

**Isaiah 53:4-6, 10-12**

<sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup> But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

<sup>10</sup> Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

<sup>11</sup> Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

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**I’m going to invite you** this morning to remain standing here in the sanctuary for the reading of Jesus’s words to us from the Gospel of Matthew. If you’re with us online, you’re welcome to stand physically or stand in your hearts as these familiar, sacred, and important words are spoken for us once again. From Jesus’s famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, verses 7-15, **hear the words of our Lord:**

<sup>7</sup> “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

<sup>9</sup> Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

<sup>10</sup> Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

**11 Give us this day our daily bread.** <sup>12</sup> And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. <sup>14</sup> For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; <sup>15</sup> but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

This is God’s Word for us this morning. Thanks be to God.

We're continuing this morning in **our sermon series** called "Your New Year Wardrobe." And, by now, I imagine it has become abundantly clear to you which item in our spiritual wardrobe we're talking about today. We've mentioned forgiveness in our Call to Worship, our songs, our Scripture passages, our prayers, our Declaration of Pardon, and our videos. Maybe I should be asking you for forgiveness just because of how much we've referred to forgiveness already today! But, I won't, because I truly believe it is for our good that we focus on forgiveness. And, having preached on forgiveness many times during my ministry, I know that it's a topic that is always relevant to our relationships and sometimes especially well-timed to our personal circumstances.

**The word that's translated as 'forgive'** in our passage for this series is the Greek word 'χαρίζομαι' (car-id-zo-ma-hee). It comes from the root word 'xáris,' which means 'grace' or 'extending favor.' So, the verb 'χαρίζομαι' points to the practice of exercising grace, showing someone favor, forgiving or pardoning.

**Pastor Craig Groechel** offers a good and simple definition of forgiveness, too. He simply says, "Forgiveness is giving to others what God has given to us."

Pastor Craig's definition is relates well to what the Apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 3, this passage that has been our central text for this sermon series. In verses 12-13 of Colossians 3, Paul wrote, "**As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.**" We clothe ourselves with forgiveness because God has forgiven us. And, because we are chosen by God to be loved by God and set apart in holiness by God, God's forgiveness isn't meant to stop with us but instead to flow through us into the lives of others.

Of course, the way Jesus summarized the Lord's Prayer adds another important dynamic to this life loop of forgiveness. Did you notice that, after teaching the disciples how to pray, Jesus gave them a message that brought the heart of the Lord's Prayer back to the topic of forgiveness. **Jesus said essentially:** You should pray this prayer because (at verse 14) "...if you forgive others, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but (he

continued at verse 15) if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you.” Wow. That’s a mic drop moment for Jesus. And, it ought to stop us in our tracks, too. Or at the very least, it ought to make us pay special attention to that central moment in the Lord’s Prayer when we say, “Our Father, forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

Now, I realize the language changes a little bit from version to version of the prayer. Debts might be trespasses. And, we also say, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” But, the idea remains the same according to Jesus. There is a critical relationship between our forgiveness of others and God’s forgiveness of us.

If you combine Jesus’ message about forgiveness with Paul’s message about forgiveness, we get a statement something like: **“God has forgiven you so that you can forgive others so that God will forgive you.”** A healthy relationship between God’s forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others produces a life-giving loop in our lives.

As I was thinking about that this past week, a lot of comparisons came to mind. But, the one that has become most valuable in helping me understand the life-loop of forgiveness is the relationship between **the immune system and the nervous system** in our bodies. I’m certainly not a trained medical professional, so please forgive my 1<sup>st</sup> grade understanding of all of this. But, as a healthy nervous system controls and regulates what we sense and how our bodies respond, a healthy immune system responds to the nervous system by creating or managing cells that keep the body healthy. That response then allow the nervous system to continue controlling and regulating properly. And, when those incredibly complex systems are working the way they’re supposed to, we feel great and we’re able to use our body’s resources to be fruitful and productive. Of course, when one of the systems gets confused or is broken, it can have uncomfortable if not deadly results.

I remember really well the day in October of 2012 when I got a phone call from my mom from a hospital room in California. An infection she’d contracted while traveling had spiraled into **a rare condition known as Guillain-Barre Syndrome or GBS**. The consequence of GBS is that the immune system starts attacking the nervous system and sending cells that damage the nerve tissue outside the brain and spinal cord. The results can

range from short-term pain and weakness to long-term paralysis and even death. Really serious and really mysterious stuff.

