

If you have a Bible, turn to Matthew 18. That's where we'll be. I'll flip around a little bit but just have you stay there all night. If you don't have a Bible, there should be one near you somewhere, and you can use that. If you don't have a Bible at all, we'd love for you to have that. Take it home. Read it. Don't start in Genesis. Start in Matthew or John. That would probably be better for you, okay. If you've never read, Genesis is great, but I have found those are a little bit better places to start for those just starting to read the Bible.

Hey, if you are new here, this entire semester you've missed us going through a letter the apostle Paul wrote a couple of thousand years ago called the letter to the Galatians. That is what we've been studying as a church week in and week out. We've been going verse by verse and line by line through this letter the entire spring. We were there last week. We'll be there this next week. On Easter Sunday we'll pick back up in chapter 3, but tonight we're going to actually, for the first time in a long time, step away from the letter to the Galatians and talk about a topic that is talked about elsewhere in the Scriptures.

I want you to know that, but I also want you to know the topic we're going to talk about is actually an implication of everything Paul has been talking about in the letter to the Galatians. If you've been here, you know the thing Paul has been talking about in the letter to the Galatians is that we are (those of us who are Christians and anyone who wants to be a Christian) saved by faith in what Jesus Christ has done. We're not saved by anything else. We're not saved by works. We're not saved by moral achievement. We're not saved by our moral efforts. We're not saved by doing more good than bad and somehow trying to balance out the bad we've done with good.

We're not saved by anything except by putting our faith in Jesus Christ and what he has done through his life. He was God who became a man without ceasing to be God. He lived a perfect life, completely obedient to the Father. He went to the cross. He died on the cross as a substitute for our sins so anybody who would put their faith in him would have their sins removed and forgiven. He went to the grave, and three days later he rose from the dead, validating and vindicating everything he said about himself, proving he really was the Son of God (God in the flesh).

This risen Savior is the one we worship. He's the one we put our faith in, and he's the only one who can save us. Putting our faith in who he is and what he's done is the only thing that saves us, so that is what the apostle Paul has been hammering over and over and over again in his letter to the Galatians. It's honestly

what the entire Scriptures are about. It's about the gospel, the message of Christianity. So what we're going to talk about tonight is an implication of the gospel. One of the illustrations I've used to teach this over the last five years...

In fact, I think this might be the first illustration I ever used at this campus. It was the illustration of a Coke machine. I don't know when the last time you bought a Coke was. For me, it was yesterday. I was a little bit surprised and appalled by how old the Coke machine was. I expected it to be more technologically advanced than it was when I was in fifth grade. I don't know. I was just sort of disappointed. It's just amazing how far we've come and yet how the Coke machine just seems to not have come that far.

Anyway, I put a dollar in. Actually, I put some coins in. You know, you put coins in a Coke machine and what happens sometimes? Well, the coins get stuck. That's frustrating, especially if you use the same Coke machine and the coins continue to get stuck. What happens when the coins get stuck? Well, unless you're a more passive type, you beat the machine. You beat it. You wrestle with it. You punch it. Some of you get angry and actually kick it. Some of you really get violent with the machine. But you shake the machine. You do whatever you need to do to get the coins to drop.

Then when the coins finally drop, the result is the fruit of your labors comes out, and you get to enjoy your nice, cold beverage, whatever it is you chose and whatever it is you worked so hard to get. It's a good moment, isn't it? It's just a great moment when you've worked that hard and then you get it. It just is satisfying in some way. Believing the gospel and being transformed by the Spirit of God and by what Christ has done for us is in a weird way a little bit like that.

If you're a Christian, particularly if you attend our services here, perhaps you're a covenant member, you and I are having the gospel of Jesus Christ (this news about what he's done) deposited in our lives all the time in various, different ways. Every time you come in here, you hear it. We sing about it. I hope in your home groups and in your conversations with your friends who are Christians, you're talking about it. This message of Christianity over and over again gets deposited, and yet all too often, it doesn't drop.

