

The world changing power of forgiveness

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Date: 06 October 2019

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[0 : 00] So we're going to take the opportunity to look at chapter 23 in the Gospel of Luke, where Joe read earlier on.

There's often things in the news that we find a bit perplexing or frustrating or worrying, and then occasionally there are things in the news that are just mind-blowing.

So I don't know if you saw the story this week on the news of two brothers, Brant and Botham Jean, in Dallas, Texas.

And Botham was shot dead by an off-duty police officer in his own apartment in Dallas. And at the trial, the police officer was convicted of murder.

However, the younger surviving brother, Brant, offered real incredible words of forgiveness. You should Google it if you haven't watched it, because it's so moving.

[1 : 03] So imagine you're Brant, this young black man in Dallas, Texas. And you get a call telling you that your brother's shot dead in his own home by a white female police officer who thought that he was in her house, she'd entered the wrong apartment, and gunned him down, fearing for her own life.

He was shot dead sitting in his own home by a trigger-happy cop. And there was outrage. Brant is a Christian, as was his brother Botham.

But when a blow like that comes, even on a Christian, what are you supposed to do? Was Brant furious and angry? Angry with the cop who killed his brother in such a stupid, senseless way?

Angry with God, who doesn't seem to care sometimes and just lets these terrible things happen? Did Brant let bitterness fill his heart?

Was he consumed with the darkness of the monstrous execution of his brother? Well, what happened in the courtroom was this, that after Amber Geiger, the police officer, was convicted of murder, Brant asked the judge, can I speak?

[2 : 23] He made his victim statement. And he says this, I forgive you. I love you just like I love anyone else.

I'm not going to say I want you to rot and die just like my brother did. I want the best for you. Because that's what Botham would want.

The best. And the best for you would be to give your life to Christ. I love you as a person, he said.

I don't wish anything bad in you. And then he turned to the judge and says, I don't know if this is possible, but can I give her a hug? And so he stood and embraced his brother's killer in the middle of the courtroom.

An amazing scene. An amazing scene. Forgiveness is such a powerful thing. And to walk with Jesus on the road to the cross, we need to be able to be forgiving people.

[3 : 29] Because the road to the cross is a painful road very often. There are difficult things that we need to encounter. And there are difficult people that we need to deal with.

And often, what we're called to do as we walk with Jesus on the road to the cross and resurrection, is to embody lives of compassion and mercy and forgiveness.

And to embrace the people that we find it hardest to love. Because even from the cross, Jesus is the one who says, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.

These are the astonishing words of Jesus Christ from the cross. If you've never read them before, I bet your mind is blown.

If you've read them a hundred times because you're a Christian, I hope your mind is blown. The crucified Jesus, looking at the people who are killing Him and praying to the Father in heaven, Father, forgive them.

[4 : 41] They do not know what they are doing. That's right there in verse 34. What do you need to be forgiven for?

Who do you need to be forgiving to? Last few times I've preached, I've told you that I want you to remember something from the sermon on Thursday.

So the Thursday moment this week is just to ask yourself on Thursday morning, who do I need to be forgiving to? And what do I need forgiveness for? Who do I need forgiveness from?

We see two or three things here. The first is that Jesus is the God who freely forgives. Secondly, we don't want a world without Jesus. And then thirdly, just that we need the power of forgiveness in our lives personally.

So Jesus is the God who freely forgives. In Jesus, we see in His experience such terrible suffering, don't we? The violence of this passage isn't expressed in graphic detail, but it's there and it's real.

[5 : 55] This is not a Tarantino movie. It's not cartoon violence. It's very real and it's very deadly. The soldiers lead Jesus away with His cross.

He's struggling to carry it, so it's put in the shoulders of a man called Simon from Cyrene. We read that two other men in verse 32 are led out with Him to be executed.

They come to the place called the skull. And then just in these very simple terms we're told, there they crucified Him along with the criminals, one on His right, the other on His left.

So here is Jesus, the Son of God, being put to death at the hands, the Bible tells us, of wicked people.

The Gospel writers don't go into graphic detail. This is holy ground. But the truth is so real. The Son of God is on the cross. And that's why Christians are able to have this amazing sense of love in their lives and this amazing hope for forgiveness because we take this in a really personal way.

[7 : 11] We don't just think Jesus died in some kind of tragic accident or some kind of inspirational example. We believe Jesus died for us.

The Apostle Paul will go on and say, He loved me and gave Himself for me. God demonstrates His own love for us in this way. Christ died for us while we were still sinners.

God did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all. He's crucified between two thieves, showing us His solidarity with us in our sin and in our death.

He is there for us. He is there with us. Calvin said they hang Him in the middle because they're giving Him the first place as though He was the thieves' leaders.

Luther says he's treated as thief, murderer, rebel, blasphemer, desecrator, and adulterer.

[8 : 21] Because now all the sin in your heart and your life, all the sin in my life and my heart, is being visited on Jesus Christ.

Your anger, your bitterness, your lust, your greed, all of your sin, resting on Jesus.

