**Forgiveness**

**Matthew 5–6**

**Bro Jamus Edwards**

Twenty one years ago next month, I stepped foot onto the campus of Murray State University for the first time, an eighteen year old preacher boy from Cadiz, Kentucky, home of the Country Ham Festival. It is home of the world's largest ham of biscuit, and home of one stoplight and a graduating class of about eighty-eight of us. We started off with one hundred and twenty, and half ended up in prison and the other half just dropped out. So, I walk onto campus some Murray State University and I'm surrounded by all these big buildings and about ten thousand other students. I had never seen anything like it in my life. I was as nervous that first day at Murray State as a long tail cat in a room full of rocking chairs. I was this anxious as a vegan in a sausage factory (no offense to all our vegan friends out there), but I remember being so anxious. That first week on campus, a young lady invited me to Hardin Baptist Church. That was back when you were at the other location before you went and got all fancy out here. I grew up at East Cadiz Baptist Church where on a good Sunday we ran about seventy-seven, and so even though your facility was smaller than now, I walked in and I remember that first day that I felt at home. For the next four years, Hardin Baptist Church became my family. Not only were you also welcoming and loving to all of us college students, but as an eighteen year old who had just surrendered to preach, sitting under the preaching ministry of Ricky Cunningham––I had never in my life experience anything like it. Listening to Bro Ricky preach was like throwing a T-bone to a Pitbull for a young preacher, I could not get enough. I just want to say thank you for the decades of the way you have loved and welcomed college students. You have no idea, even though maybe we are only here for a few years, of the lifelong impact that has on so many of us years later. So, I just want to encourage you again as a product of this church––this fall when they start rolling back in here, take one or two under your wing, have them over to your house for lunch, adopt them for the four years they are here. That is a lifelong investment.

The second thing I want to say, and I think you all know this, but sometimes it's just nice to have somebody from the outside come in and give a reminder that God has been uniquely kind to you all. To have Ricky Cunningham as your pastor for nearly forty years now, God gave you one of his rarest, choicest gifts. There are churches all over this country that would give anything to have a pastor like Ricky Cunningham, and not just Ricky, but Kory and Chris and your whole team here. When God thought about this church, He was apparently having a very good day. He has been so kind to you. So, I just want to gently encourage you from the outside, don't take for granted what you have here. I know you're not a perfect church, I know your leadership is not perfect, but God has been so kind. It is just an honor for me today to be here. Ricky Cunningham has been my pastor for over twenty years now, and I pastor and Owensboro, Kentucky. We have been there almost sixteen years, and anytime I need something I call Ricky. He is typically on the combine, but he will take my call for three hours if that's what I need, and he has shepherded me from afar.

I want to briefly introduce my family to you, my wife Annie and our three kids, Ellie, Cruz, and James. I want to share a quick story about Annie. We met on campus at Murray State University in 2001. I was this kid from Cadiz, Kentucky. I was saltine crackers and Beanie Weenies, and she was shrimp and caviar from the big state of Illinois. So when we were called to our church and Owensboro fifteen and a half years ago, we drove down to go through the interview process and to preach the trial sermon. This elderly gentleman at the church (he was probably ninety-two or three years old) walks up to me and Annie and he looks at me and then he looks at her, and the he looks back at me and he said, “Boy, you didn't just marry up, you married way up!” I was like…*Well, God bless you too. I can't wait to be your preacher. I would like to see your wife. I guarantee you married up too!* But they are great!

