

**Amazing Grace Part III: “Share It!”**  
*The Secret of a Forgiving Heart*  
**November 3, 2013**

**PRELUDE – O Love That Will Not Let Me Go**  
**Worship Songs – Jesus Saves / Mighty to Save**

**Feature – “Apologize” / Offering**

Good morning everyone.

As you know if you’ve been around for the past couple of months, we are in the middle of a series called “Amazing Grace.” And our goal to this point has been two-fold:

1. First, to better understand what it means for God to freely lavish his favor on us even though we don’t deserve it. We spent a lot of time trying to unpack the implications of Jesus paying for all of our sin – past, present, future – through what he did on the cross without us ever having to do anything whatsoever (or even promising to do anything) to try and make things right. The only requirement is that we must believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be and that God raised Him from the dead.
2. Second, our goal was to better understand how those of us who have chosen to believe in Jesus experience this saving grace in everyday life. We saw that grace gradually changes the nature of our character as we root our lives in it (and we talked about how to do that) and we also saw that even though we are born-again believers, we will continue to sin until the day we die and even that is covered by grace. We are 100% sinner and 100% saint at the same time.

But over the next four weeks, as we bring this series to a conclusion, we’re going to shift the focus away from *God* ... and away from *self* ... to *others*. We’re going to look at how the grace God lavishes on us can – and should – impact how we relate to the people around us.

And I suppose that’s really point of it all because *grace is fundamentally about relationships*. After all, what was God’s motive for offering grace to us in the first place? It’s been embedded in almost every verse we’ve looked at that describes grace.

**For example, Paul wrote to Titus:**

*When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit ... Because of his grace he declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.*

*Titus 3:4-5,7 (NLT)*

**For example, Paul wrote to the Ephesians ...**

*God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. It is only by God’s grace that*

*you have been saved! Ephesians 2:4-5 (NLT)*

**For example, he wrote to the Romans:**

*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.  
Romans 5:3 (NIV)*

**The Apostle John in his Gospel wrote:**

*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16 (NLT)*

**And later he wrote:**

*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 1 John 4:10 (NIV)*

The whole motive behind grace – at least from God’s perspective – wasn’t just that God wanted to redeem His creation and keep it from being destroyed by sin though that was certainly part of the goal. It wasn’t that God felt obligated as the only person who could do something to bring about salvation thought that certainly was true. God’s motive for grace was and is *love*.

- God *loves you* and wants to have a friendship with you forever. That’s why He doesn’t want you to perish and miss out on eternal life.
- God *loves you* and wants to be part of your life. More importantly, He wants you to be part of *His* life. That’s why Jesus says to follow Him and become one of His disciples.

God’s grace is motivated by God’s love ... which means, as I said, that grace is fundamentally about relationships.

- First, it’s about the relationship between you and God.
- Second, it’s about the relationship that you have with yourself; your ability to forgive and accept yourself *as God does* even though you may hate what you’ve done (or are doing) and feel like you don’t deserve it.
- And third, grace is about the relationships you have with *others* ... which is, again, what we’re going to be talking about over the next four weeks.

### **Strained Relations**

So let’s get into it. And let’s begin with how grace impacts those relationships with others that are, for some reason, strained. Maybe the strain is there because the person has done something to offend us. Or they’ve hurt our feelings or wounded us in some way. Maybe they’ve let us down – disappointed us or failed to live up to a commitment. Maybe it’s something severe – they’ve used and abused us in some way. Or maybe it’s something relatively minor like they just get on our nerves.

And whether or not those things have happened only once or they’ve happened repeatedly; whether they’re happening now or recently or long ago, there is a strain or maybe even a full break in the relationship.

The question is ... if we're among those who have received the grace of God in Jesus ... if we're among those who have been declared 100% righteous and holy in God's sight through no merit of our own but only because of our faith in what Jesus did for us ... if among we're those who have been brought back into a relationship with a tenderhearted, merciful, kind, humble, gentle and patient Heavenly Father who loves us ... what are we supposed to do about those people?

**The Apostle Paul give us the answer when he writes:**

*Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.  
Colossians 3:12 (NLT)*

In other words, you have to be *to them* like God has been (and is) *to you*.

**Specifically ...**

*Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Colossians 3:13 (NLT)*

Make allowances and forgive: that's how people who have received grace are to deal with "those people."

