

## **To begin with**

You know, as a pastor, when you plan for the January summer series, you've got to think of a few things. There are a few rules that have to take place for the January summer series. It needs to be light enough for a gentle start to the year. You know, no theological depth in January. It's too warm and nice, right? It can't be so important that you have to stay awake the entire-- because it's hard to stay awake on Sunday mornings. So the rule is, because we've still got turkey deep in our blood system from Christmas, which is making us very sleepy. And under no circumstances during summer, should any preacher be expected to do any preparation for their sermons, it's rehash old sermons, minimise preparation, maximise cricket watching time. They're the rules for church summer series, except that I've broken every one of the rules for this series. Because I felt convicted to do this series for some time, for us as a church, a four-week series on forgiveness. It's a little bit unconventional. It's almost wrong. But here we are, a big, theologically deep, something you want to stay awake for. A lot of work on my part, too, praise God. We are all in relationships. That's why this matters. And relationships break down all the time. They break down in significant and in little ways. So our relationships always need work. And without work, they will fall apart. And that work will often include forgiveness. Look, I know that we can cover up the mistakes that we've made, the hurts that we've felt. I know we can cover them up. Just pretend, keep going at some sort of superficial level. I know that we can do that. But you and I both know that unless there is forgiveness in our relationships, those relationships are doomed. I reckon everyone here has been hurt by another person. None of us are immune to the pain of being hurt by significant others. But I also reckon if we're willing to admit it, we've probably done the hurting as well. None of us have escaped the need to say, "I'm sorry for what I've done." Because we've inflicted pain on others as well. I suspect that this morning, today, there are people in the room desperate to be forgiven. Or seething with anger, unable to forgive. Sitting in self-denial, not even realising that you need to say sorry to somebody. We're all in one of those categories, probably. When it comes to relationships, every one of us is after the same goal. We want peace. We want to lie down in green pastures without hostility, with genuine fellowship, without fear, without guilt, without shame, without dishonour. We all want that. But for that to happen occasionally, we need reconciliation to come back together. Whether

it's marriage, or family, sibling relationships, or just people within church. We're not perfect. Problems do emerge. We shouldn't be surprised about it. We're flawed people, all of us. So I guess it's really important to grasp the forgiveness matters. Real and lasting forgiveness matters. That's why I've launched into this January series, Four Weeks in Forgiveness.

## **Should We Forgive?**

I want to say something about forgiveness, so, because over the last 50 years, that word, "forgiveness," has become a little bit of a dirty word. It's not nearly as popular as it once was. I want to tell you a couple of stories. Wilma and Cliff learned that their 13-year-old girl had been taken, hurt, and ultimately lost her life. And the grief for Cliff and Wilma was unimaginable. However, not long after the event had taken place, Cliff and Wilma had decided to head on the path of forgiveness for the person who was found guilty for it. They joined a family survivors program, and at times during the program, they shared their desire to wrestle with forgiving the perpetrator. However, after a while, they were kicked out of that family support group. Why? They were told, "Cliff, Wilma, your forgiveness is creating more of a dangerous society." I wonder if you resonate with that. Forgiving people who hurt. Isn't that creating danger? Allowing people to continue on hurting others? In 2017, the Me Too movement took off, exposing an ever-increasing realization that in society, harassment, abuse, and assault, particularly from men toward women, was more wide-reaching than any of us was willing to admit. At least in the public sphere, public discourse, the idea of forgiveness came up time and time again. Again, should we forgive such men? Should we forgive the attackers who have attacked us? Someone wrote, quote, "Instead of talking about victims who must forgive, we should be tattooing the words 'predator' on the foreheads of criminals. This would make women and children safer." I think you can hear at the heart of that, a strong desire to protect victims, to protect the vulnerable. And I think this is the reason why we want to protect victims. The reason is we've been told for years and years and years, just forgive and move on. Get over it. Yes, you've been wronged, but you've just got to deal with it. And so victims are left traumatised, silently suffering, while they've been told to just forgive and forget to move on. I think the forgive and move on is short for we are too tired and can't be bothered. Sitting with you in your grief and trauma over, over. So just get over

