

The Image of the Invisible God: Forgiveness

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

March 2, 2026 AM Sermon

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Matthew 27:45-54

So we come to the last of our sermons in The Image of the Invisible God series. In these sermons we've been learning about the character, and the heart of the living God by watching Jesus. Hebrews 1 says, "Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." So if you want to know who God is, watch Jesus. Jesus reveals the heart and character of God.

Today we will watch Jesus forgive. Jesus is really serious about forgiveness. Forgiveness matters to Jesus. I know it was early in the service and many of you were just getting yourself settled into the pew, but did you hear Rachel's call to confession? Rachel read the Lord's Prayer as Jesus taught it in Matthew. As you know the Lord's Prayer emphasizes forgiveness. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." By teaching us to pray that way, Jesus wants to put us in the stream of forgiveness; the stream where we receive forgiveness from God and pass it to others.

Rachel also read Jesus' short editorial at the end of that prayer, which is something many of you probably didn't know was there. Jesus finishes the prayer and he decides that there is one part of the prayer he wants to emphasize because he really doesn't want the disciples to miss it, and that's the part about forgiveness. Jesus doubles down on forgiveness. He says, Here's how serious I am about forgiveness: "If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." That's pointed. How important is forgiveness to Jesus? If you and I aren't doing it, it's like we are climbing out of the stream of his forgiveness. If you and I don't forgive, it's like we are removing ourselves from the stream of God's grace. Jesus says, "When you don't forgive others, you imperil my forgiveness of you." Could Jesus possibly say anything more sobering?

Forgiveness matters to Jesus. How often must I forgive my brother? 7 times? No 70 times 7. We forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive. It's who we are. It's what we do. So, these passages show us that forgiveness is close to Jesus' heart. But if you really want to see how much forgiveness matters to Jesus, you need to watch what he does in our passage.

If you were a new Christian or if you were a person who hadn't heard that Jesus forgives our sins on the cross a million times, as I read that story you might fairly wonder, "Why is that story about forgiveness? I don't see any forgiveness happening there." Forgiveness involves an offended person releasing someone from their debt of sin. I publicly accused you of stealing my watch. I was angry. I said mean things about you, then later I found the watch in my gym bag. I told you about my mistake, I said I was sorry, and you forgave me. Bless you for that. You are a good person. But in this part of the story, do we see Jesus releasing anyone from sin? Does the word forgiveness even appear? I see Jesus dying and being crucified and crying out, but where's the forgiveness?

There is amazing forgiveness in this story, but to see the fullness of it you've got to know your Old Testament and you especially have to know your Old Testament minor prophets. Do you know what I mean by the minor prophets? All those little books at the end of the Old testament. Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. How well do you know those books? Probably not well. Don't worry, I forgive you. The fact is, nobody knows these books very well. That's because they aren't easy books, they are full of judgment. Most of the minor prophets follow a similar kind of pattern. They lay out the sins of the nations, or the sins of Judah, or the sins of Israel. Then they talk about how terrible those sins are and then they describe the terrible punishments God is going to rain down on the people for these sins.

What kinds of sins are condemned? The prophets condemn things like idolatry, and the worship of idols, and the abuse of the poor, and violence against the weak. The list of sins condemned by the prophets

also includes things that seem contemporary and familiar. "Woe to you who are champions at drinking wine and mixing drinks," says Isaiah. "Woe to you who lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches, you dine on fatted calves...you improvise on musical instruments...and use the finest lotions," says Amos. "I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house...the mansions will be demolished." As a person who likes a good steak with a glass of wine, as a person who owns a cottage, these verses get my attention.

So those are the sins. What punishments will the Lord bring for these sins? They are violent and vivid. Amos says that "bodies will be flung everywhere." Joel says that "the Lord will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem. The earth and the heavens will tremble." Zephaniah says that, "the wicked will have their blood poured out like dust, their entrails like filth." Scary stuff.

When will these punishments come? Most of these prophets also say that this terrible judgment will come on a special day, a day they call "the Day of the Lord." On that day, say the prophets, God's judgement will commence. On that day God will bring his punishment down upon sinners like us and it will be terrible.

The day of the Lord will be accompanied by signs, listen to the signs the prophets say will accompany the day of the Lord. Listen to see if they don't sound familiar. Zephaniah 1:15 says that the day of the Lord will be a day of darkness and gloom." Joel also prophesies darkness on the day of the Lord. Amos gets specific. He says that on the day of judgment, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight." So the first sign is darkness at noon.

Another sign mentioned by the prophets: a loud cry from God: Amos 1:2 "The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem." Jeremiah 25: "The Lord will roar from on high...the Lord will shout against all who live on earth. Joel 3:16 says God's roar will cause an earthquake: "The Lord will roar from Zion and thunder from Jerusalem; the earth and the heavens will tremble." So another sign: a loud cry from God that leads to an earthquake.

And finally the prophets say that there will be lots of wailing and mourning on the day of the Lord. Amos 8:10 describes the mourning on the day of the Lord this way: "I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day."

So the signs of the day of the Lord coming: Darkness at noon, the Lord crying out in a loud voice, a loud voice that leads to an earthquake, and terrible mourning like that of an only son. Does this sound familiar? Do you see where this is going? When you know these Old Testament prophecies you can see that everything that is happening to Jesus on the cross suggests that this is the Day of the Lord. The terrible judgements of the day of the Lord are starting. There's the darkness at noon. There's the loud cry of God as Jesus cries out from the cross. There's the earthquakes that follows the cry as Joel predicted. There's the mourning like that for an only Son, only it's not us mourning and grieving our loss, it's God the Father mourning the loss of his only Son. And there is blood pouring out on the ground like dust, just as Joel described, only it's not the blood of the guilty Israel, Judah, me, you - it's Jesus' blood.