And "making allowance for each other's faults" simply means we don't sweat the small stuff that bugs us. We just let it go. We don't get upset because our spouse is never on time. That's just how he or she is wired. We accept that our kids might not be as athletic or scholastic or artistic as we would like them to be. That's how they are wired. We tolerate our coworker's tendency to over-analyze or to over-simplify as their first response. That's just how they are wired. We put up with the fact that people who have not yet become mature are by definition going to act immaturely.

"Making allowances for each other's faults" means we look at people and we tenderheartedly, mercifully, kindly, humbly, gently and patiently say, "in this life, they are probably not going to be everything I want them to be and that's OK ... because in this life, *I am probably not going to be everything God wants me to be and He has tenderheartedly, mercifully, kindly, humbly, gently and patiently accepted me anyway.*"

As for forgiving, that's a lot harder and we're going to spend the rest of this message talking about it but first let me point out that this is not the only time that Paul wrote this and he wasn't the only one to express this idea. Jesus himself talked about it - and repeatedly. If there ever was something that could be called a core principle of Christian living, this is it: *in the same way God has been gracious to you, you must be gracious to others!*

**For instance, Matthew's Gospel tells us that on one occasion ...**

*Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" Matthew 18:21 (NLT)*

That's a really good question, isn't it? If you're in a strained or straining relationship at home or at work, you have to face it every day, just like Peter did. How gracious should you be?

Because the rabbis of his day taught that you had to forgive someone three times, i.e. “three strikes and you’re out” Peter thought he was really going above and beyond when he suggested forgiving seven times.

**So, imagine his shock at the response from Jesus.**

*“No!” Jesus replied, “seventy times seven!”*

*Matthew 18:22 (NLT)*

In other words, “Peter, you have to forgive more times than you could ever keep track of. Your willingness to go through the process of forgiving someone who hurt or offended you needs to be without limit. Your grace needs to be boundless.”

... which, by the way, is yet another reason to be assured that *God’s* forgiveness and *God’s* grace in Christ is without limit. God does not require of us something He Himself would not do ... which is what Jesus describes to Peter and the other disciples when He continues:

*[Imagine] a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him. In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. He couldn't pay, so the king ordered that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt. But the man fell down before the king and begged him, “Oh, sir, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.” Then the king was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.*

Catch that? In an amazing act of graciousness, the king went far beyond what the servant requested! Completely wiped out the debt.

*However, when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. “Be patient and I will pay it,” he pleaded. But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and jailed until the debt could be paid in full.*

*When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him what had happened. Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, “You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me. Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?” Then the angry king sent the man to prison until he had paid every penny.*

Get the picture? The king was furious that a servant who had received so much grace would not offer even a little bit of grace to another servant.

And then, to drive home the seriousness of this offense, Jesus added a somber warning. He said,

*That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters in your heart. Matthew 18:23-35 [NLT]*

Now, just to be clear, this is not Jesus issuing a legalistic requirement for receiving forgiveness and grace. I don't think He wants us to go around thinking, “Oh, I see. I have to do this forgiving thing or I won't be forgiven” and then

obsess over failing to get it exactly right (which we can never do).

That's not grace. And that's not what Jesus means because it's part of a larger picture that He was constantly painting ...

... with statements like:

*"A person who is forgiven little shows only little love."*

*Luke 7:47 (NLT)*

In other words, a person who does not think of themselves as loved and forgiven is not going to be very loving and forgiving. You cannot give away what you do not have. If you're not a forgiving person, that's a sign you may not be a forgiven person.

Or, to state it in a much more positive way ... and this has become kind of a mantra around here:

**Loved people love. Forgiven people forgive.**

### **Why We Struggle**

Of course, if that's really true, then *why do so many of us who are forgiven struggle to be forgiving?* I mean, why doesn't forgiveness just naturally flow from us when it's necessary?

I think there are several reasons. And I see these in my own life; see if they fit yours.

#### **1. We just don't see the need to work through the mess of forgiving.**

Either we're not aware that we have emotional baggage from un-forgiveness that's affecting how we see and respond to all of life, or we don't see the value in dealing with it.

A lot of us, especially when we think of the hurtful people in our past, say to ourselves, "I'd just rather forget about it." Or we pretend it didn't happen; pretend it didn't hurt us ... whatever "it" is.

Another reason why we struggle to forgive is that ...

#### **2. We think "they don't deserve to be forgiven."**

"What they did to me is so bad that they deserve to suffer. They deserve to feel pain. They do not deserve forgiveness."

