

**“Understanding Forgiveness, Part 1” Colossians 3:13, Sermon Notes**  
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**Saving Grace Bible Church**  
**April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2017**  
**Morning Worship Service**

Colossians 3:13

“bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.” (Colossians 3:13 NAS)

Eph 4:32

“And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:32 NAS)

**Introduction**

- As many of you know I am currently in the process of working on my Doctorate in Preaching
- I trust I am in the process becoming a better communicator of God’s Word
- I have chosen to write on the subject of preaching forgiveness

**I am not writing on this subject because it is an easy subject**

- As any Christian knows forgiveness is hard
- Understanding the doctrine of forgiveness is equally as hard
- Let alone preaching forgiveness
  - Once you know what forgiveness is biblically
  - Once you have applied it biblically
  - Then we are forced to communicate what it is biblically

I think there comes a point for everyone in their studies where they take in so much information, evaluate so many sources, hear so many arguments that they simply can’t tell which way is up or down. Nor can they determine what is right or wrong. It is usually in these moments of despair that we say “What in the world have I gotten myself into?”

- This week I was listening to Matthew Waymeyer of The Expositor’s Seminary talk about the writing of his new book *Amillennialism and the Age to Come: A Premillennial Critique of the Two-age model*
- He too described this moment of being overwhelmed by the complexity and challenge while he was in a coffee shop
- I felt a measure of relief knowing this is common to man

Often I am reminded of what preacher said in Ecclesiastes 12:12

“But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body.” (Ecclesiastes 12:12 NAS)

- Not just reading many books is wearying but also the writing of them are wearying.

- What have I gotten myself into? Oh Lord Help me

Now what gives me comfort in this whole process is that this doctrine is immensely practical.

- Everyone in this room has need for forgiveness. That is either to receive it or to give it
- If you have been in any relationship for any amount of time you have needed to give and receive forgiveness
- So I go into this study for us
- I go knowing I need this doctrine and you need this doctrine
- I know going into this study, the best thing for our Church is knowing how to communicate God's message of forgiveness

Now I am going to give you a forgiveness primer. That is really an introduction to the forgiveness landscape

- This primer will provide for us the context of forgiveness doctrinally
- By this I mean the contemporary mindset on forgiveness and how that mindset informs our teaching and practice of forgiveness

Let us be honest, none of us come to the Bible neutrally and certainly none of us come to the doctrine of forgiveness neutrally

- We come with experiences
- We come with presuppositions
- We come with a preconceived understanding of what God teaches in His Word

So as we start this journey together I am not asking you to discard those things. I am asking you to properly measure your experiences, presuppositions, and understanding against a faithful exposition of God's Word and to work with all your might to keep your experiences and presuppositions from determining what a passage must mean

One of the chief demonstrations of my book on forgiveness is this, often our doctrine and experience shapes our teaching rather than an exposition of the scriptures shaping our teaching

- I have said it like this in our church, "Our theology is a servant to our exegesis not a master to it."
  - Exegesis is the practice of rightly interpreting God's Word
  - Hermeneutics is the science and art of rightly applying God's Word
  - Finally Homiletics is the science and art of explaining the right interpretation of God's Word

When we come to interpret God's word, that is practice exegesis, we can easily allow our experiences, or theology, or even our desires to shape our conclusions

- This is no more evident than in the doctrine of forgiveness
- Preconceived notions, theological paradigms, personal experiences, emotional distress, even irrational fears have shaped the perspective of many as they come to the doctrine of forgiveness
  - I read one author for example that was so against the idea of unconditional forgiveness that many of his illustrations of people who held the view or were taught the view died. The conclusion is don't take the unconditional forgiveness view because it will kill you
  - I am sure he believes it

As well I have been looking at this issue and thinking about it for nearly 20 years

- When John MacArthur wrote his book "The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness" in 1998 it was immensely helpful to me
- The book was in response to another book written by Jay Adams in 1994 entitled "From Forgiven to Forgiving." At the time this work was very popular in Biblical Counseling circles
- Even today predominately the view point presented in this work is held to by many if not all Biblical Counselors in the ACBC (Association of Certified Biblical Counselors) movement
  - My dear friend and author Stuart Scott who has written "The Exemplary Husband" in which he has a chapter on forgiveness and he presents Jay Adam's conditional forgiveness view (don't worry I will explain this later)
  - Ken Sande – President of Peace Maker Ministries – who has written books like "The Peace Maker" present the same view
  - More recently in 2008 Chris Brauns wrote a book entitled "Unpacking Forgiveness" which seems to be a rehashing of Adam's view. I say seems because I have been in personal discussion with him and he does not think this is what his work does. But as you will see from his definition and explanation he is undoubtedly in this camp
- I have dear friends on both sides of the divide of this doctrinal issue and by no means do I think any one of these men land where they land because they have not done their homework or they are not prepared for the debate
- I find myself, even now nearly 20 years down the line still holding to the same view I have held to from my early years in school and as a young Christian
- So this either means I am convinced doctrinally or that I am really stubborn
  - Honestly both are a possibility at this point
  - After hearing all that I say through this whole series you are not convinced or I have left more questions than answers then we will know I am just being stubborn and not really submitting to the teaching of God's Word.