it. Forgive and move on. That is not loving at all, to say to anybody, let alone the victim of such traumas. It's cheap grace at best, but it's awful and loveless. And it's not healing in any way. You see, victims need justice, and we want justice for victims. And to say quickly, move on, move on, is not giving the justice that is deserved. At the heart of it, we want real justice for people that have been hurt. And if we're passing just forgive and move on as Christian forgiveness, I wouldn't want it either. But at the same time, can I just say we want to move on and we must be careful that we've not thrown out more than we should. Here's what I mean. I think we're also running the risk of making the mistake that seeing forgiveness is really bad for everyone, including the victim. We're running the risk of saying forgiveness is actually bad for victims. We might have come to the conclusion that forgiveness only empowers perpetrators and yet ruins victims. So, in the aim of reaching for justice, we might end up encouraging victims to hold on to suffering. We encourage more and more punishment placed upon wrongdoers and yet forget that forgiveness is God's way through the mess given to us. It's not to avoid the mess, it's to deal with the mess head on. God has given forgiveness as a way to get through suffering. Now, in some senses, church, family, we can't control what the world outside is doing in regards to forgiveness, hurt and suffering. But what we do want to ask ourselves is, what does God say to us about what we do about forgiving other people? What does God say? We want to approach forgiveness the way God wants it and it's possible we might have to be radically different than the whole world. To what extent is the world teaching you how to forgive? And to what extent is Christ teaching you how to forgive? And I think this is so hard and I don't come to this with any sense other than this is a really difficult thing to talk about. It's so hard because to forgive genuinely, we are running uphill while people who just choose to not forgive are cruising downhill. It's easier to hold on. It is much harder to deal with. We call ourselves salmon swimming upstream against the tide and yet upstream of the bears waiting to catch us and eat us to use the salmon analogy. There's no real bears. Church, we've got to know how society is understanding forgiveness but then we've got to ask what does God want in regards to forgiveness? So four weeks we're delving into it.

## **The Centrality of Forgiveness**

We begin this morning with the centrality of forgiveness to the Christian faith. If you're new here, perhaps exploring faith, perhaps you've just come and you're just wondering what is it that the Bible is talking about? I want you to know this morning if you just get one thing. I want you to see how important and central forgiveness is to the Bible's message. It's my first part. I've gone through the intro. My first part is the centrality of forgiveness. It is central to our faith. I want us to see that first. Before we talk about side to side forgiveness, forgiveness toward each other, before we talk about that, I want us to consider this forgiveness, the upwards between God and humanity. It's such an important thing to think about in regards to forgiveness. God, the Creator, created everything including the universe, the animals and included us in His creation. All humans been created by God. God gives us relationships, things to enjoy. He gives us everything we need for life, for health, for safety, for salvation. And He says to us as people, "What I'd love you to do is love me back, just as I've loved you, love me." And then He says, "The other thing I want you to do, love one another." Well, instead of loving Him as we ought to, with our hearts, the bulk of humanity has abandoned Him. We've ignored Him in some senses. We've cheated on Him by serving other gods. We've done it deliberately. It's not been accidental all the time. We've deliberately ignored God, finding other things far more important. We've offended God, we've slandered God, we've wished God Himself was dead. And then at times we've spoken as if He is dead. That's what we as a society and as humans have done quite regularly toward God. The God that loved us, we've done that back to Him. But not only that, we've abused and mistreated one another regularly. The very people that God loves, we have not loved. The very people God gave us to protect, we have not protected, we've hurt, we've harmed. Barely a day goes past without at least one of us offending another or being offended by another. So we don't love God and we don't love one another. The very two things He asked of us. This is the difference between God's love for us, the vertical relationship, which has been perfect and all other relationships where we have had in some senses broken breakdowns. Our relationship with God has been thoroughly ripped apart and the thing is it's been entirely of our doing. It's been one way chaos and carnage. Can I give you Adam and Eve, the most one of the most famous stories as an example? Let me give you an example. What did God give Adam and Eve? Hey, yell it out, because I've been doing a lot of talking. What did God give Adam and Eve in

