

## The Gifts of Relationships: Forgiveness

Luke 6:27-38 (NRSVUE)

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-gifts-of-relationships-forgiveness/>

### I.

Have you ever been deeply wronged? Betrayed by someone you trusted? Hurt in a way that felt impossible to forgive? If so, Jesus' words in Luke 6 may feel less like an invitation and more like an impossible demand.

Jesus' words in Luke 6 call us to an extraordinary way of living: *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."*

It's beautiful in theory but sometimes unbearable in practice. Forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts we can give, yet also one of the hardest to offer—especially when we have been deeply wounded.

To grasp the radical nature of forgiveness, let's travel to Rwanda, a nation in east central Africa that suffered unimaginable violence and yet chose the path of reconciliation.

### II.

31 years ago, in 1994, Rwanda descended into one of the darkest moments in human history. Over 100 days, an estimated 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed as the world stood by. The level of violence and hatred was unimaginable and unspeakable. Neighbors turned on neighbors. Friends betrayed friends. Even family members murdered their own.

How could such brutality happen? The genocide was ignited when a plane carrying the Rwandan President was shot down on April 6, but the country had been soaking in gasoline for decades. Colonial rule had sown division between ethnic groups, and years of propaganda had dehumanized the Tutsi. Tutsis were presented as inferior to Hutu and as dangerous outsiders to the country of Rwanda, even though this was a lie. This process of dehumanization and presenting the Tutsi as a dangerous "other" set the stage for genocide.

After gaining their independence from Belgium in 1964, Hutus consolidated power, enforcing and legalizing discrimination against Tutsis. In the months and weeks before the genocide began, Hutu radicals started compiling lists of potential Tutsi targets and moderate Hutus. The Hutu-dominated government began stockpiling weapons, including machetes and other rudimentary weapons that would be the tools that carried out the genocide. In mid-1993, Hutu radicals launched their own radio channel, which would be used to incite hatred towards Tutsi using propaganda and racist ideology.

The assassination of the President was the spark that set everything off. The Tutsi were blamed for downing the plane and killing the president. Enraged, gangs of Hutu extremists began killing Tutsi, backed by the army and police. As one reporter on the ground said, “Its like a madness took over.” Over the next 100 days, extremist Hutus slaughtered nearly one million Tutsi, moderate Hutu who defended the Tutsi, and other ethnic Rwandans. As many as 250,000 women – both Tutsi and Hutu – endured horrific sexual violence.

The genocide against the Tutsi was over in roughly 100 days. However, the brutal violence committed against this minority ethnic and social group was preceded by decades of hatred incited against them. It is a painful reminder about the evils of singling out certain groups for persecution, portraying them as less worthy of human rights than others.

When the killing stopped, Rwanda was left in ruins, and survivors faced an impossible question: How do you live alongside those who have taken everything from you?

If ever there was a situation where forgiveness seemed impossible, it was Rwanda after 1994. And yet, against all odds, forgiveness became the foundation of healing.

### III.

The sheer number of perpetrators overwhelmed traditional courts. So, Rwanda turned to a community-based justice system called Gacaca (GA-CHA-CHA), meaning “justice on the grass.”

In these grassroots tribunals, perpetrators and survivors met face-to-face. Survivors had the opportunity to face the wrongdoers, hear the truth about their loved ones, and decide whether to extend mercy. Offenders who confessed and sought reconciliation were often granted reduced sentences or required to serve the community to help rebuild both structures and relationships.

More powerful than the legal outcomes were the stories of radical forgiveness. Survivors chose to forgive—not because the pain had disappeared, but because they refused to be imprisoned by it.

### IV.

One of the most powerful testimonies of forgiveness comes from Immaculée Ilibagiza, who tells her story in her book, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. During the genocide, Immaculee, a Tutsi, hid in a tiny bathroom with seven other women for 91 days, listening as Hutu militias hunted and slaughtered her people—including her family.