Where are we going?

- These next couple of weeks are just an introduction to the issue
  - I want to give you the landscape or context of the theological debate with the various supports and proofs
  - I am going to help you understand the history of this doctrine, the definition of forgiveness, and then finally its application

- I will seek to show you the confusion caused today by the various methods of interpretation
- Finally, I will seek to lay down the Bible's teaching on forgiveness
- Once I turn to God's Word on forgiveness my Thesis actually begins

I will teach through the Synoptic Gospels and every passage Jesus taught on forgiveness. We will basically look at Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. We will draw out principles and then seek to draw principles we can apply to our life and doctrine

- I figure there is no better way to get forgiveness right than to understand what Jesus taught on it
- That series will be a 10 week series through the New Testament and will begin sometime this summer
- With that we will have a beginning Survey where I will give you the opportunity to answer questions about forgiveness before we begin and then you will answer the same questions after we have finished to see if we made any progress

In the meantime this sermon, next week, and maybe the week after will allow me to give a justification for why we need a study on forgiveness when so much has been written on it. Basically we shall demonstrate this morning the importance of the study of forgiveness

- On the one hand someone could make the case, "You simply do not like what 'most everyone' is saying about forgiveness so you are writing your own view"
  - This might be true
  - I question myself regularly about this to guard my heart
  - Pride is a persnickety devil. That is we can be so painstakingly careful to explain certain ideas and easily be driven by Pride rather than actually helpful
- But on the other hand it could also be true that there is so much confusion about what forgiveness is and does that we need more clarity
  - It is my hope that this is the need I am addressing

Let us begin by acknowledging the problem of forgiveness

- We hate giving it but love receiving it
- Giving someone forgiveness can feel at times like kissing your grandma. "You do it because you have to but it is never satisfying."
- And when someone does not mind kissing their grandma you look at them like they are strange
- Just as when someone actually forgives in a godly way they are looked at as if they are strange

The Problem with forgiveness is that to truly forgive someone is hard

- I like how Jay Adam's describes the problem of forgiveness. He quotes Charles Spurgeon who had a history of battling with Gout. His battle with Gout eventually took his life. When a man who suffered from Rheumatism expressed to Spurgeon how his ailment was worse than what Spurgeon was facing. Spurgeon responded in a way that only Spurgeon could. He Said:

“I’ll tell you the difference between rheumatism and gout: Put your finger in a vice and turn it until you cannot take the pain; that’s rheumatism. Now give it three more turns; that’s gout.” Adams pg 15

- Adam’s then goes on to explain applying forgiveness hurts like rheumatism and gout
- This is a very helpful illustration

Often times when dealing with issues surrounding forgiveness there are significant hurts. Not only do we have to deal with someone who has sinned against us. But then we also have to work through to release the person from the debt they owe us

Let us be honest, when granting forgiveness to someone we feeling like we are going through double jeopardy

- I don’t mean by this we are forced to watch back to back reruns of the show Jeopardy
- Double Jeopardy is being charged with the same crime twice. Our laws forbid this practice
- But when dealing with sin and needing to forgive someone we feel as if we are going through double jeopardy. First we were sinned against and secondly we have to release the person of their sin debt
- This simply feels unfair. This cannot be right. There is no way that we can be asked to do this

Sin hurts and the idea we should forgive someone feels like the gout test Spurgeon spoke of

- What if I forgive them and they hurt me again in the same way?
- What if I forgive them and they sin against me in a greater way?
- What if I forgive them and they repeat the sin with someone else?
- If I forgive them how are they going to learn not to sin in this way again?
- What about my loss? What about my suffering? What about the hurts I have experienced?