It somehow gets lodged between our heads and our hearts, and we kind of hear it, and we know it, and we think about it, and we talk about it, and yet it never really drops. It never really makes a massive difference in our lives, but when it does drop, when it does become something we really embrace by faith with our hearts, it changes us. There is spiritual fruit that is produced in our lives as a result. The Spirit of God completely begins to transform us and shape and mold every part of our lives and every part of who we are.

One of the primary ways when the gospel drops in your heart... When you really get what the apostle Paul has been talking about over and over and over again in Galatians... If you come to believe that truly in your heart, one of the primary spiritual fruits it will produce is a love for other people that leads you to forgive other people. When you truly understand the gospel, you become a forgiving person. So that is what we're going to talk about tonight. Here is my thesis.

This is the sentence I want you to (at least in your own words) repeat after you walk out of here, and somebody says, "What was the sermon about?" which by the way is utterly frustrating. It's like you labor up here for 45 minutes, it's like, "What was the sermon about?" "Uh, I don't know. I think it was about forgiveness or something." Yes. That is what I want you to say. It was about forgiveness or something, and if you want to be a little more specific, here is a sentence that can help you once you leave here. Here is the point I'm trying to get across. If you take nothing else, at least I hope you get this and you wrestle and think about this.

When a person (an individual) truly grasps in their heart how they have been freely forgiven by God at great costs to himself, it compels that person to freely forgive other people, even if it's at great cost to them.

When a person truly believes the message of the gospel that we're saved by grace through faith, because of what Jesus Christ has done in giving himself to ransom us, when we truly believe that and we truly see and adore with our hearts that God has freely forgiven us at great cost to himself (the giving of his very own Son) it compels us to be a type of people, a type of person, who freely forgives others even if it costs us greatly.

Of course, the apostle Paul would say the exact same thing, so this is not Beau up here saying, "Hey, a primary implication of what Paul has been talking about in his letter to the Galatians is that we become forgiving people." Paul actually says that in a couple of other letters. He says it in Colossians. He also says it, perhaps most pointedly, in his letter to the Ephesian church. I'll just read a part of it. You don't have to turn there, but this is Ephesians, 4.

After he talks about the church being built up, that the church has been equipped to build one another up in love, he says, "**So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles walk...**" In other words, what he is saying is when you become a Christian, when you believe this message (Ephesians 1 through 3) I've been talking about, this gospel I've been turning so you could see the beauty of it from all these different angles, when you really get that in your heart, when it really drops it causes you to live differently.

You don't live like a non-Christian anymore. You don't live like you used to live when you weren't a Christian. You live like a different person, like a transformed person, because indeed you have been and

are being transformed by the Spirit of God. One of the constant illustrations Paul uses in his letters is he says this way: "You put off the old, and you put on the new." Some of you have read that before. He says that in multiple letters. It's almost as if this was something he consistently taught when he went to these various churches.

This was the illustration he used: When you become a Christian, as you're saved by grace, as you see how beautiful what God has done for you in Jesus Christ and you're compelled to follow him and you're transformed by his Spirit, you put off the old and you put on the new. Then in these letters, Paul actually tells what this looks like. He tells specifically, "This is what you put off. This is what you put on." One of the primary things you put on, he says in verse 32 of chapter 4 of Ephesians is that you are kind to one another. You're tenderhearted. You forgive each other, just as God in Christ has also forgiven you.

So the apostle Paul says this. He says one of the primary implications of you believing the gospel, of the gospel dropping in your heart and changing you from the inside out is you become a forgiving person, and yet unforgiveness is one of the most spiritually crippling diseases that exists among our church body and resides within our hearts individually. It's something we struggle with so much. John Wesley, who founded the Methodist church, would actually say, if this is what it means, if this is Christianity (forgiving one another) where are all the Christians? He's actually quoted as saying that.

