

“Finding Forgiveness”  
by Rom A. Pegram (3/27/16 – Easter)

On this Easter morning, we’re beginning a new worship series called: “Forgiveness: The Real F Word.” We just finished a series called “Setting Our Face to Jerusalem: Christian Commitment for Today”—following Jesus’ journey, from the time he made his decision to do God’s will up in Galilee on Mt. Tabor, all the way to Jerusalem where he would meet his death at the hands of the religious leaders & the Romans. Today then, as I said, we’re starting a new series on the topic of *forgiveness* ... and we’re going to do that with the parable or story of the Prodigal Son. For years, it’s been called ‘the greatest Short Story ever told’ and for good reasons. So, let’s begin in Luke, Chapter 15, and start with verse 11. Here’s how it goes...

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. <sup>13</sup> “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living.

<sup>14</sup> About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. <sup>15</sup> He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.””

<sup>20</sup> “So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’ <sup>22</sup> “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. <sup>23</sup> And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.

<sup>25</sup> “Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, <sup>26</sup> and he asked one of the servants what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’ <sup>28</sup> “The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, <sup>29</sup> but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. <sup>30</sup> Yet

when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’

<sup>31</sup> “His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’” – Luke 15:11-32 (NLT)

I’m also excited about starting this series today, because ... Easter is the perfect time to kick this off! Folks, without the resurrection, there would be no ultimate forgiveness! There would be no opportunity for you and me to receive God’s ultimate forgiveness ... and without this kind of forgiveness, it would be impossible to forgive either ourselves or others! It just wouldn’t work. So, because of what Jesus did at Easter, God’s ultimate forgiveness is available to us today...

The subtitle of this series is ‘The Real F Word,’ speaking of *forgiveness*, of course. And it is! Many don’t want to touch this word. It’s a word that is misunderstood, mismanaged, and malpracticed. No one wants to admit they need forgiveness. It’s rare that we seek it ... and we’re often resistant to offer it to others. Yet forgiveness is a universal need...

The truth is *there is something inside all of us that cries out to be forgiven* ... and to be able to forgive others. And the resurrection—that we celebrate today—is the culmination of God’s plan to forgive us completely, wiping our slate clean ... and allowing us the power to forgive ourselves and others...

The problem is, when forgiveness is not fully explored, a lack of it can really hold us back and can lead to things like bitterness, division, bondage, fear, disappointment, unhappiness, and a sense of abandonment ... and we don’t need those things, do we?

So, starting today, we’re going to explore forgiveness—God’s way, because within forgiveness we’ll find the same power that raised Christ from the dead—available to us when we seek to understand forgiveness! The Apostle Paul says in Romans 6:4b (NLT) – “And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.” So, folks, the same power that was available to raise Jesus from the dead ... is also available to help us receive and offer forgiveness ... and live the ‘new lives’ God has in mind for us...

There are 3 levels of forgiveness that we’re going to explore over the next few weeks:

- 1) 3<sup>rd</sup> level/next week: FORGIVING OURSELVES.
- 2) 2<sup>nd</sup> level/couple of weeks: FORGIVING OTHERS.
- 3) The Ultimate Level: FORGIVENESS WE RECEIVE FROM GOD.

So the first two are all about ‘giving’; the last one is about ‘receiving’—the ultimate level of forgiveness being the one where we’re on the receiving end of things. And to illustrate this ultimate forgiveness, I want to get back to the story of the Prodigal Son...

To give some theological background to this story, let me begin here: The story of the Prodigal Son is a divine drama. It really illustrates all of humanity's decision to turn their backs on God, to sin against God, and to ultimately leave what is best for us. And what is best for us is illustrated in this story by the word 'home'. This story is also an illustration of our need to find forgiveness, because we've sinned against God. And in the story, the son who'd left his 'home' decides to return—to go back 'home' to his father...

And so it is with us. When we make the decision to return to God, *God lays out very clearly how we can do that*. The clear path of returning to God is through Jesus Christ, God's Son. You see, Easter is the promise that ultimate forgiveness is possible. Easter is the promise that reconciliation between us and God is now available. And it's all found in the power of the resurrection—the love behind that act. Folks, *here's how we can find the ultimate forgiveness* (see sermon outline sheet)...

**RECOGNIZE I NEED GOD.** By the way, does anyone know what it really means to be 'prodigal'? Now, think of the story as I give this definition: "A prodigal is someone who leaves a better way of life for a lesser way of life." It's really saying 'no' to the best ... and saying 'yes' to less! Some people call it 'settling' ... for something less than God's best. The truth is we've all been guilty of 'settling' from time to time, haven't we? ('Ever been there? I've been there...') The young man in our story 'settled,' but then what happened?

