

Hi everyone, my name is Mark, I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance; I'm glad you're here and a special welcome to any of you who are here visiting over the long weekend.

In a moment I'm going to turn our attention to the Scriptures and continue with our teaching series on Loving Relationships, but before I do, I wanted to let you in on something that is just beginning so that you can pray along with us.

As many of you know, we have a great team of people who are involved in our student ministry. We have dozens of committed volunteers, and a few part-time staff who have been leading the ministry. At the end of June two of our part-time staff members, Jen Lewis and Charlotte Browning will be stepping off our paid staff team.

Jen will be going home to Hamilton for a few months and is looking forward to the season of rest God has called her into. And Charlotte is going to continue in our youth ministry as a volunteer as she pursues some other opportunities the Lord is beginning to speak to her about. Words can't describe how wonderful these two women are...they are going to be deeply missed by our students and by our staff team.

Practically, this means that we need to look for someone to join our staff team and join Mark Koop in Student Ministries. We've formed a search committee made up of parents, students, and volunteers, with Dave Sattler as the chair; already they've met a few times, and are pouring through resumes, and checking references. Please pray with

us for Jen and Charlotte as they step out into something new...we'll do that publicly as we get closer to the end of June. And please join us in asking God to lead us in hiring a new youth pastor.

Forgiveness Is The Way Forward:

Every so often, in the history of the church, movements have arisen that aim to call people back to the way of Jesus. Eugene Peterson notes that some of these movements have at their centre the idea that "the way of Jesus is the way of perfection."¹ That, over time, we can become sinless, or perfect, in thought, word and deed.

I've met a lot of people in my years as a pastor, but I have yet to meet anyone who has come close to perfection; perfection is hard in an imperfect world. One day, when we see Jesus face to face, our imperfections will be burned away in the light of His loving, transforming presence, but for now, we're all stuck with one another, imperfections and all.

And our imperfections are felt most keenly in our relationships. All of us long to experience perfectly loving relationships. But our on-the-ground reality is that God is the only One who can love us perfectly; every other relationship falls short. We all experience relational brokenness, and, contribute to the brokenness in others.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 79.

Peterson writes, “We can no more live a sinless life than we can plant potatoes without getting our hands dirty. But neither do we have to go around all day with dirty hands. There are washbasins well-supplied with soap in our homes and workplaces”.² And when it comes to our broken relationships, there are ways of dealing with our dirty hands so to speak, but I have to warn you, the way forward involves a cost that many of us are unwilling to pay.

I mentioned last week that I’ve been re-reading a book by C.S. Lewis entitled, *Mere Christianity*. In it he writes, “I said [previously]...that chastity was the most unpopular of the Christian virtues, but I’m not sure I was right. I believe there is one even more unpopular.”³ The virtue in question is **forgiveness**. He continues, “Every one says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive”.⁴ *Forgiveness is easy to understand, but hard to receive, and even harder to give.*

Illustration: One day last Summer, I was running on the Baden Powell Trail, going up and over Mount Seymour. When you’re trail running you need to pay a lot of attention to where you place your feet; there are so many roots and rocks that will take you down if you’re not careful. I was so focussed on where my feet were landing that I wasn’t really paying attention to the conversation running through my mind.

I was rehearsing a conversation that had taken place months before. In that particular conversation, in a group setting someone had spoken some pretty harsh words in my general direction. At the time I determined that nothing would be gained by firing back a response in the group circle, and so I held my tongue. The person later apologized; all was well, or so I thought.

But months later, on Mount Seymour, the conversation was being replayed; I remembered every last harsh word that was spoken and the way in which they were said. And I caught myself doing more than merely replaying these words, I was carrying on an imaginary conversation in which I was firing back at this person and demolishing them with my rapier wit and intellect.

Like I said, I was concentrating on trail running, and all the while my heart was in turmoil over words spoken months before. I was completely caught off guard. What struck me was intensity with which I want to punish this person for what they had said. What I had consciously suppressed, was coming out subconsciously. These harsh words still had a power over me. Clearly I had not forgiven.

In every friendship, every marriage, every family, and every church, we find imperfect people living out their imperfections every day. Conflict is inevitable. But I’ve heard said that while “*conflict is inevitable, combat is optional.*”

² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 94.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 101.

⁴ Lewis, 101.

Jesus lived a perfect life, but when He invited us to follow after Him, He did not invite us into the way of perfection; none of us can attain it. Instead, He introduces us to the way of forgiveness. And friends, forgiveness is the only way forward into loving relationships. In the absence of food, we perish physically; in the absence of forgiveness, we perish relationally.

