

And Kissed Him

by Tim Keller

The sermon teaches that forgiveness is assertive, sacrificial, and powered from inside, and that it requires emotional and spiritual power to forgive others.

Duration: 33:46

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Mark 11:25, Luke 15:11-24

Topics: "Gospel"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of forgiveness in overcoming past hurts and moving towards a better future. They describe forgiveness as turning off the painful memories that replay in our minds, setting us free from the cycle of pain. The preacher also highlights the need for a community that is persuasive, not resentful or belittling, and warns against caricaturing others in our minds. The sermon then delves into the parable of the prodigal son, emphasizing that forgiveness is assertive, sacrificial, powered from within, and ultimately leads to a resurrection.

Transcript

Tonight's scripture is from Luke, chapter 15, verses 11 through 24. Jesus continued, There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate.

So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death.

I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men.

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.

The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him.

Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. This is the word of the Lord.

We're looking at this parable of the prodigal son every week, especially looking for insights about how the grace of God creates a unique kind of Christian community, a unique kind of human society. Now, the one thing everybody knows when you read the parable of the prodigal son is it's about forgiveness. And so let's take a look first at what it teaches us about forgiveness and then ask the question, what kind of community would we be if we took the teaching about forgiveness seriously? Let's look at it under three headings, four headings actually.

We're going to learn here forgiveness is assertive, it is sacrificial, it's powered from inside, and it leads to a resurrection. It's assertive, sacrificial, it's powered from within, and it leads to a resurrection. Okay, first, the first thing we learn about forgiveness, notice the father runs to his son, pounces on him, literally the language there is, fell on his neck and kissed him.

Now, if you're a father standing on a porch and you see your adult son who's basically an idiot, you know, crazy, arrogant, he's already taken a tremendous amount of your money away and squandered it, and you see him coming, what are you going to assume? You're going to say, oh, he must be repenting. Of course not. Of course not.

What's the most rational thing to assume? He's coming back to ask for more money. And yet the father not knowing anything about the son's heart at all, not understanding in any way what's going on in his heart, it doesn't matter. The father runs from the porch, falls on his son, kisses him, laughing.

Now, here's the first point. The father does not make the son come to him and ask for forgiveness. He just gives it.

It's assertive. Fascinating. Okay.

It's assertive. It's aggressive. He doesn't sit and say, well, if he wants to come to me and grovel, then maybe I'll forgive him.

Oh, no. Rather, what he does is he goes after the son, and without the condition of repentance, he forgives. He embraces.

Now, why is this so important? Jesus says in Mark chapter 11, verse 25, and when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him. See that? It doesn't say if you know you have something against somebody and that person comes and repents to you, then maybe you can give them a chance. No, no.

It says if you stand praying and you hold anything against anyone, forgive him. Right there. And that's what this parable is illustrating.

That's not how we work, is it? We stand on our porches, and we say, well, if she started, he started it. If they want to make it right, fine. I'll be happy to talk to them.

Jesus says, no, that's not right. You don't stand on your porch. You don't wait for them to do something.

You forgive. You reconcile. You offer love.

In Matthew 18, Jesus says, if your brother sins against you, go and speak to him about his fault, and if he listens to you, you will have won your brother. In Matthew 5, it says, therefore, if you're offering your gift at the altar, and you remember your brother has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar, go and be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Notice, look, it says if somebody has something against you, go and make it right.

If you have something against somebody else, go and make it right. It's always your move. You always have to go.

It doesn't matter who started it. It doesn't matter who finished it. It doesn't matter who's more to blame.

And I'll tell you, this is the problem with the world. We stand on our porch instead of going and trying to reconcile and trying to get the relationship back and seeking and offering forgiveness, right? We stand on our porch and we say, well, you know, the reason, listen, they started it, or they're more to blame. I shouldn't have to be the one to go to them, right? But guess what? They're on their porch saying the same thing about you.

They're over there saying, well, they started it. Well, you say, how could that be? Well, because that's the way our minds work. That's the way our hearts work.

And the whole world is sinking into hell because everybody's sitting on their porch waiting for the other person to make the first move. Jesus says, my forgiveness, my love is assertive, it's aggressive, it takes the initiative, number one. Number two, second thing we learn about forgiveness is it's sacrificial.

There's two ways in which the younger son has wronged the father. First, he has wronged him financially. He took a third of the estate precipitously out.

And instead of that third of the estate basically being put to work to help the family fortune, he took it away, he squandered it on prostitutes, it's all gone. He's permanently lowered the family's economic status. But secondly, he also sinned against the father by disgracing him.