So, we move to Louisville right after graduation from Murray and lived on campus at Southern Seminary. Man, that first year of marriage was very difficult for us. It is for a lot of newlyweds. We fought like cats and dogs. Our poor neighbors next door probably thought *Lord have mercy on whichever church gets that preacher*; we were saying a lot more than Greek and Hebrew over there! I spent a lot of time in the doghouse. So, one day after Seminary class I was driving home and thought I ought to listen to a sermon from Bro Ricky and he'll whip me into shape. I pulled up the Hardin Baptist website and I found a sermon on marriage from Bro Ricky, and he said something like this: “Fellas, I want to tell you what to do if you really want to get some brownie points with your wife. Today after work, go by the florist and pick up a pretty thing of flowers take them home. Go in and give your wife the flowers, sweep her up off her feet, kiss her right square on the mouth, and say, ‘Honey, I love you more than anything in the world.’ If you do that, I promise you won't regret it.” Well, I was in the dog house so I decided to do that, I have nothing to lose. So, I went by the florist spent about six dollars on a cheap thing of flowers and I go home. We were living on the Seminary budget, right, we may like twenty thousand a year, and I give the flowers to Annie. I do all that Ricky said to do, I hold her and I love her, and I say, “You're the greatest thing in the world. I'm so blessed, honey, I love you.” And she broke down and cried like I have never heard a woman cry before. I said, “What in the world is going on?” She said, “You don't understand. This has been the worst day of my life. I woke up this morning late because the alarm clock didn't go off and I get to work and the boss chewed me out. Then, I get to work and I spilled my Starbucks coffee all over my pretty new white blouse from Target. Then, I was driving home from work to cook your dinner and I get pulled over by the state police, and I get a big fat speeding ticket. Now, the apartment is a wreck, the cornbread is burning, and you've done come home drunk!” I said, “It is all brother Ricky's fault!” So, part of that story is true, most of it is not, and you can guess which parts are or are not true.

If you would, turn with me in her Bible to Matthew chapter 6. We are actually going to pick it up today in Matthew 5:21 where I think you all left off last week in The Sermon on the Mount, so I'm going to get back to that. I want to start in Matthew 6 and we are going to end in Matthew 6, and you will see why by the time this is all said and done. I will warn you that this is one of the most difficult things Jesus ever said, Matthew 6:14-15.

**Scripture**

***“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”***

Now, if you want to hold your place in Matthew 6, we are going to get back there but let’s go back to Matthew 5:21–22 where you left off last week. Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But [Jesus is about to raise the bar on what it means to murder] I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother [or sister] will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of Fire.”

Two weeks ago, a friend of mine that I grew up with in Trigg County, played high school basketball with him, gets out of the Kentucky State Penitentiary from a twenty year sentence for murder, he served seventeen of that. It was a drive by shooting in Trigg County in the early 2000’s. Now, we all know that was wrong. Nobody in this room would debate whether or not murder is a sin. Jesus affirms that, saying you have heard it has been said do not kill. But in verses 22 and 23, Jesus speaks of a different kind of murder, a murder that is sneaky and seductive because it's not with the hands; it's with the heart. With this kind of murder, there's no DNA evidence, no blood, and the story will never be on Dateline NBC or 20/20 because the murder weapon is not a gun or a knife; the murder weapon is the heart. And the danger with this kind of murder is that you can do it, you could be a murderer, all while going to church on Sunday and Bible study on Wednesday night. In fact, you might be sitting next to a murderer right now. This kind of murder, Jesus says in verse 21, is not when we hold a gun to someone; it's when we hold on to anger or bitterness against another person. Jesus says that is murder of the heart. Look at this strong language Jesus uses in verse 22. He says when we do this we will be liable to judgment. In verse 23, we will be liable to hell. And then He says in Matthew 6, if we don't forgive that person that ticked us off or hurt us, we will ourselves not be forgiven.

Before we get into this in depth, who are you angry with right now? Let's just start there in verse 22, “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment...” Who are you angry with right now? I don't just mean that person who cut you off in traffic last night for a couple seconds. I'm talking about they have hurt you at such a deep level that you have not been able to let it go days, weeks, months, maybe years later. You know kind of anger we are talking about here, right? They disrespected you. They stole from you in business. They lied to you. They cheated on you––that Dad that walked out on you, that ex-spouse, that church member that you feel like kind of stabs you in the back, that church leader that let you down. Your mom was in the hospital and they didn't show up, and you are just kind of holding on to that. Maybe now for the first time in a long time, the Spirit of God is reminding you that you are still kind of upset about that. What about the person who posts something on social media and your eyes just kind of roll in disgust? When you see them or hear their name, your blood pressure just kind of rises. In fact, if you see them at Walmart, you are going to try to avoid them at all costs. Have you ever done that?

To keep the wheels turning in our mind, look at verse 22, the second part. “…whoever *insults* his brother will be liable to the council.” That word, insults, is an interesting word. People smarter than me tell me that in the original language it basically meant to call them a numbskull, blockhead, a brainless idiot, a nobody, or a moron. Who do you feel that way about right now? When you think about them, your instinct is that they are an idiot. You can't stand them. When you see them or hear their name, you just kind of feel this thing welling up in your heart. Do you have any names in mind?