How does Jesus respond? Well, not as we might expect of any person with bitterness or fear. Instead, Jesus does show us the incredible power of forgiveness.

Because Jesus is not like you and me. He's utterly, mind-blowingly different. He's so good.

So beautifully good. And so He's still praying. Praying for His killers as He suffers the pain of crucifixion.

[9 : 29] Praying for the souls of His murderers. A prayer that God will be pleased to answer. So in this moment, we see His great infinite love for sinful people like us.

No one is too wicked for Jesus to love them. No one is too wicked for Jesus to forgive them. No one is too far gone for Jesus to reach out with mercy.

You may think your life will never be touched by God's grace. But Jesus says there is hope for all of us. He's willing to forgive anyone who's ready to ask for forgiveness.

All the other gods of all the other religions, they make you earn your forgiveness.

And it's a forgiveness that you can never earn. It's a futility to try and earn your forgiveness. But here Jesus offers us the forgiveness we don't deserve and can never end.

[10 : 37] Now you might be sitting there thinking, well, your Christian ideas are strange to me, Neil Macmillan.

The teachings of your Bible, I don't really get them. I don't feel guilty. So why do I need forgiven? I don't need to be saved.

Except from people like you who keep telling me I need to be saved. So some of us feel guilty in life and some of us don't. But all of us are guilty.

You know, I may drive along the motorway at 120 miles an hour without any feelings of guilt whatsoever. I might just be having a really good time driving as fast as I can.

But I'm still breaking the law unliable to its penalty. You may not feel guilty, but the Bible says all of us have broken God's law and fall short of His glory.

[11 : 40] All of us. We haven't loved God as we're called to love Him. We haven't loved other people the way we're called to love them. Lies, greed, lust, deceit, bitterness, envy, theft.

All these things plague the human heart and the human life. And God says this, the wages of sin is death. But the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Jesus is willing to suffer judgment so we can be forgiven. I am not guiltless. You are not guiltless. Jesus, the best person in the world, still needs forgiven by God.

All have sinned. So Jesus is the God who forgives freely. Second thing I want to say though is we don't want a world without Jesus because that's what they were trying to create here, isn't it?

As they're killing Jesus, taking Him to His death, trying to banish Him from their world, they're actually bringing on themselves the worst kind of disaster.

[13 : 00] Now, I used to live in a town called Kirkoddy. Kirkoddy is about 30 miles away from here. It's a kind of ex-mining town down on its luck but charming in every way nevertheless.

Seaside, beautiful parks, great football team, so many things that you could love about Kirkoddy. And there used to be a couple of old guys that you'd see on the high street in Kirkoddy every Saturday with very, very long grey beards and straggly clothes and some home-made signs.

And they were out there and their signs would say, the end of the world is nigh. The end of the world is nigh. They were warning people about the judgment to come.

Now, if you go to Kirkcaldy High Street, you won't see them anymore but you'll see Greta Thunberg and she's got her signs up now saying, the end of the world is nigh.

So, there's a climate emergency and young people thankfully are standing up and trying to warn us old selfish people, we are ruining planet Earth and we're ruining their future so will we please stop because the world's in danger.

[14 : 21] What kind of future are you giving to your children? That's what Greta Thunberg is trying to alert us to and Jesus is calling the same kind of alert here in this passage.

What kind of world are you going to give your children if you get rid of me? Verse 28, Daughters of Jerusalem, I'm telling you, don't just weep for me, weep for yourselves, for your children because what kind of future are you giving them?

You're giving them a time, a time that will come when you're saying it would be better to have never had children, when you call on the mountains to cover you because the judgment of God is so great and terrible.

There's a climate disaster facing our world, there's a spiritual disaster facing our world which is even greater, to banish Jesus from our lives.

What's the world going to be like if we don't have Jesus and the power of forgiveness and the greatness of His love?

[15 : 31] Jesus warns that that kind of world is a world that no one wants to inhabit. part of the prophecy here that He gives came true in Jerusalem just decades later.

And as Jerusalem fell after years of siege, it was a scene of utter despair. The darkness of a world without God and without Jesus is really clear in this passage, isn't it?

there are sort of waves of violence and darkness and evil rippling through this passage. Verse 35, the people stand watching.

What are they watching? They're watching men being tortured to death, hanging naked on crosses.

What happens as they watch? The rulers sneer. They sneer at the dying Jesus. It is merciless.

[16 : 42] It is pitiless. It is cold and it's inhuman. Then what happens? Verse 36, the soldiers come up and they too mock Him. If you're the king of the Jews, they say, save yourself.

Is this the world that we want without God? Then another wave of abuse in verse 39, one of the criminals who's hanging there hurls insults at Him, throws his abuse in the face of the dying Jesus.

Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself or us? All of them seeking to cast doubt into the mind of Jesus, aiming their arrows at his faith in the Father in heaven saying, really?

God isn't to be trusted. He isn't good. How can you believe in God now? That's what the cynic and the scoffer says. Don't trust God. God will never give you what you want.

