

# A Season of Joy: FORGIVENESS

**Matthew 18:21-35**

*Forgiveness helps the one forgiven  
and the one forgiving.*

A sermon preached by  
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Today we are moving into new territory, yet we're staying in the same place. It's magic! For the last four weeks, we have been talking about "A Season of Joy," drawing from *The Book Of Joy* by Douglas Abrams about conversations between the Dalai Lama and the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu.<sup>1</sup> We are going to stay with this series and this theme for four more weeks, so it will be a familiar landscape. But today we are embarking into somewhat new territory as well. The first four pillars of joy—perspective, humility, humor, and acceptance—are pillars of the mind. They are accomplished primarily by thinking the right thoughts. But today we start to talk about pillars of the heart. These are accomplished only by involving the whole person—heart and mind and soul. It sort of reminds me of the first commandment of Jesus, to love God with your heart and mind and soul. The pillars of joy that come from the heart are forgiveness, compassion, gratitude, and generosity. Don't those sound a little deeper and more profound?

Before we get to forgiveness today, we have to overcome an impediment to joy. We cannot experience joy without overcoming the feeling of loneliness. Very few of us have escaped feeling lonely at some point in our lives, and for many it is a chronic condition. Sociologists and psychologists started talking about the loneliness of modern society over 70 years ago with the publication of *The Lonely Crowd* by David Reisman. Loneliness and alienation and isolation have been a cultural phenomenon ever since. Since 2014, the New York Times has contained a feature article on the epidemic of loneliness every two years, almost like clockwork.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not cause widespread loneliness, but it made the existing loneliness worse. As people were locked down and isolated, unable to have their normal social interactions, working and going to school online, the loneliness just grew. Mental illness and suicide began to trend upward. About 40% of adults admitted to feeling lonely, and 20%--1 in 5 adults—said they had no close personal relationships.<sup>2</sup>

In Japan, they did pretty well with the pandemic by adopting stringent isolation measures. But in some months, the number of suicides was higher than the number of

COVID deaths. The death toll of loneliness caused the Japanese government to appoint a “Minister of Loneliness” to try to deal with the social devastation of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

The Dalai Lama had a particular contribution to make at this point. The Buddhist idea of reality involves the interrelatedness of all things. Everything is connected—people, animals, plants, everything. What separates us are the secondary differences: race, nation, gender, religion, etc. If we focus on these secondary differences, we will find ourselves isolated. But if we look deeper to the primary unity of all things, we can feel the connection, and we will know that we are not alone.

The Christian idea of God is not lonely. God is not a solitary figure up in heaven, isolated from the creation. Even God is a community. We believe in the Trinity—God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three Persons of God are in constant conversation, relationship, activity. God never gets lonely.

So the role of the community of faith—Buddhist, Christian, Islam, Jew—is to affirm the connection we have with God and all things. The job of the church or mosque or synagogue is to establish and strengthen our connection, to break down our loneliness, and build up our relationships.

Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama make the distinction between loneliness and being alone. Sometimes we need to be alone, but that does not mean we are lonely. We can be in the midst of a crowd of people and feel lonely if our relational needs are not being met. Here’s a word from one of those New York Times articles: “Loneliness, as defined by mental health professionals, is a gap between the level of connectedness that you want and what you have. It is not the same as social isolation, which is codified in the social sciences as a measure of a person’s contacts. Loneliness is a subjective feeling. People can have a lot of contact and still be lonely, or be perfectly content by themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

The antidote to the impediment of loneliness is open-heartedness to others. Have a warm-hearted and kind attitude toward other people, and it will open up doorways to friendship. It will break down your loneliness. The Dalai Lama said, “The only thing that will bring happiness is affection and warmheartedness. This really brings inner strength and self-confidence, reduces fear, develops trust, and trust brings friendship.”<sup>5</sup> That’s how you get rid of loneliness.