Alright, now we are going to obey a difficult teaching of Christ. Skip down to Matthew 5:43. Now remember, as preachers we preach through the Bible and we get thirty to forty minutes at a time, so we might take several weeks to preach to The Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus taught the Sermon on the Mount, He would have done it all in one setting. So don't ever get on to Bro Ricky for long-winded sermons, Jesus might have preached for hours, right! So what I'm about to read in verse 43, it's all in the same context of this anger and bitterness and all this stuff. So look at what Jesus said about four minutes later in this sermon, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” That's what the world will tell. That's what all the angry people on social media will tell you. But in verse 44, Jesus says, “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute [hurt] you…” Jesus is saying pray for the people that lied to you, cheated on you, disrespected you, or misrepresented you. Pray for them. So, the people that maybe the Lord has brought to your mind this morning, let’s just obey the words of Jesus, and let's pray for them. I know that's a difficult thing for some of us. It may be the first time you have prayed for that person since they hurt you. I understand it could almost reopen a wound of sorts. Some of you are like…*alright, I'll pray for them. Because you're the guest preacher, I'll do it. Fine, I'll pray I pray they get hemorrhoids. I pray their dog dies*. Alright, don't do that!! In all seriousness, I can't tell you exactly what to pray, but if you're a believer, you have the Holy Spirit living inside of you. Just pray “Spirit, in obedience to the words of Christ, I want to pray for that person or those people who hurt me.” I know this is hard, and we need the Lord’s presence and help. We seek to obey the Lord and to pray for someone who has hurt us––it is hard. We need the Spirit of God to be present and to help us as we submit to His lordship. We need the Spirit to bring about forgiveness and grace and reconciliation. We need Jesus to do this work.

I want us to walk through just a handful of principles from Matthew Chapter 5 on this issue of anger and bitterness and forgiveness. The first principle for Matthew 5: There is a time and a place for righteous anger. It's not always a sin to be mad. Look at what Jesus does in verse 22. He says, “But I say to you. That everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” What does that mean? I will illustrate it like this––a few weeks ago, we had the opportunity to go to the Kentucky Derby for the first time. We were very fortunate because someone gave us some tickets that we could have never afforded, so we were sitting on the front row right across from the finish line. I mean they were the best seats in the house. Donald Trump sat right over top of us! When the horses were going by, if we would have wanted to we could have reached out and grabbed them. It was awesome! The best thing though about being at the Derby was all the food and drinks were free. I must have had thirty-four cheeseburgers that day about twenty-nine Cherry Cokes! There was like a hundred and twenty thousand people there, something crazy like that, and everybody was dressed in their fancy clothes. But at one point, I was going up to get me another round of Cherry Cokes, and you know it was shoulder to shoulder, and there was this guy that just kind of looked like a jerk. I didn't like him the moment I saw him. He looked like one of them frat boys. I did the fraternity thing so I'm not throwing stones, but he just had that look, and he is holding on to like three or four beers. He clearly had way too much. He kind of walks by me and spills his beer all over my britches and all over my fancy Sunday preacher shoes. I am going to be honest––I got pretty mad in that moment. Now I am not the fighting kind, but in my heart, I was ready to go down with him…*who does this guy think he is spilling his beer on me, I gotta preach tomorrow!* I go through all this stuff, kind of having a little arrogant moment there.

So, I got mad at that guy for spilling his beer on me. Does that mean I'm going to Hell? Is that the point Jesus is making? I don't think that's the point. There is a time and a place for a righteous anger. Jesus did that, didn't He? Think about the time Jesus walked into the temple and He cleans house, turning over tables. He was angry. Now, He didn't sin but He was angry. So there is a time and a place for a Christian to be mad. For example, when we see injustice, when we hear stories of abuse or racism, we ought to be angry about that. When we think about the killing of unborn children, it ought to cause a righteous anger inside of us. Paul says in Ephesus 4, “Be angry and do not sin.” So just being mad, in and of itself, isn't necessarily a sin.

