

Forgive as the Lord forgave you

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[0 : 0 0] Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Just six words that we want to spend a little time considering this evening. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. As I was giving some thought to the theme of forgiveness, I thought I would just, really out of curiosity, Google the word forgiveness, and then look in the news section. For those of you who while away many useless hours Googling things, you can Google in the word and it will give all the hits, but then you can, you know, define it a bit more by time and other filters. And one of them is news. So where in the news has the word appear? It's quite an array, a very eclectic array of articles from all over the world that have as their theme or common theme, theme or in any case the word, forgiveness. One that struck me was a news item about a sermon or a talk that the Pope gave just a few days ago in Assisi of St. Francis of Assisi fame. And he was speaking about forgiveness. It's a good subject for the Pope to speak about. But the headline quote from his homily or sermon or whatever it was called was, and I quote, forgiveness is surely our direct route to heaven. Which being a contrary kind of person immediately led me to think, well, is there a scenic route? If that's the direct route, is there some other route? I'm not sure. In fairness, I think anybody, if a quote is simply taken out from a larger discourse, it could be twisted in all kinds of ways. So I certainly don't want to do an injustice to Pope Francis. But it seemed an intriguing way of broaching this subject. Forgiveness is surely our direct route to heaven. And it's worth stressing that it would seem that the idea there wasn't so much the forgiveness we receive, though I'm sure the Pope believes in that, but in the forgiveness we grant to others. In the forgiveness we grant, there's this direct route to heaven. Well, I certainly agree that forgiveness marks our road to heaven and ever ought to mark it, both receiving and granting.

Another news item, much more random, that was speaking about forgiveness was some baseball coach in that journal, well known to you all, the Green Bay Chronicle. And he was testifying that forgiveness is a great stress reducer. I didn't spend time reading the whole article, but I thought, yeah, I can go with that. I'm sure there's some truth in that. We may just come back to that in a few moments.

Well, Paul here in this letter and in these words that we want to focus our attention on this evening speaks of both receiving and granting forgiveness. And he does so in words of challenge, in words of encouragement that are directed to the believers, to the Christians in Colossae. It's in the context of a larger body of teaching with regard to living the Christian life, but we're going to focus in very, in a very limited way, in a focused way on this one, I wouldn't call it a demand, but certainly this one encouragement, forgive as the Lord forgave you. And as we do so, it's worth making the point that I think what Paul is doing here in explaining something of the nature of the forgiveness that we are to grant to others. He's really preempting the question that any of his readers could have asked, a question along the lines of, well, how are we to forgive? You say that we have to forgive, okay, we understand the concept, we know what the word means, at least in a measure, but how are we to forgive? And here we have an answer, forgive as the Lord forgave you. You can almost see it as answering a question, an unexpressed question in our text, but the question's there. How are we to forgive? Well, this is how. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And in that answer that Paul gives to this unexpressed question, at least in the text, his answer to that question highlights three basic and important aspects of forgiveness that we want to just notice and comment on briefly this evening.

First of all, the reality of forgiveness, but then it broaches what we might call the quality of forgiveness, and then thirdly, perhaps the most evident one in terms of Paul's intention, and that is the demand of forgiveness. That is the demand that is placed upon us as believers to forgive others. So let's think of each of these in turn. First of all, the reality of forgiveness. In these words, Paul says, forgive as the Lord forgave you. Paul is taking as a given, he's assuming as a reality that doesn't need to be argued, that those to whom he is writing have been forgiven. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

[5 : 40] It's happened. You are forgiven people. He's writing to the believers, and he takes it, as I say, as a given, that they have experienced forgiven, forgiveness. For us as Christians, forgiveness is not some future hope that, well, hopefully someday God may be gracious to us. He's a merciful God, and hopefully when the time comes, we'll know, we'll experience his forgiveness. Not at all. Paul says, it's not like that. You are already a forgiven people. Forgiveness is a current objective reality.