One of the loneliness places we ever inhabit is the land of unforgiveness. If you want to feel isolated, make somebody mad at you. If you want to live in the land of the lonely, harbor resentment and hostility toward someone for something done to you. Forgiveness is something we receive, and gratefully so. God forgives us; Jesus forgives us; if we’re lucky the humans we have hurt forgive us. But we are also called to forgive others. We can hold stuff in our mind, heart, and gut against somebody, and as long as we do, it cuts us off from other people, and even from God. That’s the kind of forgiveness that I want to focus on today. When we forgive others, it leads to joy.

The teaching of Jesus is full of references to forgiving others. He gave advice and told parables to get his point across. Once Peter came to Jesus looking to limit his responsibility for forgiveness. “How many times should I forgive my brother? Seven times?” Maybe Andrew was a pesky little brother. Jesus said, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven.” Exactly 77? “OK, that’s 76, Andrew. You have one more chance.” Jesus meant, “You have to forgive a bunch more than you ever even thought.”

Then he said, “That reminds me of a story.” And he told the one about the slave who was forgiven by the king for an exorbitant amount of debt. Ten thousand talents is a day’s

wage times 60 million, just under 200,000 years' wages. Wow! But the king released the slave from this enormous debt because the slave begged him to. Then, as he walked out of the palace a free man, he ran into another slave who owed him 100 denarii—still 3 months' wages—but a tiny debt compared to the first slave. But the one who had been forgiven was ruthless. He had the debtor arrested and thrown into prison. The other slaves were indignant at this injustice, and they reported it to the king, who called the first slave back in. "You wicked slave!" he cried. "I forgave you all that debt. Could you not have mercy on your fellow slave?" So the king had the first slave not only imprisoned but tortured until his whole debt would be paid—which was never.

Then Jesus gives the punch line for the story: "*So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*"<sup>6</sup> Is God really going to torture us for all eternity if we do not forgive our debtors? I don't see that happening; it's a story. But I do know that we can torture ourselves if we hold hurts and hostility in our hearts and do not forgive. Forget ever getting to joy.

Forgiving others is the only part of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus reiterates for emphasis. He says, "*Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*" Then he turns around and says, "*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*"<sup>7</sup>

Jesus followed his own teaching all the way to the cross. As he faced those who mocked him, and spit on him, and punctured his body with nails, he said, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.*"<sup>8</sup>

When the system of racial injustice and segregation in South Africa—called *apartheid*—fell, the first Black president of the country, Nelson Mandela, set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to deal with the violence and injustice that had been perpetrated on the majority Black population. He put Desmond Tutu in charge of the Commission. The purpose of the Commission was to hear the stories of the people who had been victims of oppression and to receive requests for amnesty from those who had committed crimes against innocent people. The real intent was to allow South Africa to forgive the past and to move ahead without more violence and bloodshed.

Many amazing stories of forgiveness came out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. One that Tutu shares in the book is about an American student named Amy Biehl, who came to South Africa to try to help. She was brutally murdered for her efforts. Her parents flew from California to South Africa to ask that Amy's murderers be forgiven for their crimes. They said, "We want to be a part of the process of healing in South Africa. We are sure that our daughter would support us in saying that we want amnesty to be granted to the murderers." In addition, Amy's parents set up a foundation to assist in the work of reconciliation, and they hired the very men who murdered their daughter to continue the work for peace and justice in South Africa.<sup>9</sup>

We often say "forgive and forget," but forgiveness has nothing to do with forgetting what has happened. We don't forget. We do make the decision not to hold bitterness and anger toward that person. We drop our desire for revenge and retribution. Forgiveness may not even involve the restoration of the relationship, but it heals the heart. Forgiveness grows out of a concern for the other person, the one who hurt you, as well as a desire for self-liberation from the prison of unforgiveness. It's not a sign of weakness at all to forgive someone. It may look like you're letting someone get off without consequences, but it

takes a lot more strength to forgive than to continue to hate. And justice will come, if not in this life, then in the next.

