

The Joy of Forgiveness **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Has anybody ever said to you, “I’ll forgive you, but I’ll never forget it!”? If so, do you ever wonder if indeed they still remember the wrong you did them?...if they really ‘never forgot’? That’s an unsettling thought especially if the incident which triggered that response happened years ago and if that person is now deceased. Did they hang on to that thought? Did they remember the wrong I did them up to the moment of death? When someone says to you, “I’ll forgive you, but I’ll never forget it!” do you feel forgiven?

FORGIVENESS...forgiveness is something everybody wants to receive. Forgiveness is something most people have difficulty giving. **FORGIVENESS**...how would you define the word? When the first missionaries went to work among the natives of Labrador and Newfoundland they found that there was no word for “forgiveness” in the Inuit language, so they made one up. “Forgiveness” they defined as “not being able to think about it anymore.” Forgive and forget. Not only was this a clever way to convey the main thought in the word ‘forgiveness,’ it just happens to be God’s definition of forgiveness as well. That’s exactly what God tells us this morning through the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah the prophet lived and preached 600 years before Christ. He had the difficult task of preaching to and prophesying to God’s people, the nation of Israel, when they were at their absolute worst. The people just loved sin more (much more) than they loved God. Jeremiah had to tell them, “It’s all over! Our nation will be conquered. Our people will be carried away into captivity. Thus says the Lord.”

For his efforts, Jeremiah the prophet was beaten. He was persecuted. His family disowned him. Yet he did not waver. He foretold the destruction of Jerusalem. He foretold the slaughter of thousands of his countrymen. He prophesied that the survivors would be taken into captivity in a distant land, far from the land of Israel.

The underlying cause for all of this was Israel’s unfaithfulness to God. It was Israel’s long-standing problem with idolatry. Idolatry had poisoned the nation of Israel from the time Moses led them out of the land of Egypt.

Even though God had chosen them out of all nations to be his special people, Israel had repeatedly left God. They had trampled his ten commandments. They had abused their position as his “chosen people.” Now, finally, after years of unfaithfulness, after years of warning, Israel was going to be defeated as a nation and carried away into captivity as a people. And Jeremiah had one final message to God’s unfaithful people.

So what do you say to a nation that has repeatedly disobeyed God, that has abused its position as his chosen people? What do you say to a nation that's used up all its chances? Is it a message of anger? Is it an "I told you so!" message? No. Instead of a parting blast of righteous indignation, God sends an incredible message of love and forgiveness. He says, *"I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*

God is truly a God of love...a God of forgiveness. Aren't you glad that he's a God who forgives and forgets? Because we have the same problem with sin, the same problem with unfaithfulness to God as did Israel long ago. Oh, it's not so much with open idolatry, worshiping false gods of wood and stone. But it does have to do with secret idolatry. Secret idolatry is when someone or something other than God has the number one position in your heart or in your life.

You see, God wants to be number one in your heart and in your life. God wants you (he commands you) to fear, love, and trust in him above all else. But in this country the thing that we truly fear, love and trust the most is not God, it's money...financial certainty. "If only I had more money, then I would feel safe in these tough times." "If only I had more money, then I could get the things I really want." "If only I had more money, then I could be happy." Whatever you fear, love, and trust most in life, whatever is number one in your heart and life, that's really your god. Materialism makes the things of this world, money, possessions, financial security the most important things, the things you set your heart on. You end up rich toward yourself and poor toward God.

Like Israel of old, it is so easy to be unfaithful to God's commands, maybe not so openly as they were, but inwardly, in the heart, in the mind. Thoughts of anger, thoughts of hatred, lustful thoughts, thoughts of selfishness and greed can monopolize a Christian's mind. Evil, hurtful words escape the lips. We could fully expect God to say, "Depart from me! You are unfaithful to me. You are unfaithful to my commands in your life, in your speech, in your thoughts!"

Instead God says, *"I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more."* Now how can God, a just and holy God, how can he do that? Well, it's not that he has overlooked sin. He can't do that. He is holy. He hates sin. He is just. He must punish sin. He must punish sin with death...and he has! He has punished every sin you have ever committed. He has punished every sin you will commit. Only the punishment didn't fall on you. It fell on your substitute, Jesus. Isaiah 53:5, *"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."* The process by which God forgives your sin was not an easy road for Jesus to travel. Your forgiveness involved the life and death of God's one and only Son.