Of course, the truth about forgiveness is that *it's never deserved*. No one ever *deserves* to be forgiven. That's the whole point of grace.

Forgiveness is a free gift whereby we say, "I'm not going to make you suffer as you deserve. Instead, I'm going to treat you *better* than you deserve. I'm going to give up the right to demand that, in some way, you pay for what you've done to me, *because I already have*. I'm going to let my pain and suffering serve as the pain and suffering

you should have to experience.”

As we saw in part one of this series, this is how the death of Jesus on the cross is able to bring about forgiveness for sin. God chose to let *his* pain because of our sins be the pain *we* should have suffered for those sins. “God made Him who had never sinned to become sin for us” is how the Apostle Paul put it. The cross became the instrument of our forgiveness because God allowed his own suffering to be the suffering we should have suffered.

Another reason we struggle to forgive is that ...

### **3. We think “I don’t have the ability to forgive.”**

We get past the point of thinking, “it doesn’t really matter what happened – I don’t even want to think about it.” And we get past the point of thinking, “what they did is so bad that they don’t deserve to be forgiven.” We realize that’s a nonsensical idea to begin with.

We get past *those* barriers but then we look inside and we say, “I just can’t do it. It still hurts. I’m still angry. I just cannot let them off the hook for what they did to me. I still feel like they need to suffer in some way. Maybe not at my hands but, in some way, justice needs to be served.”

Those are very understandable thoughts and emotions. *But they do not mean that we are unable to forgive.* It just means that *we are not ready to forgive* usually for one of three reasons:

1. We simply haven’t had time to process through the emotions of how we’ve been hurt. One of the worst things you can do is to say “I forgive” when you haven’t really considered what it is you’re forgiving. That’s not really forgiveness. That’s just another way of stuffing emotion instead of dealing with it. Forgiveness doesn’t pretend that what was wrong is right or didn’t matter just to “get on with life.”
2. Sometimes we’re not ready to forgive because the sludge of bitterness and unforgiveness has become so much a part of our lives that we can’t imagine living without it. We’re going to lose something that’s part of us and it may take some time to get used to that idea.
3. But another reason we are not ready to forgive is that we haven’t yet fully comprehended what God did to bring about *our* total forgiveness in Christ. We haven’t yet come to truly believe that our sin in his eyes is far worse than we can ever imagine. We still think of ourselves as “little sinners” ... which means that we still think of ourselves as “forgiven little” (as Jesus put it) ... which means that we don’t yet have the capacity to love and forgive *big*.

And, at the risk of being overly repetitive this is why it is so important that we root ourselves in grace. This is so important why we allow the Gospel – the good news – of God’s grace to be pounded into our heads over and over: *we do not have the ability to completely and totally forgive unless we ourselves are experiencing God’s complete and total forgiveness.*

You have to have a constant and ongoing sense of being completely and totally forgiven that allows you to approach God without shame and without fear. It has to be the foundation of your experience with God. It has

to be the foundation of the way you experience life. Your constant thought about yourself must be: "Because of the cross, because of what Jesus did in dying in my place for my sins, I am completely and totally forgiven of all wrongs past, present and future. I am completely and totally loved and accepted just as I am, not as I should be, because I'm never going to be as I should be."

And, that moment-by-moment experience ... that understanding of our relationship with God ... is what enables us to love and forgive and to keep on loving and keep on forgiving. To forgive as you have been forgiven requires that you are, in the first place, *forgiven* and that *your whole life is rooted in that reality and it blossoms out of that*.

So, again, at the risk of being overly-repetitive, let me ask you this morning: *are you living in the complete and total forgiveness that comes from Christ?* If you are not, I strongly encourage you to keep digging deep on what grace is really all about. One way to do that is to go back to the messages from the previous two months and listen to them again or read the manuscript. However you do it, you need to root yourself in grace because it really is true: loved people love and forgiven people forgive.

But there's one more reason that we who are forgiven struggle to forgive.

#### **4. And that is that we don't understand what forgiveness looks like in real life.**

In theory, we understand it. Forgiveness is letting go of the right to restitution and justice. It's letting go of the demand that our offenders suffer in an equivalent manner to what we've suffered.

In practice, though, it's really muddy. For instance ...

- What if they aren't sorry for what they did? What if they don't apologize?
- If I forgive someone – especially someone who has hurt me deeply – does this mean I have to be their best friend? What if I'm unable to trust them again?
- Do I have to forget what they did? What if I can't?
- What if sometimes I feel like forgiving and sometimes I don't?