Sometimes the hardest people to forgive are the ones who are closest to us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells an amazing and touching story about his father, who was an alcoholic and abused Desmond's mother when he was drunk. Desmond adored his mother and felt terrible that he was not physically big enough to stop his father.

Years later, as an adult, Desmond Tutu and his wife were traveling through the town where both their parents lived. They had to stay with her parents because there were no motels that Blacks could stay in. He was exhausted from the trip, but they made the effort to go see his parents anyway. Before they left to go back to his in-laws', Tutu's father asked if they could talk about something. Desmond was tired and had a headache, so he just said, "Not now. Let's talk about it in the morning." Then they left for his in-laws' house.

The next morning Desmond Tutu was awakened by the news that his father had passed away in the night, like something out of a novel, he said. He never knew what his father wanted to tell him. He hoped that his father had a premonition of his death, and he was going to make an apology for the way he had treated Desmond's mother. But he would never know.

Tutu said, "None of us actually ever knows when it is going to be that moment when something quite crucial might in fact be going to happen, and we turn our back on it. And yes, I try to assuage my guilt, but it can't go away completely."<sup>10</sup> He hoped that his father would forgive him. It was a regret the Archbishop carried with him to the grave. Now he knows.

Growing out of his work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Tutu wrote a book with his daughter Mpho called *The Book of Forgiving*.<sup>11</sup> In it they talk about a Four-fold Path of Forgiveness.<sup>12</sup> This is our practice of joy today. This is how you forgive.

**Telling your story.** All forgiveness starts with facing the truth. Telling your story allows you to heal your memories. You can tell your story verbally to someone or write it in a journal. Take a step back and tell what happened from the perspective of an observer, so you won't get caught up in the emotion of the event.

**Naming the hurt.** Try to understand the feelings on both sides of the event. Observe yourself from a distance, and ask why you were feeling what you did. If the hurt is fresh, ask how you might feel in a year or two or five about this incident. If the hurt is old, ask yourself if you still want to carry this burden any longer.

**Asking for and granting forgiveness.** Whoever hurt you shares in your common humanity, and humans hurt one another. Realizing your shared humanity, release your need for revenge or retaliation and move toward healing. If there has been mutual hurt, both ask for and grant forgiveness.

**Renewing or releasing the relationship.** Once you have forgiven someone, you have to decide whether to renew or release the relationship. Maybe there's a pathway forward toward a new relationship. Maybe the hurt was so traumatic that such a relationship is impossible. In that case, release the other person and move on, wishing them the best. Don't hang on to what has caused you suffering, and don't prolong the suffering for the person you have forgiven, either.

Forgiveness may be one of the hardest things we do, but it has the potential for the most good. Forgiveness done well will bring healing to the world and joy to our hearts.

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- <sup>1</sup> Douglas Abrams, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, *The Book Of Joy* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016).
- <sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Polzin, “Suffering in Silence,” *O Magazine*, (November 2019); Timothy P. Carney, “Alienated America” (Harper, 2019), Pages 13, 134; Vivek H. Murthy, “Work and the Loneliness Epidemic,” *Harvard Business Review* (August 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Katie Warren, “Japan has appointed a 'Minister of Loneliness' after seeing suicide rates in the country increase for the first time in 11 years,” *Insider* (2-22-21).
- <sup>4</sup> John Leland, “How Loneliness Is Damaging Our Health,” *New York Times*, 4/20/22. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/20/nyregion/loneliness-epidemic.html>.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Book Of Joy*, 129.
- <sup>6</sup> Matthew 18:35.
- <sup>7</sup> Matthew 6:12, 14-15.
- <sup>8</sup> Luke 23:34.
- <sup>9</sup> *The Book Of Joy*, 230f.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.
- <sup>11</sup> Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014).
- <sup>12</sup> *The Book Of Joy*, 334ff. [www.forgivenesschallenge.com](http://www.forgivenesschallenge.com).