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Extraordinary Forgiveness

Matthew 18:23-33

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As our new series begins, we're looking closely at practicing forgiveness; extraordinary forgiveness, because forgiveness is always extraordinary, isn't it?

Before we go any further, I want to pause here and acknowledge that our thinking together today may trigger some deep feelings and emotions for some, maybe many. Forgiveness is hard work; it takes time, focus, and prayer. Maybe a lot of prayers. I know that. I don't want to minimize or simplify anything here. But in our time together here, I want to be practical, helpful, hopeful, and direct as we move ahead, embraced by the extraordinary power of the resurrected Jesus Christ in every area of our lives.

When we talk about forgiveness, to say nothing of extraordinary forgiveness, we're talking about doing something that we're not naturally wired to do. When someone wrongs or hurts us, there is a very natural "fight, flight, freeze, or even fawn" response. That's what's wired into us. When someone hurts us and asks for forgiveness, we have an opportunity to allow grace to fill the space created by that hurt, allowing us to show forgiveness. But doing that, practicing forgiveness is always challenging work. There have been times in my life when someone has said or done something to hurt me, and I'm somewhere between annoyed and so angry that I could spit tacks. And it's easy to get stuck right there. Have you ever felt that way? You know how it is: you're frustrated, hurt, and angry. You're in the spin-cycle, swirling around in that mess. And then the one who has hurt you comes to you and says those words that at that moment seem to cut through your like a knife: "I'm sorry, will you forgive me?" And I'm thinking, "Forgive you? I'm so frustrated that I can't even see straight! I don't think I'm ready to forgive!" But the truth is: when we withhold forgiveness, all kinds of unhealthy junk creeps in.

There is a story in the Gospel of Matthew that illuminates this really well. It's a parable about wrongs righted, debts coming due, injustice, bad

behavior, extravagant grace, mercy, and forgiveness. In a passage from Matthew's Gospel that in most study bibles is titled "Unlimited Forgiveness," we find all that and more. Here's what's going on. Peter comes to Jesus with the first of two enormously loaded questions lurking in this amazing passage. First, Peter asks Jesus: "Lord, if someone wrongs me, sins against me, keeps hurting me, how often should I forgive them? How many times? Seven?" Jesus replies almost incredulously, "Seven? Try seventy times seven." Now, if you're suddenly doing math in your head – and I know some of you are, let's not get caught up in the numbers. This is not about calculators, spreadsheets, and math. In fact, to illuminate just how silly that is, in some translations, Jesus says 77 times; others say 70 x 7. Why all the numbers? Because whether it's 7, or 77, or 490 times isn't the point. Jesus' point is that forgiveness is limitless. Jesus is making a huge point here with large numbers. We can never extend too much forgiveness where forgiveness is necessary.

To get to the heart of all of this, Jesus tells a story. There are three main characters; two workers and their boss. First, one of the two workers owes a large sum of money to his boss. How much? A lot. One translation says, "a hundred thousand dollars." Another translation says, "a millions of dollars." Still, another says, "ten thousand bags of gold." And one version [TPT] says the servant owed the king "a billion dollars." I think we get the idea. Whatever it is, the worker can't pay his debt. So he begs his boss for mercy to have his debt forgiven. And "Lo, and behold," the boss is moved with compassion and forgives the debt of the first worker.

But speaking of Lo, and Behold..." in the next scene, the suddenly happy-go-lucky, debt-free, fully forgiven worker is on his way to Dunkin' Donuts for a Peppermint Mocha Latte. And he runs into the second worker, a guy he knows from work, a guy who owes "Mr. Dunkin" a small debt, a really small debt, by comparison, maybe a few hundred bucks, and a Snicker's Bar. But again, remember, it's not about the math. The second worker owes nothing compared to what the first worker owed the boss. So, they're standing in the parking lot of the Dunkin' Donuts, and the guy with the small debt

pleads for mercy. But the guy clutching his Peppermint Mocha Latte will have none of it; he comes unglued, throws a tantrum, and threatens to toss the guy in prison, telling him he's going to stay there until he pays his debt. Which, you've got to admit, is really weird. The chances of this servant repaying the debt – hundreds, thousands, millions of dollars while he's in prison are, at best, slim—if not impossible. But again, it's not about the numbers.

So, all of this gets reported to the boss, who summons the first worker and demands a response. "You wicked snake! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Is this the way you respond to my mercy for you? Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?" There's a dramatic pause. And then the boss asks, "Should you not have forgiven the debt of your fellow servant as I forgave you?" And that, of course, is the second enormously loaded question.

