

Coming Together  
Romans 8:31–39  
Sunday, August 15, 2021

Two weeks ago we started looking at chapter 8 of Paul’s letter to the Romans by talking about *grace* – the unconditional acceptance and love that God has for *us*, and how we can share that same love with *others*, especially the people in our lives who are *hard* to love. Last week we talked about *suffering* – where God is when we experience suffering, and how we can remain faithful to God in the midst of suffering. This week we are going to bring those two together and finish chapter 8 by talking about *forgiveness*.

Because when *suffering* and *grace* come together, there is forgiveness. If another person has made you suffer, and you are able to come to a place of understanding and acceptance and even *love* toward them, that is forgiveness. If *you* have made *someone else* suffer, and *they* are able to come to a place of understanding and acceptance and love toward *you*, that is forgiveness. If you have made *yourself* suffer, and you are finally able to come to a place of understanding and acceptance and love for yourself, that is forgiveness. When suffering and grace come together, there is forgiveness. So with that in mind, I want to invite you to hear the word of God in Romans 8:31–39:

<sup>31</sup>What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is

written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

<sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

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This is a deeply personal sermon for me. And I’m walking a fine line here, where I don’t want to make it all about *me*. But forgiveness is not just an *idea* or a *theological concept*. It has to be a *lived reality*. It has to be *embodied*, something that is put into practice and lived out in our lives. And so the best way that I can *talk* with you about it is to speak from my own experience and my own life. Because I don’t just want you walking away today thinking, “Forgiveness is a good idea.” I want you to walk away thinking, “Forgiveness is something that is *possible* for *me*. It is something that can be *lived out* in this broken area of my life,” whether it’s between you and *God*, you and *another person*, or you with *yourself*. *We all* have places in our lives where there are things we need to let go of to find healing and peace. We all have *suffering* in our lives that needs to be met with *grace*.

Last week I told you the story of the birth and death of our first child, our daughter Madelyn, 15 years ago this past week. And I told you about some of the ways that God was able to *use* that experience to do something *good*; I was able to walk with people through their own losses in a way that I never would have been able to otherwise. But that’s not the *whole* picture of what life

was like after we lost Maddie. A year later, Jen and I were finally able to get pregnant again. But then one day she went in for a routine doctor's appointment, and they couldn't find a heartbeat. Losing a *second* child in the span of a year was just unbearable. We were absolutely broken. She would have to go in for surgery that next day, which also happened to be my 29<sup>th</sup> birthday.

We were 1,000 miles away from any of our family, feeling very alone. So we had to call everyone to let them know what was going on. That night I called my father, not just to fill him in, but also because I was *so* lost and in *so much* pain, and I just needed my *dad*. I needed someone to tell me that this was all going to be okay. So I called him and told him what had happened, and the very next thing he said was to tell me what *movies* he had gone to see that weekend. And there was a part of me that was like, "Wait a minute, what just *happened* here? Did he say something that I just *missed*? Is this the same conversation? Did he hear what I just told him?" There was no acknowledgement of our loss and our pain. No, "I'm sorry." No, "It's all going to be okay." And I remember not saying another word for the rest of that phone call, thinking, "This is it. He can't be the father that I need him to be. This relationship is only hurting me. I'm done."

This wasn't the *first* time he had hurt me or failed to be there for me. My father was one of the countless men who came home from Vietnam deeply wounded by his experiences there. And those wounds manifest themselves in alcoholism, mental illness, and post-traumatic stress; emotional, verbal, and sometimes physical abuse. Twenty-nine years of *that* all coalesced in this one conversation, this one moment in which I realized that I didn't need to let him hurt me anymore. So I simply stopped talking to him; stopped calling and stopped answering calls. And so we didn't have a relationship for the next 11 years, until he died in 2018.

Over that period of time, I learned a lot about what forgiveness is...and what it *isn't*. There were two or three times where I reached out or he reached out and we talked for a couple of minutes, I guess to see if anything had changed or if there was any possibility of reconciliation there. And there was even a time when I *thought* I had forgiven him. There was a part of me that felt like, "I'm carrying this anger and pain around with me, and I need to let go of it." So I called him on Good Friday one year, and I said, "I know we haven't talked in a while because you really hurt me. But I wanted to let you know that I forgive you." Looking back, that probably wasn't the best way to approach that, and his response was basically, "Forgive me for *what?* I didn't *do* anything. You're the one who stopped talking to *me*." So of course, that only *added* to the anger and pain that I was carrying around, so that I hadn't actually let go of *anything*.