If you have your Bibles with you this morning, I would like to invite you to turn with me to a verse found in Ephesians 4. If you are using the Blue Bibles, you can find our text on page 1822. Let me read Ephesians 4:32, “*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*”

I said last week, when it comes to love, we need to begin the conversation with God because God **is** love. In the same way, when it comes to forgiveness, we begin the conversation with God because He is the source from which forgiveness flows.

Let’s begin with the last five words in the verse: ***in Christ God forgave you.***

God created humanity for relationship with Him: perfect, unbroken, relationship. But right from the beginning, humanity attempted to live independently of God, to live by our own standards, to live according to our own resources. And look what we’ve created: our experiences of sickness and disease, violence and oppression, poverty and famine are the results of our little “experiment” with independence. When we live life apart from the One who gives it, everything begins to fall apart.

The Bible spells out what we know intuitively: we’ve all fallen short of the ideal. It’s interesting to hear people talk about the genesis of the world apart from a Creator, apart from Intelligent Design. Without God, what one is left with is a world that’s come about by random chance. And yet, most of these same people live (as we do) with a deep inner sense that things are broken, that things should be better, that violence, famine, disease, and oppression are an aberration.

But in a world without God, without intelligent design, without moral design, there is no such thing as aberration...it just is what it is. But, if God intelligently designed this world, and humanity rejected His design, then we can explain the broken mess we experience. In the absence of food, we perish physically; in the absence of forgiveness, we perish relationally. The Bible teaches that at the centre of the world’s brokenness, lies a broken relationship with God.

And so God became flesh and blood, and took on our brokenness firsthand. But, Jesus didn’t contribute to the brokenness, He counteracted it. He lived in perfect communion with God the Father, and brought healing to those around Him. And then, in an act of self-giving love, Jesus took upon Himself the weight of the world’s brokenness, rebellion, and sin. Jesus died on the cross representing all of humanity. In His death, He bore the Father’s righteous judgement. His resurrection was an indication of His vindication: His death paid in full the debt we owed to God.

The result is the offer of forgiveness; forgiveness provides the way back into relationship with God. God’s forgiveness is not something we deserve, it’s a gift. His forgiveness is not something we could ever earn; again, it’s pure gift from God, and it’s for you.

Jesus doesn't invite us into the way of perfection, we could never attain it; He introduces us to the way of forgiveness. In Christ, God offers us forgiveness; the offer is before us. We receive God forgiveness like we would any other gift: gratefully, humbly, and with great joy. His forgiveness sets us free.

The Christian message of forgiveness begins with God: *in Christ God forgave you*. But there is another dimension to forgiveness; brokenness in relationship extends beyond the vertical dimension to the horizontal one. I said at the beginning that there are ways of dealing with our relational brokenness, but that the only way forward involves a cost that many of us have been unwilling to pay. That cost is forgiving others.

Lois' story: At this point I would like to invite a friend of mine, Lois McCann, to come and share a part of her personal journey in forgiveness.

I would like to read Ephesians 4:32 again, "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*" One scholar suggests that what Paul gives us here is a take off on what has been dubbed the "Golden Rule". In Matthew 7:12, Jesus said, "*Do to others what you would have them do to you.*" Here, Paul says, "Extend to others what God has extended to you." In Christ, God has forgiven you, so, give away what you have received. This word, "received," is an important word I think.

Illus: As a father, I regularly find myself stepping into arguments between my two children. Sometimes when I step into the argument,

I'm merely trying to shut things down so that I can have a little peace and quiet. But in my better moments, I step into the argument in order to bring perspective. Often the arguments are over something seemingly benign, like the blankets we have laying on our living room couch. We have two blankets, and two children...simple right? Things are rarely simple when humanity is involved.

"*But I had them first,*" one of my children will say, "*they're both mine!*" In my better moments, I will smile and say gently, "Who's blankets are these?" To which they will sheepishly reply, "*Yours*". When something isn't "ours," when it's something we've received, we tend to treat it differently don't we?

If forgiveness is something we've worked for, something we've earned, then we'll likely be tempted to stamp the word "mine" across it and do with it as we please. Christian forgiveness is centered in the experience of being forgiven by the God we've offended. And because His forgiveness is unearned, pure gift, it's meant to change the way we look at those who have offended us. We extend what has been extended to us.

Jesus once observed that those who have been forgiven much, love much. When we love little, or forgive little, at times it's because we think we've done little to offend, that there's little in us that God or others need to forgive.

