

Russell Kelfer

Free at Last

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Series: Let God Be God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230 • (210) 226-0000 / 1-800-375-7778 • www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org

Free At Last

It was an incredibly beautiful day. The sun was shining. The sky was a brilliant blue. The clouds overhead seemed to form just enough of a soft, white covering to cushion the brilliance of the light that clothed the universe with its rays. But as always, just how beautiful any day is, is determined by the eye of the beholder. To one who had just been the victim of an unexpected tragedy, that day is bleak and clouded with fear. To one who has just experienced the birth of a child, or the fulfillment of a dream, the same day is a light-filled joy. How beautiful any day is may well be determined by how beautiful life is to the one who is making the judgment.

This day was no exception. As the big iron gates at the Southview Prison swung open on their hinges and two men walked, for the first time in ten years, into the sunlight of their freedom, their view of the world that awaited them was, to say the least, as varied as their individual mindsets.

Rob Edwards had done time for murder. He had pleaded self-defense, though the jury determined otherwise. For years he had harbored a bitter spirit. He was angry at society for the circumstance upon which he blamed his crime. His avowed goal was to some day “get out”, having “repaid his debt to society.” This was his day of freedom. He viewed it with an eye to revenge. He was going to “get what was his” from this unfair world. Now he was “free at last.” Or was he?

By his side was Billy Anderson. Sentenced to die in the electric chair, Billy had nothing to look forward to but his own execution. Condemned to die for the murder of the governor’s son, Billy never expected to see the outside world again. Broken and penitent, he viewed every day he lived as a gift from God. Now the governor himself, grieved though he was at the death of his son, had reexamined the facts of the case and issued Billy a total pardon. Not only would Billy *not* die for his crime, he too, this bright sunny day, was “free at last.” There was no bitterness

Free at Last

in *his* heart, only unworthiness. There was no vengeance on *his* mind, only a desire to transfer to others a measure of the grace he had received.

One man was filled with anger and self-righteousness. The other was characterized by humility and repentance. By the world's standards, both men were free at last. But if you could see inside their hearts, real freedom awaited only one of them.

Free At Last! That is the title of today's study. We have been, these past two lessons, looking at that amazing passage of Scripture commonly called "The Lord's Prayer." Our loving Lord, aware of our limitations when it comes to appropriating principles into our lives, did not simply *tell us to pray*, nor did He simply *teach us about prayer* (though He did do both). No, our Blessed Christ, seeing the depth of our need, determined rather to *teach us to pray*. And understanding how dense we, who claim to be disciples, can be, He simplified it beyond our wildest expectations. He looked us lovingly in the eye and simply said, "Pray like this."

First of all, He taught us to enter into the courts of God with awe and humility, praying, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." Then, He taught us to lay our expectations and our plans at His feet praying, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." He taught us to take one day at a time, and seeking the good of the Body of Christ as a whole rather than just our own selfish desires, taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." He did not insist that we legalistically use those words. He did insist that we understand and appropriate those principles.

Our Lord lovingly went on. At this point, there just may have been some gasps in the crowd as He uttered these words:

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
(Matthew 6:12 NAS)

This was the only part of this prayer pattern that Jesus stopped to elaborate on. He paused when He had completed the prayer and added these words:

For if you forgive men their trespasses (offenses), your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

But if you forgive not men their trespasses (offenses), neither will your Father forgive your trespasses offenses.

(Matthew 6:14,15 NKJV)

Free at Last

Now, beloved, you can explain that verse away any way you like. Or you can pretend it is not in the Bible and read around it. But if we are to be honest with ourselves and the Word of God, it is there, and it says what it says. So rather than ignore it or explain it away, we will, in this lesson, attempt to address it head on and see just why our Lord not only tied *His* forgiveness with *ours*, but took the time, in this abbreviated pattern, to explain *exactly what He meant*.

Forgive us our sins...

