

Lavish Forgiveness

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] I really like if you turn back with me to Ephesians chapter 1 and we're going to continue today on our theme of grace but we're going to look today at or loosely use it as our theme verse 7 and 8 of chapter 1 of Ephesians.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of his grace that he has lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Now if there were three really big words that we would regard as important in life in many ways whether we're Christian or not but obviously they're imbued with a different meaning and a different angle in a sense as Christians but life changing words or words that we would love to hear are these three words.

You can probably guess them. I love you. They're really significant words when they're meant aren't they?

And it can change our life to have somebody say to us I love you. It can be a wonderful thing to experience and in many ways life changing.

[1 : 28] And at one level that is the core of grace. I'm imbued with a great sense of divine character Jesus says to us I love you.

But I want to speak about the coin of grace and say that it has two sides. One side may be the side that says I love you but can I say that there's another side to grace that is our theme for today and it's also a three worded side if we can use that imagery.

And probably these three words are just as powerful as significant and I'm sure in a broken and dysfunctional and sinful world even more powerful.

I am sorry. What a wonderful world this would be if people took these two sides of grace and were able to accept God saying I love you in Christ and were able to live in the spirit of repentance saying I am sorry.

And I want this morning to carry on our theme of grace to look at forgiveness today and the theme of forgiveness is a very important part of our understanding of grace.

[2 : 55] Sometimes think our understanding of grace is a bit spineless and a little bit soft and mealy and insignificant and it's kind of powder puff a little bit and it's got nice kind of connotations and it's nice and warm and fluffy but it loses it sometimes doesn't have the grit and the power that is its characteristic biblically.

I want to look at the power of forgiveness today because that's very much part of grace. It's part of the overflow of grace. These beautiful words that Paul pens to the church in Ephesus he says in him way of redemption through his blood the forgiveness of sins which he has freely given us in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he's lavished on us, poured out on us with all his wisdom and understanding.

So forgiveness is the outworking of grace and it's part of the same coin and they go together and it is the overflow of grace that helps us to understand forgiveness.

In him do you see the importance of that? In him we have redemption. Christ is central to our understanding of love and our understanding of forgiveness and is the centre of the gospel and is at the very core of everything we are and everything we know.

In Christ we can see through Christ the cost of His infinite love at the cross and that leads us to that place where we recognise through him all that has been done on our behalf as we've been looking at grace over these last few weeks and seeing that it's not our attendance in church, it's not our good efforts, it's not our hard work, it's not our religiosity, it's not our theology.

[5 : 01] None of these things we can lay before God and say please accept me into your presence. It's by His grace and when we see that all of our brokenness and our ugliness and our sin has nailed Him to the tree through the spirit of God we say Lord God I am.

I am sorry. I am sorry. It's like Psalm 51 isn't it? We recognise lots of different levels of seeking forgiveness in life don't we?

Sometimes against our wife or our husband or our children, family or friends or neighbours or work colleagues. But ultimately we recognise like David says against you, you only have a sinned and so David says I am sorry and we come to recognise as the overflow of grace is in her lives Lord God I am sorry and we hear God saying I know, I forgive you, I forgive you and grace is under us.

We can't have, we just simply can't take grace sort of on its own like that without recognising and understanding as we were kind of looking, trying to see last week, understanding the depth of our failures before God, of our badness and of our guilt before Him and recognising that He has taken that and He has paid for that and that we are set free.

These are great words, if you have really messed up with someone, you have messed up in your marriage, if you messed up with a colleague, if you messed up with your children and you ask for their forgiveness and they say I forgive you.

[6 : 59] These are great redeeming words, they enable us to start afresh their words of grace. But when God says them, they are ultimate, it's the ultimate forgiveness and the ultimate belonging and acceptance that we need.

The power of forgiveness is His overwhelming grace that comes through His redemption in His blood, in His crucifixion.

It remains core and central to everything that we are and everything that we do. He has given us various pictures to help us to understand His forgiveness because we struggle with it.

When we hear that God forgives us as Christians we think, ah yeah, but I have got to change my ways, I have got to do things differently, I have got to earn His forgiveness, even some consciously we do that, it's impossible we find it very hard to accept His forgiveness.