If you're not a Christian and you're here tonight, I'm going to primarily be speaking to Christians this evening, but if you're not a Christian, I'm really glad you are here. What I hope you hear tonight is first, the message of Christianity, that our God at great cost to himself sacrificed his Son so we could be forgiven and saved. Secondly, I hope you hear tonight how we as Christians are commanded by God to live in light of what he has done for us and how we stumble and struggle to do that.

If you're not a Christian, I hope this is informative and helpful to you tonight, but I'm primarily going to be speaking to Christians, and very few things the Scriptures say are to characterize the new nature of Christians like forgiveness. Here is why: Because very few things characterize the nature of our God like him being merciful and forgiving, and we as a people have been saved to reflect the character of our God to each other and into the world around us, so we are to be merciful as he is merciful. Yet, in our weakness, in our selfishness, in our woundedness, in our self-righteousness, we are so prone to harbor resentment and bitterness.

For a myriad of reasons even we as Christians, who have been saved in such a merciful way, struggle to extend mercy and forgive others. I mean, can you imagine with me for a moment the collective resentment and bitterness that resides in our hearts in this room right now? It's pretty overwhelming to think about. The amount of anger, the amount of bitterness, the amount of resentment that you and I walked into this

room with tonight... I'm not talking about the 5:00 service or the other services this morning. The 450 to 500 of us in this room is staggering. It's weighty.

We struggle with this. It's almost unnatural, it seems, to forgive, and yet God calls us to it. There is unforgiveness toward parents. There is unforgiveness toward friends who have wounded us, toward institutions that have wronged us, toward strangers and family members who have abused us, toward spouses and roommates who have annoyed us over and over and over again. Of course, most of us carry resentments not just from one-time events that happened a long time ago.

No doubt, there are particular and significant events that have happened in many of your lives that were hard, that were wrong, that have deeply wounded you and led you to a place where you find it impossible to forgive others. But most of our resentments are a little bit smaller than that. They're a little bit more routine. We pick them up in the day to day and carry them with us, and they compound, but surely you know those routine, day to day resentments can pile up and be just as eroding to our soul as the big, significant, one-time event that happened five years ago.

When you hear me talk tonight, I'm not just talking about these big, massive things. I am talking about that, and I really am hopeful God might set some of you free who have been wronged and wounded in some significant ways in years past, but I'm also talking about your relationships with your roommates, your relationships with your classmates, your relationships with your co-workers and supervisors, your relationships with your spouse. These relationships that we walk in every single day. I'm talking about the things that happened in your home group yesterday that frustrated you and that you've not yet resolved.

Unforgiveness is one of the most deadly threats to our personal spiritual formation, to the unity of our church family, and also to our witness to this city God has sent us in to. This is an area where God means for us to shine brightly, which is part of what Paul was getting at in Ephesians 4. It is part of what Jesus will get at on the Sermon on the Mount we will read here in a bit. We are to live differently in this regard than the rest of the world. We are to be a forgiving and merciful people, to such a degree people go, *Wow. Their God must be really powerful and really amazing to be able to turn them into this type of people who are forgiving with one another.*

So here is what I want to talk with you about tonight. There are six points. If you take notes, this is your night. You typically don't get this at The Village, right? So here they are. Six points. Here is what we want to walk through tonight, and I'll try to remind you where I'm at along the way.

1. *What forgiveness is.* I want to define it. I think it's helpful to do that.

2. *What Jesus says about forgiveness.*

3. *Why Jesus cares whether or not we forgive others.*

4. *What forgiveness does to us if we continue to harbor it and not release it.*

5. *Why we struggle to forgive.*

6. *The only way we can truly forgive.*

If you're in Matthew 18, look with me. Start in verse 21, and if you follow this text, Jesus has taught his disciples in this text about how to have faith like children and to be humble. He's talked about church discipline in the verses that precede this, and now he's going to talk about forgiving others, and he's going to say something and then use a parable to drive home his point he is making. **"Then Peter came up [to Jesus] and said to him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?'"**

Now Peter is going big here, because the Jewish law and tradition said you only had to forgive somebody three times, so Peter is doubling that plus one. He's been following Jesus. He gets that Jesus is a bit more merciful than the other teachers and says, "Okay, Lord. How often do we need to forgive? Seven times, is that enough?" Jesus says, **"I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."** Now don't think here just that seventy times seven equals four hundred and ninety, if my math is correct.

