

It's amazing how God can meet us in the darkest of places and turn our life around. There's nothing more powerful than a personal story of someone encountering the love and forgiveness of Jesus.

For those who don't know me, my name is Shane Gould, and I serve as one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance. Over the last number of weeks, we have been making our way through the Lord's Prayer, line by line, petition by petition. I don't know about you, but I have found this series to have been a powerful time. God has been speaking to me.

I don't know when exactly I heard it the first time, but my earliest memory of hearing the Lord's Prayer was in elementary school. Every morning at a few minutes before 9am the voice of our principle would crackle through the PA system, reciting Jesus' model prayer. I have to admit that hearing the Lord's Prayer this way, monotonously read every morning through the staticky PA system, didn't leave me with a very warm feeling. I can still hear Principle Lenz's voice, "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." This 5th petition is the one that stands out in my memory the most and is the focus of this morning's message.

Whether I realized it at the time or not, contemplating these words every morning at school was teaching me about how important forgiving others is to God. How close to his heart it is and how much extending forgiveness needs to be a daily exercise. Even though I was quite young at the time, I knew that these words were important, that they were words God wanted to shape my life by.

Last week Pastor Mark introduced the first half of this 5th petition, "forgive us our debts," where we saw that our greatest need is our need for God's forgiveness. Like the heavy backpack Mark first carried and then took off, Jesus offers to lift off of us the heavy burden and penalty of our sin when we accept the gift of his forgiveness that has been made available through the cross.

But forgiveness isn't something we just experience between God and us. In the same way he cancelled our debts, Jesus says we must

cancel the debt others owe us by leaving them behind with him at the cross.

The Lord's Prayer has helped teach me from a very young age that the forgiveness I ask from God is directly connected to me being willing to forgive others.

Out of the six petitions Jesus gives us in this model prayer, this petition of forgiveness is the only one that is expanded on with a condition. We can only ASK God for his forgiveness AS we are willing to extend it to others.

At the end of his prayer, Jesus goes on to say in Matthew 6:14, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Pray.

As we talk about the importance of forgiveness, there are a number of things I want to point out this morning.

The first thing is that **Forgiveness Extends In Two Directions**. Out of the forgiveness of the cross, God reaches down to us in Jesus, making a way for us to come up to the Father. Forgiveness begins in a vertical direction, between you and God. But then it must begin to flow horizontally, where we take what we have freely received from Jesus, and extend it to those who are indebted to us. British pastor and theologian John Stott said that "God forgives only the penitent, and one of the chief evidences of true penitence is a forgiving spirit."¹ Our ability to forgive others is not what makes us forgiven by God. It's simply a key evidence of having truly experienced the forgiveness of Jesus at the heart level. And just as God took time to bring you to a place of understanding your need for his forgiveness, it sometimes

¹ John R.W. Stott, *Christian Counter-culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1978), pg 149.

takes time for us to really begin forgiving others. But forgiving others is where we must go if we want to fully receive what the cross offers.

It's been said that every petition that Jesus has given us in the Lord's Prayer has been illustrated for us in a story Jesus told or through an action Jesus took in the Gospels.

As I think about Jesus' teaching that our experience of being forgiven by God is directly connected to our willingness to forgive others, I can't help but think of the parable Jesus told in Matthew chapter 18 of the Unmerciful Servant.

For the sake of time, I won't read it to you now, but the story basically goes like this. Jesus said the Kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One of the king's servants came before him with a mountain of debt he could never possibly repay. The king took pity on the servant, graciously cancelling his debt and letting him go. A short time later, this same servant went out to find someone who owed him a debt that was tiny in comparison to the amount the king had just forgiven him of. Demanding payment, this servant began choking the man who owed him the debt to try to make him repay it.

Jesus ends the story with the king finding out that the servant he had let go was now demanding payment from someone else. The king said to him, "You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. **33**Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' **34**In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. **35**" [Jesus then said,] "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."²

When we refuse to forgive others, we are cutting ourselves off from the flow of God's grace in our own lives. Refusing to forgive others leaves us vulnerable to the torture of bitterness and anger that

inevitably takes hold of our hearts when we persist in holding someone in judgment.