So all the prophecies are being fulfilled with one shocking twist. They are falling on God instead of us. Amos and Joel and the rest of the prophets are very clear. This judgment was supposed to fall upon the guilty sinners. This judgment was supposed to fall upon the nations, this judgment was supposed to fall on Israel, this judgment was supposed to fall on us. We are the ones who neglected the poor, we are the ones who have lived in a half-hearted relationship to God and flirted with other idols, we are the champions at mixing drinks, we are the ones who spend so much time thinking about our pleasures and our amusements, we are the ones who love God with maybe half our heart, a third of our soul and a quarter of our mind. We are the ones who've made a mess of this world

The prophets also say that for all this we've earned an avalanche of judgment. They say, the avalanche is coming, it's barreling towards you and it's going to flatten you. But mercifully and miraculously, in a twist that I don't think Amos or Joel or Zephaniah could have seen, Jesus steps in front of the avalanche. While we are still hurling curses down upon his dying Son, God absorbs the avalanche of judgment into himself and we are forgiven. Amazing Love, how can it be.

When you hear the echoes of Old Testament judgment in the story you realize that this story is all about forgiveness. In this story Jesus is taking all the terrible judgment for our sins. How serious is Jesus about forgiveness? He's given his life for it. It was the center of his mission. It's what he came here to do.

And it's what he came to establish in us. When you see what Jesus does on the cross and what he takes upon himself so that we can be relieved of the burden of sin and judgment, you can see why he's so forceful about forgiveness in us. You can see why he says, "If you do not forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will not forgive you." I don't hear him saying: "forgive or else." I hear him saying, "If you guys can't become a community where you forgive each other, do you even understand what I did for you? Do you understand what I absorbed for you? Do you not want to be a part of this community of forgiveness and joy and peace that I'm trying to establish? Do you not want to live in my community of grace, would you rather go back to that community of grievance and self-righteousness?"

Jesus dies to forgive our sins, and he dies to create a community of forgiveness and grace. It's something the world needs. We live in a world of grievance, outrage and retribution. We live in a world where people get their identity from their grievances, where outrage is a political tool, and where retribution is encouraged and celebrated in the highest places. It's a different river, a river of fear and anger and we get sucked into that river. Jesus is so clearly moving in the opposite direction of all that. Jesus died to create a community that moves in the opposite direction of all that. We are that community.

So every week we come to this place and gather around the cross and we remember that we are forgiven people. We remember that while we were still sinners, Jesus stepped in front of the avalanche. And then we go out into the world and try to do a little bit of the same thing; we try to absorb a bit of the world's misery. Sometimes that looks like full-orbed forgiveness of someone who has hurt us, complete with apologies and spoken forgiveness. But most of the time, in the grind of life, we are doing smaller components of the grand work of forgiveness. We get in a room of cynical people and we try to plant a little hope. We take the call from a fearful friend and we listen well and absorb her fear and anger and try to speak some reassuring words of peace. We go out into our neighborhood and we work with some of our neighbors who've had more than their share of trauma in their life. We absorb a little of their trauma and return a little love and attention.

It's tiring work, because there's a lot of giving in forgiveness and absorbing other people's pain is hard, so at the end of the week we come back here, we come to the cross, and we offload our tiredness and our frustration onto Jesus. He happily takes it because that's what he came for, he feeds us with his word and his food, and now refreshed and renewed he sends us out to do it again.

Garrison Keillor wrote about that in his blog this week. Keillor has become more of a church goer and more of a Christian the older he gets. He wrote about how much he loves going to Sunday services in his church community and how the Spirit works on him in this service. The service opens with everyone singing Trust and Obey. He is moved by the song, even though, as he puts it, "I am neither trustworthy nor obedient." The gospel for the day is from the Sermon on the Mount: "Love your enemy. Bless those who curse you. If someone takes your coat, let them have your shirt." It challenges him. "This is no piece of cake," writes Keillor. "I do not love my enemy."

Then comes communion. In the hymn before communion Keillor writes, "My voice shakes and I feel tears on my cheeks, as I ask my creator to lift me above the clutter and the cross-talk, the chit-chat, the crapola, and face the heavenly eternal, and accept the unbelievable face of the faith, that God gave himself to suffer humiliation and death for our sins."

After the service is done Keillor says, "I listen to the postlude and shake hands with the rector, thank the organist for the hymns: it's not easy to make me weep, I am not that sort of sensitive male...I walked into church thinking about deadlines and the news and my aged, ailing pals, and I walk out into sunshine, feeling shaken, raised up and grateful for the love of God and the people around me."

To me this is a small and beautiful description of what the Spirit is doing in our lives in this community through the power of the cross. We come to this place worn out, distracted, focused on our fears and our angers and our grievances, but then here in this place we encounter a love that we did not deserve and a

forgiveness that washes our spirits clean. And we walk out together into the sunshine, feeling shaken, raised up and grateful for the love of God. And, in another weekly miracle, the Spirit has made us into a community of grace ready for another week of the hard, beautiful work of forgiveness.

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