

**Stuck in the Middle**  
***Unforgivable***  
**September 22, 2019**

Let's pray together.

Lord, I thank you for these few moments to reflect on your grace and mercy to us because of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

I pray that those of us who are Christians would learn to live every moment of our lives with a constant and overwhelming sense of the forgiveness we have received for all our sins – past, present, future, known and unknown.

And I pray that those who are *not* Christians would be truly amazed at what you offer to them with no strings

attached, and that they would come to believe in Jesus and receive Him as their savior and Lord.

In His name I pray, amen.

Good morning everyone.

We're in the middle of our series "Stuck in the Middle" which is a series about dealing with *change* ... a series about what we can do ...

- When the "old normal" of our lives is gone ...
- When "what was" no longer "is" ...
- And we're forced to accept and live in the "new normal."

And the reason we're talking about this is that *change is hard*, whether it's the natural

progression of things, such as when ...

- You become an empty-nester.
- Or your pet dies.
- Or your best friend moves away.
- Or your job changes and you no longer have the influence you once did.

And dealing with change is even harder when it's unexpected, unpleasant and undesired; when someone says something like ...

- "It's malignant."
- Or "I don't want to be with you anymore."
- Or "There's been an accident."

- Or “We have to let you go.”

Unfortunately, what often happens when hard and difficult change takes place is that, instead of moving on and embracing the future, we get stuck – *stuck in the middle* between “what was” and “what is” (and what could be). Our body lives in the present but we’re emotionally and spiritually trapped in the past. Time has moved on but we have not.

And in the first week of our series, we learned that a big reason we get stuck is that we don’t adequately deal with the pain and loss associated with the ending of “what was.” Instead of facing those emotions, we tend to ignore them, minimize them or medicate them.

But the fact of the matter is that ...

**“You can’t leave it until you grieve it.”**

You cannot end “the ending” of whatever was and embrace “the new beginning” of what is and could be until you have grieved what you have lost and how you lost it.

That’s why, for Christians, the discipline of *lament* is so important.

Lamenting is a direct and intentional way to deal with grief. It’s a process that allows us to face our anger and sadness and bleed off the emotional toxins that can keep us stuck and trapped. In a lament, you name the loss and you confront God with how you feel about it.

Now, I talked about that in great detail in the first week of this series, so I’m not going to go back through it again today. However, if you missed that message and you’re a Christian, I strongly suggest you go to the media section of our app or our website and watch, listen to

or read it.

I suggest that because that things I talked about last week and the things I'm going to talk about today and in the two messages after this one aren't all that effective apart from the process of lamenting.

And, again, that is so important for Christians because what we tend to do in addition to ignoring, minimizing or medicating our pain is to "Christianize" it. We jump right to "the Bible says" and we try to do whatever it is we're supposed to do.

For example, there have been times in my life where I've been greatly wounded because of something someone said or did. And I'm not talking about a minor offense. I'm talking about something that brought about a significant change in my life and/or a significant change in my relationship with

that person.

Some of those situations were personal, with family and friends. And more than a few had to do with being the pastor of this church, situations where ...

- I was made out to be “the bad guy” when I really wasn’t ...
- My reputation as a pastor and a leader was sullied ...
- And my credibility called into question.

And some of those folks knew what they were doing. They wanted to make *themselves* look good so they made *me* look bad.

And that hurt. And I was very angry.

*And you all know what this feels like. You’ve*

been through the same kind of thing.

In fact, some of you have been through much worse.

- Some of you lost a job because of something someone else did or didn't do.
- Some of you, your marriage ended because of what your ex did or didn't do.
- Some of you were abused as a child and your sexuality has been confused and out of control ever since.
- Some of you were taken advantage of financially and your business was ruined or you lost your home.

And the list could go on and on.



Now, here's the deal. If you're a Christian and that kind of thing happens to you, you already know what you're *supposed* to do.