In the Lord's prayer and throughout the Gospels, Jesus teaches us that we can only expect to experience the grace of his forgiveness to the *degree* to which we are willing to offer it to others. Jesus lived and died for the sole purpose of offering us the freedom of his forgiveness. The heart of our life needs to be the same – forgiving those around us.

Eugene Peterson says that in forgiving others "we are pulled into the action of God in relationships...we're getting in on what God is doing." We can never think that we can enjoy being forgiven by God without being willing to begin to forgive others. Forgiving others isn't a nice suggestion. It's the only way we can truly enter into God's forgiveness.

The second observation I want to make about forgiveness is that we can either pursue **Justice or Mercy, but Not Both**. I have found that when there's unforgiveness operating in my life, it's rooted in a deep desire to see justice served. When someone has done something to hurt me, I want that person to pay for what they did. In each of us, there's a cry for justice. Part of the reason we want to see justice for things that have been done to us or done to others is that God has created us with a need for it. Whether you acknowledge God or not, justice is something every human being wants. And it's because we're made in God's image, who is a just God. The Bible says that God is concerned about fairness and for things to be made right. Isaiah 30:18 says, "Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!"

The only problem with justice is that we are all guilty! We have all wronged each other. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. When we have been wronged, we have a need for justice. But because we're all guilty of hurting people, we have a greater need for mercy. James 2:13 says that in Jesus, "Mercy triumphs over

² Matthew 18:32-35 (NIV)

judgment!" In other words, justice is good because without it, life would be hopeless, but mercy is better.

But you can only have one or the other. You can't have both. You can't say, 'God, I want mercy for me but justice for them!' Jesus says, no it doesn't work that way. If you want my mercy, then you're going to have to be merciful. If it's justice you want, then you too will have to be judged. Jesus said in Luke 6:36-38 "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

So, we have to understand that when we're unwilling to forgive someone, we open ourselves to judgment and bondage. Our thoughts and words against others not only hinder us but actually invite judgment upon our own lives.

Let me take a few moments to explain what I mean. When it comes to the things of God, the battle is always fought in our minds. That's where spiritual battles take place. That's why the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:5 said, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." It's in our mind that we make judgments, where we entertain negative and critical thoughts about others, or even ourselves. We rehearse those injustices that have been done to us. Or we go over our failures or our mistakes again and again. In so doing, we are inadvertently exercising judgment over others and even over ourselves.

Instead of aligning our thoughts with God and his loving mercy, we begin to sound more like the enemy. The Book of Revelation describes Satan as an accuser. Revelation chapter 12:9-10 reads, "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.....the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down." The enemy wants us to hold grudges against

one another in judgment. And in the process, pull us away from mercy and joy.

But instead of crying out for justice or judgment, Jesus invites us to align our voice with his in crying out for mercy. As Jesus hung on the cross, full of pain, betrayal, and being completely innocent of any crime or any wrong doing, he cried out on behalf, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"(Luke 23:34).

This morning, I want to invite you to let mercy triumph over a sense of justice in your life. It may be incredibly hard to let go of that desire to want justice. Because of Jesus and what he did and what he went through, we can be confident that God understands. Jesus understands what it means to be done wrong by, to be betrayed, to be abandoned, to be conspired against, to be rejected, to be cursed, or even ridiculed. There's nothing this morning that you have endured that Jesus' doesn't understand. He's inviting you to allow his mercy to triumph over your need for justice. He's inviting you to make his cry for mercy, your cry for mercy. "Forgive them Father. They don't know what they have done."

The third thing I want to bring to our attention is that **In Forgiveness We Find Freedom**. The reason for God wanting us to exercise mercy over people and ourselves is because where there's forgiveness there's freedom. Jesus wants you to be set free, not only from God's wrath but from your wrath.

There's two levels you can live life on. You can live at the level of justice, which is down here where the world tries to live and where the enemy is looking to gain rights into your life. Or you can live up here at a higher level, at the level of mercy where Jesus lives and where his grace freely flows. To forgive is a costly act. You have to let go of your rights to be paid back, but it's worth the price. Jesus thought your freedom was worth going to the cross for. God wants you to see that in laying down your right for justice, you are actually gaining a great freedom. Harboring bitterness and anger toward someone is a luxury you cannot afford. In coming to Jesus, you enter life up here with him where there's mercy. But every time someone

hurts you, the enemy and your flesh (that part of you that has still not been transformed to be like God) wants to pull you down to live back down at the justice level.

