

## **“OFFERING GRACE!”**

**Matthew 18:21-22**

### **Good News About Grace**

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There is a phrase that probably defines grace better than any other phrase—God is for us. God is not just with us; he is not just by us; he is not just in us. The Bible says that our God is for us. It is pretty evident that God has multiple reasons to be against us as the result of our sin. It is because of Jesus, however, that God is for us.

We’ve been looking these past couple weeks at the good news of God’s grace. We’ve focused on and discussed Saving Grace and Liberating Grace. This morning we will look at the theme, “Offering Grace.” The Bible, of course, is very clear in telling us that God doesn’t intend us to simply receive his grace in us—he wants us to pass it on.

If we have been blessed by God he in turn wants us to be a blessing to others. If we have been cared for by our loving God he in turn wants us to care for others. If we have been forgiven by God he wants us in turn to forgive others. Jesus says in Matthew 10:8, *“You have received without payment, give without payment.”*

My friends, this morning I want us to think especially about the blessings of forgiveness since God has amazingly showered that gift upon us. And yet as he has showered that gift of his grace upon us how then do we give and share his grace, and forgiveness, with other people?

It is obvious today that we live in a society where some people are watering down the true meaning of forgiveness. Forgiveness can easily become cheap grace; it can get to the point where forgiveness means very little or nothing at all. There are some who seem to be afraid that a person might somehow feel guilty for a second so they quickly declare that everyone is forgiven and absolved no matter what they have done.

Therefore this morning I will talk about the real meaning of forgiveness. Before we can do that, however, we need to look at what it is not. The Bible tells us that there are at least five things that forgiveness is not. First of all forgiveness is not conditional. It is not something you earn. It is not something we get as part of a bargain if we promise never to do something again. It is unconditional.

When we tell a person, “I will forgive you if...”, that is not forgiveness. This is bargaining, not forgiving. Genuine forgiveness is unconditional. It is offered even if it is not asked for. When Jesus hung on the cross he prayed, *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* At that point nobody had asked for forgiveness. It was an unconditional offer of pardon.

Secondly, forgiveness is not minimizing the seriousness of the offense. It is not saying, “It’s no big deal. Don’t worry about it.” The truth is that if something is worth forgiving it did hurt us. Forgiveness is saying, “Yes it did hurt; yes it did cause pain in me; but I’m going to let it go. I am not going to hold these things against you.”

The news recently has shared the story of the man who killed his wife and yet they have not yet found her body. Now if I were to go to him and say, “I proclaim you forgiven. I’m sure you didn’t mean to do it. I feel bad that people are saying such bad things about you.” If I were to do that I would minimize the meaning of forgiveness. Forgiveness, therefore, is not just feeling bad for someone or downplaying/rationalizing what they did.

Thirdly, forgiveness is not just resuming a relationship without change. Forgiveness is not necessarily the same as reconciliation; they’re really two different issues. Forgiveness is something we can give fairly quickly while trust needs to be rebuilt over time. There is a huge difference between forgiving a person and trusting a person. It takes more than forgiveness for reconciliation to happen.

For instance a person may have been married to an alcoholic abusive spouse, and has been hurt repeatedly over and over again. That spouse may come to their senses and say, “I’m really sorry for my behavior. Will you forgive me?” In response their husband or wife may say, “Yes, I do forgive you.” Yet to let them back into the house, or to have the relationship healed, is often a very different issue.

A person should actually follow up by saying, “In order to prove how serious you are we now need to see some progress here. You need to get some counseling. We need to go to some counseling together. We need to see whether these steps lead to some genuine changes.” Forgiveness is based on grace and love, it is unconditional. Trust, however, is earned. If someone hurts us we may be willing to forgive them, and yet resuming a relationship often means there needs to be a change.

Fourthly, real forgiveness is not forgetting what happened. Unfortunately many of us have been indoctrinated with the American cliché, “Forgive and forget.” It is such a sweet and nice thing to say. And yet there’s one problem with that—it doesn’t work. Forgiveness is not forgetting what happened. In fact, the more painful something is the less likely we will be able to forget it.