How do we do that? How do we let go of the pain and anger that we carry around, of the ways that we have been hurt? How do we make amends for the ways that we have hurt others? How do we meet suffering with grace so that there can be forgiveness?

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Paul asks in these verses, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" And his answer, of course, is *no one*; that there is *nothing in the world* that can separate us from the love of Christ. Christ loves us with a steadfast, unending love that does not depend on who *we* are or how *good* we are, it all depends on who *he* is and how good *he* is. Christ loves us ever and always, no matter what. Nothing that *we* do, nothing that is done *to* us can ever separate us from his love.

The reality, though, is that we are not Christ. And there are *plenty* of things that separate *us* from *one another*. Arguments, addiction, and abuse. Religious and political divisions. Betrayal and lying and cheating. Misunderstandings and perceived slights. We are sinful, prideful, imperfect

human beings who, despite our best efforts, are not always able to love one another the way that Christ loves us. We often talk about how we should strive to be like Christ, but the truth is that we *can't*. Jesus Christ was *God in human flesh*. That is something that, no matter how good we are, no matter how hard we try, we will never be.

The best that *we* can do, and I think what we *are* called to, is to *bear witness* to Christ. Not to *be like* Christ, but to live and speak and act in ways that *point* to Christ and say, “Everything that I do, everything that I am is only because of who *Christ* is and what *Christ* did. I will never be *like* him, but maybe the way that I live my life can in some small way testify to who *he* is and point others to *him*.” And in that way, we are called in our relationships, in the way that we *love* one another, and in the way that we *forgive* one another to bear witness to the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

And the ultimate demonstration that we have of that is the cross. On the cross, Christ met suffering not with anger or vengeance or indifference or despair. He met suffering with *grace*, crying out, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” He sought the love and blessing of God upon the very people who were making him suffer, *while* they were making him suffer. And he *did* that from a place of *empathy*. By saying, “They don’t know what they are doing,” he showed an *understanding* of those who were hurting him.

Two weeks ago, when we first started looking at this chapter in Romans, we talked about *grace* as this understanding that everyone is doing the best that they can. Maybe not the best that they have *ever* done or the best that we think they *should* be doing, but the best that they are capable of doing in this particular moment in life, given whatever else they are dealing with. We said

that when we come to that place of understanding with one another – that this person doing the best they can – then we are better able to show them patience and kindness and love.

When suffering and grace come together – when suffering is met with understanding and acceptance of the other – then there can be forgiveness. That is the way that Christ loves *us*, and that is what we are called to bear witness to in *our* relationships; to a love that is steadfast and will not let us be separated from one another.

Of course there may be times when, for our own safety and wellbeing, we *have* to be separated from one another. Forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation and restored relationships. That's the *goal*, but it's not always possible in this life. Even then, though, we can choose to try to *understand* this other person; to understand why they may have hurt us (what's going on with them that might have led them to act in this way), or to understand why what *we* did hurt *them*. To have *empathy* for them. We can't control what this other person does, but we can control how we respond to what they do. We can always choose to respond with grace, in ways that seek understanding. And the good news is that, while reconciliation is not always possible in this life, this life is not all there is.

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In the last year or so of my father's life, I was able to come to that place of understanding. I was able to see how deeply he was affected by his experiences in Vietnam, and how the way he was raised by his own father shaped him. I was able to come to a place where I could say, "He *wasn't* the father that I *needed* him to be. But he was the best father that he *knew how* to be, that he was *capable* of being, given everything that was going on inside of him." That there was something about all of this that was even beyond *his* control.

That realization gave me a lot of peace, and I was *finally* able to let go of the anger and pain and resentment and fear that I was carrying around for so many years. I think I was really able to forgive him. I had even started thinking about the possibility of reaching out to him and reconnecting, when I got the call that he had died. And for a while I carried some *guilt* about that. That I had waited too long, and now I had lost that opportunity. What I came to see, though, was that, in death, he had finally found the healing and peace that he couldn't find in this life. That there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and so he was living a new life now in the presence of God, sharing in the resurrection of Christ. That, one day, I would be living that life, too. And that *then* we would finally be able to find the wholeness that eluded *us* in this life.

How do we let go of the ways that people have hurt us or start to make amends for the ways that we have hurt others? By meeting suffering with grace and attempting to *understand* one another – understand why they did what they did or how *our* actions might have hurt them. It's about having *empathy* for one another and understanding that we are all doing the best we can, where we are. But when suffering and grace come together, there is the possibility of forgiveness, of *us* coming together. And whether that is in *this* life or the *next*, it is never too late, because the love of God in Jesus Christ is stronger than death.