

My dad caught me stealing from him when I was 14. My parents were already divorced, and one day a week, we went to his house after school. He usually wouldn't be home from work yet, and he had this giant coke-bottle bank in his bedroom he filled with his spare change. One day, I decided to take a few quarters and walk to the gas station at the corner of the road to buy a soda.

The next time, I took a little more. And then I didn't wait very many days. Before long, every time I was at my dad's house, I took anywhere from \$2-5 in change, which I blew on snacks.

One day, my dad came home early and found me in his bedroom, stealing money. And needless to say, I got in trouble. At the time, I was only concerned with how much trouble I was in, but looking back, I can see how hurt my dad was. He's a generous person, and I'm sure if I had asked him he would have given me a buck or two for snacks from time to time. (Probably not every day, but that's because he's a good parent!)

That's one of the most memorable moments in my life where I was clearly in need of forgiveness. And that's a dangerous place to be because we're not, as a rule, great at forgiveness.

How good are you at forgiveness? For small things, maybe I can forgive (though more often I just forget, which is different). But I've been betrayed. I've been lied about. I've been scapegoated and abandoned by people who were supposed to fight for me. Maybe you've been cheated or cheated on. Abused. Ignored.

Forgiveness is hard because it's *always* relational. The greater the offense, the harder it is to forgive. Many of us carry unforgiveness with us because we have been wounded deeply. We wonder if forgiveness is wise, or if it's even possible.

But we will see today that we were created to be forgivers, and that we find the strength to forgive in first receiving forgiveness from God. In fact, in the famous Lord's Prayer, which is what Jesus taught his followers when they asked him to teach them how to pray, Jesus includes this prayer:

Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us. -- Matthew 6:12

That "as" is important. Growing up saying this prayer, I always thought it was about time. At the same time God is forgiving me, I forgive others. But the Greek isn't about time - it's about mode. A more accurate translation might read:

Forgive us our sins the same way we have forgiven those who sin against us. -- Matthew 6:12

If you're bad at forgiveness, this is not the prayer you want to pray. We want to say, "God, forgive me! Please don't treat me like I treat other people. Treat me *better* than I treat others!"

Which is obviously wrong when we say it out loud, but we want God to forgive us whether or not we forgive.

So let's do better. Let's take a hard look at forgiveness and see whether we might be able to pray as Jesus invites us to pray.

First, let's talk about what forgiveness is *not*. Forgiveness is not something we earn. My dad could've made me pay him back every dime I stole. I could do that, and we might be financially square, but I am not forgiven.

Forgiveness is about the relationship. Even if I had paid my dad back, that wouldn't have healed the wound I created in our relationship. Relationships don't run on spreadsheets.

Forgiveness also isn't just letting something go. Saying, "No big deal! Just forget about it!" Again, my dad could've shrugged his shoulders and said, "No big deal!" But that would've been a lie. It *was* a big deal, and refusing to acknowledge what I was doing was wrong. It wasn't loving for him or me in that situation.

Forgiveness can't be just ignoring offense. We're going to investigate this more next week, but for now, let me be clear: Forgiveness isn't just pretending the wrong never happened.

So what IS forgiveness? First, forgiveness is naming the offense. There can be no forgiveness without an honest assessment of what has been done.

Then, forgiveness is release. It's a canceling of the debt. It's a proclamation that creates a new reality, speaks healing over the relational wound.

Forgiveness is a release from a genuine debt. Forgiveness is a gift. It's a special kind of gift.

We're in the middle of a series called Free of Charge - this whole series is based on the work of Miroslav Volf, one of my favorite theologians. And for the last three weeks, we've talked about giving. Now, we're going to build on that foundation of giving to talk about giving the gift of forgiveness.

[Flow Graphic] If you were here the first week of the series, you remember that we saw that God is most essentially a giver. God exists as three persons in one God, and these three constantly give to and receive from each other. It's out of the overflowing abundance of this self-giving love that God created a world and filled that world with beings - us - who bear this giving God's image.

We are givers because God is a giver.

The problem, though, is that because we are free, we choose not to give. For the last couple of weeks, we've seen how God's loving gift of Jesus' death and the Spirit's new life overcomes our

sin so that we can become the givers we were created to be. God forgives us so we can become givers.

So how does forgiving connect with giving? Before God created the world, God knew we would abuse the gift of our free will. Which means that when God decided to give the gift of creation, God had already committed to rescuing that creation from the Sin we would introduce to the world.

God forgave us before God even created us. God's gift of creation was woven into God's act of forgiveness. That's what Peter says in 1 Peter 1:

You know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And it was not paid with mere gold or silver, which lose their value. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. God chose him as your ransom long before the world began, but now in these last days he has been revealed for your sake. -- 1 Peter 1:18-20

God chose Jesus as your ransom long before the world began. God's giving and God's forgiving are one and the same. Forgiving is how God loves us.

God forgave you before God ever created you.

Hard to believe for some of us. We've heard more of the God of Wrath, the God who smites sinners and hates the wicked and doesn't seem to have much room in his heart for love or forgiveness.

But God's wrath is a good thing. God's wrath grows out of God's love.

Huh?

Wrath is an appropriate response to Sin. When someone hurts a child, how do you feel? Angry. When you see people suffering because of oppression like ISIS, how do you feel? Angry. When someone hurts someone you love, how do you feel? Angry.

Anger is how we respond to injustice. And that's a reflection of God's anger. Could you worship a God who doesn't care about ISIS? Who doesn't bat an eye when a child is abused? A God who doesn't care whether your family is hurt?

No. God's wrath grows from God's love.

And we don't *want* a God who shrugs his shoulders and says, "Eh, forget about it. Let's just pretend that never happened."