Think an infinite number. That is what Jesus is trying to communicate. More than a specific number, he's trying to communicate, "You forgive as often as it is necessary. You forgive every single time." This is shocking. Then he tells a parable that explains why. He says, **"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he [the king] began to settle, one [servant] was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents."**

This was the largest number Jesus could have used. Think of him saying this is a jillion dollars. It's an infinite sum that can never be repaid. That is what Jesus is saying here. This servant owed the king an infinite sum he could never repay. **"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. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him [the king], '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."**

But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii..." which is an infinitely smaller sum. A denarii was a day's wage, so Jesus means to contrast the sums here. That is what he is trying to do and part of what he is saying in this. The servant, who had just been forgiven **"...seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will pay you.' 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..." They were watching this scene and were horrified at what had just happened. **"...and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him [the servant] and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt [you owed me] 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." Here is the point. Jesus says, **"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."** Let's pray for a minute, and then we'll continue forward.

Father, this is a very sobering, and at different levels, a shocking statement, a shocking parable, a shocking lesson Jesus just told, so I pray you'll give us ears to hear. I pray you will minister to the parts of our heart that are secret, that we don't even know candidly that we need to be ministered to. That maybe you would set us free tonight. That you would teach us to forgive as we have been forgiven, so help us now as we think about these things and as we think about our own lives. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Before we think about this parable in any more detail or even some of the other Scriptures, let's just jump in and talk about what forgiveness is. Let's define it. I think it is helpful lest we are talking about different things all night long. What does it mean to really forgive someone from the heart as Jesus said here? The word, *forgive*, in this passage literally means to release, to let go. I think that is a helpful start, but I like the definition Thomas Watson gave. He was a pastor 300 years ago.

This is the definition he gave for forgiveness, and in his writing he is commenting on the Lord's Prayer we will read here in a minute where it says, **"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."** Watson asks the questions, "So when do we forgive others?" In other words, what does forgiveness really look like? His answer is this: "We forgive others when we strive against all thoughts of revenge, when we will not do our enemies mischief, but we wish well to them.

We grieve with their calamities. We pray for them. We seek reconciliation with them and show ourselves ready on all occasions to relieve them." That is such a comprehensive definition, and I really like it because

every bit of literature I read this week, whether it was other pastors who had preached on this, whether it was commentaries, or whether it was scientific research that we'll talk about here in a bit, every single bit of literature I read wanted to make the point in terms of defining forgiveness that forgiveness is not merely the absence of unforgiveness.

In fact, one article said it this way: "Just as health is not the absence of illness, forgiveness is not the absence of unforgiveness. That is to say that one does not forgive by merely avoiding revengeful thoughts toward another person, but forgiveness actually consists of replacing those vengeful thoughts with grace and mercy and love." I think Thomas Watson captures that in his definition. He says forgiveness includes resisting revenge. It includes not returning evil for evil. That's great, but he doesn't just stop there.

He doesn't just stop at, *Okay. I'm not going to be angry at you.* He then moves into a complete transformation that turns our hearts from hatred to love by saying, "Forgiveness also includes wishing them well, grieving at their calamities, praying for their welfare, seeking reconciliation as far as it depends on us, and coming to their aid in their distress." That is a whole different level than just not being mad and resisting your bad thoughts toward someone, and this is what God means to do in our hearts and means to create in our hearts toward others who have wronged us.

I think it's just important to talk about what forgiveness is not, as well. Forgiveness is not necessarily forgetting about what has been done, as if that is even possible. This is not possible. That is not what forgiveness means, to forget what has been done. Forgiveness is not the absence of anger toward sin. It doesn't mean you don't have a longing for justice. We're commanded to do justice. Forgiveness doesn't mean you ignore the fact a wrong has been done or a sin has been committed.