Here is the question…When does my anger become a sin? Well, I think it's when we hold on to that anger and we let it penetrate deeper into our hearts. We don't take it to the Lord, and it becomes bitterness, hatred, or disdain. Now we are in the sin category, and so here is the second principle: Bitterness becomes a trap. Bitterness is a prison. Now, we probably have some deer hunters around here. We have some turkey hunters. Okay, how many monkey hunters do we have in church this morning? Probably not any. That originated probably somewhere in South India they think––monkey hunting. So if you want to hunt a monkey, you don't need a bow or a rifle. You need a monkey trap. So here's what the natives do. They take something like a hollow coconut and they drill a little hole in it, which is just barely big enough for a monkey to stick his hand down in that hole. They stick a treat down in the coconut, like a banana or something like that. They tie it to a tree and they go hide out in the bushes and wait. Eventually, a hungry little monkey will walk along and sniff out that banana, and then the monkey will grab the banana and it becomes trapped. See, the monkey's hand fits through that hole, but his fist doesn't fit back out of that hole as long as he holds on to that banana. The monkey will scream and struggle, holding on with all his little might to that banana, hard-headed, he is not going to let go of that little treat. The hunter hears the scream, comes over, throws a net, gets the monkey, and that's how you get monkey for dinner. You throw in a little A1 sauce and you're good to go! But the irony, of course, is the monkey could have escaped at any time. All the monkey has to do is let go.

What we hold on to traps us. What we hold on to controls us. When we hold on to unforgiveness, when we hold on to bitterness against another person, it is a trap that controls our entire lives. We become slaves trapped in the prison of unforgiveness, and Jesus uses that language of prison. Let’s go back to our passage of Matthew chapter 5 verses 23–24. Look at what Christ does. Again, the context is there is a tension between you and another brother or sister in Christ. You are mad at them or they are mad at you, or maybe a little bit of both. Look at what Jesus says about that, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.” Before you drop that tithe check in plate, before you sing that song of the goodness of God, before you do any of that, first be reconciled to your brother or sister––then come and drop that tithe check off. But watch what happens when we hold on to the bitterness, when we don't try to reconcile, whether we have hurt them or they hurt us, when we just let that simmer and we don't deal with it, look at what happens in verses 25–26. Jesus says, “Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.” When we refuse to forgive, when we hold on to what that person did us, it's as though we go to prison, a metaphorical prison, a spiritual prison, and I take that to be God's discipline. He disciplines those He loves. It's a self-induced trap, though. It's a voluntary stay in prison. God will let us leave that jail cell anytime we want; all we have to do is forgive! But so long as we refuse to forgive, and we dig in and we hold on, Jesus says, fine––you can stay in prison under my discipline. That is not a fun place to be.

Brothers and sisters, here is the thing about bitterness that they don't tell you on late night television or on social media, Facebook and Twitter. When we don't forgive, we are the ones that suffer. Bitterness is self-torture. Bitterness is drinking poison waiting on *them* to die. When we refuse to forgive, everybody loses and God is not glorified, because bitterness is a trap that keeps us stuck in the past. It prevents us from moving on to what God has for us in the future. Bitterness from what happened yesterday will keep you from experiencing God's blessing for tomorrow! So, here is the objection, and I get why there are objections; I have been hurt like we have all been hurt. We all have justifiable reason to be angry at somebody for something. If you live long enough, somebody will do you wrong. And unfortunately, it's the people who are closest to us that it can happen with, and that's what makes it so hard when it's a parent or a child, or a best friend or a spouse. But here is the objection, this is what I hear, “But Jamus, they hurt me.” “She cheated on me.” “He lied to me.” “They gossiped about me.” “She ruined my reputation.” “Jamus, they don't deserve forgiveness!” Can we just be honest for a moment? None of us deserves forgiveness. Friends, if we got what we deserved we would all be in Hell right now. Anything north of Hell is grace. Aren’t you glad God doesn't give us what we deserve; God gives grace and forgiveness through Jesus! So we have to be real careful when we say they don't deserve it.

