant on my part to ask God, “Forgive me for what I owe you, Lord.” The debt is so large it’s impossible to pay! And God doesn’t *have* to forgive you. But He wants to; He loves you. His passion is different! Special! His forgiveness is a gift to you.

We can only *accept* this gift; *give thanks* to God; and *submit* our life to Him. (Galatians 2:20) And when we submit our lives to God He *transforms* our lives, which enables me to forgive others!

There’s no *miracle* that compares to forgiveness. We think it’s great when our prayers are answered for healing – and rightfully so. But that’s no comparison to the forgiveness of sins! That’s a huge miracle!

Before I close I want us to take a quick look at what forgiveness looks like in you!

- When you live in faith with the Son of God, not only is your eternal destination changed, but your *will* is changed. You begin to *want* different things!
- Forgiveness doesn’t mean that the wrongs done to you were acceptable. We’re not hiding the pain, the injustice, or the wrong.
- Forgiveness is letting go of your desire to hurt the other person. Simply put, forgiveness means to “cancel the debt.”

- Forgiveness is a difficult and uncomfortable process. When you make a decision to forgive, God provides you the grace and courage to forgive and to maintain a heart of forgiveness.
- Forgiveness doesn't wait for the offender to repent.
- Forgiveness is about how much you trust God to take care of you.
Do you want what God wants for you?

Jesus: "Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you." And He stood behind those words when, from the cross, He prayed, "Father, forgive them."

Is that the love that moves you through your world?

The sin to which we most easily fall is *refusing* what Christ would have done if He were in our place. After all, can you imagine a selfish Christ, a bitter Christ, walking the streets of our town?

INVITATION from the Lesson: Do you have a forgiving mind and heart?

What's the next step for you to take? Is there a relationship God brings to mind for you that can be reconciled because you are submitting to Him today? Because He is your Lord?

What's prohibiting the Spirit of God from influencing your life? Is it resentment? Stubbornness?

Are you satisfied with that hostility?

The journey to healing and relief begins with confession today: confessing how hard forgiving can be ...Even as it comes to forgiving God – for letting you down.

[PRAYER]

Lord, we have been angry long enough. It doesn't feel good to us inside.

Set us free from this anger; even this hate

so that we might find courage and comfort to reconcile and forgive.

Help us make those small steps with You – as You help change our mind and our heart and to know the great satisfaction – living in Your will and your way through Jesus Christ!

Amen

SONG: "Offering"

Are you bringing your heart and life to the Father through Jesus the Son – so that you serve Him completely?

By the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...

HYMN #382 "Have Thine Own Way, Lord" (vs . 1, 4)