Frankly, dealing with sin hurts and when we have to forgive others, the pain of sin is very real to us

- Nobody in this room minds forgiveness when they are receiving it, but many if not all struggle with it when we need to give it

The problem of forgiveness is that life is messy

- There is the old adage that there is nothing new under the sun. This is true, but it is also true that with the advancement of society and technology we are inventing new way to practice the oldest evils
- The oldest sins are packaged in the newest technology

As soon as we start talking about forgiveness the most complex and most serious issues come rushing out

- Incest
- Abuse
- Murder
- Domestic Violence
- Genocide
- Catfish schemes

- Abuse of authority
- Catholic Priest Scandal
- Corruption among Pastors
- Corruption in law enforcement

There is literally no end to the amount of corruption and violence in the world and the need for forgiveness

- Every book I have read on forgiveness presents some complex scenarios when applying the doctrine of forgiveness
  - How does a woman forgive her rapist?
  - How does a family forgive the drunk driver who killed their child?
  - How does a congregation forgive a Pastor who has abused his authority?
  - How do we forgive those who have sinned against us?

If we are honest most of us would rather run away from the problem and hide and act like nothing happened

- It is far easier to go into a corner and weep and lick our wounds than it is to deal with sin in a Biblical way
  - Confronting sin can be draining
  - Dealing with sinners can be confusing as they lie, twist the facts, intimidate, avoid responsibility and blame you for their actions
- At times we have been violated in ways that have now defined us in new ways. The sins of others cause us scars which now identify us
  - Boston Marathon Bombing Survivors
  - 911 Survivors
  - Rape Survivors
  - Those who have been through Church splits carry the stigma around and feel the weight and emotional turmoil
  - When we have been cheated on, lied to, slandered, mistreated, abused, or maligned we wear those hurts as part of our personal identity and we get to a point of establishing our new identity based on the past sins we have experienced

If you talk to people who are victims they say things like:

- “You do not understand”
- “You cannot understand the pain and suffering I have experienced”
- “You do not know what it is like”
- “You cannot imagine how bad this hurts”
- “I have forgiven them but they still have to earn my trust.”

This world, with all its sin, and with all the ways we can access sin, is messy

- We even have Sin Cities where we are told what happens there stays there
- Unless you get arrested there, that follows you around forever

It is also clear that a lack of forgiveness destroys

- More families, businesses, and churches fall apart because of a lack of forgiveness

- Businesses which have had great promise have collapsed because of a lack of forgiveness
- John MacArthur mentioned that most if not all of his counseling cases relates in some way to the doctrine of forgiveness
- If we do not forgive it will tear us up. A lack of forgiveness will consume us
- It will rob us of joy
- It will rob us of peace
- A lack of forgiveness will make us bitter against those who harmed us
- A lack of forgiveness can lead to angry rages
- A lack of forgiveness can lead to depression and sleepless nights as you turn over in your heart and mind the events over and over again
- A lack of forgiveness will make you untrusting and self-focused. Because you do not want anyone to hurt you again in the way you have been hurt in the past
- A lack of forgiveness will poison your view of God and His sovereign work in your life

And most significantly understanding forgiveness is hard

- If you think applying forgiveness is hard, give your hand to trying to define and explain forgiveness

Chris Brauns in his book “Unpacking Forgiveness” says

- “Unpacking forgiveness requires much effort.” Pg 35
- Not only is the doctrine ‘emotionally charged’ but it is also ‘intellectually challenging.’ Pg 36
- Chris Brauns goes on to explain how the doctrines of ‘soteriology’, ‘ecclesiology’, and ‘eschatology’ shape our understanding of forgiveness. Ibid
- This matter is hard to understand
  - What does 1 John 1:9 mean when it says that if we confess (Present Active Indicative) our sins He is faithful and righteous to forgive us?
    - If we stop forgiving do we lose our salvation?
    - Is this only for the first time believers?
    - Is this verse for Christians at all?
  - When Christ was on the cross and he said “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34) did he show the crowds forgiveness? Was he simply demonstrating an attitude of forgiveness?
  - In Matthew 18:21-35 we have the parable of the unforgiving servant, is Jesus addressing believers or unbelievers? If it is to believers does this mean we could lose our salvation?
  - In Eph 4:32 and Col 3:13 we are told to forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you
    - This ‘just as’ does it mean manner – that is in the same way – or extent – that is to the same degree?
    - Are we to model our forgiveness after God by following His conduct or by being as lavishly gracious as He was?

Then of course there are the doctrinal questions surrounding forgiveness

- Is forgiveness conditional or unconditional?
- Can forgiveness be defined as Judicial and Parental?