### **As Paul wrote in his letter to the Colossian churches ...**

*Forgive as the Lord forgave  
you. Colossians 3:13  
(NIV)*

By the way, this is not the only time that Paul wrote this and he wasn't the only one to give this command. Jesus himself said it on several occasions.

"How often should I forgive someone when they sin against me? Seven times?" Peter wanted to know.

*"No, not seven times," Jesus  
replied, "but seventy times  
seven!" Matthew 18:22 (NLT)*

Now, if you take those statements from Jesus and Paul on their own without the big picture, it's easy to conclude that God just expects us to "just get over it."

And when the offense is minor, we probably should.

But sometimes, the offense – the loss – is just too great. It's just too painful to do that.

And in those times, we're not expected to say "I'm so angry at this person, but, as a Christian, I shouldn't feel that way."

*You feel how you feel ...* which is where lament comes in ... and the emotional and spiritual poison goes out.

And, sometimes when it comes out, it is really ugly.

**A great illustration of that is in the lament recorded in Psalm 137.**

*O Lord, remember what the Edomites did on the day the armies of Babylon captured Jerusalem. "Destroy it!" they yelled. "Level it to the ground!" Psalm 137:7 (NIV)*

And history tells us that the Edomites and the Babylonians did just that. And it was horrible. Many people died and most of the rest were taken away as slaves to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

Jerusalem was and then it was no more.

**And so the writer pours out his anger about that terrible change.**

*O Babylon, you will be destroyed. Happy is the one*

*who pays you back for what  
you have done to us.*

*Happy is the one who takes  
your babies and smashes  
them against the rocks!  
Psalm 137: 8-9 (NIV)*

Not a very Christian thing to say is it?

But it's in the Bible for a reason: *God does not expect you or me to forgive without lamenting.* The two go hand in hand.

And the psalmist is doing is lamenting. He's taking his anger and his pain and he's throwing it at God instead of ... and this is so important ... instead of taking it out on his oppressors. He's not *personally* bashing babies against the rocks or even asking someone else to do it. He's not even saying it's right.

He's just letting the poison drain from his heart and his soul to God.

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And that's where it always begins when your life changes because of what someone has done to you. You have to grieve it – whatever "it" might be – *in order to leave it.*

And *then* you can do what you're supposed to do ... which, when it comes to people who have hurt us, is to forgive.

Because if we don't – if we consider a person or an act "unforgiveable" – we're going to remain emotionally and spiritually stuck in the middle between what was and what is and could be, powerless to escape the prison of the past and unable to move forward in the future.

I've seen it happen so often and to so many people, including myself. There simply is no other way – *you must forgive*, even if you're *not* a Christian.

## **An Assumption**

Of course, if you *are* a Christian, you have a huge advantage in this. Or, at least, you could ... and should.

And, to understand why, let's look again at what Paul wrote to the followers of Jesus in the Colossian churches.

### **Paul wrote:**

*Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Colossians 3:13 (NIV)*

Now, when we read that just at face value

without thinking about it, we tend to hear it only as a “prescription.”

In other words, Paul is *prescribing* an action to be taken: “you must forgive others who hurt you.”

And that’s true, but if you look at it more closely, you’ll see that it’s also a “descriptive statement.” Paul *describes* a condition that has to exist in your life before you even attempt the prescribed action.

- That *you yourself are forgiven by God*;
- That you have experienced what it is to be released of the debt you owe God;
- That you know what it is not to have to make restitution for your sins (which, of course, is impossible);

- That you understand that God does not desire or demand that, somehow, you suffer because you have ignored Him and rejected Him; that you've hurt and offended Him by breaking His law.

To "forgive as you have been forgiven" assumes that you are, in the first place, *forgiven* and that *your whole life is rooted in that reality and it blossoms out of that.*

It assumes that you have a constant and ongoing sense of being completely and totally forgiven that allows you to approach God without shame and without fear.