This is a shame culture, an honor culture, something that we have a little more trouble...we have a little trouble understanding because we live in an individualistic society. But in that society, for the son to treat the father that way meant that the father had lost face, he had lost reputation, he was no longer regarded as a person of great respect. It was a tremendous blow, it was a terrible sin.

He had robbed the father of social capital. He had robbed the father of his status and his good reputation as well as having robbed him of his money. And that's the reason why when the son comes back, if you read carefully, you'll see the son knows that the only way that he can get back into a relationship with the father is if he deals with this dual debt.

That's the reason why he says two things. First of all, he says, make me like one of your hired men. He wants to pay back the financial debt.

He doesn't want the father to assume the debt. He says, I'm going to pay it back. But then secondly, he says, and I'm not worthy to be called your son.

And see, that's where he's trying to repay the social debt, the emotional debt. He says, I am not going to assume that I have the right to call you father. I'm humiliating myself before you.

I'm groveling before you. I'm abasing myself before you. I will not assume the right to call you father.

You should not call me your son. He's trying to pay it back. He's trying to make good on the debt.

But the father won't let him. And here we get into the essence of what forgiveness is. I have to give you a little caveat, a little side note.

This is a parable that Jesus devised, and a parable is a fictional story that Jesus devises as a teacher to get across certain points. We have to be careful not to read it on any level. We have to read it at the level that Jesus meant it.

So for example, did Jesus...can you tell by reading Luke 15? Did Jesus design this parable to teach us about parenting? No. And therefore, if you are the parent of an adult child who's an addict, no, this isn't telling you what to do. No, you probably would not perhaps react to a person quite this way.

But that's not what Jesus wrote this for, right? He didn't design it for this. He is telling us how God's forgiveness works and how our forgiveness needs to work with people who have wronged us. And here's what we see.

First of all, the father runs. All commentators agree that this was a demeaning thing for the father to do. In those days, the inferior would come to the superior.

The superior would stand stationary. The inferior would approach the way it was done. Instead, he runs to the son as if he's the inferior and the son is the superior.

But not only that, he doesn't walk to the son, he runs. And to run meant you had to pick up the skirts of your robes and bare your legs. And that's why adult males just didn't do that.

Boys did it. Women did it. But a man of patriarch would never do it, but he does it.

And what does this mean? He is not letting his son grovel before him. He is not doing anything that in that shame culture you would have done in order to kind of restore, make restitution for your reputation. He doesn't have his son grovel.

He won't let him. He doesn't stand on his pride. So that's the first thing.

He will not let his son try to pay back the debt to his ruined reputation. But then secondly, he won't let the son pay back his financial debt. Because even though his son says, oh, make me like one of your hired men.

I'm going to pay you back. What does he say? No. He says, put a robe on him and a ring on his finger.

And the ring was the signet ring. The ring by which the family made contracts. You didn't sign a contract.

You used the family seal. And what is the father saying? I am not going to let you pay me back. I am not going to let you assume the debt.

I am going to absorb the debt. I'm going to eat it. I'm going to take the limitations and all the diminishment that comes.

I'm going to absorb the debt myself. And this is the essence of what it means to forgive somebody. When someone wrongs you, they've robbed you always.

Sometimes literally they've robbed you of money, but usually they've robbed you of happiness or reputation or opportunity or something like that. And therefore they owe you. There's a debt.

There's always a debt when someone wrongs you. And there's two things you can do with the debt. Either you can make them pay it back to you or you absorb it yourself.

In other words, either they pay or you pay. Either they pay you back or you absorb the diminishment that comes from the loss. And the father says, I am going to absorb the debt.

In other words, forgiveness is absorbing pain instead of inflicting it. What we do usually when someone wrongs us is we make them pay. If they've hurt our reputation, then we're going to slice up their reputation to maybe get a little bit of ours back.

If they have robbed us of happiness, we're going to make them unhappy to get a little bit of satisfaction back. We can make them pay. We are going to make them pay.

And we make them pay, but that's not forgiveness. Forgiveness is absorbing the debt. And therefore forgiveness is always a form of suffering.

And forgiveness is absorbing pain instead of inflicting pain. And here's how the father did it. He did do it.

You know why? Why is it after all that the son did, the first sight of the son, the father runs to him and kisses him and hugs him. Why? I'll tell you why. If the father had been spending all those months, whenever he thought of his son, clobbering him in his heart, then when his son actually showed up, he would have clobbered him.