Here's the question this morning. This is the challenge to us from God's Word. The question for you and me is not how much forgiveness do they deserve; the question is how much freedom do you desire? I want to say that again. The question is not how much forgiveness do they deserve; it is how much freedom do you desire? When we choose to forgive, we are saying to that person, in effect, what you did to hurt me, I will no longer let that ruin my life and keep me in prison. I will not die old angry and bitter because of what you did to me. I choose freedom because I choose forgiveness! Christ died on a tree and open up the jail cell. You don't even need a key. It's open! But some of us are choosing to remain in that prison of bitterness, and all you have to do is forgive and walk your way right on out into the joy of the Lord. The enemy will lie to you…*Don't forgive them. They don't deserve it. They did they ought to come tell you they are sorry. They ought to initiate. They ought to come crawling to you on their hands and knees, then you forgive them*. Friends, I'm glad Jesus didn't take that posture with us. He left Heaven and pursued us. Hey, if our salvation is a game of hide and seek, we didn't find Jesus, Jesus found us because we weren’t looking for Him! We were dead in our sin. Christ initiated. Christ took the first step. He sought us out. Friends, don't wait on them to come to you because they may never come.

So this leads to the third biblical principle for Matthew 5: Deal with the bitterness quickly. The enemy's tactic on this subject is he will tell you…*wait. Just keep praying about it. Wait for them to come to you.* That's not what Jesus says. Go back to verses 23–24, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First…” So look at the priority in worship, “first.” He didn't say first sing the songs. He didn’t say first go fellowship. He didn't say first write that tithe check, or first go to Sunday school. He says, first, like when you walk through them doors, this ought to be the priority: am I right with God and other people. If there is a beef or a tension among the people of God, that is an open door invitation for the devil himself to creep into the body of Christ. You serve your church well when you walk through here saying am I right with the people of God. When you hold on to bitterness against another person or somebody on your leadership, or whoever it is, it is it is going to spread like gangrene. Don't do that to your church! You owe it to Christ and to the health of this body. A bad apple can spoil the whole bunch. Don't be the one who refuses to forgive, as that will infiltrate the whole body of Christ and metastasize. I've seen it happen in churches over and over and over again. I don't want to be the one to stand before the judgment of God who's bitter heart brought harm to the body of Christ. No, Jesus says, “First be reconciled to your brother, and *then* come and offer your gift.”

See, we can't truly worship if we are fired up sideways about somebody else in this church body. God is not interested in bitter worship. This is why Christ says verse 25 to come to terms quickly.” Quickly is the keyword. You ought to underline that in your Bible, “Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him [or her] to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.” So, there is a beef between you and another person––Jesus says to deal with it quickly. Paul comes along in Ephesians 4, and he says the same thing. Paul says, “Be angry and do not sin.” Okay again, when does anger become sin? It's when you don't deal with it *quickly*, because Paul says next, “do not let the sun go down on your anger.” So the biblical teaching is don't let the bitterness simmer. Don't let that anger in our hearts just kind of fester. It is of those diseases, bitterness is, that only gets progressively worse over time. Time does not heal bitterness; repentance does. To use psychological terms, if you just keep suppressing that anger and pushing it down it is going to just spread all throughout your body and soul from head to toe, and it will hurt you and everybody around you. Not only that, Paul says that when we keep letting the sun go down on our anger, refusing to forgive, we are inviting the devil himself right up into our lives. He says, “…do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity to the devil.” Man, talk about spiritual warfare! We talk about that a lot, spiritual warfare. What we typically mean is it's some of the crazy people in America on the other side, politically or whatever. Let me tell you where spiritual warfare starts. It starts with a bitter heart. A bitter heart in the church is the devil's playground. You make your family and your soul and your church vulnerable to demonic attack when you don't forgive! When we don't forgive, we are not just playing with fire. We are inviting Hell itself right up into our lives.

This is why the fourth principle is this: Forgiveness requires action. Here's the thing about sermons like this…and I have been on both sides of this. This stuff convicts me as I'm preparing to preach it! With a sermon like this, some of us think…*preacher, you kind of stepped on my toes today*. We will get a little convicted maybe, and then we will go eat lunch at Martha's and we won't think another thing about it. Just being a little convicted or maybe feeling a little guilty is not the purpose of what God's Word does. Don't just be hearers of the Word, be doers. God wants us to do something about the situation, and He tells us what to do in verses 23–24. If you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother something against you, look at what He says to do…leave. “…leave your gift there before the altar and go.” Those are action verbs, two of them, ‘leave’, and ‘go.’ Don't just sit there praying about it the rest of your life. Don't just go talk to your therapist about it, though there is a time and a place for that. No, leave and go. First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer that gift because we are the ones who are called to initiate. Now here's the pushback––“They hurt me, they should apologize.” Okay, but we have already established that's true. Maybe they should come to us first, but we are to be the more Christ-like person. Jesus didn't wait on us; He pursued us. This means we have got to swallow some pride. When you say, “I won't say sorry to her till she says sorry to me,” okay, that's what our seven year old does. I mean, I'm guilty too, but we need to grow up in Christ, swallow the pride, and initiate, even if you didn’t do anything wrong. Christ did nothing wrong and He hung on a cross and bore the wrath of God for our sins.