I'm grateful to report that my mom is on the Zoom call with us this morning. Her medical teams diagnosed her situation early enough to begin treatments quickly; and thanks to great care from the medical community, **incredible love from her husband** and surrounding community, and years of really hard work in physical therapy, she has been restored nearly 100% since the day she called me from the hospital. Praise God.

And, believe it or not, all of this has helped me understand **forgiveness**.

How many of you know in your head that, as a follower of Jesus, you are supposed to be a person who forgives? How many of you struggle in your hearts to forgive others as God has forgiven you when you've been the victim of someone else's sin? See, our systems don't always work in agreement when an infection creeps in. We want to do this as clearly as we know it, but sin makes it hard.

In a **2018 TEDx talk** about forgiveness, Sarah Montana said that forgiveness is like the Nike of spiritual practices. The Bible says, "Just do it!" Just forgive. 62 passages in the Bible direct us to 'forgive,' and another 27 address the importance of forgiveness; but Sarah found that not a single one tells us how to do it. It's like saying to a patient with Guillain-Barre, "Just get your nervous system and your immune system to get along!" Easy to say. But how do we do it?

Unforgiveness within the body of Christ is a lot like a spiritual case of Guillain-Barre. Where the members of the body should be supporting each other and working in partnership for the health of the whole system, the presence of sin disrupts the systems. One member can think they're trying to purify the system by withholding forgiveness, but they're actually making the body sicker. The failure of one member to forgive another member can cause a lot of pain within the body and, maybe, even lead to the paralysis or death of a congregation.

So, it's really important that we, the people called by God's name, learn to forgive with God's forgiveness. But, how do we clothe ourselves with forgiveness?

For the sake of keeping the comparison going, maybe we can use the same steps used in fighting Guillain-Barre to fight against unforgiveness in the church. First, we **seek the care of a good doctor**.

In each of the synoptic gospels, Jesus told the religious authorities of his day why he was hanging out with the tax collectors and sinners everyone else was trying to avoid. He said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Matthew 9:11-12; Mark 2:16-17; Luke 5:31-32).

When we find ourselves holding onto bitterness, holding a grudge, or struggling to forgive a brother or sister, our first step is to seek the doctor who has made a house call from heaven.

Someone *else's* sin may have made us sick in the first place. But, if we are failing to forgive, it is our *own* sin that is *keeping* us sick and in need of the doctor's care. So, we start by confessing to our Heavenly Physician that we are infected with unforgiveness and asking in prayer for the treatment of love and grace that only God can provide.

Of course, any doctor that would hear about our disease and simply condone it or allow it to continue is probably not a good doctor. Instead, a good doctor will apply medicine or prescribe changes in lifestyle that put boundaries in place to protect a hurting body against further harm.

So, if that's true of doctors, one of the things I want us to remember is that forgiveness is not the same as condoning bad behavior or allowing the harm someone is doing to you to continue. You should not forgive that way principally because God did not forgive that way. Applying boundaries that protect you from further harm may be necessary as a part of forgiveness. God condemned sin and, like a good doctor, did something to break the power of the sickness of human sin. That's the truth we heard declared earlier when Dale read **the Prophet Isaiah for us**.

“Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:4, 6).

The crucified Christ was our Heavenly Doctor's response to the sickness of our sin. God's forgiveness was not an allowance to let sin continue. It was a sacrifice He took on Himself to show us sin's immeasurable ugliness and His immeasurable mercy. So, look first to Him. Confess your struggle to forgive. Recognize that God paid the ultimate price to heal the sickness of sin, both in your life and in the lives of the other members of the body of Christ. Forgiveness is not an allowance for sin to continue against you. It is an invitation for the Doctor of All Mercies to make a house call by the Spirit that lives within you. Forgiveness is His prescription so that the medicine of His mercy will help bring healing to the various members of His body. Seek first the care of the Doctor.

The next step in the Guillain-Barre healing process is for the patient to **receive special blood treatments.** Patients with GBS are often treated either with plasmapheresis or immunoglobulin therapy. Essentially, skin is pierced so that harmful blood can be replaced with healing blood. Do you think that idea has any overlap with the gospel message?

Isaiah 53:5 said what to us earlier? "But he was wounded/pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

Still not picking up the theme here? **In Ephesians 1:7**, the Apostle Paul wrote of the Lord, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup> that he lavished on us."

**Need a little more evidence?** I can do this all day, but we've got to get to the Table eventually. Romans 5 – "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup> Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God."

