

The New Normal: A Grace Freely Given
Romans 5:6-15

The ability to forgive in any relationship is essential for its survival. The willingness to move forward and onward from a transgression is vital for the life of friendships and marriages. Some people are very good at forgiving and moving on. They are able to shed the bitterness and anger for the sake of their relationships. For other people, it isn't so easy. So the flip side of this is that there is nothing more toxic to a relationship than never letting something go. If in every argument your friend or spouse brings up every thing you've ever done as ammo against you, that relationship is in trouble. The list that some people keep in their heads is amazing and they are ready to bring it out at a moment's notice. That kind of mentality. That kind of behavior creates a weird power imbalance in a relationship. It stokes fear and division. It is used to control and manipulate. It can be exhausting for the person on the receiving end of this resentment. Apparently, they've dug a hole they can never get out of. They've committed a sin that can never truly be forgiven. They will pay for that mistake the rest of their lives, or at least as long as the relationship continues. You will never grow, you will only decay in a twisted system like this. Unfortunately, many people do this. It is rampant in our world and in our country today. It's destructive. It's dangerous. Most importantly, it's not Christian. Today, we will continue exploring the new normal by talking extensively about forgiveness and grace. Paul brings it to our attention in Romans 5 and it is the perfect topic given the current and ongoing state of our society. What are we called to know when we hear the refreshing truth about God's grace? What is the new normal for us that needs to be enacted in the world? Where do we go from here?

Paul, as many of you know, was not always Paul. He used to be Saul, a pharisee of pharisees, tied to the sacrificial system of the Jewish temple. He hated Christians. He hated Christ. He sought to destroy the church and he was mostly successful in his efforts. He was there holding coats as the first martyr of the church, Stephen, was stoned to death. But on the road to Damascus, as he sought to persecute more followers of Jesus, he was confronted and converted by Jesus himself. Saul became Paul and he depended greatly on the mercy and grace of the church he had scattered so that he could grow into the leader God wanted him to be. So Paul knows all about forgiveness. He knows about a sacrificial system of atonement. He knows how the law can be abused. He knows how the system can be used to crush people. He knows the radical nature of God's grace. As he writes to the christians in Rome, he wants them to know the extent of God's grace, too. We need that message ourselves. We need the reminder because we convince ourselves we can't be forgiven. We convince ourselves that others can't ever be forgiven. We create our own systems of sin and atonement that don't align with scripture. Paul knew how much he needed to be forgiven and it amazed him how free this gift really was, how readily available it was for him. He wanted others to know that same truth. He wanted the church to know and live this reality because the world screws this up royally.

As you read one of Paul's letters, I know it can be easy to get lost in his rhetoric. A single sentence can be three lines long. He debates with himself at times. He approaches specific problems at a time and place that isn't our own. It's easy to blast through Paul's teachings without absorbing what is helpful for us. So, for your benefit today, I will highlight two radical statements from Paul that make no sense to the world around us. Ready? The first one is this, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." The second one is similar, "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Basically, forgiveness comes through Jesus to people who don't deserve it. Not only do we not deserve it, we have earned the opposite. Our sin puts us at odds with God's holy law. Our sinfulness has paved the path straight to hell. Our sinful nature promises us death. While we were worthless, worthy of death and eternal separation from God, Jesus came to save us. There was nothing in us that could benefit Him. We brought nothing to the table. The cross Jesus hung on and breathed his last was meant for you and me. Forgiveness came to us when Jesus said "No, let me take their place." Grace is defined as the free and unmerited favor of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners. We can see it lived out in the person and work

of Jesus, bleeding out on an instrument of torture meant for his accusers. Earning the forgiveness of the world through his wounds. Pleading for his Heavenly Father to forgive those who put him there, who cried out “crucify him”, who mocked and laughed at him, who outright rejected him.