What was his father doing in his heart? He was kissing him in his heart. So when the son actually showed up, he kissed him. What does it mean to make the person pay? It means you sit there and you clobber them in your heart.

You think about all the things they've done. You replay the videotape of what they've done. And then when you get a chance, you slice up their reputation, or you avoid them, or you're cold to them.

But what is forgiveness? Forgiveness means you kiss them in your heart. You turn away from the anger. You pray for them.

You will their good. And when you have a chance to do good, you do good. And then when they actually do show up, if they show up, if they come to you, then you can kiss them rather than clobber them.

The father paid the price. He absorbed the debt in his heart so that he was able to reconcile with his son. And that's something of the anatomy of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is sacrificial. It's absorbing the pain instead of inflicting it. Now, I know as a pastor, and therefore as a spiritual counselor, guide, whatever pastors are exactly, I know that what I just said to you,

that the essence of forgiveness, the way to heal relationships, the way to get freedom from your own past, the essence of forgiveness is absorbing pain instead of inflicting it.

That's actually a fairly dangerous thing to tell somebody. It is not an easy thing to do. It is not an easy thing to do spiritually and emotionally unless you've got an inner power.

And therefore, we go to point three. The forgiveness that is assertive, the forgiveness that is sacrificial, the forgiveness that heals relationships, the forgiveness that resurrects relationships, the forgiveness that does all this has got to be a forgiveness that's powered from inside. When the father sees the son, we're told something about his insides.

What does it say? But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. B.B. Warfield wrote an essay many years ago called *The Emotional Life of Our Lord*. And it was a study of all the words that have to do with Jesus' emotions.

And the one thing that comes out of that, one of the most striking findings of that essay is that there is one Greek word that was used of Jesus' emotions more than all the other words put together. And it's the word compassion. It's a word that literally means to be moved from the very depths of your being in love for someone.

And that word is used so often of Jesus Christ. It's used constantly of Jesus Christ. You'd be surprised.

You can go through it constantly. It says move with compassion, move with compassion. And yet Jesus uses this word that is really his signature on this father.

And you know why? He's inviting us to see him in the father. So let's do it. And you know what we're going to see? Here's what we're going to see.

The father did not stay on the porch. He ran to his son. And by doing so, by bearing his legs, by running to his son, he made himself incredibly vulnerable socially because he was losing his dignity and emotionally.

Look, if someone's wronged you, someone you really love, and this has happened to practically everybody in this room, I would think, if somebody you really, really love has really rejected you, that hurts horribly. And you never want to make yourself vulnerable again. You never want to open up.

You never want to bare your soul to that person again unless you're really, really sure that person has changed. But guess what? The father goes running to the son in order to forgive him, in order to reconcile him, knowing he might get abused again. He might be wronged again.

He might be sinned against again. So he goes running to his son even though he knows that there's a really good chance that he'll be emotionally rejected again. But the Bible tells us something a bit more about Jesus.

We're told in John chapter 1, he came to the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to his own, but his own received him not. He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, while we were his enemies.

While we were his enemies, Christ came to us and died. Do you see? Here's a father who loses his dignity and makes himself vulnerable and goes for the forgiveness of his son even though he knows there's a risk of being emotionally spurned. But Jesus Christ didn't just lose his face.

He didn't just lose a little bit of his dignity. He didn't just bare his legs. He was stripped naked on the cross.

He didn't just lose a little bit of his dignity. He lost his glory. He ran from heaven to earth not knowing he might be rejected emotionally, but that he will be killed physically.

He will be killed. He's not just maybe will be rejected. He will be rejected, not just emotionally rejected.

He talked about making yourself vulnerable. He did. He didn't just throw his arms around us.

He opened his arms and was crucified. Why did he do it? Why did he identify with the wretched of the earth? Why did he do all that for us? He was absorbing the dead. We sinned against God.

God gave us our lives. God gave us the world, and we have destroyed them. We owe God.

We owe God so much. We've ruined a whole lot more than one-third of his estate. We owe him.

But what has God done? He doesn't stand on his porch and wait for us to get to heaven. He comes from heaven to earth, and instead of inflicting pain, he absorbs it. Instead of making us pay for our sins on the cross, he is paying for our sins.

You see, when you look at the cross, you see God doing cosmically and infinitely what you and I have to do anytime anybody wrongs us that we try to forgive. Absorbing the debt. But it's an infinite debt, and he's decimated, and he's destroyed.