Those are some very practical questions that need some very practical answers. So, that's what I want to focus on for the rest of this message.

#### **Getting Practical**

*So ... what about forgiving someone who hasn't apologized; someone who hasn't come to you and asked to be forgiven?*

The answer to that is that it doesn't matter. Because forgiveness is simply releasing an offender from the debt they owe you, you can do that regardless of whether or not they ever confess; regardless of whether or not they come to you and say, "Please forgive me." *Forgiveness is something that happens inside of you, not them.*

Now, it *can* change the world of the person who is being forgiven (especially if they realize they've hurt you and

offended you and they've come to you and said "I'm so sorry. Would you please forgive me?") It can change their world, but that's just an optional byproduct. The change that is ALWAYS brought about by forgiveness is what happens inside of you, inside of me. *We are set free from the bitterness that's holding on to us.*

The second question was ... *does forgiveness require reconciliation and restoration? In other words, do I have to have the same relationship with this person that I did before?*

The answer is, no, not necessarily. To forgive someone does not mean you have to be their best friend. Forgiveness simply means you drop the demand that justice be done in their life with respect to yours. It *can* open the door to a renewed and restored relationship but there are many other factors that go into that ... primarily the person's response to your forgiveness.

That's how it works in our relationship with God. He makes the first move in offering forgiveness and grace but it's not until we respond with "yes, I am a sinner and I don't want to be against You any longer" that any kind of relationship can happen.

It works the same way with those who have hurt us. Relationship going forward is dependent on how they respond to our offer of forgiveness.

The third question had to do with the idea of forgiving and forgetting. And we've all heard that at some point. "Just forgive and forget." But sometimes that's just impossible. I mean, there is no way you are ever going to forget something like being betrayed. You will never forget if you were beaten or if you were abused or if you were robbed or if you were raped. Those memories will always be with you.

**But that's OK because forgiving is *not* forgetting. Forgiving is *choosing* not to remember.**

When something happens that tweaks your memories about a particular person or situation, you can choose to say, "I have forgiven. I have chosen to release that person from their debt to me. And I will not allow my mind to replay the offense that was committed against me."

And, amazingly, that's exactly what God does for those of us who have turned to Christ and received his forgiveness.

**Listen to what God says in Hebrews 8:12 about people who come to Christ, He says:**

*"I will forgive their sins and will no longer remember their wrongs."  
Hebrews 8:12 (TEV)*

It's interesting, God doesn't say, "Somehow, I'm going to forget their wrongs. He says, "I'm going to *choose not to remember.*"

With all the damage that sin has done to His Creation, it would be impossible for God to forget what has happened. But, He says, "Instead of choosing to remember how awful your sin is and the damage it has caused, I'm going to remember that I've chosen to bear your sin in myself." He remembers that we are forgiven.

And that's what we have to do if we're going to continue to live in forgiveness, and maybe we've got to remember

that three or four times a day ... which leads to the final question: *what if sometimes I feel like forgiving and sometimes I don't?*

That's normal. Forgiveness – at least of the human variety – very rarely sticks with a one-time pronouncement. A lot of times it takes an internal wrestling match to keep it nailed down.

When Jesus told Peter to forgive “seventy times seven,” he didn't clarify whether he was talking about forgiving 490 different offenses, or 490 consecutive occurrences of the same offense. Maybe he was saying that sometimes you have to forgive one offense 490 times. Maybe forgiving one offense is a process that you never give up on; a series of decisions that you make over and over – without limit.

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I think from all of this you can see that forgiveness is a battle. It really is. And sometimes you may wonder, “Am I winning this battle of forgiveness?”

I like how R.T. Kendall, in his book, *Total Forgiveness* describes a helpful indicator. He says you know that you're living in forgiveness when you can pray – not wish – when you can pray *that God will bless your offender as much as he blesses you ...*

**... which echoes what Jesus said:**

*“You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!” Matthew 5:43-44 (NLT)*

Pray a loving prayer. Pray the kind of prayer that you would like to be prayed for you. Pray that they would be blessed by God in the same way that you want God to bless you.

And then, as if Jesus knew that some of us would hear his instruction as a legalistic rule to be obeyed in order to win God's favor (which is impossible) ...