There is no human justification to refuse to forgive another person. It is antithetical to everything that is the gospel of Christ. The worst sin has been committed against us, pales in comparison to what we have done to Christ, and yet He forgives and He does so with joy. The takeaway from this may be this afternoon. What does it look like not just to be a hearer of this word but a doer? It might mean you need to pull out that phone and just shoot that text message that says, “Hey, can we grab coffee this week? There's something I love to share with you.” Or hey, “Can we can we meet for lunch this week?” If they live somewhere else, maybe it's a phone call, or maybe you just drop by their house this afternoon. Don't do it until you can do it with a tear in your eye. Don't go in mad, don't go in angry; sit with the Lord until your heart is pure, and then lead in humility and seek out that reconciliation. God will honor that.

Now, here's the next question, guaranteed. What if they won't reciprocate that? What if they won't meet with you? What if they won't respond to your text? What if they won't call you back? When you see them at Walmart, they turn the other cheek. They are not willing––what then? Well, this is the fifth principle: All you can do is your part. In Romans chapter 12:17, look at what Paul says, “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable on the sight of all.” And then verse 18, “If possible…” Now, he's implying it may not be possible because some people are just so darn hard-headed, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people.” Friends, God does not hold us responsible for the other party's sin. All you can do is try. If they are not willing to meet, if they are not willing to forgive and do that, that's on them. That is between them and God. But you want a clean conscience before the Lord. You don't want the blood of that relationship on your hands. You don't want to be a murderer. So do your part, so far as it depends on you, and leave the rest in God's hands, and maybe somebody needs to hear this this morning. You have tried…there's a broken relationship, maybe it's with a sibling, a parent, a co-worker, or a friend. That relationship has been broken for a long time and you have tried to be the bigger person, and they are just unwilling, they are going to hate you until you die. That's not on you. You are free from that. You just make sure in your heart you have done what God has called you to do.

This is the final and the most important thing, the six principle: Forgiveness is just living out the gospel. This isn't just some willpower thing we do; this is the gospel in action. First, forgiveness by definition is just doing for others what God has already done for us in Christ. God will never ask you to do something that He has not already done. As Christ hangs on the cross, what does He cry out (Luke 23)? “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Jesus wasn't just talking about the Roman soldiers; He was talking about us. The Roman soldiers nailed Jesus to the cross but it was our sin that kept Him there. Forgiveness is the heart of the gospel! Christ can forgive us because He has paid for our sins, and so forgiving other people is just acting out what's already been done to us through Christ! Because of the gospel, it is not just that we can forgive, but because of the gospel, we must forgive. Can I say this? Forgiveness is not an option. It's not one of those things that just super spiritually mature Christians do. To be a Christian, to follow the hard, difficult, narrow path of Christ is to forgive those that have hurt us the worst. It's not that we ought to consider forgiving; it's that we must because perhaps the greatest display of Christian hypocrisy is to receive the forgiveness of Christ for our sins, but to be unwilling to give it to others. That's why we will conclude with the words we opened with in Matthew chapter 6. It is one of the most difficult things Jesus ever said, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

I know the temptation when we read that verse. Some of us right now are coming up with seventeen theological reasons why that verse doesn't mean what it looks like it means. Well, it is what it is. If we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven. Jesus said that. I don't think His point is we earn His forgiveness by forgiving other people. That's not the point, is it? We know we are saved by grace alone. His point is the evidence (as my grandma Stalin's would say, the proof in the pudding) that we have been forgiven by Christ is that we will therefore go and forgive others, because forgiveness flows from God's heart to us. And because of the gospel, forgiveness doesn't just flow to us it flows through us. Don't let the flow of forgiveness stop with you.