

# “The Freedom of Forgiving”

Matthew 18:21-25, Mark 2:1-12, John 9:2-3a, Isaiah 1:18, & Psalm 103:12

Pastor James York

July 5, 2015

Yesterday we celebrated Independence Day, the freedom of our country. Twelve of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence were Presbyterian. The only ordained minister to sign the Declaration was the Presbyterian John Witherspoon. He also was the president of a college that later became Princeton. Since signing the Declaration was considered treason, the signers knew they would have freedom or death. Several of the signers did die before the end of the war and most had their property destroyed; but in the end, our country became free.

The freedom of our country had a great cost. Spiritually our freedom cost Jesus his life on the cross. We are showered with the free, unearned gift of God’s love. God freely forgives us of our sins, shortcomings, and imperfections. We are freely offered newness of life everyday here on earth and eternal life in Heaven.

A wonderful way to honor those who have sacrificed for our freedom is to forgive. God freely forgives each of us. God commands us to forgive. **“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?’ ‘No, not seven times,’ Jesus replied, ‘but seventy times seven! Matthew 18:21-22 (NLT).** Forgiving 70 x 7 times means that we should not ever keep track of how many times we forgive someone or ourselves. In those days 70 x 7 meant infinite forgiveness, forgiveness without limit, forgiveness with no strings attached. We should always forgive. We even regularly pray, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Jesus illustrates the importance of forgiveness with a parable. Imagine that God is the king, you are the forgiven servant, and the fellow servant is someone who has hurt you. **“Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn’t pay, so his master ordered that he be sold—along with his wife, his children, and everything he owned—to pay the debt. ‘But the man fell down before his master and begged him, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.’ Then his master was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. ‘But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. ‘His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it,’ he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn’t wait. He had the man arrested and put in prison until the debt could be paid in full. ‘When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him everything that had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn’t you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ Then the angry king sent the man to prison to be tortured until he had paid his entire debt. ‘That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.’” Matthew 18:23-35 (NLT)**

Each of us has, is, and will continue to be forgiven for every mistake, forgiven for every instance when we fail to give or receive love, forgiven for every moment we hamper peace, joy, or goodness. At times, each of us will be reluctant to forgive another and ourselves. When we fail to forgive, we imprison ourselves. Whenever we fail to forgive, we torture ourselves. God is pure love and goodness. God never tortures; however, God does not always immediately alleviate the consequences of our failure to forgive. Harboring a grudge, remembering a wrong or a hurt, desires for revenge, even desires for justice does huge damage to ourselves. In our own minds replaying a mistake, dwelling on, if only I would have...hinders us from being a joyful, loving person in the present. In our own hearts, feelings of shame, guilt, or hate robs our creativity, imagination, and wonder. Psychoanalysis has discovered that failure to forgive generates an array of physical symptoms such as high blood pressure, muscle tension, insomnia, unhealthy eating, and headaches. When we fail to forgive, we physically torture ourselves making ourselves miserable, causing us to be even less forgiving, which without

massive dosages of grace will create an out of control spiral of bitterness. Whenever we are quick to judge and slow to forgive, we destroy relationships and ourselves.

Without forgiveness we become paralyzed. Jesus frees us from all that cripples, enslaves, and imprisons. **“When Jesus returned to Capernaum several days later, the news spread quickly that he was back home. Soon the house where he was staying was so packed with visitors that there was no more room, even outside the door. While he was preaching God’s word to them, four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. They couldn’t bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, so they dug a hole through the roof above his head. Then they lowered the man on his mat, right down in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “My child, your sins are forgiven.” But some of the teachers of religious law who were sitting there thought to themselves, “What is he saying? This is blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins!” Jesus knew immediately what they were thinking, so he asked them, “Why do you question this in your hearts? Is it easier to say to the paralyzed man ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or ‘Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk’? So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins.” Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, “Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!” And the man jumped up, grabbed his mat, and walked out through the stunned onlookers. They were all amazed and praised God, exclaiming, “We’ve never seen anything like this before!” Mark 2:1-12 (NLT).**

The story of the paralytic teaches that forgiveness and healing are interconnected. Every time we forgive another, or ourselves, we experience healing. Some of the scribes were outraged by the forgiveness-healing connection. They rejected Jesus teaching that to be healthy you need to be forgiving. They were unforgiving. They divided people into categories; the clean and unclean, the righteous and sinners. They believed themselves to be righteous. They thought that health came from burning sacrifices to God instead of forgiving. They saw Jesus’ ministry to the paralytic and the people they have judged as unclean to be a disregard for God’s holiness. They believed you need to earn forgiveness, to repent, to do something. God freely gives forgiveness. They believed that others had to admit their mistake, apologize, or do something before they would forgive them. Jesus rejects their divisions and their unforgiving ways. Jesus is destroying all barriers between us and God and one another. Forgiveness is essential to community.