We always think that there are periods that we must not do things wrong in order for forgiveness to be applied, that there is trial periods of good behaviour before we can accept the forgiveness, that we are paralysed to inactivity until we feel we have made ourselves right with God so that we can take His forgiveness.

[8 : 24] He gives us four pictures of what He has done and what His forgiveness means for us. I just want them verse by verse as we look at them quickly to go onto the screen so that we can read them.

East from West, that is a description and a picture of our forgiveness in Psalm 103 verse 12. As far as the east is from the west so far as He removed His transgression from us.

Now that's a picture and He says as Christians, as believers, there is an infinite distance between our sin and Him because it is banished from us.

He has removed our sin from His presence because you can never get to the end of the east in a linear line, in linear terms, nor can you get to the end of the west.

He hasn't forgiven us by the skin of our tear. We don't get into heaven just by what He has done and us trying our best alongside that.

[9 : 30] All our sins, past, present and future, He has taken and removed them entirely from His being and from His consciousness as far as east is distant from the west.

His second picture is that He puts them behind His back in Isaiah 38 verse 17. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction. You have put all my sins behind your back.

Now that's a very deliberate picture. It's anthropomorphic language. It's making God like a human being using that kind of picture, isn't it?

And He's saying, look, I've put my your sin behind my back and it's very deliberate. And it's interesting because it's kind of where we used to be with God because that's what we are.

By nature we have turned our back on God. So God's behind us. We don't see Him. We don't love Him. We don't serve Him. We don't worship Him. And repentance coming to faith is about turning and looking and living facing God.

[10 : 42] And God says, well, I'm going to do with your sins what you used to be like with me. I'm going to put them deliberately behind my back where they are unseen, where they are ignored.

I shouldn't say ignored. Ignored is not really the right word. They're not ignored, but they've been dealt with. The sins that we have committed have been paid for.

They have been dealt with. So He has every right then to take our sins in that pictorial language and hide them from us. Then He gives us the third picture, which is that they are hurled into the sea in Micah 7, verse 19.

You will again have compassion as you will treat that. That's supposed to be treat. Oh, no, no, it is not. It's a tread, our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea. There's kind of two pictures there, really.

Again, that picture of something being thrown into the very depths, not just thrown but hurled in, a deliberate action, not intending them to be resurfaced, to come back to haunt us.

[11 : 48] Isn't that what we think about sins? Well, that's going to come back to haunt you. We often think that.

That is a reality in our lives. But before God, through Christ, you can't sit and be paralysed as a Christian by past failure. You can't allow Satan to keep you imprisoned and say, well, you're just too rubbish to be a Christian.

Your past is too unclean. It is impossible for you. Jesus, God says they are hurled into the sea with that picture of deliberate and active forgetting.

And the last picture he gives, or that we look at with regard to our sins, that just emphasise what he's trying to get across is that they are blotted from the record.

In Isaiah 43, 15, I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and remembers your sins no more. It's a picture of our relationship with God through Christ is that he, it's a kind of legal thing.

[13 : 01] It's a legal picture blotting out our sin. It's cleansing the record. It's there's nothing there that can be held against us.

It moves towards judgment day. There's no case to answer before God for the Christian. He chooses to not remember.

You know, it's not that he just forgets, though he uses that terminology as well, but he chooses not to remember our sins because it is for his own sake, his own glory and for our good.

These are pictures of what God, the judge, God, the sovereign King will do for all who come by faith to Jesus Christ for redemption and for salvation.

And so we have his invitation, very famous invitation from Isaiah chapter one and verse 18. Come now, let us reason together.

[14:09] Jesus, Lord, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.

That's his invitation. Now, I believe possibly here, but definitely in the world around us, hell feels closer for some people than others.

They sense their own darkness and they sense their own guilt and their own brokenness more than others.

There may be people here today who feel that they have completely screwed up, that they have absolutely lost hope, that they're alone, that they've made a mess of their lives, that they've made a mess of their relationships, that they've made a mess of what they are and what they do, that they've lied and they've cheated and that things are desperate and that nobody will accept them.