Forgiveness doesn't mean you put yourself in a position to be hurt again and again and again. So we're kind of clearing the cobwebs. Those things are not what forgiveness is about, and I would also say this. Forgiveness is rarely a one-time event. For most of us, it's going to be a long process, so if you read Thomas Watson's definition and you're just discouraged immediately tonight, don't be. Don't be discouraged because right now you're not coming to your enemy's aid in distress.

Now if you journey for years and you're still inclined in heart away from coming to their aid in distress, then I think you do need to be concerned. I think that is a time to dialogue about what is really in your heart, but for most of us, getting to this place where we're truly forgiving and walking in the comprehensive forgiveness Watson talked about, it's a journey. It's not something we can just turn on once we hear a sermon or once we feel convicted. It is something the Spirit of God does in us as we move forward. That is what forgiveness is.

Let's talk about what Jesus says about forgiveness. What he says about forgiveness, it's radical if you didn't notice in the parable. It's absolutely radical. The parable we just read is just as shocking today as it would have been 2,000 years ago, but lest you think this parable is sort of an isolated teaching of Jesus, I want to share a few other Scriptures with you so you can see this was the consistent teaching of Jesus. He didn't just say this once. He didn't just say this twice. He said this over and over and over again.

Matthew 6. You don't have to turn there. I have it up for you on the screen. Jesus says this. This is the Sermon on the Mount when he's preaching to his disciples. He's preaching to those following him and teaching them how to be a community who live as God's people, who truly live as what God has done is true. He says this to them: **"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words [in their prayers]. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.**

"Pray then like this..." The Lord's Prayer, which even non-believers pray, for some reason. **"Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.'" Most of us know this text right up to about that point, but look at the next two verses. "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."**

He is saying here plainly what he said through the parable. In Mark 11 he says it again. He says, **"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, [forgive] so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."** Some of the earliest manuscripts in Mark actually say the same thing he said at the end of the previous verses we read. "If you don't forgive, your Father won't forgive you." So Jesus' teaching on this subject could not be more consistent or more sobering, and his example in it couldn't be more stunning.

I'm so thankful Jesus is not a God who just tells us what to do, but then doesn't do it himself. That Jesus demonstrated what he just said in the most beautiful of ways when he was on the cross, if you remember. He's already been crucified. These men and women below him are spitting on him and mocking him. They are gambling for his clothes, and what does he say as he's on the cross? After he has been betrayed by those closest to him, after he's been unjustly tried and unjustly convicted and unjustly punished, what does he say while he's on the cross?

He says, **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,"** which I struggle to believe at some level. Jesus' example is beautiful and his teaching is consistent and sobering. This is what he says

about forgiveness. Why does Jesus care? Why is he so strong? Why is he so passionate about whether or not we forgive others? I think it is a great question to ask. I mean, the way Jesus talks in these passages almost makes it sound as if our being saved is based on works on whether or not we're willing to forgive others, does it not? It really does.

You read this and you go, *Golly! That sounds like the exact opposite message the apostle Paul has been teaching in Galatians. It makes it sound like we're saved based on whether or not we forgive other people.* That's not what Jesus is saying. Forgiving others does not and cannot save you. We're saved by grace, not by works, not by our moral achievement, not by how good or how well or how often we forgive other people. Forgiving others won't make you right with God. Nothing will do that except you putting your faith in what Jesus has done to make you right with God.

That's the only thing that will save you. That is not what Christ is saying. However, what your willingness and my willingness or unwillingness to forgive others can and does do is reflect whether or not you and I have truly put our faith in Jesus Christ. Though our forgiveness and willingness to forgive others does not save us, it is a reflection of whether or not we truly are saved. Again, this is weighty and sobering. It proves whether or not you really have believed the gospel in your heart.

