
We are in this season of Advent, preparing our hearts to receive this most wonderful gift of Jesus

Our Savior, our Redeemer, our Messiah, our King

And we're reflecting on the astonishing gifts that are ours in Jesus

Today we're considering the gift of **forgiveness**: forgiveness **received**, and forgiveness **given**

Forgiveness is the foundation of the abundant life that Jesus offers us

In Jesus we receive the gift of forgiveness for all our sin...

And in Jesus we receive the gift of forgiving - being able to forgive others as we've been forgiven

Receiving forgiveness and extending forgiveness are two sides of the same coin

You really can't have one without the other

You remember those familiar words from the Lord's prayer...

Luke 11.4 NIV "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us."

Receiving forgiveness from God and forgiving those who sin against us - must always go together

Jesus insists that if you and I have truly understood and received his forgiveness, we will do everything in our power to forgive others

This is a very good diagnostic for the true condition of our hearts

When you discover within yourself a desire to forgive, you may be sure that you have understood and experienced forgiveness

But when you are unwilling to forgive, and resentment fills your heart, and you seek revenge, you have every reason to wonder if you've truly understood or experienced God's forgiveness in Jesus

Jesus is very concerned that we grasp this connection between being forgiven and forgiving others

Matthew 6.14–15 NIV “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

The reason that Jesus puts it this way is to shock us into the realization that if we are harboring unforgiveness and resentment in our hearts, we may not ourselves be forgiven

Mark 11.25 NIV And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

Luke 6.37 NIV “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

As you can see, extending forgiveness is a most serious matter

In Jesus we are the **forgiven** and therefore **forgiving** people of God

Now having the desire to forgive doesn't make forgiveness easy - it is still supremely difficult

Being a disciple of Jesus is all about learning to practice the Jesus way, learning to practice the Jesus kind of forgiveness

And so when we discover unforgiveness and resentment and a desire for revenge within us, we go straight back to Jesus and remind ourselves of all that we've been forgiven, and ask him for grace to forgive others as he's forgiven us

And we talk to a few trusted friends who can help us along the way

You must not allow unforgiveness and resentment to settle down into your heart...

Unforgiveness will turn into a harsh bitterness that will destroy the joy and the freedom and the peace of the Jesus life within you

There's a marvelous story in Luke 15 that Jesus used to open our eyes to the complexity and the pain and the wonder of genuine forgiveness

Luke 15.11 NIV "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

The younger son is done with his family...

And he wants to cash out: he wants his inheritance, and wants to move on, live his own life

Jesus tells the story in a very matter-of-fact way

But just imagine your reaction if one of your children said something like that to you... what might your response be?

The father... yields... to his son's deeply offensive demands

The way the story is told provokes the question: **is the father weak?** He could have simply said no, and turfed his son out...

We discover later that the father is actually incredibly strong...

Incredibly strong in the kind of grace and love that the world considers weak

He accepts his son's declaration that their relationship is broken

He accepts his son's declaration that his son wants nothing to do with him anymore... except to get his share of the father's wealth

Can you imagine the grief that now fills the father's heart?

You and I - we are born into a network of relationships

Two of these are primary

The first is with the One who creates us, who gifts us, who fills us up with life, who sustains us, who loves us with an everlasting love...

Listen to the psalmist describe this profound intimacy...

Psalm 139.1–16 NIV You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar... Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely... you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb... My frame was not hidden from you when I was made... Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

God is more aware of us than we are of ourselves...

God understands us far better than we understand ourselves...

And God loves us more than we could possibly comprehend

The second flows from the first - it's our relationship with one another...

It begins with our mothers... they're the first other tangible person in our lives... and then our fathers... and siblings... grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and family friends...

We are born into a network of relationships, and the condition and health of our souls is directly dependent on the condition and health of our relationships

There's a fascinating insight in the very last verse of the OT

The day of the Lord is coming, says the prophet Malachi, and here's the sign of his coming... listen

Malachi 4.5–6 NIV "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents..."

You'll know that God is present among you and the kingdom of God has come, says Malachi...

...when there is full reconciliation between parents and children

There was a man who came to Jesus with a deceptively simple question

Matthew 22.36 NIV “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

This is not a trivial question about priorities in the Law of Moses

This is a question about the deepest longing of God’s heart for us

What’s the one thing God wants us to know, and understand, and practice? What’s the most crucial bit of wisdom that God has for us?

Matthew 22.37–40 NIV Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Everything truly important in our lives depends on us being in genuine relationships of all-out love with God and with each other

1 Corinthians 13.4–7 NIV Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

That’s the deepest longing of God’s heart for us... this is what he longs for us to experience... this is what Jesus died for

Love one another, Jesus said, as I have loved you

That’s the context within which Jesus locates this story

Luke 15.11–13 NIV “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.”

It would be easy to assume that this is the younger son's sin - this wild living - wasting everything on prostitutes, as his older brother later says

But that's not the way Jesus sees it

The way he tells the story, these obvious sins are simply a secondary outcome of the far greater evil that has already happened - this breakdown of the son's love for his father

Luke 15.14-19 NIV "After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

And now the son makes an intensely pragmatic choice

He'd cashed out his most important relationship - with his father - for autonomy and pleasure

And while he was blowing his inheritance on pleasure, he likely had no end of fair-weather friends, no end of "relationships"

But now that all the wealth is gone, they've all gone... and he has absolutely nobody left to turn to

But his father still has wealth - and his father has servants that are well-fed, while he's starving to death

So he carefully scripts out what he might say to his father to get back into his good graces...