What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

I want to make a couple of points here. **First, forgiveness isn't forgetting or denying that wrong was done.** In Christ, God acknowledged the wrong of sin and did something about it. He doesn't forget; but thanks to Jesus, God doesn't hold our sin against us anymore. Christ still bears his scars as a reminder of the price God paid to forgive us.

Secondly, when someone has hurt us, **a desire for justice is a righteous desire.** I think a lot of us hesitate to forgive because we care about justice. If I forgive that person who betrayed me, they'll just get away with it and no justice will be served. If I withhold forgiveness, maybe there's just a little justice, and maybe things even out just toward fairness a bit if I withhold my pardon for a little while longer from that person who withheld his best – or her best – from me. But listen, vengeance is not ours. Deuteronomy and Romans are equally clear that vengeance belongs to the Lord. And, the cross is God's decision for how justice and vengeance are satisfied. Not that we crucify the other person. But, that **God sent His perfect and sinless Son to satisfy God's righteous wrath and perfect justice on behalf of all of us.**

What did Christ say on the cross? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And then, before he breathed his last, he said, "It is finished." The justice on your behalf? It's been done. The vengeance for that wrong you suffered? It's finished. Your grudge and withholding of forgiveness will not accomplish any more of what has already been done perfectly for us at Calvary. So, trade the healing blood of Christ for the blood you'd like to spill through your unforgiveness. The punishment you think belongs to the person who wronged you was put upon Christ at the cross. Amen?

A story tells of a mother who ran into her daughter's bedroom when she heard her seven-year-old son shouting in the room. She found his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. After gently releasing the little girl's grip, the mom tried to comfort the boy. "There, there. She didn't mean it. She just doesn't know that it hurts to pull hair like that." The boy accepted this with a nod, and the mom left the room. Of course, almost as soon as she'd walked out, she heard her little girl screaming from the place they'd just been. Rushing back in, the mom asked, "What happened?" **To which the little boy replied, "She knows now."**

We don't have to teach that lesson. Let's forgive and let our forgiveness teach others the lesson of the one whose healthy blood paid the price to make ours whole.

Last step for this morning. After seeking the good doctor and trading good blood for bad blood, Guillain-Barre patients **commit to physical therapy.** This is the step needed to restore balance and strength and resiliency to the body after it has been damaged and weakened.

As many of you know, effective physical therapy is usually not a one-time thing. One of the many reasons my mom is a hero and example in my life is because of her example of relentless dedication to therapy and healing and wholeness. And, as I mentioned earlier, because of my parents' dedication to her healing over several years of physical therapy, my mom has earned recovery beyond what some on her medical team predicted was possible.

The same is true with forgiveness. There is no universal fix or timeline for healthy forgiveness. Once damage has been done by sin in a relationship, it may take days or months or years for you to get to the place where you are truly ready to forgive without strings attached. It may take exhausting work in prayer or counseling to get to a point where you don't need the other person to apologize or repent or own what they did in order for you to forgive them. **As Sarah Montana said in her TEDx talk**, it can take a long time to be able to say to someone, "I know what you did. It's not OK. But, I recognize that you are more than what you did. I don't want to hold us captive to that thing anymore. I don't need anything from you." It may take growth in your own faith before you can reengage conversation with someone, with an allowance for the fact that, even with new boundaries in place, they may hurt you again.

That's how it was with Jesus' disciples. You may remember that **in Luke 17:3-5**, Jesus said to his disciples, "Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 4 And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive." Wow! That's super tough stuff. So, I love what the disciples' reaction in the next verse. Verse 5 says, "The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'"

Can you blame them? It takes tremendous faith to forgive once. To forgive someone's sin seven times a day? We're going to need a lot of faith.

So, let's go to the good doctor. God is ready to give us that faith. And, God loves to give good gifts. So much so that He has sacrificed His Son for us. So, let's trade the bad blood of unforgiveness for the blood of grace. And let's do the therapy work necessary to experience recovery and restoration in faith. Why? Because ultimately, being able to forgive allows you to live in the fullness of the health and freedom Christ died to give us. As author **Lew Smedes** once wrote "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you." Let's pray and gather to the table of grace.

**CHARGE AND BENEDICTION (End of service):**

In her last journal entry prior to being killed in the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, 19-year-old Mary Karen Read wrote this: “When deep injury is done to us, we never recover until we forgive. Forgiveness does not change the past. But, it does enlarge the future.”