Genesis chapter one and two if you know your Sunday school story? Someone yell it out. A garden, thank you. What else did He give them? Food, thank you. - Each other. - Each other, yes. - Existence. Existence, right? Yep. And He did that for them. He gave them everything that they would need. And how did they respond in worship? Not for long, in rebellion, in division, in hostility. They rebelled against God and then they went at each other. The breakdown was completely one way. And I wonder if you pause now, whether you can see yourself in that exact situation. You, like Adam or like Eve, God has given you so much. This incredible state of Tasmania, even with the weather. Perhaps He's given your family a job, wealth, perhaps you have your health still. Perhaps you're one of the rare Tasmanians that has prosperity. All the things given by God and yet, what has He got in return from you? Large size. I gotta go to church again. It's such a burden to pray. They're gonna force me to read the Bible, I'm sure of it. He gives us everything. And what do we give Him back? Hey, not much. We're all the same. I'm not sitting here pointing the finger. The point is, it's right back at me too. None of us escape this rejection of God. So God, the offended party, we the offenders, but what does He do? Well, He has two options. Wipe us out or deal with the problem. Wipe us out, get rid of us, start with a new aliens. He's like, I should have started with those aliens to begin with, but He doesn't do that. God deals with the problem and seeks out the process of reconciliation. God initiates it. Instead of wiping us out, He provides a relationship solution. It's the possibility, despite what we've done, to be friends with God again. God sets out to do this. He provides a way for us to be forgiven. And the whole Bible, this reconciliation story, is the whole Bible. First, God offers for us to be forgiven. And then we have a chance to receive that, to say sorry and to receive His forgiveness. Have a look at this from Psalm 130. It'll come up on the screen now. Psalm 130. I hope, there it is. "With you there is forgiveness," says the Psalmist, "so that you might be feared." That's speaking to God. Look at this, the Old Testament can be graphed like this. It should come up on the screen here. That the first part was forgiveness provided, the wisdom literature, forgiveness received, the history books was where forgiveness was rejected, and then the prophets was where forgiveness was provided again, promised. The whole of that Old Testament can be summed up in forgiveness. The very beginning of each gospel puts forgiveness upfront. Look at Matthew 1, 21, which states that the coming Messiah will save people

from their sins. That's a level of forgiveness. Have a look at 1, 77, Luke 1, 77. Oh, the Lord's Prayer, sorry. The Lord's Prayer, you might remember, our Father in heaven. Forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us. The one prayer to summarise all prayers has vertical and horizontal forgiveness in it. Matthew 26, 28. Jesus says, "My blood which has been poured out "for the forgiveness of sins," the death on the cross, Jesus dying on the cross, his blood being poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. And then we have our passage, which Scarlett read for us today. And very briefly, can you remember the passage? "This man comes, brought by friends, with his greatest problem." His biggest problem is he cannot walk. He is completely paralysed. He has no ability to walk. And he comes to Jesus for his greatest need to be met. And Jesus meets it immediately by saying, "Son, your sins are forgiven." They came looking for feet to walk so that he could get on with life. And Jesus says, "No, I'm gonna give you something "greater than that, your sins forgiven." Jesus saw in him, by him coming, Jesus saw in him a faith, a faith that knew Jesus could do something. And Jesus filled in the blanks. The good news for that guys, he also got to walk later on. But we make no mistake that at central to that narrative is the fact that Jesus came to forgive sins. His greatest need was there. Sitting on the church, we exist and we started as a church community nearly five years ago. March, 2021, we opened the doors. And it wasn't by accident and there was no mistake and we were not unclear about the reason why we opened the doors. We began as a church to let people in Glenorchy and the northern suburbs know there is a chance for you to be forgiven. Not a chance for you to be nice. Not a chance for you to have morning tea as good as that is. We are a church so that we would let people know you can have your relationship with God restored. You can be forgiven. But just like the paralysed man, whatever needs you've brought this morning, Jesus says to you, "In faith, your sins are forgiven." Praise God. No forgiveness can begin without thinking about the possibility of being forgiven by the creator of the universe. It's such an amazing thing for us.