They reject in their own estimation with no self-esteem whatsoever, even at a human level, and that there is, church is the worst place for them because they feel that they're around lots of people who seem to have it together and everything is great and going well for them and they look nice at their dress well and everything is fine, they smile and things are good, but they feel that there's nothing for them in the house of God and church, nothing for them in the message because the churches we've looked at before in this series somehow gives the impression that we're better than others and don't need grace as much.

[15:52] Hell feels close for some. When one feels like that today, then know that the love of Christ is great enough for you to go to Him by faith on your knees and say, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry for the mess that I've made but above all the sin of brokenness before you.

Because Christ says I love you and He says I forgive you. That is the redeeming, freeing, full message of the gospel.

Hell feels very close for some people in their life's experience and I mean that guardedly, not trying to diminish in any way the reality of being ultimately separated from God.

But for many others maybe hell's a bit of a joke or the whole idea of guilt's a bit of a joke and it's something that doesn't impinge consciously in their lives.

Something maybe they would suppress the whole idea of being sinful or wrong or broken or dysfunctional in their lives.

[17:17] They might just want to party away their life and just have good time living. But I ask you if that's your position today that really the whole concept of forgiveness and need is, is one you suppress, that you choose not to think about, that you don't deal with your soul and what the truth of God's word says about your need or indeed unwilling to deal with the brokenness that is often part of your life, part of your responses to other people, part of your bitterness, part of your unloving nature, part of your carelessness for God.

And I simply ask you to ask Him to show you your heart and to show you your need. The power of forgiveness are great and it's a wonderful part of grace because until we know our need we don't fully understand the cost of Christ being nailed to the tree, the Son of God being set free for us, nailed to the cross so that we might be set free and we will not live great.

I'm telling you, until we understand that we'll not live grace. We will not, we'll preen about it, we'll talk about it, we'll theologize it but we will not live it unless we recognise and see how much we've been forgiven and how great God is and how free is His offer.

So briefly I just want to look at one other aspect which is the prayers of forgiveness. You know I've spoken a lot there about the totality of God's forgiveness when we come to Him that our past, present and future sins are forgiven, they're blotted out, the price is being paid, He's a just God, He's not going to punish them again.

You know it's not like the theology of some that I heard who said that if you go out and you die with someone confess sin then well you'll not be saved because you haven't confessed your sin.

[19 : 27] You haven't dealt with that sin before God. It's not that kind of legalistic understanding of grace but if our sins in Christ as we come to Him are forgiven why should we pray daily for forgiveness?

Why should we? If it's all done in dust, it's all done in dust in 1 John chapter 1 and verse 9.

George Word says as if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. Why do we believe in going to God for forgiveness if our sins are already forgiven?

Isn't it just overkill to do that? You know we're only just live by grace and let's be done with all that kind of forgiveness stuff and all that repentant stuff and guilt stuff.

Christ redeemed as He set us free. Why do we pray for forgiveness if we're already in Christ forgiven?

[20 : 28] Because it's the language of grace. That's why. It's the language of grace received. It's the acknowledgement of who we are.

It's acknowledging that God isn't a liar. It's acknowledging that we still battle with sins but that it is a battle that we don't willingly and easily give into them or though sometimes maybe we do.

But we recognize our need for Him. It's the evidence of this new life of dependence on Him. So why do we pray prayers of forgiveness?

Because in the first place we've come to know ourselves. That's why. You know I speak with many Christians and I battle with this myself about praying.

Prayer's difficult. We find prayer hard. And I haven't prayed. People say I haven't prayed for a week. I haven't prayed for a month. Struggling to pray. But as we begin to know ourselves and know the battle that's raging and as we've been touched by His grace, we want on a daily basis to express our sorrow for abusing His love and His grace.

[21 : 50] Prayer isn't going to change Him. Prayer doesn't grant us forgiveness. Prayer changes us. It enables us to experience and enjoy the forgiveness that has already been bought for us.