The Prodigal ran from 'home' (the best), blew all of his inheritance, and then 'settled' for a job feeding the pigs just to stay alive. Even the pig's food looked good to him; that's how far down he'd gone, or how much he'd 'settled' for less... But, check out Verse 17 with me: "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger!'" What just happened? The Prodigal began to realize that he was experiencing a lesser life than what was available to him; he recognized he'd 'settled' for less (light bulb)...

Now, THE PIGSTY IN THE STORY REPRESENTS THE ILLUSION SIN OFFERS. You see, every time we think about leaving God's best and pursuing something less than what God wants for us, it seems extravagant ... *at first!* At first, he enjoyed his newfound lifestyle; he had money to burn (and that he did). But, when his money runs out, he finds himself in this pigsty ... which represents the trap of sin—the *willingness to settle for something less than God's best*. But, then the light bulb went on...

We too have to come to the point, just as this young man did, that we recognize ... *WE NEED GOD!* And then, *we come to realize we need to...*

**RETURN HOME TO GOD.** The first step to forgiveness is to realize my need for God; but, just recognizing my need is not enough; I have to take action; I have to return 'home' to God...

Folks, this may seem like one of the most painful or awkward things to have to go through, but it is absolutely necessary if we want to experience forgiveness in our lives!

When I was in my early 20s, not too long after Jane and I were married, I quit going to church. In talking with Jane about it, I think it was a period of just about 6 months. I just dropped out. I decided, in my infinite wisdom, that *I didn't need God*—not that much anyway. So, I decided just to stay home on Sundays...

Jane continued to go to church, but I didn't ... so it was rather obvious. And the fact that my father was our pastor at the time didn't help either. Just like the father in the story, my dad never said a word. He let me go ... so that I would find out for myself what I was missing (i.e. free will, etc.). There was a lot going on at the church at the time and there was a lot going on at my parent's home still (with younger siblings), so no one was going to miss me! I just turned my back on God and away I went...

You know, I'm not sure what it was that got me to return to church (God), but after about 6 months of 'settling' for something less than what God wanted for me, I was miserable! You might say I was wallowing in the pigsty. And I just had to go back...

Folks, let me tell you ... going back to church after being away for several months was one of the most painful and awkward things I've ever had to go through. And I'm sure it was for the Prodigal Son, too. But, it's the second step in being able to experience God's ultimate forgiveness. We have to go 'home'... And finally, we need to...

**RECEIVE FORGIVENESS THROUGH CHRIST.** Verse 20 says: "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him."

I want you to notice now how the father reacted when he saw his son returning home. He didn't go out and say 'I told you so,' did he? He didn't go out and chew his son out for being so stupid. It was pure, unadulterated love! As soon as the son took one step toward home (and the father saw him), the father ran out to meet him. The journey back to God is not a long journey at all! It's actually just one step. Just one step... All you have to do is ask for forgiveness. The Bible says that if you take one step toward God, God will cover the rest of the distance...

Folks, this is what Easter is all about! *Easter is not about us overcoming our sin so that we can be with God; Easter is about God overcoming our sin so that he can be with us!* (Remember the curtain being torn in two?) *This is the point of Easter.* God is reaching out for you ... no matter what your life is like ... no matter what you've done ... and no matter how far you've traveled from God; God is still reaching out to you. It is never too late to come home to God. Never. God never stops reaching out to you...

Step three to God's ultimate forgiveness is to ... *receive God's forgiveness through Christ.* Jesus is our salvation, folks; without him, we wouldn't have a chance ... but because of all he did on through his life, death, burial and resurrection, we can now

know the FREEDOM of being sons and daughters of God! Just like that Prodigal Son who returned home, that privilege is now ours, too...

Folks, let me end by saying this: *God is not mad at you!* Like the father in the story, God runs to welcome you back! “But, I turned my back on God!” That may be true; it was true for me. But, *God’s not mad at you!* If you take just one step, asking God to forgive you, *God will run to welcome you back!*

I’m thankful I was at a church that did the same for me. As awkward as it was for me to return ‘home’ to church, I was welcomed back—even by my father—with open arms and love. Folks, that’s the power of the resurrection. It’s that kind of love that will not give up. *It was God’s love that wouldn’t give up on us that raised Jesus from the dead!* And we can experience that same power of love ... through forgiveness...

Receiving God’s forgiveness for turning our back on him ... is the first step. That’s what the Prodigal did, didn’t he? And just like the party that was thrown for the son who returned, *all of heaven will be rejoicing when just one son or daughter decides to come back home*; it’s amazing, but that’s how God treats us. If...

- You recognize your need for God...
- You decide to return home to God...
- And you receive God’s forgiveness through Christ...

Then the party will begin... It’s as if you’ve lost nothing. All the benefits of being a son or daughter of God are yours; you can return home... That’s the GOOD NEWS of Easter!