One of the foundational components of any healthy, fully functioning, life-giving relationship is the ability to practice forgiveness in all its many expressions. Anyone who has ever made personal, emotional, and spiritual investments in a relationship knows how vital it is to practice forgiveness. But the road toward forgiveness is strewn with all the risks of honesty, hurt, pain, and vulnerability. Who of us has not been hurt by the actions or words of someone else? Perhaps it was a parent constantly criticizing you growing up, a colleague sabotaging a project, or spouses, partners, friends, or family members who acted or spoke without thinking. Or maybe you've had a traumatic relational experience, a partner had an affair, or you were physically or emotionally abused by someone close to you. These wounds can leave us with feelings of anger and bitterness, even vengeance. But I want to gently remind us that if we don't lean into the practice of forgiveness, we'll probably be the ones who pay the most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, we can experience the kind of "eternal life" that Jesus talked about constantly. And this "eternal life" in Christ is the ongoing fullness of life that isn't reserved for some "there-and-then-reality" that happens after we die. Rather, it's the ongoing

fullness of life that flourishes all around us, in us, and through us, right here, right now.

Friends, let me acknowledge once again how deeply challenging this is. This is so difficult that it may require getting professional help. And let me be clear: asking for help may be the next best step into bravery and courage. Asking for help is never a sign of weakness. On the contrary, it is a sign of health and life.

Today I want to give you some practical handles for all of this. I want to do two things. First, I want to talk about what forgiveness is and what forgiveness is not. And then, I want to give you a clear method for practicing forgiveness in your life. The point of this story is that forgiveness is part of God's vision for how we live our lives in community. So here we go.

First, forgiveness IS NOT condoning what someone did to us. Forgiveness is not saying that the wrong that was committed, what someone did or said to us, or how someone hurt us is okay. If it was awful, abusive, or even brutal, part of forgiveness is finding the freedom, the liberation to call it what it is. Naming it is part of the important process of claiming power over it and moving toward forgiveness and healing - if only for ourselves. Here again, you may need help from someone trained to help you move through it – not around, but through it.

Second, forgiveness IS NOT waiting for the other person to admit what they did. Forgiveness isn't waiting for someone to confess or even apologize for what they did ... because that day may never come. When we hold onto the pain, and it's making us miserable, bringing us down, and the whole thing is eating a hole in our hearts, waiting for someone to apologize is an exercise in missing the point. Our own healing is never dependent on someone else's actions. Our healing comes from God's grace and mercy through the Spirit's work within us. Showing forgiveness opens a door or maybe just a small window to the possibility that relational health can prevail. And that is never dependant on someone else.

Third, forgiveness IS NOT forgetting what happened. In healthy, well-maintained relationships, when things go south, people

apologize, forgive, and take responsibility for their actions, and then everyone moves on. And then, "Forgive and forget!" right? Hmm. Not so fast. Sometimes forgiving is not forgetting. Sometimes forgiving is actually remembering what should never take place again. For example, sometimes someone wrongs us, or we wrong someone else, and we give and receive forgiveness by remembering what happened, acknowledging our part in that, learning from it, and establishing new boundaries, so it doesn't happen again. This is a deeply healthy practice. So, showing forgiveness is not condoning what someone did; it is not waiting for someone to confess, and it doesn't forget what happened.

On the other hand, FORGIVENESS IS the deliberate decision to release feelings of vengeance and resentment. Forgiveness is more about the forgiver than the forgiven. Most of the time, forgiveness does not happen spontaneously; it is a deliberate, conscious choice to forgive. FORGIVENESS IS a process. It takes time, effort, and energy to achieve. Forgiveness is not easy, and it is not fast. It does not happen in an instant. It is often a painstaking process, which is difficult because it is worth it. Forgiveness is liberating. The Greek word for the verb "to forgive" means "to send off," "to hurl," "to release," "to let go." So then, to forgive is more than just a passive sentiment. To forgive is a powerfully active and dynamic process; it's almost a wildly enthusiastic act of dismissal. When Peter asked, "How many times should I forgive? Seven?" Jesus said to do it endlessly. I'll admit, for most listeners in the 1st century, as in the 21st century, Jesus' words seem nearly absurd. And part of the reason that most of us feel that expressing forgiveness is so difficult is that most of us don't have the tools to carry it out.

So, I want to share a method with you that will provide you with those tools. It's a very practical method that will give you a greater chance at moving forward into healthy, fully-functioning, life-giving relationships. It's tough work. But if you're willing to invest in these four practical steps, you'll discover a deeper sense of healthy life in forgiveness.

First, Step One: Identify the hurt.

