

AUG 27 Sermon - "This town is big enough for the two of us."

We have a big problem. If you were here last week then you heard Pastor Jay's reminder from the Bible that "there is no one good, no not one!" Romans tells us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We have a debt to pay. My wife Paige and my son Salem and I recently walked into one of those old-time photo places in Gatlinburg. I was a southern gentleman and Paige was a southern bell, but Salem had me at gun point and was taking the bags of money. It was a fun memory, and I've got the photo in my office here now, but it got me thinking if we were in the wild west, we would all be outlaws, our pictures would be in every saloon, bank, post office, and inn, and in capital letters underneath would be the word WANTED: for treason against the Most High God and for high handed sins against humanity. We are guilty and Wyatt Earp and his lawmen are hunting us down because the gallows await us. That, or a shootout that ends in death, either way our future does not look good. It is a tight spot to be in, and it raises the question: is there any hope for us? Is there any way we might become free from this bounty upon our heads? Will there be any rest for the weary?

We continue our "Inside Out" series this morning with a topic that we hear weekly in worship yet, could very well be devoted to its own sermon series as there are so many facets and nuances to it, not to mention the 125 times it comes up in the Bible. The topic today is trying to understand, "what does it mean to be **forgiven**?" Try as I have, I simply couldn't boil this sermon down to one point, so today you'll be receiving a more traditional 3-point sermon and here is why: Forgiveness is a continuum.

If you're not familiar with a continuum, one example is the 4 seasons: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter. A never-ending loop that helps us track days, months, and years. A spectrum from life to death to rebirth and on and on it repeats. Thus, forgiveness is primarily best understood in a 3-part continuum, and the first part is recognizing that we are sinners, outlaws, convicts, that we have a heavy bounty upon us, a debt to settle our account, and moreover we really need someone else to pardon us from that bounty that we will never be able to get out from under by ourselves. The Hebrew people were physically enslaved for over 400 years. If anyone knew the experience of bearing a heavy load, of being burdened down and oppressed, of needing to be released from bondage, it was the Hebrew people while they were enslaved in Egypt.

Now that Salem is 3.5, I find that any time I do get to watch a movie these days it's likely not a Western, but is usually some animated movie, so recently I watched both the live action remake and the original Aladdin movies. As I watched, for the first time I picked up on the Genie's comment of being trapped in that lamp for 10,000 years, "that will give you a crick in the neck" he said, and Disney fans let me ask you what is the one thing that the Genie would wish for himself above all else? To be set free. To be released from his enslavement, to be free from his ity-bity living space and having to exist under the rule of someone else. Let me ask a rhetorical question here: I wonder, what burden you've been carrying that you need to be released from? What sin have you committed that follows you around, that you're ashamed of, that you'd be completely embarrassed if someone found out about it? What action or despicable thought made you the outlaw in the eyes of God, and the most important question is are you weary of it yet? Having an awareness of this burden, this debt, and our need for someone else to help us out of it, this is the 1st part of the continuum of forgiveness. The lie that Satan tells us at this stage is that you're not bad, you've done nothing wrong, you're not guilty, keep on living the way you are...but our worn out and tired souls tell us otherwise, so to sum up this first part of the continuum I would call it **Weary Conviction**,

Point number 2, and the middle of the continuum is the divine act of being forgiven. This is where the word forgive comes in. It means dismissal, release, pardon, a sending away, a letting go. Last week we sang in Amazing Grace, who can save a wretch like me? **God can!** God stands ready to forgive because it is in His loving compassionate nature to do so, the same way that a loving Father forgives his Son, so God stands ready to forgive all who turn to him in their weary need. Jesus reminds us of this in Matthew 11, "28 *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.* 29 *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I*

am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” The focus verses from the NT reading are, “Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. ³⁹ Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses. Jesus is our savior. He saves us from sin and death, and weariness, and carrying heavy burdens because he has taken our place, he has paid our sin debt, and he has paid the ransom we could never repay. God can forgive us while upholding His justice because in Jesus our wrongdoings are paid for. God doesn’t shirk justice but rather provides a way to uphold his justice while still providing RELIEF for all those who call on his name asking to be forgiven, so if I had to put this middle part of the continuum into a word, it would be **RELIEF**.