It assumes that your constant thought about yourself is: "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, future, known and unknown. 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 kind of relationship with God – is what enables you to love and forgive and to keep on loving and keep on forgiving.

Or, to say it more directly ...

**Your ability to completely and totally forgive someone else *their* sins is dependent on the experience of God's complete and total forgiveness of yours.**

When you are aware of the many sins for which God has forgiven you (which is why we did the confession time earlier), it's a lot easier to extend forgiveness to someone else – even someone who has hurt you badly because you realize that you have hurt God just as badly and He has forgiven you.

So, let me ask you: *is your life rooted in the complete and total forgiveness that comes from simply trusting in Jesus and what He did on the cross?*

I'm sure some of you are. Some of you are hearing this talk and you're saying, "Thank you, Jesus, for making your grace clear to me."

But some of you are thinking, "I'm not sure I buy that. I think you've got to live up to a certain standard before God will truly accept you."

And because you're living out of that mindset, and because you've never understood that your acceptance, your worth, your forgiveness is totally dependent on Jesus and what He did on the cross, it will always be a struggle to forgive anything of significance.

So, for you, the starting point is simply to pray ...

“God, help me understand what it means, that because of Christ alone – because of what he did and not what I do ... that I’m accepted and I’m loved. Help me stop trying to pretend that I’m something I’m not and thinking that I’m better than the person who hurt me.”

“Today, God, I put my complete and total trust in Jesus and in his complete and total forgiveness of all my sins.”

And, maybe that’s what some of you need to take away from this message ... because that’s where it all begins.

## **Forgiveness FAQs**

Of course, being *forgiven* is just the foundation of extending *forgiveness*. You still have to actually do it – to forgive.

And what I've discovered over the years both personally and as a pastor is that most of us are confused on what exactly forgiveness is. And that confusion typically comes down to four questions.

And I talked about these earlier this year in the *State of Mind* series but I'm going to go over them again since they are so critical to the process.

First question I think a lot of us have is ...

*1. What about forgiving someone who hasn't confessed that they did wrong; someone who hasn't asked to be forgiven?*

The answer to that is "it doesn't matter"

because ...

**Forgiveness is *you* releasing an offender from the debt they owe you.**

And 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 begins in you, not in them.

Now, it *can* affect their world (especially if they realize they've hurt you and they've come to you and apologized) 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 is ...

2. *Does forgiveness require reconciliation and restoration?*

In other words, "do I have to have the same relationship with this person that I did before? Because I'm not sure I want to jump back into it because maybe they're not really all together yet and I could get hurt again."

So, does forgiveness mean reconciliation and restoration?

The answer is, no, not necessarily.

To forgive someone does not mean you have to be their best friend. In fact, it doesn't mean you have to have any kind of a relationship with that person, going forward, at all.

**That's because *reconciliation and restoration to***

**“what was” is dependent on how much trust can be re-established in the relationship ...**

... which is a completely different issue from forgiveness.

Forgiveness simply means you drop the demand that justice be done in their life with respect to yours. You release them from what they owe you ... which also releases you.

*3. The third question is ... why is it so hard to “forgive and forget?”*

And we’ve all heard that at some point, right?  
“Just forgive and forget.”

But 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.**

Here's how it works:

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

You can do that. I can do that.

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, He says:**

*[For people who come to Christ] "I will be merciful toward their evil deeds, and their sins I will remember no longer." Hebrews 8:12 (NET)*

Notice: the fact that God can even mention our "evil deeds" and our sins means that He *hasn't* forgotten about them!

And how could He? With all the damage that sin has done to His Creation, it would be impossible for God to forget what has happened.

So, God isn't forgetting. He's choosing not to remember. He's choosing to push aside the memory of our sin and, instead, remembering that He has also chosen to bear our sin in Himself on the cross.