We want a God who names these offenses as evil, as sin. We want a God who takes sin seriously.

As long as it's not *my* sin. As long as God's wrath is reserved for *them*, over *there*, then bring it on. But I don't want God to name *my* offenses. I don't want God to look too closely at *me*.

Which again is silly when I say it out loud. I know immediately that is a wrong attitude.

If it's good news that God is wrathful against *their* sins, then it has to be good that God is wrathful against mine. And it can't be about the scale either. Where would we draw the line? What betrayal is small enough God shouldn't care? What abuse? What lie?

This puts us in a difficult place. We want God to be wrathful against Sin, but we realize that must include us as well. Are we hopeless? Are we lost?

No. Because God's wrath is revealed on the Cross. Jesus died *for* our sin. Again and again, the Scriptures talk of Jesus as a substitute for us. He dies in our place, and he bears the consequences of our sin.

This is where some recoil in disgust. It sounds like God really wanted to smite all us sinners, but at the last second took it out on his son instead. That image of God is still, frankly, terrifying.

But when we think of God like this, we forget that God is Trinity. The Father is not separate from the Son. They are one and the same God. So God offers Jesus to die for us, but in Christ, God is dying for us. On the cross, the offended person bears the offense. God dies for us.

On the Cross, God names sin. The cross displays the ugly consequences of all our sinfulness. We cannot escape from it. We cannot hide. We must face it. But on the Cross, God forgives us. God releases us from our debt.

On the Cross, God forgives us.

[Scripture Slide] But it's not just that God dies *for* us. Yes, Jesus is our substitute, but strangely, Jesus' death is something we participate in. We are freed from Sin because we die *with* Jesus. If you have a bible, turn with me to 2 Corinthians 5.

This is a letter from Paul to a church he founded. Here he is reflecting on the meaning of Jesus' death. He starts with substitution, but then goes on to claim that in Jesus' death, we have all died. Listen to what he says, then let's follow his train of thought:

Christ's love controls us. Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life. He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.

In Jesus' death, we die with him. By dying with Jesus, we are raised to new life. Paul goes on:

So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

We are made new. We share in Jesus' new life that is free from the stain of sin and death.

And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ.

Forgiveness is a GIFT we receive from God, the ultimate giver. God, the one wronged by our sin, took the weight of that wrong for us, and then invited us into that death so that we might have new life.

This is a beautiful, powerful mystery. God invites us to die to sin. God invites us THROUGH the cross to a new world waiting on the other side. A world that's not measured by debt, but by relationship. A world of forgiveness.

Because we are recipients of God's forgiveness, we are now God's ambassadors. We are to take God's forgiveness into the world, announcing to people that God does not count their sin against them. That just as we have found release of debt in the infinite, merciful generosity of God, they can too!

And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!" For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ. -- 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

For Paul, this forgiveness from God is a completely different way of living. God's economy of grace and forgiveness is something we participate in. Only after we have experienced God's forgiveness can we pray as Jesus taught us to pray:

Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven those who are in our debt. -- Matthew 6:12

Forgive us the way we forgive others. We don't have to earn forgiveness - God forgave us before the world was even made. Rather, we pray that God teach us how to forgive as we have been forgiven, so that we may become a channel of God's forgiveness to the world.

[Illustrate] How do we respond well to God's forgiveness? In at least three ways:

First is with confession. In order to receive God's forgiveness, we must acknowledge that God judges us rightly. We must admit that we have sinned, that we are in need of forgiveness.

Confession doesn't have to mean you sit in a booth with a priest. Life Transformation Groups are a great space for confession. Confessing to other people can be scary because none of us is perfect. We need a lot of trust to be able to confess, and LTGs are designed to create that safe space. Confession can also take place in our personal prayer life. When we confess, what is important is that we agree with God, that we are sinners in need of God's grace and rescue.

We also respond by repenting. We stop sinning and work toward what is good and holy. As we confess our sin, the path to repentance becomes clearer, and we are encouraged down this path by the Spirit who goes before us and within us. We do not walk the path of repentance alone, but in the power of Jesus, who died with us and gives us new life.

Finally, and perhaps most difficult, we respond to forgiveness by forgiving. We turn from the God who has forgiven us to the world that has wronged us and we become a channel of God's forgiveness. Just as we are recipients and givers of God's good gifts, so we become recipients and givers of God's forgiveness.

We cannot forgive until we have received God's forgiveness. We simply do not have the strength on our own to name wrongs well and to release those debts. But when we face the God who bore our sin for us that we might receive new life, when we receive forgiveness, we are free to forgive.

It was Christmas morning, and my dad, stepmom and my siblings were all gathered in the living room. The first present we opened was an envelope of cash. My dad had cashed in all the coins in his giant coca cola bank and divided the money among the four kids. And that Christmas morning, the money I received was exactly the same amount as my siblings.

Even though it had been months since my dad had caught me stealing, I knew in that moment that he had forgiven me, that my offense was gone and that our relationship was restored. Have you been there? Felt the weight lift from your shoulders, felt the air swell in your lungs because you are free?

Friends, this is the power of forgiveness: to mend what otherwise cannot be healed. Repayment will not do, and neither will simply ignoring real sin. No, we must join God in releasing others from real debts they owe us.

When we receive God's forgiveness, we become forgivers. We become healers of impossible wounds. We become God's ambassadors in the world, pleading with the world to come back to God. And they will believe us because they experience God's forgiveness in us first.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] asdf

1. When in the last week have you been an ambassador of God's forgiveness?
2. When in the last week have you withheld forgiveness?
3. When in the next week will you be tempted to withhold forgiveness?
4. How can you respond to God's forgiveness this week?