We are sinners. Each and every one of us, we are sinners. We sin frequently. We sin foolishly. We sin in a gross way often. And yet, even though all that is sadly true, if we are believers, if we are Christians, we are forgiven sinners. And so, this is the reality of our forgiveness.

Paul doesn't even contemplate the possibility of an unforgiven believer. There is no such creature as an unforgiven Christian. That is our current reality. But I wonder, though it is our current objective reality. Is it always a grasped reality? You see, there can be a great difference between something being objectively true and something being appreciated or grasped or understood.

And this is one matter where some can have difficulty. We can be unwilling or find it difficult to see ourselves as God sees us. It may be that sometimes there's a burden of guilt that seems so great that we just find it difficult to really believe that we are forgiven, that God has dealt with that particular sin, and that it is gone, forgiven, dealt with. Our own self-perception can sometimes be, it's not true for all of us, some of us err in another direction, but for some it might be this self-perception that we're worthless, that we're unworthy, that we're vile. And we find it difficult to grasp and to accept that we have been forgiven. We don't see ourselves as God sees us. When God the Father sees a believer, He sees Jesus. He sees us perfect in Christ. He sees us clothed in Christ's righteousness. He sees us as those who have been forgiven. And Paul understood this, and hence the language that He uses, forgive as the Lord forgave you. And that you is a you in the plural to all his readers. Every Christian reading this letter, Paul understands to be among those who have been forgiven, an objective. But it's also the case that sometimes not only do we find it difficult to accept that we're forgiven, but we find it difficult perhaps to get over or to overcome guilt of one kind or another, to receive the forgiveness that God grants to us, to appreciate, to even enjoy His forgiveness.

And if we can't do that, then there's a problem with this admonition or with this encouragement. We can't even begin to do what Paul is asking us to do because the starting point for forgiving is to recognize and appreciate the forgiveness that we enjoy ourselves. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

[9 : 40] If we have a problem with the second part, then we're certainly not going to be able to do the first part. The whole argument that Paul has, it loses its force. How can you forgive as Christ has forgiven you if you are not persuaded that He has? So we have the reality of forgiveness. But then there's also in these brief words of Paul a reference to the quality of forgiveness. You see, the encouragement, the challenge is, forgive as the Lord forgave you. And we're focusing here on that little word, as. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Paul could have said, and on other occasions in the Bible we have this idea, and it's a true reality, this idea of forgive because the Lord forgave you. And that's true.

There's a sense in which in the light of what God has done, it's reasonable, it's right and fitting and proper that we should forgive. And the idea because would capture that. Why do we forgive? Well, we forgive because God has forgiven us. That is a gospel truth. But that's not the truth that Paul is principally highlighting here. Rather, he's highlighting something to do with the quality of forgiveness that we are to express. We are to forgive as God forgives, in the manner that God forgives, exhibiting the characteristics of forgiveness that we find in God's forgiveness. What we're calling the quality of forgiveness. This little word, as, highlighting that aspect of forgiveness. Well, what can we say about the quality of forgiveness that we enjoy in Christ? Well, we can only scratch at the surface. But let's notice three or four characteristics of the Lord's forgiveness.

Perhaps one of the first things that we can say about the Lord's forgiveness granted to us is that it is immediate. The moment that we seek and ask to be forgiven, of course we do need to ask to be forgiven. But the moment that we do that, then we are forgiven. In the words of the hymn that we sometimes sing, Amazing Grace, the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus, a pardon receives. That moment. Asking and receiving in the matter of forgiveness, they're logically sequential.

You know, you ask first and then you receive. So, logically, one follows on from the other. And so, because of the logic, that's the way we tend to present it. But temporally, in terms of time, they're simultaneous. The moment that we ask, we receive. It's not even separated by time. As we ask, we receive. God's forgiveness towards us is immediate. That's one characteristic that we find explained to us and clearly presented to us in the Bible. We could also describe God's forgiveness, as we think of the quality of it, we could describe it as exhaustive. Everything is covered. Jesus is not selective in forgiving. You remember the words that we read in John's first letter in chapter 1 and verse 9. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us or purify us from all unrighteousness. From all unrighteousness. The forgiveness offered and experienced by the Christian is a forgiveness that covers every transgression, every fault, every sin.