What *we are asking for* is forgiveness. What *we are asking God to forgive us for* is our sins, our debts against God and man. We are asking to be forgiven for our trespasses against a Holy God and His creation. What we are asking God to do, if we pray as Jesus prayed, is to forgive us of our sins in direct proportion to how we forgive others. That is a serious deal to make with God. But Jesus is insisting that, if we are to pray in harmony with the Father's will, we are to pray like this:

Dear Lord,

Please forgive me of those things that have come between me and Thee. But Lord, only forgive me in the measure that I have consciously been willing to forgive others.

Amen.

Jesus said, "Pray like that."

Now does this mean that God will not save you if you have not first forgiven all those whom you have offended? No. This model prayer is being given to believers to teach them how to pray. It is for those who can realistically pray, "Our Father." It is a model of the attitude the Christian is to have each time he or she asks the Father for forgiveness. Just as the partaking of the Lord's Supper is to be a time of soul-searching and personal assessment, so every time you ask forgiveness of God is to be time of personal inventory concerning your relationship with others. The church was intended to be a fellowship of men and women who keep short accounts, who never let bitterness and hostility and an unforgiving spirit develop in their midst. God's check and balance system was to be 1 John 1:9. There he told us, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Just as 1 John 1:9 was to be the power source to restore us

to fellowship, Matthew 6:14 and 15 was meant to be the warning light that flashes as we attempt to restore the power that says, “error code 14: this function cannot be completed.” We knowingly ignore Matthew 6, but we joyfully claim 1 John 1:9.

We cannot do that. You may say, “But God will still forgive us. He is just wanting us to have that mindset. It is a goal to strive toward.” Then how do you explain verse 15? It says, “If you forgive not men their offenses, neither will your Father forgive your offenses.”

Let’s begin our look at this tremendously important precept by identifying the key word. The key word is forgive. The Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament defines forgiveness this way:

“to send away, dismiss, set free. To express the discharge or acquittal of a defendant, whether the appellant is non-suited by verdict or otherwise, esp. to remit the punishment, where the guilty person is dealt with as if he were innocent.”

The key words here, I believe, are “set free”, “acquittal”, “remit punishment” and “guilty dealt with as innocent.” To forgive, then, is to remove the stigma of guilt from another, regardless of whether or not they are guilty, and to send it away beyond recognition, so that it cannot be recalled again.

Dictionary definitions include such phrases as “to pardon”, “to grant relief from payment of indebtedness”, and “to cease to feel resentment against an offender”. It is the exercise of a pardon, the canceling of a debt, and the removal of resentment (the issue, the act and the emotion).

That is what forgiveness is. We can all relate to it where God’s forgiveness is concerned. We were and are guilty as charged. But God, in His love, has pardoned us, cancelled the debt against us by paying it Himself, and has flung even the charges against us as far from Him as the east is from the west never to be remembered again. That is the forgiveness of God. We love it. We thrive on it. We claim it constantly. It is the emblem of freedom. We have been forgiven.

But forgiveness apparently in Scripture has a three-fold purpose. It is to free man from bondage to his sins; it is to motivate man to a life of love; and it is to generate in man a life characterized by the same kind of mercy he has been shown.

Let's look into the Scriptures to verify those three purposes:

1- Forgiveness is to free man from bondage to his sins. 1 John 1:9 again speaks of this: if we confess, God forgives... and as He forgives, He cleanses us of all unrighteousness. He releases us from bondage to those things which have separated us from Him. In other words, when God says, "I forgive," the wall of sin between us is removed; and we are empowered once again by being restored once again to that kind of fellowship Adam had with God before the fall.

2- Forgiveness is God's method of softening hearts and generating love by generating a grateful spirit. Jesus used an illustration to explain that principle to the Pharisees. It is found in Luke 7:36-47. Paraphrased from the Living Bible, it says:

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to come to his home for lunch and Jesus accepted the invitation. As they sat down to eat,

a woman of the streets—a prostitute—heard he was there and brought an exquisite flask filled with expensive perfume.

Going in, she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping, with her tears falling down upon his feet; and she wiped them off with her hair and kissed them and poured the perfume on them.

When Jesus' host, a Pharisee, saw what was happening and who the woman was, he said to himself, "This proves that Jesus is no prophet, for if God had really sent him he would know what kind of woman this one is!"