It's a bit like moving from this just now because of the lights not working properly. This rather dull and dingy building. Moving outside but not today but moving out to outside to an imaginary beautiful hot day and feeling the heat of the sun on your face.

Now if you go out or if you stay in, doesn't make any difference to the beautiful heat of the sun. Now as you go out, it changes your appreciation of it because you feel its heat, you feel its warmth and you feel its life giving energy as it were in your life.

And so with forgiveness when we pray for it, when we go into His presence, it's like opening the door into God's own, to our own experience of God's forgiveness for us.

We feel His warmth, we feel His forgiveness and we feel the freedom that comes from that because that's what He asks for us and from us in our lives, the prayer of forgiveness because we've come to know ourselves.

[23 : 08] But we pray for forgiveness because we've also come to know God, haven't we? We've come to know Him as someone who is glorious and pure and different and holy and not like me, not like you and yet who is loving and gracious and good and fatherly.

And we want as we recognize that to ask for forgiveness for not understanding that, for not seeing that, for maybe living how many times do you hear of people who become Christians late in life saying, I wish I'd seen them, known and understood that earlier.

And as we see God, we recognize our own falling short at so many levels in so many ways that maybe nobody else can see.

And it moves us away from this comparative Christian living where we love to spend our time judging everybody else. So it's because we've come to know and love God.

But also can I say that we pray for forgiveness because we've come to know each other? Not only do we therefore pray for forgiveness but we ask for forgiveness at a human level because living grace, and I mean by that, living out grace in our Christian communities is utterly crucial in our understanding of it as a concept.

[24 : 45] Grace is not in some kind of theological vacuum. It's outworked with God's people in the community of believers.

And it's the other side of that coin which we seek to spin in our community which is knowing God's love but also knowing and experiencing and living God's forgiveness.

Not just receiving his forgiveness, not just asking for forgiveness but asking for it and receiving for it in and among the people of God because we recognize primarily our own hearts and we know how much we feel and fall.

We should be and we ought to be and we strive to be a prodigal people. That's what we are. We are people of the second chance, we are people of the second opportunity. We by grace are people who have short memories for the failings of others where so often we have long, elephantine memories for other people's failures.

We love the fact that God keeps a short account on us but we love to bear grudges for years and years against other people because it suits our misunderstanding of grace.

[26 : 05] But as those who recognize grace we see a willingness in our community, a willingness in our church to be wronged, don't we? A willingness to be wronged.

We don't make a song and dance about things that don't go our way when we are hurt, when things go wrong, not excusing anything for one moment.

But grace recognizes our position before God and the unworthiness of what we've received. There's a beautiful verse about love coming over a multitude of sins.

That's grace at work. That's the other side of the coin, isn't it? A forgiveness that we are willing to cover over a whole lot of kind of small and significant trivial things that love covers over in a marriage, in a family, in a friendship.

And we're willing and we're able to do that in the church or we should be by grace. My word, we often struggle so much with that concept and we want our love to cover not one iota of anyone else's faults and failings but we love sometimes to broadcast them, to make sure everybody knows about them and we are so righteous in return.

[27 : 28] But at the same time, while love covers over a multitude of sins, faithful also are the wounds of a friend. So in a grace-filled church, it's a church that is honest and open about important issues where we will challenge those whom we love about life and behaviour that we recognise as harmful to the cause, harmful to the kingdom and harmful to the individual and are willing to receive the faithful wounds of a friend as well as to give them slow to judge.

Love hiding behind the failure of other people because it makes our own failure seem so much less significant.

Not to be those who like to shout loudest in the church, in my own heart and in my own experience, those who shout loudest usually have the most to hide, not finger pointers, not those who have been forgiven and who forgive.

That's the kind of gritty side of grace that I want us to recognise from God's word. It's the grace of forgiveness and the challenge will be for you and for me when our grace is challenged by behaviour that needs forgiveness.

It's easy to be graceful when we love everybody and everybody is doing great, isn't it? When everyone thinks the same and acts the same and all have the same uniform level of faith, it's easy.

[29 : 18] There's no challenge to our faith and to our grace then. But when we are challenged by behaviour that requires forgiveness, that's when we see and understand grace in its rightful place.