Let’s try an experiment really quickly, everyone take a breath in, and hold it as long as you can. How long can you hold your breath? For some of you, 15 seconds, 30 seconds, maybe a minute, 3-4 minutes tops, but at some point, you need RELIEF. You need to exhale, release, or send away the carbon dioxide that is in your lungs and replace it with wonderful oxygen. When you exhale, you are sending away and letting go a minor but important burden in order that you can experience relief and be at peace. At this point in the continuum, you know you need relief, but Satan tells you the lie that you can never be forgiven, that you’re too bad, too far gone, and unredeemable! But nothing is impossible for God! When God forgives you who put your faith in Jesus, He is sending away the punishment, canceling the debt, retracting the bounty on your head, and he is taking down the WANTED posters with your face on them. The hangman is not prepping the gallows anymore, and you are free to come and go throughout the town as you please. What a relief that is!

Anytime I think of forgiveness I also think of Victor Hugo’s classic novel and play Les Miserable. The man Jean Val Jean was originally convicted for stealing a loaf of bread. Needless to say, he didn’t feel weary at all about stealing to eat, but he did feel weary after serving 19 years doing manual labor under the watchful eye of Pollice Inspector Javert. He inevitably gets caught red handed again while out on parole because he stole some silver from a bishop who was housing him, and the bishop releases him, he pardons him, he forgives him. Val Jean experiences relief from this act of mercy and grace and is therefore transformed to go live a life for God. I wonder, have you forgotten that you have been set free from every sin? The law does not show mercy, that is not how law functions, it exists to show you how to live and where you have disobeyed, but One who is higher than the law, indeed the One who established the law, can do what the law is unable to do by forgiving you of your sentence. Friends, it is time, in faith, to lay **every sin** at the foot of the cross of Jesus and receive the forgiveness that only God can give you. Let Jesus take that heavy load off you so that you can experience relief!

So, the first part of the continuum is **weary conviction**, followed by God’s divine **relief** made possible by His forgiveness of your sins, now the 3rd and final part of the continuum is **joyful assurance** provided by God’s Spirit. The lie Satan tells you in this final stage is that your sins follow you, but God is not a double minded God who goes back on His word. God is not like the Pharaoh of Egypt, who after sending away the Hebrew people, chased them down once again in an effort to recapture them. God is not like Police Inspector Javert who hunted down Val Jean because he was unable to truly live in a world where Val Jean is forgiven. No, our Psalm reading today reminds us that God forgives all our iniquity, and *as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.* That is the largest unit of measurement the Biblical author could come up with! God abundantly, majestically, totally, forgives us without a shred of lingering conviction. This final part of the continuum is an astonishing look at the goodness of God that He would do so great a thing for us and it is cause for celebration! There is a reason that the Israelites celebrated annually with a festival called Passover, because God delivered them from their bondage, and being set free is a reason to celebrate! Indeed, thinking again of the Genie of the lamp, spoiler alert if you’ve never seen Aladdin, but Aladdin used his 3rd and final wish to set the Genie free, and he **CELEBRATES!** He is ecstatic, and he takes a long vacation! Recalling another familiar story Jesus tells of the Prodigal Son, you remember the joy the father had towards his wayward son, so much joy that he did what? He celebrates with an over the top party! I wonder, do you celebrate your

forgiven status with God? Do you rejoice? Are you assured that the forgiveness that has been imparted to you is trustworthy and true? One way we celebrate being forgiven is to come and worship our great God! To lift our voices together in praise and awe of who He is and the great things He has done! Another way we celebrate is by being a people who forgive as we have been forgiven. It would be a shame to be forgiven by God, and then not be a forgiving person in return. It would be a shame to be the kind of person that says, “this town ain’t big enough for the two of us” because we are unable to forgive one another.

In summation, that is the forgiveness continuum in 3 parts: weary conviction of our wrongdoing, followed by the relief of pardon from our sentencing, which gives way into living out a joyful assurance that we are loved, we are redeemed, we are free from sin and the tyranny of the devil. Where are you on that continuum right now? If there is doubt between you and God, be assured that you are forgiven, and not just sort of forgiven, but as far as the East is from the Wild Wild West!

The real challenge ahead of us, is how do we live now that we are forgiven in Christ Jesus? Next week Pastor Mark will help us see what might happen if we take that forgiveness for granted, but for now, let us marvel at the compassion of a God who loves us as His own children, who does not count our sins against us as we deserve. Let us be forgiving people with one another. When someone owns up to wronging you in some way, remember how God has forgiven you in Jesus, and go and do likewise by forgiving the debt of those indebted to you. Your act of mercy and grace might just give someone a reason to celebrate too! This is what the kingdom of God looks like here on earth: a people saved by grace, willing to give grace and forgiveness to one another. A people who are intentional with owning their sins and who commit to changing their generational sins. A people who says, **“this town IS big enough for the two of us”** and who can forgive one another. A people who seek to honor God and leave a legacy of humility, mercy, and compassion. Therefore, go and forgive because God has forgiven you by way of His son, Jesus. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.