Imagine if Pastor Mark came up to me and out of the blue, punched me in the jaw! I would think, 'Wow. That really hurt. His punch is a lot harder than it looks! Well, now I've got to decide what I'm going to do about that. If I think, well, I'll show him, then I've got to go back down and punch him back. Well, what's the result? Now both of us have sore jaws and we're both down here, angry. And that's what that enemy wants to do. He wants to pull you down to living at a justice level where all you really end up with is two hurt people who are now bitter, angry, and farther away from God.

But Jesus by the Holy Spirit is saying, Shane, don't go down there. Bring that pain to me. Leave it at the cross. Leave it with me. Let me take care of that. Let my mercy triumph over justice. Despite what he did to you, I love Mark. I want you to bless him so I can keep blessing you. Stay up here with me, where you can stay enjoying my joy and my grace.

You know the people we are holding something against often aren't even aware of it. The one who has hurt us may not even realize it, or have just moved on. My judgment against them isn't really affecting them at all. The person my judgment is most affecting is me. Listen to this quote from Lewis Smedes: "To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and discover that that prisoner is you."³

Staying up here at the level of mercy and grace is not easy. It takes effort. Mercy is not usually our first reaction. The fullness of God's forgiveness takes time to accept and believe at the heart. And it's the same with extending forgiveness to others. It takes time for the words, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" to take root in our heart.

The final thing I want to share this morning is that **It's Time to Forgive**. So, the question to ask this morning is who do you need to forgive? Who do you need to release? To really move into a deep experience of God's grace and freedom, we need to uncover the areas in our hearts where we are calling out for God's justice. When we hold on to judgement it's like giving Satan a key to the door of your heart. Those kinds of thoughts and attitudes will only end up letting in more pain, leaving you toxic to everyone around you.

The measure of grace you give to others will be the measure of grace you will experience in your own life. Release those who have wronged you, and you will begin to experience release. That's why there's so much blessing and healing in choosing to forgive. You are the one set free. God invites us to release our judgements over others, so we can be released, so his healing can begin.

"Forgiveness is clearly God's prescription for the broken. No matter how great the offense or abuses, along the path to healing lies forgiveness. Forgiveness in no way excuses the abuser for the harm they caused you, but it will release you from the power they have had over you." Celebrate Recovery.

If you are here this morning and holding a grudge, a judgement, against someone else in unforgiveness, it's time to release them, so you can be released. Let God release you from a cycle of justice, ushering you into a new place of mercy, where there's joy and peace.

This morning may just be a first step in the path toward the freedom of forgiveness. Nothing is impossible with God. His grace is sufficient for you, no matter the injustice that you have suffered. Forgive and receive the promise of God's forgiveness and freedom. Jesus can help you forgive. He can set you free.

As our worship team comes, I'm just going to ask them to play for a few minutes as we bring ourselves before the Lord. Tell the Lord that you want to know a greater flow of his mercy in your life, his joy, his peace, his grace. Invite the Lord to bring to mind anyone that you need to begin forgiving this morning. Maybe you need to forgive

³ Darrell Johnson. *Fifty-Seven Words that Changed the World*. pg. 79

yourself of something because you've been constantly beating yourself up over something you've done. Maybe you need to release God. Not that he needs forgiveness but you need to repent of judging God, holding him at arm's length because he hasn't been there for you in the way you wanted him to be. At first thought, maybe it appears that there isn't anyone you've been holding something against. But just to be sure, ask him if that is really the case.

We want Jesus to reveal the issues of our hearts this morning, so he can move us into a place of freedom. The choice is ours. We don't have to forgive. But when we do, it gives the Spirit of God permission to move him with his grace, with his healing. Our decision to release someone is his invitation into that place within your heart.

Lord, come and meet us this morning as we lay these wounds and these debts owed to us at the cross.

"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Amen.