Grace is a radical thing. Forgiveness is a foreign concept in our world, especially today. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus shows us what true forgiveness is. It isn't just reluctantly saying “it's okay” to people who have hurt us. He died in the place of people who totally deserved their punishment. That death equalled forgiveness for the ones who hurt him. They didn't even ask for it. He didn't make sure they were worthy of it. He didn't search their hearts to find out where their allegiance resided. He died for all, so that all might receive forgiveness. He didn't just speak words of forgiveness. He earned it with his blood. We didn't have to prove our worth. We didn't have to clean ourselves up first. He saw us just as we were. He sees us just as we are and still forgives. He still sacrifices. Knowing all that you are, all that you've done and will continue to do. He does his work anyway. So, grace and forgiveness is a free gift. We don't have to earn it and we don't receive more of it just because we are good people. It is a gift we receive as we humbly ask for it in Jesus' name. It is a gift freely given to each of us, it's no skin off our back just the pounded and pierced flesh of Jesus. We don't have to jump through hoops or perform unending tasks. All we do is say sorry and the gift is granted. All we do is repent and that sin is removed entirely from our lives forever. We know this as Christians but do we really let it hit us. Do we really accept all that is spoken in this truth? You are no good. You are a sinner. There is no merit or worthiness in you. That is a devastating place to be but thanks be to God he gives us the victory in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God his great love for us crosses that divide that our sin has created. Thanks be to God he loved first. Thanks be to God that he saw us as the sinners that we are and still sought to save us. He did just that, securing us by the blood of his son, Jesus. It's incredible.

You know what forgiveness is? Yes, it is absolution for wrong doings. Yes, when done properly it can be given without consent. It is given freely and recklessly. It is given despite the state or attitude of the offender. We receive it immediately when we ask for it, never again needing to worry about that past offense. Most importantly, Jesus shows us that forgiveness is death. Quite literally it is with Jesus. He dies for an unjust cause. He dies for an unfair outcome. He dies to his rights and by that death we are freed to live forever. Forgiveness requires death, but not of the one asking, but of the one giving. In order to truly forgive you must die. That truth is the new normal of the church. While we were still sinners Christ died for us. We die to self in order to forgive another person. Do you understand what I'm saying? It means you die to your sense of justice. You die to your need for revenge. You let your ego and selfishness die. You kill that sinful urge to leave a sinner twisting in the wind. You die to any sense of self importance or that temptation to lord a sin over someone. You die to the idea that sins can be brought up again as ammo later on. You die to all of that when you become an agent of God's grace. You die just like Jesus did. He died so that sins can be laid to rest forever. As Jesus rose from the dead, he left every sin buried in the grave never to be seen or heard from again.

Our world needs a message like this because our world has an unhealthy view of forgiveness and atonement. Our world wants the sinner to die. Our world wants the descendants of sinners to die. Our world wants sins laid in shallow graves to be dug up over and over again, trotted out to make a point or to put people down. It isn't enough to ask forgiveness because those sins can still be brought back to bite you. We judge and condemn many because of the actions of one. We make the many atone for the sins of the few. Even then it often isn't enough. Our world has a twisted system of atonement, one that is far from the ideals and expectations of God. We need to die to these notions. We need to die to the sense of making someone pay for a sin over and over and over again. God never makes us pay for sin. Jesus does that. We repent, yes, and we need to but once forgiven it is finished, the incident is over. We've created our own sacrificial systems where someone has to beg forgiveness over and over and over again. God says our sins are as far from us as the east is from the west. Meanwhile, our world says your sins are an ever present shadow, following you forever. It's a ghost waiting to be conjured up in order to take you down and shut you up. That's

what our world says and does. That's what our world thinks forgiveness is and its disgusting. And if you do that you are just as guilty of perverting that free gift that Jesus earned for all.