**He adds this little postscript:**

*In that way [by loving and praying for your enemies], you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For He gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.” Matthew 5:45 (NLT)*

What's Jesus saying? “Children of the Father act like the Father.” Loved people love; forgiven people forgive.

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Several years ago, I went through a pretty hard time in my life because I was carrying a lot of emotional baggage from people who had hurt me either intentionally or unintentionally. There were names and faces that when they came to my mind or they came literally before my eyes – I would see them somewhere – caused me lots of heartburn and lots of anger and bitterness. Fortunately for me, God made it clear that this was the issue and for some reason or other, He also gave me that little phrase: “loved people love and forgiven people forgive.” For some reason, that just got pounded into my head.

But it didn't come to me as some kind of spiritual imperative, i.e. "this is what I have to do or God's gonna be mad" or "this is what you've got to do because it's just what you've got to do even though you don't want to, you just have to suck it up and do the Christian thing and forgive these losers."

It came to me as a gentle reminder that I have what it takes to be a forgiving person because of what Jesus has done for me. Forgiven people *can* forgive.

And so, one day, I decided to act on that in faith in a very concrete way. I made a list of all the people that kept coming to mind who had hurt me and who I needed to forgive. I took a piece of paper for each person and I literally wrote down a list of what I perceived to be their sins against me. For some people it was just one or two things. For others, I filled the page.

And this was important because, as I said at the beginning, forgiveness is not pretending. Forgiveness looks hard at reality and deals with reality – and reality was that I was sinned against.

And then I forgave. But I didn't just say, "I forgive you" because that's too nebulous. Instead, on each piece of paper I wrote a forgiveness pledge that reflects what forgiveness really is based on the things I just told you.

**Here's the pledge:**

*I will remember your sins no more.* When I think of you, I will choose not to remember what you did wrong, how you hurt me. I'm going to choose to not remember that.

*I will not speak ill of you for what you did.* When I hear your name mentioned in conversation, I'm not going to use that as an opportunity to get even with you behind your back.

And when I'm praying for God to bless me, or when I think of you, *I'm going to pray that God will bless you just like I want Him to bless me.*

That's what I wrote on each piece of paper. And then I wrote over the page "paid in full" because, what I was doing in that moment, what I was saying was that "the pain that I suffered by what you did – that's enough. That's enough pain. You don't need to pay because I've already paid. Paid in full."

Now, I never went to any of those people or said anything to them. But I began to have a sense of peace at that point. Not completely or not totally, but I started to notice a change. I could feel myself becoming emotionally free from the bitterness that was binding me.

That was two and a half years ago and today, I have actually reconciled with a couple of those people and I no longer have any bitterness towards any person on that list.

And I think some of you, this morning, could probably use that same kind of relief. So as we close, I want to give you the opportunity to do the same kind of thing that I did.

But you've got to start in the same place I did. You've got to start by agreeing with the truth.

### **Remember, Jesus said ...**

*"The Kingdom of God is near – it's here and it's now – so repent (change your mind) and believe this good news." Mark 1:15 (NIV)*

And that means that if you know Jesus – if he really is your savior – it is already in your heart to forgive. That's the truth. That's what it means that the "Kingdom is near, it's now."

So, repent. Don't believe anything less. Don't believe that you can't forgive - you *can* forgive. In fact, your renewed heart in Christ *wants* to forgive because it's like your Father in Heaven.

And maybe this afternoon or sometime this week you need to set aside some time and make a list of people and the sins they have committed against you. And after you make that list, take some time to reflect on what God has forgiven you – *your* list – and agree with the truth that forgiven people *can* forgive.

And then maybe write down something similar to the pledge I just showed you or "Paid in Full" on the list.

Some of you really need to do that for your own good so I want to pray for you to that end.

<PRAYER>

God, I'm just amazed again at the grace and forgiveness that is ours in Christ. And because of that, not only are we forgiven, not only do we know that we're totally loved and totally accepted, but we have this incredible ability to now be like Christ and be like our Father in Heaven.

And God, I pray that would be the spirit as we walk out of here; that we're not motivated by guilt - "oh, great, another thing on the religious to-do list" but that there would be a joy and a freedom and a rejoicing that "I am forgiven, therefore I can forgive."

And I pray that those who need to forgive would take the time this week to do that and that there would be a new freedom and peace in their hearts in a way there has not been in a long time.

I ask that in Jesus name, Amen.

### **Feature – "Losing"**

### **CLOSING COMMENTS**

Endnotes