It isn't clear that any of it came from a genuinely repentant heart... perhaps there was some real repentance, it's hard to say

But imagine all that might be going on within his heart...

Humiliation, shame, anger, depression, hunger, fear of rejection... perhaps a glimmer of hope?

Luke 15.20 NIV "So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

I wonder if the father knew, all along, that this moment might come

As a father myself, I think he did

I imagine the father knew all along that his younger son would quickly waste his inheritance

Now this is a most crucial moment in the story

The father could have gone in a very different direction: he could have been hoping and waiting for his son to go broke, and return in shame to a well-deserved tongue-lashing, anger, contempt, humiliation and rejection...

This is normal, this is the way of the world around us...

Maybe you've experienced this... maybe you've even done this

But the father's heart goes in an altogether different direction

He is filled with compassion, runs to his son, embraces him, holds him close, kisses him...

He says nothing to his son, and there's deep wisdom here

There are situations where only our actions can communicate what is on our heart... our words may even get in the way

And the son is confused... he's not quite sure what to do now

But he's got a plan

And so he begins his prepared speech, his scripted self-humiliation...

Luke 15.21 NIV "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"

But the father will have none of it

He interrupts his son before the son continues into words that will forever fill this moment with public shame

I remember years ago, Jeanne and I would quarrel about something

[story]

But the father here will have none of it

He moves instantly to interrupt his son's scripted self-shaming words, and instead, covers up the son's brokenness, his shame, his painful emotional nakedness with grace and love...

Luke 15.22-24 NIV "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."

This is the father's heart...

And this is how God our Father sees us... for you and I have certainly followed in this younger son's footsteps, haven't we? And we wonder, how will God ever take me back?

What do I have to do to earn back a little of his love...

A couple years ago, I got to know a young woman who had grown up in the church, gone to a Christian school, and had then rejected all of it... [story]

This changes everything... that's the gospel right there, isn't it?

Our story isn't over yet... there's another brother, isn't there?

Luke 15.25-28 NIV "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in."

The older son hadn't done anything the younger son had done

But the older son was in a far worse condition than the younger son had ever been in - and the worst part of it was that he didn't know it

He too, had left his father a long time ago...

But it was all well-hidden

He continued to live in his father's house... he worked the fields... he did everything that you'd look at and go, what a good son he is... not like that other one

But his heart was in a far worse condition than his younger brother's

This is the truly shocking part of Jesus' story

There's the scandal of the younger son rejecting his father... and then there's the shock of the father's forgiveness and grace

But this... this blows things up

Here is a son who - from all you can tell - is respectful of his father, obedient to his father, faithful to his work...

On the face of it he's doing everything right

And yet, when grace and forgiveness is shown to his brother, his true heart is revealed as cold, angry, judgmental, critical, unforgiving

In his response to grace extended to his brother, the deadness of his own heart is uncovered

Very often we learn the true condition of our hearts when someone else is shown grace

Particularly when someone else who has deeply offended us - is offered grace and forgiveness

The younger son had certainly sinned against his older brother, just as he had with his father

And the older son has no intention of forgiving his brother... on the outside he is dutiful, disciplined, faithful, obedient....

But on the inside his heart is unforgiving, and resentful, and bitter

And it all comes spilling out when he hears that his father had forgiven his brother

And now his own anger against his father, which had been there all along, now comes bubbling to the surface

Luke 15.28-30 NIV So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him!'

When you think life is transactional

When you think your good behavior, and your holy living, and your choices to reject evil and choose good are all about earning a good standing with God

You cannot tolerate grace shown to others

Sadly enough, it is often those of us who've spent much of our lives in the church who unconsciously take on the older brother's critical spirit and harsh judgmentalism and unforgiving self-righteousness

And it's only when we reconnect with the depth of our own sin and desperate need of forgiveness that we are able to enter into the heart of the father, and offer grace and forgiveness to others

The older son is lost in his own unconscious self-righteousness...

And the father loves him utterly, just as he loves the son who was lost to obvious unrighteousness

Luke 15.31 NIV “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

The story ends there...

We don't know if the older son finds his way back or not

Self-righteousness is a far greater barrier to experiencing grace than is unrighteousness

Unrighteousness wonders, can one such as I be forgiven?

Self-righteousness, on the other hand, doesn't even recognize its need of forgiveness, but passes judgement on the unrighteous

You and I... we are sometimes the younger, and sometimes the older son

In us are found unrighteousness at times, and self-righteousness at other times... that's just our condition

But our father's heart toward us is compassion, and gentleness, and love, and mercy, and forgiveness, and overwhelming grace

We're going to end our time together in a moment of reflection

Let's begin with these words from Psalm 139. Would you say these words with me, from your heart to God our Father?

Psalm 139.23–24 Search me, O God, and know my heart; Examine me and know my thoughts... see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting

Come, Holy Spirit... open the eyes of our heart so we may see our own condition, and the Father's grace, mercy, forgiveness and love

The Father invites you, right now, to enter into his forgiving heart

So let's take three steps together into his heart

First, is there anything you need to settle with God right now?

Does anything come to mind that you need to repent of, and turn away from, and turn toward God?

Write it down

You have an index card that you picked up... Or use your phone

Second, is there anyone you need forgiveness from?

Does a name come to mind? Write it down

Third, is there anyone you need to forgive?

Does a name come to mind? Write it down

You know what to do...

If you need prayer or need to talk this over, the prayer room is open right after the service

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us...

Break us, melt our hearts, mold us, fill us...

Make us your forgiven and forgiving people