### **What does this mean For us?**

So part two, what does this mean for us? What does it mean? Now this is a four week series so I'm not gonna say everything this morning. You've got to come back for the rest. But here's what few things I wanted to say this morning. Right? I don't want us to cave in to the pressure the world is giving us to not

forgive others. God forgave us all the things. I don't wanna cave in. I don't wanna give in to a world and remove the possibility of joy that can come from forgiveness. Let's not settle for anything short. Just because society says it's wrong to forgive others. In fact, I wanna be a community that is built upon forgiveness. I want people to know, wow, there is something different about these people. So we need to practice forgiveness and we need to practice being forgiven. The practice of forgiveness is very clear in the Bible. It's very clear. But it is not simple. I would not stand here and pretend that it is simple to practice forgiveness and being forgiven. It is clear though, because the Bible leaves us in no doubt what God wants from us. We'll find out over the next few weeks. It is completely transparent what God is expecting from his people. Just as we've been forgiven, the Bible makes it clear we are to forgive one another, but it is not simple. Let's not offer simple, cheap forgiveness. It is in fact very complex and here's why. 'Cause when you have been wronged, the thing that you're looking for is a good thing, justice. You want vengeance on the perpetrator. When someone hurts you, your anger is the right response. One writer says it like this and it should come up on the screen. When we are wrong, the anger we have is a right and proper resistance against the loss of something good. In other words, you're angry because you've lost something good. Our desire for justice springs from the God who made us, who is also the God of justice. We are made in his image. He wants justice. So do we. Without justice, our fear is that victims will continue to suffer and offenders will just keep getting off. That's our fear and our fear is rightly placed. We don't want that. And yet, however, our desire for justice can very easily turn into a not so godly desire for long lasting revenge. An overreaction which doubles as a sinful desire. What started as good becomes something not good. Vengeance and revenge. We want justice, but then we want a little bit more. Incidentally, you might remember that old testament covenant. What am I saying? The law, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Show of hands. Has anyone heard that? An eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. In other words, if you poke my eye out, the Bible said that person can have their eye poked out. Tooth for tooth, if they knock your tooth out, justice is that you knock their tooth out. Eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. Now, I'm not giving a sermon on that, but what I hear is what I did want to say. That law was set in deliberately for this very purpose. Justice demanded that the offender lose what they had taken from the victim. In an equal transaction, that's what

that was about. But no more. You see, because God knew that sinful desire and human desire would turn from an eye for an eye too, an eye for an eye, but let's include a tooth and a leg for good measure. We love revenge. And it feeds into something very negative within us. So what do we do about this? When we want vengeance and we want justice, God's answer, forgiveness. It's where the cross of Jesus most clearly speaks to us. At the cross, we see a man, someone paying for the sin of another, dying, although he did not deserve a desire. It is unjust. But at the same time, it is also justice rightly served. Someone is being punished. The punishment is being served. The justice is happening, but it's happening to someone else, not ourselves. Justice, your evils and wrongdoings are paid for. At the cross of Jesus, so are other perpetrators and criminals, other abusers who have come to him for forgiveness. Their sins are paid for at the cross, as well by faith, of course. Either they are forgiven offenders and we trust God's system of justice, or they're opposing God and their sins are not forgiven there. It's one or two things. But at the cross, justice is served when the punishment is paid upon Jesus. Now you might say that is completely unfair 'cause he was innocent, we're not. That is unfair, except he willingly did that. That is what we call grace and mercy. He has taken that on himself so that we go off free. Do you believe that when Jesus died, your wrongs were paid for at the cross? And the wrongs of all other people who have turned to him for forgiveness, do you believe that? That is what the Bible says we can trust. Our faith is tested in this, but we can also rest in this. It's clear, but it's not simple. Therefore, a forgiveness revolution will begin when we, broken people, who are drawn together as followers of Jesus, are willing to once again consider forgiveness to be forgiven first by God. Forgiveness, church, forgiveness is part of God's work and we need to get in the forgiveness lane, not in the revenge only lane. (gentle music) (gentle music) (gentle music) [Music] you