When the subject of forgiveness comes up, a crowded room often goes quiet. But if you can get people talking, often there are two objections, or barriers that keep people from practicing forgiveness; one is the desire for justice, and the other is personal pain. Let's start with the desire for justice.

Yearning for Justice: I've sat down with many different Christians and heard many of them say, "But if I forgive them, I'm saying that what they've done to me is 'okay'." Friends, that is not Christian forgiveness. There's a world of difference between forgiveness and excusing what someone has done. Christian forgiveness does not use words like "it's no big deal," "it's okay," "forget about it". Christian forgiveness does not excuse damage done, injustice practiced, or evil.

Neither does christian forgiveness neglect justice; instead, we recognize the One who is Judge over all. In forgiveness, we do not give up our "rights" to justice; instead, we choose to place justice in the hands of the only One who is truly Just. Romans 12:18-19 says, "Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone."⁵ "Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."⁶

Again, Christian forgiveness needs to be centered in the forgiveness God offers us, centered in the death and resurrection of Jesus. When we ask God to forgive us we recognize that our sin, against God and others, was laid upon Jesus. God dealt with our sin, He judged and punished our sin through the death of Jesus. In the Christian way of thinking, justice was served as Jesus suffered and died.

But Jesus didn't just die to pay for **my** rebellion against God...His death atoned for all the things **I've** done, **you've** done, **the world** has

done to hurt and destroy others; Jesus paid for it all. And so, in that sense, when we say to ourselves, "I can't forgive, justice must be done!", God the Father replies, "It was the need for justice, Mine and yours, that sent my Son to His death; more than you know, justice has been served."

Extending forgiveness does not mean there will be no consequence or restitution required. As one author writes, "Forgiveness is not the absence of accountability. It is a refusal to let a past wrong destroy present relations."⁷

Let me continue on with that thought by addressing the personal pain that often crowds out our decision to forgive.

Personal Pain: we heard some of this is Lois' story, and it mirrors what each of us has felt at times. I'm still in pain, I'm still so wounded by what has been said or done...and since I'm not free from this pain, I'm clearly not ready to forgive.

What we have in the Christian practice of forgiveness is a paradox; what appears to be a contradiction in terms is the only way forward. We might say, *I'm not free from this hurt, so I cannot forgive.* And God responds saying, "You will not be free from this hurt until you begin to forgive."

⁵ Romans 12:18, New Living Translation.

⁶ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Romans 12:19.

⁷ Snodgrass, 260.

Those of us who have walked the road of forgiveness know that forgiveness is a costly act. But it is equally true that there is a great cost in refusing to forgive. Refusing to forgive costs us our own freedom.

In our desire for justice, we think that withholding forgiveness keeps our offenders bound to the pain they have caused. More often than not, when we refuse to forgive, we end up in a prison of our own making: we become chained, enslaved, captive to our own anger, bitterness, and judgement. Forgiveness, we find, is just as much about releasing ourselves from hurt as it is releasing others to meet God's justice and mercy.

Conclusion: In just a moment we are going to share the Lord's Supper together, but before we do, let me conclude my sermon with the following word. Very rarely should a 30 minute sermon be treated as the final word on any subject. This is certainly the case with the subject of forgiveness and how we practice it in our relationships. Let me encourage you to think of this sermon not as being the final word, but as the first word in a conversation that needs to continue on in your own life, and in our corporate life together.

Many of us have been chained in the past, or are presently in chains because forgiveness has been withheld. I've said this morning that forgiveness is the only way forward...it is the only way forward in your relationship with God, and it will be the only way forward in your relationships with others. Maybe God has brought a relationship to mind this morning, where forgiveness is needed...my dear friends, do not ignore what the Spirit is saying to you. Let Him lead you in a process that will lead to your freedom.

Communion: In Christ, God has forgiven us. This is at the heart of what we celebrate when we come to the Lord's Supper: God the Father did not count our sins against us, they were counted against Jesus, and He willingly embraced death for our sake. This broken bread is a symbol of Christ's body that was broken for us. This juice is a symbol of Christ's blood that was shed for us.

If you are relatively new to coming to church then you might think it's strange how much Christians talk about and sing about the blood of Jesus. I can promise you it's not because Christians are closet vampires. We talk about the blood of Jesus because He gave His life for us; it's our way of saying that He took our place when He didn't have to, He shouldered our punishment, and it cost Him His life's blood.

Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup we do so remembering and celebrating the fact that in Christ, God has forgiven us. If you have never received the forgiveness of God, it is available to you today. Turn your heart to the Lord, put your faith in what He accomplished for you, ask Him to forgive all that you've said and done against Him and others...and then come, and participate in this holy meal.

Invite servers