

How to be Forgiven When You Are Skeptical of Authority

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[0 : 0 0] Oh man, great. Thanks, Graham. Thanks, Simon, for leading. Thanks, Greg and Rebecca and the band. Rebecca was loving picking up the, not a bass, I don't know, whatever that's called. I'm not great with instruments. I'm clearly a speaker, not a musician. Great, welcome. Lovely to see you all in the house this evening. I've got a little sheet here for you that will give you a steer, or at least give you some hope that the sermon's coming to the end. And the reading, there's some points on there that will whiz through.

If you're watching at home, a big warm welcome to you, and the points should come up on the slides during the sermon. So let me pray for us now, and then we'll kick off. So, Fathers, we gather together physically here tonight and virtually at home. We are echoing that great gathering in heaven where we are spiritually. Please, may we from this letter tonight, think on that, consider that, may our hearts rejoice on that, may our hearts be fixed on heaven, where our Lord and Savior is, Jesus, ruling and reigning until he returns. Amen.

Amen. Well, I've entitled the sermon tonight, How to be forgiven when you are skeptical of authority. How to be forgiven when you're skeptical of authority. And the heart of being a Christian is forgiveness. Forgiveness is something that we all need. It's a heart longing. And so here's a chap who had a library book, and he'd forgotten to return it. And so 30 years later, his conscience was plagued, and so he sent it back. We read this on the BBC this week. He needed to restore things. He needed forgiveness. I've got a friend who's a neurologist, and he quizzes people who've got mental problems. And he says 75% of the people that he deals with could go home and live happy lives if they understood that they are forgiven and that they can have forgiveness. But for lots of us, forgiveness is very hard. You see, the idea of forgiveness involves authority and power. Who are you to tell me how I should live? Church, family, state? Why should I say sorry to you when I haven't lived the way that you expected? Why should I forgive others? Can't I just do what I want? But the heart of this letter is forgiveness and the peace and reconciliation that it brings. And so as we've explored the relationships in this letter, Philemon and Anisimus and how they need to be reconciled and forgive one another and how Paul has helped that, we have a worked example of what Christian forgiveness looks like and how we can have forgiveness if we are skeptical of authority. And forgiveness really involves two parts. It involves being cleansed from those things that we've done wrong that we need forgiveness for, having those things wiped out so they're never brought back to haunt us, so we can have a clear conscience. But then also payment, having those things that have been done wrong put right. And so what we're going to do this evening is we're going to look at four relationships that we see in this letter and in our church life. And so that speak about power, that speak about forgiveness and what it means and looks like for us. So we're going to look at Paul and Philemon, then Philemon and Anisimus, and then us and God and us and one another. And just as a reminder where we are in the story,

Paul is speaking to a wealthy householder called Philemon, and he's asking him to take back his runaway slave, Anisimus, who has become a Christian after meeting Paul in prison. And this week we have the crux of Paul's appeal to him there in verse 10. Take him back, welcome him back as if he was mean.

So let's look at Paul and Philemon. And what we see is Paul has power, but he lays it down. You see, Paul is the most powerful person in this letter. Verse 19, Philemon owes him his life.

[4 : 46] Anisimus has become a Christian. Anisimus owes Paul his life. But we also see that he's the weakest. Then we saw right in the start, Paul, a prisoner of Christ. But it's not just Paul. Everyone in this letter who speaks for Jesus is in chains. They're powerless. They have no power. So verse 24, Epaphras, he's the one that founded the church where Philemon and Anisimus are.

What is he? He's a fellow prisoner in Christ. And we saw this last week as Michael brought out Paul's gentleness, how he appeals for restitution on the basis of love, how he wants that reconciliation to not be forced, but voluntary. And we see that this week in how Paul offers to pay even though he doesn't owe. He wants his heart refreshed, not for his own benefit, but for the benefits of Philemon and Anisimus. And yes, he speaks of obedience in verse 21, but it's an extravagant, other person seeking, over the top, abundant, generous, willing obedience. And so true and Christian forgiveness comes from a place of powerlessness. There's level ground at the cross. And it's not that God doesn't have power. He's infinitely powerful, but he lays it down. It's forgiveness offered without strings attached, that's not coerced, that we're not pushed into, but that we might accept willingly and voluntarily. When I think of forgiveness, I always think of Nelson Mandela. I've got a South African accent and you can tell that. 27th of April, big day. It's the day that Nelson Mandela was released from prison. It is Freedom Day. And we remember how Nelson came out and instead of wanting revenge for all the hardships that his people faced, he said, let's make peace. And then right at the end, when he left power, he could have stayed on forever. He could have been emperor for as long as he wanted, but he stepped away. He gave power back. He laid it down all in the name of forgiveness and equality and unity. Right, let's move on and we'll consider Philemon and Inesimus. And what we see here is that