That is why Jesus is so strong about it. That is why he's so passionate about it. One pastor said this: "An unforgiving heart is an unforgiven heart." That is why Jesus over and over and over again comes at it like this, because he is serious about us, his people, forgiving others, because refusing to do that is actually a contradiction to the way he has treated us, so we can't receive or at least say we receive his forgiveness and say it has impacted our hearts and say our whole lives are based on it, and then turn around and act in a completely contradictory way to the way he has treated us.

That is what so shocking about the parable in Matthew 18, isn't it? That the king forgave an infinite sum and then the servant turned around, and for a little bitty sum, he didn't show the guy mercy. That is what so horrible and gross about that passage, and what it proves is this servant never really got it. He thought it was about a monetary exchange. He didn't get the mercy part. He didn't take that with him, and sadly, many of us don't. That is why he cares. That is why Jesus is so strong, because he means for us as his people (both corporately and individually) to display to one another and to the world what he is like and his character.

When we claim the name of Christ and then walk around harboring bitterness and resentment and we're unwilling to forgive, we're saying something that is not true about his character. We're saying he is not merciful. We're saying he did not give his one and only Son that whosoever would believe in him would be

saved and forgiven. We're acting in a contradictory way to the way Jesus acted to us, and that is why Jesus is so firm and so fierce about this over and over and over again.

What does unforgiveness do to us? We start to get into why it matters. *I get what Jesus said. I understand why he said it, maybe. So what? Why does it matter?* Well, the most horrific implication of being unwilling to forgive others is God's response to us, as we have already seen. Jesus couldn't be clearer: If you don't forgive others, you will not be forgiven by my Father in heaven. This is the most tragic and terrible consequence of our unforgiveness. That it actually keeps us from receiving the forgiveness and grace of God.

Listen, some of you are there tonight. You come in here every week. You sing the songs. You could quote to me your homework from the Galatians study, but you hate people who have wronged you, and you are unwilling to back off of that and forgive them. In that way, with that heart, what you are saying is, *I am not experiencing and I have not experienced the true forgiveness and grace in my heart of hearts*, or at least you're just in a really bad place I'd love to talk with you about tonight and pray with you about.

That is the most tragic consequence. That is why it matters the most, because it keeps us from the forgiveness and grace from God. But some of you, I know, are not Christians. You're in here. You're going, *Great. What if you don't believe there is a God, or if there is a God that he is holy and he demands righteousness from his people; therefore, he'll punish people for whether or not they have put their faith in Christ. I don't believe any of that. Why does this matter for me? What does this have to do with my life from day to day?*

I would say a lot. Here is why it matters: Unforgiveness leads to a bitterness of heart that erodes your soul and my soul, that deteriorates our physical bodies, and that robs us of the joy and contentment we're all really seeking. In a comprehensive way, unforgiveness destroys your life: mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. It destroys us. Both Scripture and the latest scientific research say the same thing about this. They agree here.

In Hebrews 12, the pastor writing to this group of Christians says, "**See to it that no one [among you] fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.**" Bitterness creates havoc. It is poisonous. It defiles, is what he saying. I think primarily he's talking spiritually, but I think in every way it defiles. That is what the research is showing. This is from the Stanford Forgiveness Project.

It says, "Although the act may not come naturally to us, research has shown that learning to forgive lessens the amount of hurt, anger, stress, and depression people experience. People who learn to forgive

also become more hopeful, optimistic, and compassionate. Forgiveness also has physical health benefits. People who learn to forgive report significantly fewer symptoms of stress such as backache, muscle tension, dizziness, headaches, and upset stomachs. In addition, people report improvements in appetite, sleep patterns, energy, and general well-being." That is amazing.

The Mayo Clinic says the same thing. Their study concluded that "forgiveness can lead to healthier relationships, greater spiritual and psychological well-being, less anxiety, less stress, less hostility, lower blood pressure, fewer symptoms of depression, and even a lower risk of alcohol and substance abuse." Unforgiveness and bitterness comprehensively destroy us, both now and eternally, as Jesus said. Perhaps this is the reason someone said a long time ago that bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. That is what bitterness is.

