

September 13, 2026
Paul Purdue preaching

Monday, after coffee, prayers, and the Wordle I looked at our upcoming sermons and saw the topic “forgiveness.” I groaned a little: forgiveness is hard, complex, often misunderstood, and maybe you have noticed our world is not in a forgiving mood.

Hear the Good News, forgiveness is deeply liberating. Forgiveness breaks the cycle of recrimination, revenge, and retribution,

In Matthew 18, Jesus talks about forgiving 70x7 after detailing a reconciliation process for when a member of our faith family sins against us. We might cautiously note that Jesus’ teaching here is about reconciliation inside personal relationships, not reconciliation with systemic evil that we are called to resist. Forgiveness is complex

1. First, go to them privately and talk, if they listen *“you have won a brother or sister”*
2. If no resolution then seek mediation guided by your two or three faith leaders
3. If no resolution then try a larger intervention.
4. If the larger intervention fails, *“then treat them like a sinner or tax collector.”* Now before anyone starts shunning people, let us remember how Jesus treated *“tax collectors and sinners.”* Jesus loves sinners. Jesus talked with them, dined with them, and defined his mission as being “a physician” not to the self-assured church folks but to broken people beyond the faith community’s reach. (Mark 2)

I wonder if Peter sensed how some folks would use Jesus’ reconciliation process to judge, exclude and harm? Peter questions Jesus: *“Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”* What about forgiveness? How many times should we forgive folks, seven times and then mediation? *Jesus answered, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, forgive seventy to the seventh power times”.* Forgiveness is to be our way of life, our orientation, our path.

I want to share how an act of forgiveness changed me. I am offering no tabloid details to prove my heroic faith or win your sympathy. I simply want to testify how a decision to forgive 32 years ago changed my life.

Perhaps, we were doing a series about the Lord’s Prayer 32 years ago. I was scheduled to preach on *“Forgive us our trespasses (or willful sins) as we have forgiven those who trespass against us”*. As I studied and prayed about Jesus’ command *“forgive and you will be forgiven”*, I felt a cloud of unforgiveness haunting my sermon preparation. How

could I honestly preach about forgiveness while holding onto unforgiveness, demonization, and retribution?

My unforgiveness from a slow-burning bitterness erupting into an explosive encounter. As I prepared for my sermon, please know, I had already tried the first part of Jesus' four step reconciliation plan, *"If your brother or sister sins against you, first go privately to them and point out what happened, and If they listen, then you've won over your brother or sister"*. Did I go to them with a forgiving spirit? Maybe not! Our follow-up conversation added to the hurt. .

Jesus' promise that we will know forgiveness as we learn to forgive framed a reality I could not articulate: my holding onto unforgiveness: paying back, dealing in kind- was a choice to live with unforgiveness clouding my vision, my relationship and my life .

On Tuesday, my sermon stank. I decided to talk to Connie in person and Jesus in prayer. Was it Connie, Jesus or me that asked "why am I only focusing on what they did to me and not what I had said to them?" I knew I needed to ask for their forgiveness before I could expect them to ask for mine. I decided to draft a letter. Connie read the letter and suggested that I had buried some real ziggers in my flowery self-indulgent psuedo-apology. After two drafts, three arguments with Connie and four days, I signed, sealed. stamped, but did deliver the letter to the USPS.

On Sunday morning I still had the letter with me as I drove to church to preach about forgiveness. I had reasons to be hurt and angry. Maybe one more edit after the sermon? The big blue USPS mailbox across from the church sang like a tent revival altar call.

*"I have decided to follow Jesus, I have decided to follow Jesus,
I have decided to follow Jesus
no turning back, no turning back,
Don't you decide to, not mail that letter. Don't you decide to not mail that letter.
Don't you decide to not mail that letter
drop it in the box and preach"*

I dropped the letter through the slot and preached with genuine honesty but anxiety about what was next. Sometime that week the phone rang. It was them. I wish I could tell you we had a warm healing conversation and everything changed. We had a cold civil conversation but not much changed. But, I changed, and my change changed everything. My letter reluctantly turning the other cheek, blessing those who had cursed me, forgiving those who had harmed me, slowly opened up a compassion within me

that I did know I was there. My forgiving them released me from the grip of their attitudes, actions and words. Forgiveness broke the reactive cycle.

In Luke 6, Jesus tells us to forgive expecting nothing in return. I had expected my letter to lead to their apology. It did not. However, my asking for their forgiveness changed how I view those who harmed me, I came to see them as *“sinners and tax-gathers.”* Jesus loved sinners and tax collectors, breaking bread with them, gently inviting them into God’s healing Kingdom, but not entrusting them to his inner circle that he shared with Peter, James, and John- and with Mary, Martha and Magdalene. I forgave them, but I kept a boundary. Jesus did not invite Pilate, Judas, or the angry crowd into the garden to share with them *“my soul is overwhelmed with grief, keep watch with me”* (Matthew 26)

We can forgive and set boundaries. We can forgive and move on. We forgive and say “never again”, file a restraining order, seek a divorce or otherwise break ties. Paul tells us to “not be mismatched with unbelievers”, we might ask how can we partner with those who are actively harming us? (2 Corinthians 6)

In Matthew 7, after warning us to first remove the splinter from our own eye before trying to fix someone else’s vision, Jesus cautions us *“do not give your holy things to dogs, or offer your treasures to hogs.* Hogs do not appreciate diamonds. Wounded dogs can bite. We can forgive and shake the dust off our feet moving on to more welcoming people. (Luke 9) Forgiveness pulls us away from cycles of demonization, retribution and harm. Sometimes this is a hard break, but forgiveness leads us towards mutual respect and honor. Our inner circle is reserved for those who honor, respect, and love us,

I noticed one other thing about forgiveness in re-reading chapter 18. The chapter begins with Jesus talking about children, *“Truly, unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Jesus then warns us to never harm or sin against a child. It is better to swim with a concrete life preserver than to *“cause one of these little ones to sin”* Jesus then tells us these vulnerable little ones have angels in heaven connecting them directly to God. As we think about forgiveness, we need to be mindful of the effects on harm done to vulnerable people and populations. God especially cares for the little ones, the vulnerable: children, widows, orphans, strangers, immigrants, the poor, the hungry, the sick, the oppressed, and the disposed. (Exodus, Deuteronomy 10, Matthew 18 & 25) Our mistreatment of vulnerable people and populations somehow ripples across eternity.

1. Forgiveness is not acceptance of bad behavior
2. Forgiveness moves us away from harm, recrimination and hurt
3. Forgiveness opens our eyes to compassion.

Forgiveness like all spiritual disciplines fosters grace with a few big decisions and a thousand everyday practices. There will be set-backs and miss-steps. I am sure if I drive to work tomorrow I will need to forgive someone. Forgiveness can save us from road rage and so much more. Forgiveness opens to compassion for tax collectors, sinners, and each other.

May you know the great love of God

May God's infinite forgiveness wash over us

Liberating us from the cycle of recrimination, payback and revenge

And opening our hearts to compassion, to healing, and to love. amen