Then Jesus spoke up and answered his thoughts. "Simon," He said to the Pharisee, "I have something to say to you." "All right, Teacher," Simon replied, "go ahead."

Then Jesus told him this story, "A man loaned money to two people— \$5,000 to one and \$500 to the other.

But neither of them could pay him back, so he kindly forgave them both, letting them keep the money! Which do you suppose loved him the most after that?"

"I suppose the one who had owed him the most," Simon answered. "Correct," Jesus agreed.

Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Look! See this woman kneeling here! When I entered your home, you didn't bother to offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped

Free at Last

them with her hair!

You refused me the customary kiss of greeting, but she has kissed my feet again and again from the time I first came in.

“You neglected the usual courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has covered my feet with rare perfume.

“Therefore, her sins — and they are many—are forgiven, for she loves me much; but one who is forgiven little, shows little love.”
(Luke 7:36-47)

“One who is forgiven little...shows little love.” Jesus clearly explains the principle that has been multiplied and magnified in human experience throughout the ages in the church and in the home. The process of forgiveness frees a person to love. The degree of that forgiveness may well determine the degree to which they can love. Therefore, one of the greatest tools to generating love in the home is the spade of forgiveness that uproots the fibers of bitterness and pours mercy upon them until they disappear. The one forgiven is freed to love. The one doing the forgiving is freed to love as well. Conversely, then, if the greatest attribute we can express is love, our greatest enemy is an unforgiving spirit.

3- The act of being forgiven is supposed to generate in a man or woman the God-released attribute of forgiveness itself, so that the one forgiven now is free to forgive...and does so. So clear is this principle in Scripture that God actually limits our future forgiveness to our willingness to forgive.

That is what Matthew 6 has just clearly explained. That is why in Ephesians Paul makes this fervent plea to the believers in Ephesus:

Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:

And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you.

(Ephesians 4:31,32)

It is Matthew 18:21-35, however, that illuminates the precept to its richest color. There, Peter asked the Lord how many times he was to forgive a brother who had sinned against him. “As many as seven times seven?” Peter asked. “No,” Jesus replied, “seventy times seven.” Then, Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to a king who decided it was time to collect his delinquent accounts. In the process, in comes one who owes the king ten million dollars. The man falls down begging for mercy and promises to

Free at Last

pay soon. The king's heart is moved and he not only grants him an extension, he forgives him, canceling the debt entirely. The man is pardoned, freed from the consequences of his crime. The debt is cleared. The offense is forgotten.

But, the forgiven man, instead of being filled with such freedom and gratitude that he would now go and likewise forgive those who owed him, instead goes to one who owed him \$2,000 (a paltry sum by comparison) and grabbing him by the throat, demands payment. This man too, begs for mercy, but the one who had received such forgiveness refuses to forgive. The king thus calls him into the palace and says these words from the Living Bible paraphrase:

“...You evil-hearted wretch! Here I forgave you all that tremendous debt, just because you asked me to—

shouldn't you have mercy on others, just as I had mercy on you?’

Then the angry king sent the man to the torture chamber until he had paid every last penny due.

“So shall my heavenly Father do to you if you refuse to truly forgive your brothers.” (Matthew 18:32-35 TLB)

That's what forgiveness was intended to do. It was intended to generate in the one forgiven a like-minded spirit. Therefore, when we who have been forgiven so much fail to forgive, God may close the valve of future forgiveness until we come to grips with our bitterness.

Without God's continual cleansing and forgiveness, you and I cannot have the power to live victorious lives. We become empty shells, pretending to be what we cannot be. And without dealing specifically and continually with any grievances or offenses that we hold against others, we cannot be forgiven ourselves. Therefore, the act of taking inventory and keeping our lives free from unresolved hostility is not a casual option for us to consider when we attend a seminar once a year or when we hear a message preached on the subject. It may well be the most important thing we as Christians have to do on a day-to-day basis.