Why does he do it? So that someday he can fall on our neck and kiss us. He's paying the price. And someday, everybody, if you receive Christ as your Savior, someday the Lord will literally throw his arms around you, will literally fall on your neck and kiss you.

Teresa of Avila says that when that happens, the first kiss from the lips of the Lord will make a thousand terrible lives of suffering look like one night in a bad hotel. Now, if you see he did that for you, that gives you what you need. Why? It'll move you from the depths of your being in love.

And here's why. There's two things you've got to do, got to have inside, if you are going to be able to absorb debts. When you absorb a debt, when you absorb pain instead of inflicting it, you free the person.

You free yourself from the past. You make it possible to heal. All kinds of great things happen.

But how can you do that? You need an incredible amount of emotional power and spiritual power on the inside to forgive. And why? There's two things you've got to be able to do if you're going to forgive. First of all, well, I'll give you the two right now.

You have to resist the superiority and you have to release from liability. You have to resist superiority and release from liability. What do I mean by resist superiority? All grudges, all grudges, resentment, is to a great degree based on a sense of superiority.

You cannot stay mad about somebody. You can't stay mad at somebody unless you feel superior to them. You can't stay mad at them unless you feel like, I would never do that.

Some years ago, when I was a young minister, I was counseling this couple, and it was a married couple, and the wife had had an affair. And she had broken it off, and she was sorry, and she was trying to, you know, salvage her marriage. And to my surprise, the husband, even though he was very emotionally

mature and very spiritually immature, to my surprise, he was doing pretty good at forgiving her.

He was being pretty understanding and pretty forgiving. And then about halfway through the counseling, I found out he was having his own affair. That's the reason why he didn't have too much, why he was able to forgive her, because he didn't feel superior to her.

See, I thought it was my counseling. I thought, oh, I'm helping him forgive so well. But see, basically what had happened was he saw what she had done to him, and he saw, but in his heart, he said, but I'm no better than you.

If you understand the gospel, if you understand that you're so lost that it took the death of the Lord of the universe to save you, if you really understand that in your heart of hearts, you cannot look at anybody and say anything other than, I'm no better than you. And if you, see, if you stay angry at somebody, but you say, well, I know I'm a sinner saved by grace. Well, go back.

You don't know you're a sinner saved by grace. You may say it in your head, but you don't know it in your heart. Or you couldn't stay mad.

You're no better. And so the gospel gives you the power to resist the superiority. But then secondly, it gives you the power to release the liability.

What do I mean by that? Basically, forgiveness means I no longer hold this person liable for their debt. If you find yourself feeling like this person owes you, so you ride them a little harder and you push them a little harder and you're a little bit colder and you, in other words, you're holding them liable. You're continuing to see that they owe you.

But forgiveness is you cancel that. You absorb the debt. You release the liability.

Well, how can you do that? It's very, very simple. If you have a billion dollars in the bank, it's not that hard to forgive a hundred dollar debt. But if you've got nothing in the bank, it's very hard to forgive a hundred dollar debt.

And if you understand what you've got in Jesus Christ, you know that you are the world's first trillionaire, what could that person have taken from you? Reputation? Do you know what the honor of being a Christian, do you know what it's like to have the Lord of the universe crown you with His love and delight? What could that person take from you? Money? Opportunity? Happiness? Think of what you've got in Christ to the degree you understand. What Jesus has given you, you'll be able to release from liability, and that's the power from within you need. Now, when the man said, my son was dead, but he's alive, he didn't mean he was literally dead and had been literally resurrected.

What he meant was he was dead to the community, he was dead to the family, he was dead to the relationship, and forgiveness has now resurrected him. What kind of community would we be if we really took very seriously this gospel forgiveness? Here's what I would like you to consider. First of all, we would be a community in which reconciliation and relationship repair happened all the time.

Out in the world, people will not admit their resentment. They just say, oh, I don't have a grudge, I just don't want anything to do with that person. How do you know if you've got a grudge or not? Can I give you one test here? Do you remember what we said? Here's a father who was kissing his son in the heart, not clobbering his son.

If there is somebody in your life who's hurt you or wronged you or kind of burned you or something like that, and if you know that their failure would bring you some satisfaction, if you know that their misfortune or their failure would bring you satisfaction, if you know that their unhappiness would actually make you happy, you've got a grudge. Christians, first of all, are people who know that they've got it. They don't deny it.

And secondly, when they go to try to make it better, they don't use confrontation to punish. They forgive before they go. Mark 11.25, if you know you've got something against somebody, you forgive them.