And so the whole of humanity here and its diversity unites in rejection of Jesus. Everyone complicit.

[17 : 54] Ordinary people and punters in the street, leaders, criminals, rebels, and the religious. We're not singling out other people and saying, we're good and they're bad.

even the most religious of us need the forgiveness of God. Religion is often the best place to hide from God because religious people tend to be self-righteous and the self-righteous don't see how much they need the righteousness of Jesus.

But a life without Jesus and without God, a world without Jesus and without God is a world that will be engulfed by darkness.

And so I want to say to you, don't push Jesus away. That's what they're doing here, isn't it? They're pushing Jesus away into the margins and away into the darkness and away into oblivion. And you might want to do the same thing with Jesus, just keep him far, far away.

Even those of us who are Christians often keep Jesus on the edge of life. do you know what you need? You need his presence. You need the presence of God in your life in such a real powerful way every day.

[19 : 20] The presence of his love and the presence of his forgiving grace. That's how we're going to close off. I'm just going to say that we need the power of forgiveness in our lives personally.

So Jesus is the God who forgives. He's the one who we need to forgive us personally. It's amazing as we look at Jesus, his forgiveness towards this second thief.

Verse 42, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus answered him, truly I tell you today you will be with me in paradise.

Paradise. What an interesting word Jesus uses here for this dying man. Being crucified was a really horrendous thing. It left you in great pain severely dehydrated, bleeding and broken.

And to that dying man Jesus says there's a place for you of kindness not cruelty of light not darkness of life not death of living waters not soul destroying thirst.

[20 : 54] To this agonized brutalized wreck of a human being Jesus holds out the power of love and the depth of forgiveness and he says I forgive you now.

Come with me to the place where you will find the best. Isn't that an amazing thing to do to a dying man? And it's what Jesus is offering you.

We want a healthy planet with healthy ecosystems and that means we need healthy people. It means in the world we need an ecosystem of grace and forgiveness not bitterness and envy.

Where's that going to come from? It's going to come from Jesus. us. We often wish we were more forgiving and less bitter.

We often wish we were kinder and more gracious and more generous. But so often we try and we fail and we fall short and people hurt us.

[22 : 03] They let us down. They slight us. They attack us. They betray us. They cheat on us. They say the worst kind of things to us and about us and our hearts are captive to bitterness and self pity and hatred and grudges.

How can we be free to forgive only as we experience the power of forgiveness in our lives? There are such an amazing beautiful contrast in this passage between the two men who die alongside Jesus.

One of them dies bitter, hateful, spiteful, still in the grip of fear and darkness and one of them dies in peace and in hope.

What's the difference? Well the difference of course is found in Jesus and how they respond to Jesus. The second criminal, he admits his guilt, doesn't he?

We are punished justly. We're getting what our deeds deserve. He sees his own guilt and he admits his own guilt but he also sees the innocence and the goodness of Jesus.

[23 : 31] This man, he says, looking to Jesus, has done nothing wrong. He fears God. Don't you fear God? Life can go two ways, can't it?

And this is all about what way is your life going? What trajectory are you going? What road are you traveling? And then he says, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And that's so simple. That's what I really love about this in one way. You know, how do you pray? Who knows how to pray? That's so complicated, isn't it? How do you start a relationship with God?

Is that not really hard? What do you actually have to say to God? And all this man had to say was, remember me. It is beautiful simplicity.

All you have to do to Jesus is say, remember me. And he will. Forever.

[24 : 49] And he'll forgive everything. And he'll give you a new life and a new beginning. This man left it to the last moment.

But I would say you don't. You can have this new beginning and this new life now. I'd quite like to tell you a story.

I'm not sure if I'll manage though because I always get a little teary when I tell this story. But we'll see how we go. Louise isn't here this morning so it's easier for telling me this story.

But Louise is my wife. Her dad was dying of cancer. She went home for the weekend just to see how he was. He lived a long way from us. He was a kind of religious person but whenever I spoke to him about faith he had no real sense of personal hope about eternity or death or God but he used to read the Bible so he asked Louise read the Bible to me so she read the Bible to him and I don't know what they read but afterwards he said you know that story about the thief on the cross when Jesus said today you'll be with me in paradise did he really mean today and Louise said to him yes and then he turned around and he said something he'd never been able to say in his whole life he was 84 years old he said you know what in the end Jesus is the only one that matters and then he died just a couple of hours later after that so that's why I get a little emotional when I tell that story but I just want to say this is a very real thing

I don't I'm not giving you abstract ideas about God I'm giving you an existential phenomenological reality that you need to experience to have your sin forgiven and have peace with God forever is the best and greatest thing that you can ever have and it's offered to you freely now through Jesus and all you have to say is thank you remember me let's finish I'm going to pray and then we're going to sing Lord Jesus Christ thank you so much for your great hope offered to us in the gospel that to dying people and hurting people and sad people and broken people all they have to do is look to Jesus and say remember me and that you will give to them the forgiveness and the love they need amen you god you you