Scientists have proven that our brain is like a giant warehouse filled with thousands of file cabinets and we never really forget anything. And the more important or traumatic an event is in our lives, the more likely we will continue to remember it. We may do everything we can to block things out, but most of the time they are still there.

Yet there is actually something better than forgetting. It is remembering but no longer feeling the pain. Remembering, and yet experiencing how God has worked to heal us, and to replace our bitterness with peace. Remembering, and yet seeing how God has helped us to become more sensitive to the hurts and needs of other people. Remembering, and yet focusing on what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Fifthly, forgiveness does not necessarily remove the consequences of sin. A person in prison may ask Jesus to forgive them, but that does not end the consequences of their prison term. A person who leaves their wife/husband and has an affair, and as a result breaks up their marriage may later say, “God, please forgive me. I know that was stupid. It was selfish. I was completely wrong.”

The good news is that there is forgiveness in Jesus Christ for all who are truly repentant. And yet that does not necessarily remove the scars from breaking up a home—scars on the children; scars on both spouses; scars on family and friends. There are usually consequences. Real forgiveness is not just some cheap term where everyone instantly feels better. It can be a very painful process.

Then what is this truth? Forgiveness is first of all remembering how much I've already been forgiven. Ephesians 4:32 says, "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgives you.*" We are not forgiven because we earned it; we're forgiven because we have put our faith in Jesus. If we don't feel forgiven in our own hearts we won't want to forgive others. The truth is that the more we feel forgiven and healed by God, the more forgiving we will be with others.

Secondly, forgiveness is relinquishing, and giving up, my right and feelings of wanting to get even. Romans 12:19 says, "*Never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God for he has said he will repay those who deserve it.*" Notice here that the Bible says that we should never try to get even. Don't try to retaliate; don't try to get revenge; leave that up to God.

When we say "I forgive" that means I give up my right to get even. Yet some people may push back this idea by arguing that this is totally unfair. We may rationalize that we simply want justice for that person. We want them to get what they deserve.

And yet aren't you glad, my friends, that God doesn't give us the justice and payback we deserve? It is interesting how we always want justice in everyone else's lives; they should pay for their sins. Our God, however, is gracious to us and he wants us to be gracious. We give up the right to get even.

Thirdly, forgiveness is responding to evil with good. Jesus says in Luke 6, "*Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you.*" How can we tell, my friends, when we've genuinely forgiven someone? It is when we can pray for them and bless them. It is when we can look at their hurt and not just our own.

Hurt people hurt other people. We hurt others because we are hurting in ourselves. When we have genuinely forgiven a person we can look past the ways they have hurt us and can see their hurt. We can pray for God to heal and bless them. When we want what is best for another person, even when we still have some hurt feelings in us, we are responding to evil with good.

A guy was having a big argument with his wife. The next morning he went to the office and said, "Last night my wife got historical." His friend said, "Don't you mean hysterical?" "No, she got historical. She listed everything through the years I've ever done wrong." Do we ever do that? To bring up old mistakes, words and sins can be very manipulative and controlling. Love means letting go of our stockpile of ammunition.

Finally, forgiveness is repeating the process as often as necessary. When Jesus was asked by Peter in Matthew 18 how often he should forgive Jesus said seventy times seven and beyond. In other words we need to forgive as long as it takes; until we can let it go; until the pain goes away. And when certain painful memories come back we need to let them go. It is a continual process.

In our congregation this morning I know there are some who are probably carrying some bitterness and pain toward another person that you may have carried for months, maybe even years. There are some here today who may be filled with some deep resentment for some other person/persons.

And yet remember, my friends, bitterness in our lives hurts us far more than it does the other person. Resentment will never be able to change the past. Leave whatever it is, my friend, in the hands of Jesus. Allow him to liberate you. Allow him this day to fill you with his love and forgiveness, so you can truly forgive others through his offering grace.