Paul is a go-between who brings about forgiveness. And so our question is, how do you get forgiveness if you are skeptical, if you don't trust authority and there is a lack of trust? How are Philemon and Inesimus, where so much has gone wrong in their relationship, are they going to become friends again and become united as God's people? And the answer is, you need a go-between. You need someone who's going to bring them together and not use the situation for their own benefit. And so Paul is a go-between here, and he's not trying to benefit out of that. Just notice that the basis of forgiveness is partnership. And that's the red-letter word that we see coming up again and again in this letter.

It's a common lived experience in Jesus in the Holy Spirit. So verse 17, verse 23, my fellow partner or prisoner. 24, my fellow partner in labor. And it's a partnership that comes from kindness, from generosity. Verse 25, the grace of the Lord Jesus. And then verse 17, we see that it's this forgiveness, this go-between is a cleansing. And then verse 18, we see it's a payment. So verse 17, a cleansing. So if you consider me a partner, welcome Inesimus, Philemon, as you would welcome me, Paul. And so when Philemon looks at Inesimus, when he sees him walking through the door at church, he is to see him wrapped in Paul. He's to figure out all the bad things that Inesimus has done wrong, all those things that hurt him. And instead, he's to see Paul's perfect love and obedience for

Philemon. It's not that those wrongs go nowhere, that they evaporate into the air. But in verse 18, we see a payment to cover the debt that Inesimus says. So what does Paul say? He says, if Inesimus has done you, Philemon, any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

[9 : 35] We don't know what Inesimus has done. But whatever those wrongs were, Paul was going to pay. It wasn't a free forgiveness. It was very costly. But he was going to expect nothing in return.

There's no power games here. It's absolutely clear. It's easy. And then verse 19, Paul is emphatic. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back. And if you imagine, he was maybe dictating to a scribe, and at that point, he whipped the quill out the scribe's hand, and he wrote it as if he was signing a check. I'll pay it back, whatever it is.

The picture that we have here of Paul going between Inesimus and Philemon is rather of a father going between two sons. We heard last week how Inesimus has become Paul's son in prison.

And you can imagine Charles trying to mediate between Wills and Harry. Wills, when you see Harry, won't you welcome him as you'd welcome me, your father? Think of all the kindness and care that I've shown for you. Whatever Harry may have done, all those mistakes. Forget about them. I will repay them. I'll cover the cost. And obviously, Charles wouldn't be motivated out of power, but wanting joy and seeing his sons reunited, a family that's united and whole again. And interestingly, Philemon is the only letter that Paul writes where he doesn't speak of Jesus' death and resurrection.

And the reason for that is because he is being a picture of what Jesus did for us, of the forgiveness that we have in Jesus. It's a worked example. And so in verse 17, when he says, welcome him, it's used in only one other place in the New Testament. That's Romans 14, 15. So 15, 17, welcome one another just as Christ welcomed you in order to bring praise to God. Paul wants Philemon and us to see that the reason that we forgive and welcome one another is not because Paul's a good beg and he asks us to, but because we have been welcomed by Christ. And so this brings us to the third relationship we're going to look at, us and God, that Jesus is the go-between who brings about forgiveness. And God made us in everything we see, and we've had a brilliant day today, and it's been absolutely spectacular. He gave us good things, but we've rejected that. And God made, but God has made a way for us to have forgiveness, to be right with him. And it's brilliant. It's powerless. And it's for those who are skeptical of authority, for those who never feel as though they're quite fit in. So just notice that Jesus comes as the go-between us and God. And so when we are forgiven, it's God, the Son, speaking to God, the Father. It's got nothing to do with earthly power games. We don't need to go to a priest. You don't need to go to an earthly person to find that forgiveness. You can go to God,

[13 : 03] Jesus, directly, and he'll speak to the Father on your behalf. And when Jesus came to earth, he was immensely powerful. But what did he do? He laid down all of his authority and power. Just before Easter, on Maundy Thursday, the night before Jesus died, we looked at John 17. There's a wonderful picture in there where we read of how Jesus acknowledges that all authority is given to me. And what does he do?