- Are there certain matters we just ignore and move on? Or do we confront them and stand ready to forgive?
- Should we have an attitude of forgiveness? Should we just cover and move on? At what point is a sin too big that we cannot just cover it, drop it, or ignore it?
- Do I keep a track of wrongs and wait to be asked for forgiveness?
- If I have asked for forgiveness of my sins at salvation do I need to ask for forgiveness of sins in my sanctification? After salvation should we be asking for forgiveness at all?
- If sin has taken place who initiates forgiveness?
- Can unbelievers forgive if we have sinned against them? How do we handle the sins of unbelievers who have sinned against?
- If forgiveness is based on repentance what kind of repentance are we looking for? Is it simply the words “I repent and please forgive me” or are we looking for certain actions?

Do you see the theological rabbit hole we have gotten ourselves into?

- It is no wonder that people want to run away screaming when anyone brings up the doctrine of forgiveness

Now let us lay some ground rules for our study

1. The Bible is the ultimate authority and will be the final authority on all we believe and practice
  - a. This means the Bible trumps our experience
  - b. We want to know God’s teaching on this subject
  - c. God has given us everything pertaining to life and godliness 2 Pet 1:3 so this question has to be clear from His word
  - d. This also means we are going to be exegetical first
  - e. It also means that we understand that theology has a place in our exegesis, and that is last. Harmony with the rest of the scripture is the final step. Not the first or middle but LAST
  - f. The passages speak first, then we see what the rest of the scriptures say to see if we got it right
2. We expect the message to be clear
  - a. We do not need a convoluted explanation
  - b. If we are having to ignore the plain meaning and obvious teaching of the text our theological construct is likely skewed
  - c. This is what theologians call perspicuity – which is a complex way of saying clarity
  - d. We expect God to speak about important doctrines in ways that are clear and understandable
3. We expect consistency
  - a. To come up with a system that cannot be consistently applied is a clear sign we likely have something wrong
  - b. As we will see in our studies some say we just drop sin. We cover it. We ignore it. We let it go

- c. This is great, I am all for that but if we just drop sin, let it go, cover it, or ignore it then how are we dealing with sin in the same way God is?
4. We cannot be afraid of complexity
- a. Just because a doctrine is said to be clear it does not mean it is not complex
  - b. How can God be Sovereign and Man Responsible
  - c. How Can God be eternal? Not have a beginning or end
  - d. How can Christ be 100% God and 100% Man?
  - e. How can salvation be by faith alone apart from works and yet James says show me your faith by your works?

The doctrine of forgiveness is complex and for that reason it is a worthy study for a doctoral thesis

- But more importantly it will help us honor God
  - We are taught by Jesus How to pray Matt 6 and he explains we are to forgive the debts of others if we have been forgiven
  - We are given the model of forgiveness in Jesus Christ
  - We expect that those who have been forgiven much will in turn forgive others
5. I would expect to be charitable
- a. It is easy to take a view and then be very uncharitable to those who do not take our view
  - b. We could slip into attacks or false arguments
  - c. I expect to present the other side in the best possible light. I want to present the strongest case of those I am disagreeing with so that we can see their best stuff
  - d. It is only fair and right. This means simply more listening, pondering, and Berean activity for you. But it is an act of love to be gracious and thoughtful

This is your part in this process:

- Be thoughtful
- Think carefully about what is said
- Evaluate intently
- Work cautiously
- Give people the benefit of the doubt

I am sure every author is trying to honor God as they write about the doctrine of forgiveness

### **Conclusion**

I really did intend to get further but as I started to put my notes together I saw that we were not going to get very far this morning

- What I have sought to demonstrate to you this morning is the importance of this doctrine and study
- We need to think through this issue and we need to apply this doctrine to our hearts and minds

I know many of you are hurting and suffering and were wishing we would to more this morning so my simplest and best encouragement to you is this: Look at what God has forgiven you and then go out and be that gracious and kind to others

- All of your sins nailed to the cross
- All of your debt taken out of the way
- All of your transgressions removed
- All of your punishment paid

"Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"<sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."<sup>23</sup> "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves."<sup>24</sup> "And when he had begun to settle *them*, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents."<sup>25</sup> "But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made."<sup>26</sup> "The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.'<sup>27</sup> "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt."<sup>28</sup> "But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began* to choke *him*, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.'<sup>29</sup> "So his fellow slave fell down and *began* to entreat him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.'<sup>30</sup> "He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed."<sup>31</sup> "So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened."<sup>32</sup> "Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me.'<sup>33</sup> 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?'<sup>34</sup> "And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him."<sup>35</sup> "So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:21-35 NAS)

Go and forgive everyone from your heart

Next week we will look at the context of forgiveness, the definition of forgiveness, and then finally what I call the Forgiveness Paradigm

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