In our life together the church will be revolutionised the more and more that we recognise that. Sadly church can be a hugely unforgiving place.

Many people will not come near a church because of their experience of the harsh and critical and graceless experiences that they've had.

But as we understand grace, I need to recognise increasingly and so do you that you and I will need to forgive each other.

There will be times, and again there is no justification, but there will be times because we are sinners and because we remain as yet being sanctified.

[30 : 24] There are times where here you will be hurt, you will be let down, you will be treated badly, you will be ignored, your gifts will not be used, someone will be insensitive and careless in what they say to you.

You'll feel you're invisible. No excuse for any of these things. But you know as a Christian probably the deepest hurts you've experienced have been from fellow Christians.

That will be when your grace is tested. That will be when you either act in a worldly or in a Christ centred way. Do we respond naturally or do we respond spiritually?

God will take these experiences to strip us back, to expose our own need and to enable us to grow in forgiveness and grace.

If we kind of throw up our hands and condemn everyone's failure or walk away and say, well I'm going to just start my own place, we will never learn the harsh lessons but beautiful lessons of forgiveness and grace.

[31 : 41] Forgiveness isn't a kind of ethereal vague soul concept, some kind of private dialogue and experience between ourselves and God while it is that.

It's much more than that. Grace outworked. Grace outworked, you know there's one area, one direction that we will never look with our forgiveness and that's heavenward.

Forgiveness is all about our horizontal relationships with one another and not only will we need to give it, we'll need to receive it and be humble enough to ask for it in our lives.

It's the one area that we don't need to go and ask God to be for or God doesn't need to ask forgiveness for as we need to forgive at a human level.

Now today is a great day for us as a congregation, we're very happy to have friends and visitors with us today. We're very blessed, eight new deacons and elders, four new deacons, eight altogether and we're very pleased that that's the case.

[33 : 03] It's a great challenge for us, we're a young congregation and it's a great challenge to have young leadership, it's lots of advantages, there's also lots of disadvantages.

But what I'm asking is that you as a congregation recognise that these are men called by God and appointed by God and that they will, I guarantee you, they'll make mistakes.

How can I guarantee that? Well you should know because I've been your minister for the last ten years and we make a lot of mistakes. Your old leaders and your young leaders need your forgiveness, they need your loyalty, they need your support.

And as young elders and deacons and as old elders and deacons, they say we need to practise this life of grace and forgiveness. It's the same side of one coin.

Be people that will encourage and build up and above all be people that will forgive. That is what we need to do. We need to be a forgiving and therefore a building and growing and graceful congregation in our life together.

[34 : 18] May we recognise that and live it, live it. We will not need grace and we will not need forgiveness if we don't live as a people together in our life together.

But also can I ask you in your life apart, apart from the Christian community, we are here to equip you for works of service, take forgiveness and grace into the world that you live in.

It's a foreign currency. Can I say that? God's grace and forgiveness is absolute foreign currency. But you live by grace by that theme.

Live in your workplace, your university and your studies, your school, your home and your friendships. Live by grace.

Hold a short account. Don't be bitter. Don't hold grudges against people. Let God judge. Be forgiving. And I'm telling you, it will turn your world upside down.

[35 : 23] It turns our world upside down. It makes the world speechless because it's foreign currency. They don't know and understand and receive that knowledge of forgiveness and grace that Christ alone can give.

So take Christ. How do we take Christ into the world? Yes, we share His message. But often we can only share His message because we have shown the radical nature of that message of grace and forgiveness in our relationships and in our life.

May that be what we know and experience and enjoy. Let's bow our heads in prayer. Father God, we ask that you would help us to live a life of amazing grace.

And we thank you that that is your gift and that you seek us to be open to receive and to live by your grace and through your power.

We pray that your message would touch our hearts today. We long for an awareness of our own need before you more so that we will understand and not despise and ignore and reject your grace and your forgiveness.

[36 : 47] Help us, Lord, we pray to see. Take these words and apply them to our hearts and conscience as we ask, for we ask it in His precious name. Amen.