There are so many ways in which God's commands are broken. There is so much that needs to be forgiven. Yet God forgives every sin to everyone who believes in Jesus. Ephesians 1:7 *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...* That's how you can stand before God someday, redeemed, restored, forgiven, through faith in Jesus.

The story is told of a young pastor who had a woman in his congregation who claimed she talked to God and he talked to her. The pastor was skeptical so he said, "Next time you and God talk, ask him about that terrible sin, that awful incident I was involved in when I was in college." The woman agreed. When the pastor next saw the woman he asked, "Did you have another conversation with God?" She said, "Yes." And so he asked, "Did you ask God what terrible sin your pastor committed in college?" She replied, "Yes, I asked him. But he said he didn't remember." "*I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.*" That's how God forgives...He forgives and he forgets.

God forgave Israel of old. After seventy years of captivity, a remnant returned to the land of David and Solomon, a chastened and forgiven remnant. From this remnant came Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Messiah promised of old, the very one God used to win your forgiveness. From the ashes of the ruined city and temple a new Jerusalem would rise. From the shattering of the old covenant a new and more glorious covenant would rise. The old covenant pointed ahead to Christ as the fulfillment. The new covenant looks back to the accomplished work of Christ. This new covenant of which Jeremiah writes proclaims a salvation complete, finished, and, above all, free. God was giving Jeremiah a picture of the New Testament church where you, as a believer in Christ live in a state of constant forgiveness.

You know what kind of God we have. He loves you. He forgives you. So unburden your conscience. Ask him for forgiveness. If you are like most people, there is something tucked away in the back of your mind, stuffed into the recesses of your heart that you're embarrassed to even think about. But you know it's in there, gnawing away. Take it to God today. Acknowledge it. Talk to God about it...the secret thing, the hidden thing that still burdens your conscience. Ask for forgiveness and then feel the release. Feel the weight lifted. That's full and free forgiveness. That's the joy of forgiveness. And that comes from a God who forgives fully and freely through faith in Jesus.

But forgiveness is a two-way street. You know God's forgiveness is full and free. You know that you live in a state of being forgiven, a state of forgiven-ness. The problem comes when it's time to forgive others. God says, "*Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*" God forgives and forgets. What about you?

Forgiveness - the lack of real forgiveness is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to a joyful life and oftentimes to a happy marriage. Maybe it's little fights, constant spats, continuous sniping and you're keeping score...never forgetting, ("Oh I'll forgive but I'll never forget!") never

forgetting a wrong, never forgetting an angry word. Maybe you're harboring resentment for past mistakes...mistakes made even before the marriage began, but they are eating away at you and at your marriage and will continue to do so until you forgive and forget. So many couples, so many families are shackled with coldness, bitterness, and strife because forgiveness is lacking.

Maybe you need to forgive someone for something done to you in the distant past...a parent, or a child, a brother or a sister or a cousin who said something stupid in anger years ago and it still bothers you, still comes between you and that person. Maybe you need to forgive that co-worker who got the promotion and left you behind. Maybe you need to forgive a teacher or a trusted leader whom you loved and admired and who betrayed your trust. Now is the time. God is your example. Forgive and forget.

Forgiveness is good for everyone. Forgiveness is good for those you forgive. If they are contrite, there is a sweet release, knowing that no hard feelings remain. If the one you forgive is impenitent, if they're not in the least bit sorry, your forgiveness of them will be tougher to take than your anger. It's like, the Bible says it's like heaping burning coals on their head (Proverbs 25:21-22; Romans 12:20).

Forgiveness is good for everyone. Forgiveness is even good for you. When you forgive and forget it's like emptying your heart of poison. It's like bursting a boil that's festering and growing. Yes forgiveness is good for you. Have you left someone hanging in that - I'll forgive you, but I'll never forget it - limbo? Now's the time to finish forgiving...forgive and forget. Through faith in Jesus, God forgives and forgets, and he says, "*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*" (Ephesians 4:32).

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

In perfect love you sent your Son Jesus to live for us and to die for us. Through faith in Jesus we have continuous forgiveness for all our sins, and for this we give you thanks. Help us now to be forgiving people, forgiving others as you have forgiven us. Amen