Let me ask you a question. When you bow to ask God to release into your life that supernatural, grace-empowered flow of divine freedom called “forgiveness”, whose name comes to mind? When your mind is in “neutral”, who do you crucify on the stage of your imagination in what you construe to be a make-believe

Free at Last

drama seen only by you? It isn't make-believe to God, and it isn't seen only by you.

Are you still angry at your parents for what you consider to be a partial or condemning spirit? You will become just like them unless you forgive them. And your loving, gracious God will be bound by the integrity of His own word not to forgive you until you learn to forgive them.

Are you still bitter towards your mate for something he or she did ten years ago? Two years ago? Last week? Whenever they try to resolve present conflicts, do you resurrect old hurts that should have long since been put to rest? And do you wonder why there is no lasting peace in your heart? Do you shout at God for peace, but there is no peace? Perhaps He cannot grant you what you're seeking because you will not forgive.

God has not bound you. You have bound yourself in the straitjacket of an unforgiving spirit. God's desire is to set you free. Give those offenses to Him once and for all and leave them. He has loved you much and forgiven you of much. Now, unless you forgive, you are choosing to live your life in the self-imposed misery of hostility. Let God set you free at last.

Maybe you are still harboring a grudge toward an ex-mate or someone in your past who, according to you, has ruined your life. Beloved, no one can ruin your life. As with Joseph, even if they meant it for evil, God wants to use it for good to save others and to change you. But *you* can ruin your life by refusing to forgive, thus closing the door on the grace that God has designated for you that is literally the fuel to transform you into His likeness. God wants you to be free at last. You must forgive and keep on forgiving to experience that freedom.

Is there a pastor or someone in the church somewhere who offended you in the past? Are you reliving that incident again and again to justify the apostasy in your own life? Guess who you're hurting? You are wielding a deadly weapon, but it is aimed at you. Lay it down, Beloved! Forgive. Forget. Turn that offense into love and let God set you free at last!

If there is yet an unpaid bill in the file drawer of your heart marked "still not settled", and it bears the name of one who wronged you or perhaps one who wronged your children or wronged others you love, Beloved, God paid for that. He gave all He had to free you from that prison and to cancel that debt.

Free at Last

That bill can't be paid twice. Unless you willingly correct the ledgers of your heart and reconcile your books to God's, you will not be able to walk into the Grace National Bank and withdraw forgiveness. Your account will be overdrawn.

Are you still not convinced that your ability to pray with power is coupled to your willingness to forgive? Read Mark 11:22-26. In the Amplified Bible it reads like this:

And Jesus replying said to them, Have faith in God [constantly].

Truly, I tell you, whoever says to this mountain, Be lifted up and thrown into the sea! and does not doubt at all in his heart, but believes that what he says will take place, it will be done for him.

For this reason I am telling you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe—trust—and be confident—that it is granted to you, and you will [get it].

And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against any one, forgive him and let it drop—leave it, let it go—in order that your Father Who is in heaven may also forgive you your [own] failings and shortcomings and let them drop.

But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your failings and shortcomings.

(Mark 11:22-26 The Amplified Bible)

Jesus said, "When you pray, pray like this..." And the "like this" went like this:

And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us.

Now I realize there are many unanswered questions and many theological possibilities we have not covered. That is not the issue. The issue is, that throughout the New Testament, Jesus again and again reiterated this principle. We do not need to totally understand it to obey it, but we do need to obey it to be set free.

Remember those two men in the opening illustration? Both stood on the threshold of freedom. Both possessed the possibility of beginning life again with their past imprisonment totally behind them. One of them went out determined to count his freedom as something he had earned and revenge as something he had the right to achieve. The other went out clothed in humility that

Free at Last

someone would pardon him, determined to demonstrate to the world what it meant to be forgiven.

You have been loosed from the prison house of sin by a gracious God. You have been forgiven. You are free at last! You can make a mockery of that forgiveness by refusing to forgive others and thus willingly enter into bondage. Or, you can walk into the sunlight of a life that because of the great forgiveness you have received you can pour that forgiveness liberally into the lives of all who might offend you.

The choice is yours. The choice is mine. If we learn to pray as Jesus prayed and learn to forgive as He forgave, one thing is for certain...

We will be free at last!

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