It is interesting when scripture says that our sins are as far from us as the east is from the west. They don't say as far as the north is from the south because we can measure that. It's actually 8,595.35 miles from pole to pole in case you were curious. God said from the east to the west because it's impossible to measure that. That's how far our sins are from us in God's eyes. It is immeasurable because they can never touch. That's what our God thinks of us and our sin as we repent, yet our world thinks differently about our transgressions. Our world never truly forgives. Our world only takes the time to remember your sins. Our world has such a contorted idea about atonement and grace and mercy and forgiveness. If you've tweeted anything in your lifetime, even if it was when you were 14 years old, they'll dig it up and ruin your life. If someone, anywhere, that has the same skin color as you does something bad they'll judge you for it. So an entire ethnicity is branded with sin because of one. That's how our world operates. One officer kneels on the neck of a black man in a city far from you and now all officers are branded with that sin. That's how our world works. It's an unbelievable world we live in. It's an unbelievable system we've constructed for ourselves. It is such a contrast from how God works. It's so far from what God wants for any of us.

What's amazing about our world today compared to how Jesus operates is this: Jesus dies. Jesus pays the price for the sins committed by us. Our world demands repentance for sins they experience from people who didn't commit them. That's how sick and backwards our world is when it comes to forgiveness and grace. How do we as a church live differently? Do we hold sins over people's heads? Do we leave them in shallow graves, ready to be exhumed for our political or social gains? Do we measure sins from north to south instead of east to west? How do we treat sin? Do we live and forgive as the world does? Or do we forget the sin when we forgive? Do we die to self? Do we die to our need to be right, or to enact our own justice, our own vengeance? When repentance comes is that enough or do we demand retribution? Or do we die to the old ways of the world and forget the sin just as God does? That's the normal that we are called into and it is a revolutionary way to live. It's a very difficult way to live because that requires us to take on some scars, to take on some hurts and you put them in God's hands instead of you demanding to be repaid or begged for forgiveness. No one should ever have to grovel and beg for your forgiveness. You die to self as one who forgives. Or have you already forgotten? Because while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. That is your calling as a Christian. That is the new normal and as we enter into it, as we navigate our world now, whatever it will be, whatever it will look like, one thing will be certain. We will be a people that will forgive entirely. We will be a people that gives grace freely. We will be a people that won't demand atonement. Let God handle it. We know that when you repent of your sins, you are forgiven before God. The exact same should be true with one another. The exact same thing.

We do not hold the sins of others over them. We forgive recklessly, even at the cost of our own lives, our own egos, our own sacrificial systems. We forgive. We die to self and we forgive. And maybe, just maybe as we do that and as we show the world what the Church thinks about sin and atonement and sacrifice. Maybe we can change some hearts. And maybe there can be some real reconciliation in our world. Instead of whatever they are trying to do now which is an absolute mess. You know it and I know it. It's just a bunch of people pointing fingers at other people or even straw men, never taking accountability. Always holding others' sins over their heads, while acting as if they are the pure and spotless lamb. No, that is Jesus and that spotless lamb was willing to be slain so that we can put aside sin and live differently. Die to self. Live as Christ lived. He didn't demand that people thank him as he hung on the cross. He didn't demand that people praise him as he died for their sin. He didn't demand they kneel and beg forgiveness as he breathed his last. His work of salvation wasn't conditional. Neither should your forgiveness. With dying breaths, dying breaths, Jesus said, "Father forgive them." Wow.

Can we live like that? Can we live like Jesus died? Can we forgive entirely, leaving sins dead and buried so that relationships can continue on and thrive? That's our calling. That is

what we are called to do and to be in this new normal. And our world needs it. Oh boy do they need it. In the unrest. In the uncertainty. In the riots and protests or whatever else you call it. Our world needs this absolutely. And we've got it. We can show them. There is forgiveness for every single person. It's waiting for them at the cross. They can exchange those sins for righteousness. They can leave them behind, never to be thought of again. That's what our world needs, not whatever system they are trying out in the streets these days. That's where we go from here. That is what characterizes the new normal. In the church. In a world gone mad. In a world stepping out of quarantine into the fire. We bring grace. We bring forgiveness. We show them that in order to forgive you must die. In order to be truly forgiven, you kneel only to Jesus who died for their sins without hesitation and gathers them up into his eternal arms of love. Everyone needs to know that for their own salvation. Everyone needs to see so that they know how to forgive others. Show them that. Because that is the new normal that will change everything. Amen.