That is how foolish bitterness is, and you would think this research and these things would be enough to make people want to forgive, even if it's for self-seeking reasons. Even if you're a narcissist, you would look at this list and go, *Golly! If there is any resentment in my life, I want to get it over with because I want to live a better life. I want to be happier. I want to have less backaches or whatever it is I'm struggling with.* You would think it would be enough for even the selfish and self-seeking person to want to forgive, but it's not.

It's not enough. Here is what that shows. It shows and proves the heart's proclivity and inclination toward bitterness is stronger than any of us could possibly imagine. which leads me to why we don't forgive. If unforgiveness eats away at us, if it erodes our souls and our bodies and it keeps us away from the forgiveness and mercy of God, then why in the world would we ever refuse to forgive other people? What could possibly lead us to make such a foolish decision in light of Scripture and everything else?

There are plenty of things. I wrote some down. I think a primary one for many people is the pain is simply too deep. Listen to me. Some of you have been wronged and sinned against in some horrific ways, ways I wouldn't even feel comfortable getting up here and sharing. It's been so bad. You have some legitimate wounds, some legitimate things that have happened to you. We live in a fallen world, and we live among fallen people like ourselves, and we do horrible things to one another.

You add on to that the natural calamities and horrible things that happen. They just happen outside of interpersonal relationships. It's a hard world, which makes me so grateful, as we're going to sing here in a while, that Jesus is going to come and make it all new. He's promised to do that. He's promised to come and make what is crooked straight. I love that. My wife and I were actually at an adoption seminar yesterday. Some of you know we are fostering a little girl, so in order to do that we have to keep our training hours up, so yesterday all day long we were at a training.

I've been to these trainings before. I've heard these stories before about these children who wind up in CPS' care and why they wind up there, but they never cease to devastate my heart when I sit in these meetings and in these trainings. I mean, we heard this story of a few young girls who were being fostered by a woman from our agency. She had them for seven years, and they still weren't sleeping through the night. They weren't sleeping through the night because nighttime for them was sexual abuse time in their old home

So every night they would get up and they would go make a pallet by their foster mom's bed, and they would lay down on that pallet because they were scared to close their eyes. They were scared to go sleep in the next room. It's a brutal world, and some of you have felt that brutality in a way I haven't and in a way most of us haven't, and your pain is immense and it's valid. I want you to know that tonight, but you hear stories like that, and you go, *How in the world could those little girls ever be brought to a place where they would forgive those who perpetrated them?*

It seems impossible. It comforts me the disciples said the exact same thing to Jesus one time. One of the times in Luke, if you go look at Luke 17, verses 1 through 10, I think it is. One of the times he said, "Hey, you need to forgive seventy times seven." The disciples said, "Oh, my God. Help me with that. Help our unbelief." In other words, that is impossible. "You're going to have to strengthen our faith if you're going to cause us to believe that." Then he goes on saying, "I tell you what. If you say to this mountain, 'Be thrown into the sea,' it will."

We kind of use that to quote different things and to claim different things. He's talking about forgiveness. He's basically saying, "Yeah, with man, that is impossible, but with God, all things are possible." As the Holy Spirit changes a heart, as a person really comes to believe and to see how they have been forgiven of an infinite debt through Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God will lead them to a place where even the most impossible of situations, people who have experienced some situations can be led to forgive.

Perhaps, for some of you tonight that would be hope-giving, that the Spirit of God would want to do that and that he could do that in your heart and in your life. That is one reason many people don't forgive. The pain is simply too deep. Another reason is they fear they'll be wronged again, so they just withhold. They just protect themselves because they don't want to be hurt again. Another reason is because people demand justice. They want things to be made right before they'll forgive.