Identifying the hurt means clarifying the hurt and pain in a relationship. And the healthiest first step here is to recognize your part of the pain in a relationship. I told you it was hard work. As much as we may not like to do it, the first step is to focus on what we may have done to cause pain. Your part, no one else's part, your part. As the saying goes, "It takes two to tango." And because relationships are like a dance, in most relationships where some hurt has taken place, it is rarely the responsibility of one person to express forgiveness. But the only person you can take responsibility for and change is yourself. So, identify the hurt, and be clear about how you understand your part in that pain. That can often open the door to a conversation with your partner or friend about where you have been hurt. Be clear, be honest, and be kind. Two wrongs don't make a right.

Step Two: Embrace the Apology.

There's no simpler way to say it: sometimes, we just have to suck it up, take responsibility for our own stuff, and apologize for our actions. Did I mention that this is hard work? Voicing an apology creates a dynamic, powerful momentum. But apologizing isn't quickly erasing pain or instantly making hurt go away. Instead, saying "I'm sorry" acknowledges reality, the sadness about the current state of a relationship. "I'm sorry that we're in this mess." "I'm sorry for my part." "I'm sorry that we both feel so broken." These are all honest admissions. However, when apologizing, we will have to resist the urge to rationalize our actions or blame our partner. But something happens when we apologize for our actions: the doorway to reconciliation and healing begins to open up.

Step Three: Choose Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is one of the most powerful forces for healing in any relationship. But, again, in every relationship, there is a wide range of forgiveness. There are small issues like forgetting to do something that you said you would do that causes someone else annoyance and inconvenience. And then there are gigantic, relational-shifting issues like unfaithfulness that take an enormous toll on whole family systems, sometimes necessitating years of work to come to grips with. But we must

remember that forgiveness is, first and foremost, a choice; forgiveness is not a feeling. The question IS NOT, "Do we feel like forgiving?" The question IS, "Will we forgive?" Again, remember, forgiveness IS NOT demanding that a person change before we forgive them. Forgiveness IS NOT forgetting that the hurt happened. Forgiveness IS NOT pretending it doesn't matter or thinking that time alone will heal the hurt. Not at all. On the contrary, forgiveness is facing the breach in a relationship and recognizing the emotions that we have about that. Forgiveness is choosing not to hold it against our spouse, brother, sister, friend, coworker, or partner and releasing them into God's hands. Extending forgiveness creates a path to dealing with resentment and anger—although we might still feel hurt until healing is complete. Forgiveness is a process. We often need to keep forgiving—sometimes daily. My forgiveness for someone who has hurt me may benefit them, but ultimately, I will benefit by being free from bitterness.

Finally, Step Four: Welcome a New Day.

After you've identified the issues, come to terms with and apologized for your part in that, and offered forgiveness where it's due, you will move into the power of the "New Day." When Nancy Lee and I have hit an impasse, and we're just stuck, we've often begun again with a simple, mantra-like phrase: "New day ... new day." That's become our not-so-secret code for wanting to begin the journey through forgiveness back to each other. One of us will say: "New day." And the other of us responds, "New day." It's not always easy, but it's also not complicated. "New Day!" signals that we want to lay everything down that we've been carrying and go in a different direction. It's hard work, but it works.

Maybe this will be a helpful image: Imagine a boat in the water and you're on the shore holding on to a rope tied to the boat. The boat is filled with all the hurt and pain that has built up in the relationship. But the boat is being pulled away by a strong current, threatening to pull you into the water. And for whatever reason, you don't want to let go, so you continue holding on to the rope. You struggle, you strain against the current, you're hurting, and you're growing tired and weaker. And then you begin to feel angry that you're holding

onto the rope. Wouldn't it be great just to let go of the energy you're using to hold onto the pain and hurt in the boat? Wouldn't it feel great to let go of the rope? Wouldn't it be awesome to have a "New Day?" Speaking these words: "New Day!" may just be what you need.

What comes after that is what we can only call the gift of God's amazing grace. At this point, we can begin to offer each other comfort, tenderness, love, forgiveness, and joy. Of course, we make ourselves very vulnerable through this process, but doors open that we thought would be closed forever.

Here's the good news. Moving through this process brings us to the hope for new beginnings where joy and thanksgiving open windows and doors to the extraordinary power of new life that has been restored.

Ultimately this is about God's work in us through the Holy Spirit. We cannot do this alone; only God can do this in us. So when we invite the power of forgiveness into our relationships, we welcome the power of the cross of Christ to change everything about us. That, I must say, was the hardest work ever done. But the work shows us how much love God has for us and how deeply God desires us to live in healthy, whole relationships with one another.