And that's the choice we have to make if we're going to continue to offer forgiveness to someone ... which leads to the final question:

*4. What if sometimes I feel like forgiving and sometimes I don't?*

And that's normal – especially if the wound is deep.

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 say if that meant forgiving 490 different offenses or if that meant *forgiving one offense 490 times*.

Personally, I think He meant both because sometimes you *do* have to forgive one offense 490 times.

Here's what I mean:

You've decided to forgive someone for something that caused you a lot of pain. But then something happens to remind you of whatever that was and you feel that anger again.

To forgive "seventy times seven" means you go through the process one more time.

- You lament again if you need to – you yell at God, not at the person.
- And then you again choose not to remember and relive what happened.

**Sometimes forgiving *even one* offense is a**

**never-ending process.**

It's a series of decisions that you make over and over – without limit.

## **Getting Practical**

Ok, let's get practical.

Several years ago, I went through a difficult time where 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 a little phrase: “loved

people love and forgiven people forgive." For some reason, that just got pounded into my head and I realized that my forgiveness in Christ was the key to being able to forgive "them."

And then, through a book I read called *Total Forgiveness* by R.T. Kendall, He gave me a process that I've used over and over through the years.

Kendall says you know that you're living in forgiveness when you can *pray* – not wish – when you can pray that God will bless the offender as much as he blesses you.

**This is exactly what he says:**

"Total forgiveness involves praying for God's blessings to rain on the lives of your offenders ...

... that God will show favor to them rather than punish them, that they will prosper in every way ...

... that they will be dealt with as you want God to deal with you."

By the way, Kendall didn't just come up with this idea on his own. He's drawing from what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount.

**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)*

And, just to be clear, Jesus is not talking about the kind of prayer we read in Psalm 137!

He's talking about praying the kind of prayer that we would like someone to pray for us; a prayer that they would be blessed by God in the same way that we want God to bless us!

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 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 I suffered because of what you did – that's enough. That's enough pain for both of us. So you don't need to pay because I've already paid. Paid in full."

Funny thing is, I never went to any of those people or said anything to them. It was a totally private process.

But I began to have a sense of internal peace at that point. I could feel myself becoming emotionally and spiritually free from the bitterness that was keeping me stuck in the

past because of their sin against me.

## **Response**

And I think some of you, this morning, would probably enjoy that same feeling, that same kind of relief. So as we close, I want to give you the opportunity to go through that same process (or at least to begin it).

In your program today, there's a little brown card. I'm going to ask everyone to take it out right now.

Notice that the card says "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another just as Christ has forgiven you" because that's where it starts. You can't give to someone else what you yourself do not possess. It all begins with your own experience of forgiveness.

Now, this is what I want you to do while the band does one more song.

1. Think of someone who has treated you poorly or unfairly or made your life unnecessarily difficult, whether it's intentional or not.
2. Then, write down on the card a list of their sins against you. What did they do that they should not have done? How did they fail you or wound you? Be specific.
3. Then, as you're looking at that list, you might just want to lament – "God, I am so angry about this? How could you let this happen to me? Where were you?"
4. And then, if you're able (and some of you may not be today because you've not really lamented these things) ... then you write out the "forgiveness pledge."

(which is coming up on the screen).

**– leave up during first part of next song; follow director's cue>**

5. Then, you maybe write over it "paid in full" (because your pain is going to be enough – you don't need their pain to make things even).

Ok, let's pray and then we'll begin.

<PRAYER>

## **CLOSING COMMENTS (2)**

1. I'm going to ask you to hang on to this card because sometime you'll probably need to look at it again and remind yourself, "oh, this is what God has enabled me to do."

And you might need to do more cards for

other people who have wounded you.

2. Next week we'll talk about the third thought – the third lament, really – that sometimes causes us to get stuck when things change ... and that is "it's just too hard. This new normal is more than I can handle."
3. 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary a week from this Wednesday ... GREAT evening planned.
4. Offering at the door.

Endnotes