When we think of wrongdoing, we sometimes use the language of crossing the line. Maybe even in conversation with others, some family member or somebody, and something has happened and we say, well, you've really crossed the line. It's like, you know, you've gone beyond what you could reasonably expect me to put up with or forgive even. You've crossed a line. You know, we're in the month of the Olympics and there's a whole lot of talk about doping and all the kinds of rule-breaking that goes on in the context of high-performance sport. And even within that context, you sometimes hear the language of crossing the line. So there are some faults that you say, well, okay, maybe just a short ban would be sufficient or a warning. But then there are certain misdemeanors that cross a line and the view is, well, that's unforgivable. There can be no zero tolerance for that kind of fault.

[14 : 47] But when we're thinking about Christ's forgiveness, when we're thinking of God's forgiveness for his people, there is no line. If you perhaps think that you've crossed the line, well, I've got good news for you. There is no line to cross in the matter of God's forgiveness. Again, as we remember the words of the hymn, the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus, full pardon receives. So we're thinking of the quality of forgiveness and why is that important? One, so that we appreciate how we are forgiven, but perhaps even more significantly given our text, it serves as a model for how we are to forgive others. So it's immediate, it's exhaustive. We could also describe God's forgiveness as generous. There is a sense in which God's faithfulness and justice constrain him to forgive. Even that word or that verse we commented on in 1 John 1 and verse 9, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. There is a sense that given

God's promises concerning forgiveness, that when we come and ask to be forgiven, and given what God has done in providing Jesus as our Savior, there is a sense in which God is constrained, not by some outside element, by his own promises to forgive those who come and seek forgiveness. He has promised to forgive, and so he will be true to his word. But even though that is so, that shouldn't in any way be understood to mean that there's in any sense some measure of reluctance on the part of God to forgive, that, well, he's duty-bound to forgive. God enjoys forgiving. I wonder if we've ever thought of it in that way, that God enjoys forgiving. And we don't need to just speculate, well, that would be nice if that were true, but rather listen to what we read in the Bible. Listen to the prophet Micah speaking on this matter of forgiveness, pondering on God and on the greatness of God, and he expresses himself in this way, who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy. Very especially those final words, a God who delights to show mercy, who enjoys forgiving. Or we have the language of the prophet

Isaiah, who speaks of God as one who abundantly or lavishly pardons there in the 55th chapter of that book. God's forgiveness is generous. But maybe one other characteristic that I don't think we have noted down there in the outline, but another characteristic of God's forgiveness is that it is free. The very word that's translated forgive here in this verse is a word that in Greek incorporates the word grace, *charis*. It's in the very heart of the word. It's in the heart of the reality, but even linguistically it's at the heart of the word, grace. God's forgiveness is free.

There's no price to be paid on our part, no merit required to secure God's forgiveness. It is gracious. It is driven by and grounded in God's grace. So there are some characteristics of God's forgiveness, the quality of it, immediate, exhaustive, generous, free. Which leads us on to the third aspect of this verse or the third element that we want to notice, and that is the demand of forgiveness.

There's a sense in which this is Paul's principal concern here. The challenge to the believers is this, to forgive. And then he explains how they are to forgive or the manner in which they are to forgive. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. This is the demand, forgive. And when we ask the question, okay, well, how are we to do that? Well, we've already seen it. We've seen it in the characteristics of God's forgiveness. In that way, we are to forgive. We are to forgive immediately. We're to forgive exhaustively. We're to forgive generously. We're to forgive freely. It's easy to say it is more difficult to do. We just think of these characteristics that should mark our forgiveness immediately.

[19 : 31] So often we do allow resentment to fester. We've been offended. You've been offended. You've been hurt. You've been let down. Perhaps somebody in your family, perhaps somebody who is very close to you, perhaps somebody at work. They've done you harm. They've spoken ill of you. They've gossiped about you. They've hurt you in one way or another. And Paul comes and says, forgive as the Lord forgave you.