He takes off his clothes and picks up a towel to wash his disciples' feet. He lays power down. It's as if the queen was walking into Buckingham Palace, and she stooped on the way in and polished the doorman's shoes, laying down of power. And notice Jesus makes us clean. Despite all the filth in our lives, all the ways that we get stuff wrong when we let our friends down, if we trust Jesus, when God looks at us, he sees us wrapped in Jesus. He sees all the good things that Jesus did in life, listening to God, praying to God, speaking to others of God's goodness. He sees us wrapped.

He sees us praying in Gethsemane, the night before Jesus died, trusting in God's plan, even when it's hard. And then just notice that Jesus pays the price for our wrongdoings. So Paul speaks of his ministry as being a ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5. So he goes that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins. That's where they've pushed God aside. And he has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation. And it ends, 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21, we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. So as Jesus died, all the things that we had done wrong went on him. All that sin, all those bits that we're ashamed of, all those bits that we would rather not have our friends and mothers know about, it goes on him. And he makes us clean and right before God, even though he was not going to benefit in this life in any way whatsoever. Then as we come into land, let's unpack what this is going to look like for us and others. What's it going to look like for us to think about forgiveness?

And the vision that Paul paints for God's new community is one where there is complete unity and equality, and in particular, that it's found in Jesus as we trust and live our lives in Jesus.

So Colossians 3, verse 11, here there's no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, civilian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all. It's complete equality.

[16 : 22] equality and unity. He's trying to get us to be so heavenly minded with whatever we do in life that we don't see the pettiness of this life and this world. That when we look and see other Christians, we see people worshipping around God's throne. And that we cultivate a love of God in our own hearts and in the hearts of others. So what might this look like? If we, as someone who's visiting tonight and we're watching, we've never thought about forgiveness and considered the offer of free forgiveness that we get in the gospel. One application might be to ask God for forgiveness, forgiveness, even though it's hard, even though we might struggle with that, even though we might struggle with the words. If we are trusting, then it might mean that we rather, instead of standing on our pedestals at church and home, at work, we lay our powers down. We don't stand on our rights.

We don't focus on our own status and position, but rather we make ourselves small that we might recommend Christ to others. I had this friend as a student growing up. He was a chap at our church. He was immensely successful. He had Jane Fonda as his neighbor, and she was a really big movie star in America back in the day. And whenever someone came into church who's awkward, he would be the first person over to go speak to her. Think of another friend, another acquaintance who I've met, who is a high court judge. You read about his cases in the paper where he's passed down judgment on people, but on summer camps, you'll see him wiping the tables behind 13-year-olds who've spilt their lunch everywhere. And then it might mean that we welcome others as we have been welcomed in Christ. So, obviously, at church, we get assigned our seats now, but if you could choose your seat, who would you choose to sit next to? What might you think as you thought, where can I sit? I wonder if you might choose the awkward person or the person who you know has done some wrong things and sit next to them in the way that you have been welcomed in Christ. And then finally, it might mean that we look to refresh the hearts of others, even though it's hard for us. So, often when we think about refreshment, we think of a nice holiday and something for our own benefit. But the thing that gets Paul out of bed in the morning is seeing other Christians built up in Jesus. That's the thing that's going to keep him awake at night about whether someone is going well in Jesus or not. Is that the thing that shapes our prayers, our thoughts? That keeps us worrying at night? Are others doing well in the gospel? Are we putting ourselves out for the spiritual benefit of others? This week, I had a text message from a friend in

India, and his wife's doing poorly with COVID. And their daughter left India to go to South America and tell people the gospel there. And it's meant immense hardship for her. She's away from her family, doesn't know what's going to happen to them. She can't get in contact with them. But she does sit.

She embraced that hardship. She embraced that risk because she wanted to refresh the hearts of others and see them come to know the awesomeness of Jesus. She offers a free forgiveness forgiveness for all of us, even if we're slightly awkward and we don't really trust people and we struggle with authority and power and those kind of things. Let me pray for us as we finish.

So, Father, life is filled with relationships, Father. But we recognize that we are united in Christ.

[20 : 58] Help us to commend Christ to others as we live, as we seek to welcome one another at church, no matter how awkward others may be. Help us to keep our eyes fixed on heaven and seeing that we can have a free forgiveness in Jesus and complete equality and unity in Jesus. Help us to trust Jesus and long for him more and more each day. In Jesus' name. Amen.