Again, it's not wrong to long for justice. It's not wrong for what has gone wrong to be made right. We're called as Christians to do justice. It is wrong, however, for you to base whether or not you're going to forgive somebody on whether or not they make it right. Listen, there are a lot of things that are not going to

be made right before the Lord Jesus Christ comes and makes all things new. You're going to have to wait for that day, and as much as you do, I wish there were reasons Jesus gave that we didn't have to forgive others.

I wish he would have said, "Forgive, unless of course, they refuse to act like they're sorry or make things right." He didn't say that. He didn't tell us to wait for that. The primary reason he didn't is because he didn't do that to us. He didn't wait for you to get it before he came and died. He knew you wouldn't get it, so he came and died for you so you could be saved, so you could be forgiven. He calls us to do the same. So many people just demand justice, demand things be made right, and that reflects something different than the way the Lord has forgiven us.

Another thing that keeps people from forgiving is a desire for vengeance. Many people just want vengeance. They want to punish the other person. It's amazing. The only one who bitterness imprisons is you. You're still in prison if you're bitter. The person you're bitter at has control over your life. It's so sad. The only way those people win is if you remain bitter at them. Again, even in a self-seeking way you would think that would be enough for you to lay aside your desire for vengeance, but that is another reason.

Arrogance and self-righteousness are other reasons. Honestly, when you're bitter, there is always a sense or very often a sense of superiority. What you're saying is you would never have done something like that, and so therefore, *I'm justified at being mad at you. I'm justified at looking down my nose at you. I'm justified at holding on to my bitterness, because what you did, I would never do that.* This happens in marriage every day. This happens, I'm sure, among roommates and teammates and friends every day.

This self-righteousness we carry around that keeps us from forgiving other people. I don't know if you've ever realized it. It's almost impossible to be bitter toward someone who does something you know you do all the time. Have you ever thought about that? It's really difficult to be bitter toward someone who you know is better than you. The reason is because so much of our bitterness is driven by our self-righteousness.

Other people refuse to forgive because they want to remain a victim. Of course, they wouldn't say they want to remain a victim, but by their actions they sort of prove over and over again they've become so identified by being a victim that to give up on that, to forgive, even if they have been truly victimized, would mean they don't let that define them anymore, and many people just can't do that. Because what that means is they'd have to quit pointing fingers at everybody else and actually look at their own heart moving forward. They don't want to do that.

Of course, many people don't forgive because they want to keep the upper hand. One psychologist I talked to this week said it's almost like a prosecutor keeping evidence to bring out in the future. We just want to have that ace in the hole, so we just keep it so we won't really forgive. But I think the biggest, deepest reason most of us (especially those of us who are Christians or at least say we're Christians) refuse to forgive is we have forgotten and we forget how Jesus Christ has forgiven us. We have forgotten and we forget every day what Jesus has done for us, which leads to the only way we can truly forgive.

The sustaining power you need to forgive other people only comes through receiving forgiveness yourself. It only happens when you see with your heart of hearts how you have been forgiven by the King of the universe of an infinite sum you could never repay. To the degree you see that, to the degree you realize how God has forgiven you of your infinite debt to him at great cost to himself, will you be able to forgive others, even at great cost to yourself. The reason most of us don't forgive is we simply forget what Jesus has done.

It's not at the forefront of our minds. We're not talking about it. We're not thinking about it. We're not letting it transform our hearts. We're not pondering and meditating on it. Our mind is not fixed on Christ and things above. It's fixed on us and things below here. We forget what he has done. Or perhaps, like the parable, you've never actually believed it to begin with. You've never really had the gospel truly drop. You think Matt's a good preacher. You think what we sing here are good songs and the theology is right, and cognitively you embrace it, but it's never really changed your heart.

When we see what God has done for us at great cost to himself, when we truly embrace that with our hearts, it dissolves our hearts. It changes our hearts. It melts us, and it compels us to forgive others. I want to show you a video here that sort of encapsulates that entire idea of this young man who was a child soldier in Uganda, and then we'll be done.