This morning, we are going to take a look at one of the most beautiful, necessary, holy, complete, foundational, and basic elements of the Christian faith: Forgiveness! As children of God, we are recipients of the complete, unconditional forgiveness of our Holy God. In fact, Jesus pleaded for the forgiveness of His persecutors while He suffered on the cross (Luke 23:34\*). Like those who crucified Him, we have done nothing to earn His forgiveness, and yet, He forgives still—a gift freely given. Oh! How blessed we are! But that incredible boon requires that we review this statement by C. S. Lewis: “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.” While we gratefully and readily accept the forgiveness of our Father, we find it difficult to forgive those who offend us, hurt us, or betray us. But, Family, forgiveness is a foundational Christian virtue, not just in the receiving but also in the giving.

 Now let me say, before we get much further, that some of you have been through terrible things. You have been wronged; someone you love has been hurt. I understand. But forgiveness is not a compromise of morality. And we must remember that justice belongs to God. No, forgiveness is part of God’s plan for you to live free. It means making a choice to refuse to live in the past. It means choosing to live by the instruction of God through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes that we must forgive, “just as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). Ninety-five times in scripture, forgiveness is mentioned. We remember that on one day, Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive someone who sins against us. Jesus answered 70 times 7; that’s 490 times! (Matthew 18:21-35\*\*) That’s a lot of hurt and a lot of forgiveness. Listen, family, the Greek word for forgiveness is “*APHESIS*.” It translates “to release,” release from bondage or imprisonment, remission of the penalty. Forgiveness is not calling some evil or mean thing someone did “okay,” nor is it excusing a particular offense. No, you make a conscious decision to “release” the offender, and, suddenly, you discover

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\*Luke 23:34 “Jesus said, “’Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.”

\*\*Matthew 18:22 “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ 22 Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’” (See full text at end of this sermon text.)

that *you* were the one in bondage. Truthfully, much of our unwillingness to forgive is rooted in pride. Recently, I have been reading through the minutes of the first meetings of Shepherd Church, and I came across a beautiful statement: “We will not bring the baggage of the past into what God is doing now.” Forgiveness is a decision and a process. The origins of this congregation could have been steeped in regret, anger, and hurt because of the previous experiences of its founding members, but NO, they chose forgiveness and new life for this church family.

 Forgiveness cannot be based on emotion but on the decision to do as Christ directs. It is the mark of the true believer, and for the Christian, it is not optional (Matthew 6:14-15\*). To harbor unforgiveness is to give root to bitterness (Hebrews 12:15\*\*, Ephesians 4:31-32). When we forgive, we realize that we were really the prisoner all along. We experience release and liberty because of our obedience to our Lord. We forgive because that’s what born again, forgiven people do. Our reading in Colossians 3(see passages in support of this message at the end of this text) gives us the instruction on how it is to be done: We allow the peace of Christ to rule (v. 15), and we allow the word of Christ to dwell in us (v. 16). We each surrender our right to rule and our tendency to dwell on the past. Angry, unforgiving people suffer from roiling emotions. Isn’t it true that you cannot see your reflection in boiling water? Similarly, you can’t see the truth when your anger and bitterness control you. Choose the peace of Christ that will help you choose to forgive.

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\*Matthew 6:14-15 “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

\*\*Hebrews 12:15 “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”

\*\*\* Ephesians 4:31-32 “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

 The best incentive to forgive is to remember how much you have been forgiven. Forgiveness requires a soft but courageous heart. Forgiveness requires turning away from resentment, releasing anger and hurt, refusing to keep score. And before you say it: Yes, you can! Peter writes, “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (2Peter 1:3). Forgiveness is embracing a lifestyle marked by Jesus’ love, grace, and mercy. Also, it requires that the believer be bold enough to confess the struggle: “Father, I am having trouble forgiving X. Help me!” The Christian lifestyle requires embracing of His forgiveness. The great truth is that God delights in showing mercy (Micah 7:18\*). And since I am forgiven--and since you are forgiven--as a child of God I should be programmed to forgive—to release and to experience release. This forgiveness is foundational to our faith. Don’t bring the baggage of the past into what God is doing now. It is for each of us to have and maintain a forgiving spirit, a spirit that pleases the Lord.

 We have to decide which is more important, pleasing ourselves or pleasing the One who has forgiven us. No one has wronged me as much as I have wronged Him. Yet, He forgives me. When I look at wrongs done to me in light of His Holiness and His sacrifice for me, He becomes my fixed point of reference. I don’t want anything to stand in the way of my intimacy with Him, and I refuse, yes REFUSE, to give anyone or any circumstance that kind of power over me. I have been released from the bondage of pride and anger, from penalty for sin, and from death. I choose to please the Lord by being a forgiving believer. My learning to forgive is foundation to my faith. All believers need to ask God to choose forgiveness, and this choice will bring His peace.

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\*Micah 7:18 “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.”

*Passages in Support of This Message*

Colossians 3:12-17 “12 Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Ephesians 4:31-32 “31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

*Additional Referenced Passage*

Matthew 18:21-35

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” 22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. 23 “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. 26 “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ 27 The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. 28 “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. 29 “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ 30 “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32 “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”