And see, if you've forgiven them in your heart, if you use the power of the gospel to get rid of the superiority, to release the liability, and then you go to confront them, why are you going now? You're not going to make them feel bad now. You're not going to tell them to get something off your chest, to show them they're wrong. No, you're going there, yes, to show them they're wrong, but for their sake and for God's sake and for the relationship's sake and for love's sake, but not in order to pay them back.

And what happens out in the world is when somebody wrongs you, you just avoid them and you deny that you're mad, unless it gets so bad, then you go and confront them and you do it in order to make them feel bad, and it just makes everything worse. But in this church, we must never let ever relationships cool off and go away. If we know that if your brother or sister has something against you or you have something against them, you go to them, Matthew 5, Matthew 18, and you go gently and you go after you've already forgiven.

And we should be a community in which that's happening all the time. You know why? Because we are sinners and we rub each other the wrong way and you should be constantly having to reconcile. And if you're not, you're kidding yourself about the fact that you do have resentment and there are people out there who you need to be going to.

So we ought to be a reconciling community, first of all. Secondly, we need to be a persuasive, not resentful, and belittling community. Here's another way you know that you are bitter against somebody.

You caricature them in your mind. You turn them into a one-dimensional cartoon figure. I use this illustration sometimes, so you may have heard this.

See, if somebody has lied to you and you're mad at them, then how do you think of them? You think, they're a liar. That's a liar. But do you ever lie? Yes.

Why do you lie? Well, it's complicated. You know, there's extenuating circumstances and I probably shouldn't have, you know, but you know, this happened, that happened, I won't do it again. See, in your mind, you lie, but you're a three-dimensional character.

But that person is flat, just a liar. We live now in a country and in a society in which instead of trusting the power of truth to persuade people, we don't look at people of different political parties, we don't look at people of different religions, we don't look at people of different persuasions, so much as people who are wrong, but they probably have a lot of goodness and nuances and they've probably got a lot of good... There's a lot of reasons why what they believe is valid and all... No, no, no. They're just stupid.

They're just wrong. They're the whole problem with the world. See, for about a month before and after any election, everybody on the other side is an idiot, caricatured, fools, liars.

That spirit can't come into our church because it shows that you do not have the emotional humility that keeps from the superiority and the emotional wealth that makes it possible to be generous to people who are saying things that you think are wrong. So first of all, a reconciling community. Secondly, a persuasive, persuading community rather than a belittling and harping community.

But lastly, we've got to be a community in which we let people free from their past. When God saves you through Jesus Christ, the minute you believe in Christ, the determining factor in your relationship with God is not your past, it's Christ's past. It's not what you have done, but what Christ has done.

And you know what that means? It means that God has detached you from your terrible past. He's not treating you in accordance with your past. He's treating you in accordance with your great future in Christ.

And no matter what people have done before they get here, they believe in Christ no matter what they've done. We do not rub their nose in it. We do not treat them differently.

Louis Meads wrote it, who's a Christian philosopher, said this. He says, toward the end of her book, *The Human Condition*, the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt concludes that there is only one thing that can release us from the grip of our history, and that is forgiveness. A hurting person needs more than anything else to be released from the painful past, and that only happens if you forgive.

Do you want to be stuck into your painful past? Do you want to be walloped again and again in the hurt? Vengeance is having a videotape planted in your soul that cannot be turned off. It plays the painful scene over and over again inside your mind. It hooks you into its instant replays, and each time it replays you feel the clap of pain again.

Is this fair? Forgiveness turns off the videotape. Forgiveness sets you free from your past. Forgiveness is the only way to stop the cycle of pain turning around in your memory.

Our only escape from history's cruel unfairness, our only passage to the future's creative possibilities is the miracle of forgiveness, and that comes through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and His gospel. Let's pray. Thank you, Father, for giving us in the gospel all the power inside our lives and our hearts and our souls that we need to be forgiving people.

And we ask that you would help us to immediately... Everybody listening to this, everybody would immediately realize that there are people that they need to forgive. Many times they don't... they can't go to them, but they can certainly do the work of forgiveness in their hearts. And in some cases we do need to reach out, and we do need to go, and we do need to open ourselves to the possibility of being hurt by reaching out and saying, I want a better relationship.

Father, we pray that you would help many people now make decisions to get into reconciliation and repair relationships. We pray that you would make us gentle people, forgiving people, persuasive people, and people who help many burdened folk get freedom from their past. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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