And that involves immediate forgiveness. And that's difficult. We sometimes think, well, I'll wait for a suitable time. But the challenge of God's Word is that we ought not to postpone our forgiveness until we feel like forgiving. We may never feel like forgiving somebody in some circumstance. So we don't wait until we feel like doing it. We simply take on board the challenge, as it is clearly laid out before us, forgive as the Lord forgave you.

The question could be asked, a practical question in regard to this matter of immediately forgiving somebody who has harmed us or offended us. A practical question could be, what about somebody who doesn't look for forgiveness, who doesn't seem to have any interest in enjoying our forgiveness?

Maybe he doesn't even acknowledge any fault against us. Where's the obligation there? And we might even think about it in terms, well, God, when he forgives, forgives in response to a request. That is ordinarily how God operates. We ask to be forgiven and he forgives us. We don't ask, we don't receive. And you might say, well, there's a model for us. If there's no request to be forgiven, no acknowledgement of any wrong done, then, you know, we're scot-free in the matter of forgiveness. And yet, when we think of Jesus, and maybe think of him in one particular circumstance, when we think of Jesus on the cross, and before him were his torturers and tormentors, and we remember the words that he declared as he addressed, his father, father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. And I think that gives us perhaps the model or the example that we are to follow. Well, that's something that we, is maybe worth giving serious thought to. But certainly this is one characteristic of God's forgiveness that ought to mark our forgiveness, that we forgive immediately. Also, exhaustively, whatever the fault, however unforgivable it may appear. Withholding. Forgiveness can be used sometimes as a weapon in order to get even with somebody. But really all we're doing is not only damaging the one we are unwilling to forgive, but perhaps even more so damaging ourselves. Maybe what the coach of the baseball team is true, that forgiveness is a great stress reducer. Liberating to forgive immediately and exhaustively and generously coming to the third feature of God's forgiveness. How many times are we to forgive?

Well, we know that question was posed to Jesus, and he answered it in Matthew's gospel. Seven times? Seventy times seven. We know that it's not a question of doing the arithmetic, but simply an expression of this generous forgiveness time after time, just as we enjoy God's forgiveness time after time, innumerable times.

[23 : 16] And we are to forgive also freely. We can't condition our forgiveness or charge for it. We can't think or declare, well, I'll forgive if the person does this or that, if they say this, or if they act in this way, then I will forgive. It's to be free. It's to be grace-driven and grace-grounded.

And so the challenge is there for us. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. A challenge that has at its heart a recognition of the reality of forgiveness that is ours as believers. A challenge that is developed or given content by presenting God's forgiveness as our model. We are to forgive as He has forgiven us.

A forgiveness that knows of all these wonderful characteristics and features, some of which we've highlighted. And all of these to be reflected in the manner in which we forgive others.

Well, as we kind of draw the threads together, I don't think that I concur with the Pope who, as he was quoted, identified forgiveness as our direct route to heaven. But I do agree that forgiveness, both received and granted, is to mark and daily punctuate our travel to heaven. It is to be received daily and to be granted daily. We could maybe even paraphrase somewhat the words of the Lord's Prayer and employ the language that is used of receiving our daily bread. Use it in reference to forgiveness.

Give us this day our daily forgiveness as we daily forgive everyone who sins against us. Well, may God help us so to receive but also so to give. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word.

[25 : 33] We thank You for Your grace. We thank You for how Your grace finds wonderful expression in Your willingness to forgive us. We thank You for the forgiveness that we enjoy. We thank You that as Christians we are forgiven sinners. It is a current and objective reality. This is something that You have already done for us. When You see us, You see us not loaded with sin, but You see us rather clothed in the perfect life and righteousness of Your Son, Jesus. And as we acknowledge and receive and appreciate Your forgiveness, we ask that that would better enable us to respond to this challenge that we find in the Bible this evening to forgive others, to forgive others, to forgive as You have forgiven us. Help us so to forgive.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.