Our inability to forgive has a myriad of devastating consequences on ourselves and the world. We must be careful for the story of the paralytic sometimes leads to a dangerous misinterpretation. Paralysis, disease, disabilities, broken relationships, poor health is often **not** the result of a person’s inability to forgive. Over and over again Jesus corrected people for blaming a person’s lack of health or fortune on their lifestyle or morals. **“Rabbi,” his disciples asked Jesus, “why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?” “It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered.” John 9:2-3a**

You cannot tell how loving, forgiving, or holy a person is by their health, status, or success. Good faithful people are struck with horrible disasters. Cruel, irreverent people enjoy great health and success. However, we are able to improve our circumstances through forgiveness. Forgiving is a gateway into the blessed life God longs to give us. It is through our God-given ability to forgive that we release our own lives from bondage. When we withhold forgiveness, we hurt others and ourselves and lose the joy of living. When we forgive, we release peace and restoration.

Forgiveness doesn’t say that the action is OK, it often isn’t. Forgiveness is often more than a one-time act. Forgiveness is an ongoing, deepening, life-giving journey. Forgiveness involves prayer and partnership with God. Forgiveness means letting go and asking God to lift from us our hurt, pain, and thoughts of revenge. Whenever you are hesitant to forgive, remember and celebrate how much God is forgiving you.

What is happening in your heart’s core? Do you find yourself angrily revisiting scenes of wounding, imprisoning your heart to resentment? Are there debilitating thoughts in your mind replaying a mistake, failure, or error? Our attitude, actions, and behavior flow from what we are thinking, feeling, and choosing inwardly.

In the book, *Forgiveness the Passionate Journey*, Flora Wuellner reflects on the Sermon on the Mount and wrote, “Jesus is talking about release from that which imprisons and corrupts our central heart—our heavy loads of resentment, fear, anxiety, shame, self-deception, cover-ups and from the vicious cycles of revenge that continue to destroy both individuals and nations. Forgiveness is a major release: a release from the prison and burden of the past. This release does not mean release from responsibility for what was done. Nor does release necessarily mean release from paying a penalty in this world. It means release from the chains of resentment

and guilt that hold us back from entering God's freedom, the new beginning as a beloved child of God. It means release from the expectations and obligations of the past so that we and those who injured us may start anew. This act of release does not depend on our own willpower... When we are full of hate, the living Jesus loves through us; when we are tired, the living Jesus breathes the breath of life into us. When we are numb and cannot pray at all, the living Jesus prays for us, in us and through us. We are reminded that we do not create forgiveness. It already exists. We join it, abide in it and slowly we come to life."

Stephanie Dowrick in her article, *The Art of Letting Go*, wrote, "As challenging as it is, forgiveness may be the supreme virtue, the apotheosis of love, for it declares: "I will attempt to go on loving the life in you, or the divine in you or the soul in you, even when I totally abhor what you have done or what you stand for. What's more, I will attempt to see you as my equal and your life as having equal value to my own even when I despise what you do and everything you stand for. This is, of course, awesome to translate into practice. In emotional terms, it is Everest without oxygen, Wimbledon without a racket."

Forgiveness is a difficult process that may take years, yet Jesus longs to help us forgive just as we have been forgiven. Our experiences of God's love, blessings, and companionship are a free gift of God springing from God's constant forgiveness of us. Our experiences of God's grace wash away our sins and soften our hearts enabling us to forgive others and ourselves.

Was there someone missing from your 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration – A family member or friend who needs to be forgiven? What about at work or at school? Who else needs to be forgiven? Is there someone in your past you can't seem to forgive? Is your hesitancy to forgive crippling your heart with hurts, imprisoning your mind with debilitating thoughts? One's inability to forgive creates distorted perceptions. If one does not forgive a wrong soon, they start interpreting every comment, gesture, and body language with negativity. Sometimes the person's attempt to make amends is even seen with negativity. One small hurt can soon snowball into a mountain. Once a relationship is strained, both sides often become nervous which again can be perceived negatively. When one forgives, the negative misperceptions are avoided and one can put all that energy into building a better relationship. Forgiveness is the tipping point that causes every relationship to either flourish or deteriorate. Without forgiveness even the strongest relationships quickly crumble. Praise God that God is constantly forgiving us.

How about yourself? Where do you need to forgive yourself so you can experience peace, joy, and creativity? Are there words or actions you wish you could take back? – A behavior you keep failing into? – A mistake that haunts you? Are you replaying something in your mind, beating yourself up, stuck in the past? What would happen if you forgave yourself and put that energy into making yourself better, more creative, and loving.

When God forgives us the sin is gone. **"Come now, let's settle this," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, I will make them as white as wool. Isaiah 1:18 (NLT). "God has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. Psalm 103:12(NLT).** We are to offer the same forgiveness.

Once President Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the rebellious Southerners when they had finally been defeated and returned to the Union of the United States. The questioner expected that Lincoln would take a dire vengeance, but he answered, "I will treat them as if they had never been away."

Celebrate freedom with forgiveness. Avoid letting the hurts of yesterday imprison you today. You cannot change the past; but, you can keep yourself free by letting the grace of God flow through you enabling you to forgive others and yourself, so you are free to be creative, joyful, and loving. Amen