During her time in hiding, she turned to prayer, clinging to her faith in God despite the horror surrounding her. She repeatedly prayed the Lord’s Prayer, struggling with the line about forgiveness - “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” How could she forgive the men who violently murdered her parents and two of her three brothers? Eventually, she experienced a transformation as she prayed. She realized that hatred would destroy her further while forgiveness would free her. She forgave while still crammed in the bathroom while evil was on the hunt on the other side of the door. She forgave the man before he ever asked for forgiveness.

After the genocide, she met one of the men who had murdered her family. Looking into his eyes, she did something extraordinary, something he did not expect: she forgave him in person. She later wrote: "Forgiveness is the only way to heal. It is the path to freedom."

She later moved to the U.S., worked for the United Nations, and became a global speaker on faith, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

In her talks and interviews, she often discusses how forgiveness is not about excusing evil but refusing to let hatred control one's life. She teaches that Jesus calls us to mercy, not merely because mercy tends toward peace within and around us, but rather, Jesus calls us to be merciful because that is what God is like! This echoes Jesus' call to radical mercy in Luke 6—to give without expecting in return, to love beyond reason, and to **reflect the character of God** through acts of grace. Be merciful as God is merciful.

There are thousands of stories like Immaculee's. Jesus' words to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and forgive as you hope to be forgiven are alive and well in Rwanda.

Can they be alive and well here? In us?

#### V.

Jesus' words in Luke 6 are not just difficult; they feel impossible. When we are wronged, our instinct is to seek justice, to hold on to resentment, or even to retaliate. At the heart of this teaching is one of Jesus' most well-known sayings: the Golden Rule. "Do to others as you would have them do to you." (v. 31) The Golden Rule is often misunderstood as an instruction to love as someone loves you, give as someone gives to you, and forgive as someone forgives you. We live in a world that thrives on reciprocity and retribution. "I'll do good to you if you do good to me. And if you don't, I'm justified by your choices, in not doing good to you." But this is not what Jesus is saying. Jesus calls us to something radically different. Jesus says we do to others as we want them to do, hope them to do, and *desire* them to do, according to the Greek translation – we do to them even if they don't to us.

In Luke 6:35, Jesus emphasizes the importance of "Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend, **expecting nothing in return**. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." This phrase is key. We live in a world obsessed with return on investment. We want fairness, justice, and retaliation. But Jesus calls us to a different economy: the economy of grace.

In this economy, love isn't a trade; it's a gift. Forgiveness isn't earned; it's given. Mercy isn't conditional; it's abundant. Jesus even plays with language here. When he asks, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" the word for "credit" is *charis*, the Greek word for grace. He repeats it three times: What grace is there in loving when someone loves you, doing good when someone does good to you, lending when you know someone is good for it? True grace doesn't rest on fairness—it flows freely.

Jesus challenges his followers with a stunning command: "Love your enemies. Forgive as you've been forgiven."

Forgiveness is not just about genocide or war. It's about the friend who betrayed you, the family member who wounded you, the church that disappointed you. How do we extend radical mercy in our own lives? Jesus invites us to a different way. He calls us to release those who have hurt us—not because they deserve it, but because we deserve freedom and because this is how God loves. And so, we must ask ourselves:

- Who needs to hear the words, *"I forgive you"*?
- What resentment are we carrying that Jesus is asking us to release?
- How can our church be a place where forgiveness is a way of life?

## VI.

Forgiveness is not just personal—it is communal.

After the genocide, Rwanda had every reason to pursue vengeance. Instead, they chose reconciliation. Because of that choice, Rwanda has taken active steps to prevent this from happening again. Lessons about the genocide are part of the curriculum in schools. Ask a Rwandan today, and they will tell you: "We are not Hutu or Tutsi. We are Rwandan." Rwanda is far from perfect, like every nation. There are still struggles and injustices, but their example of forgiveness, mercy, and restoration can teach us.

This kind of forgiveness is not just for Rwanda—it is for us, too. Churches can choose unity over division. Families can choose reconciliation or forgiveness over grudges. Nations can choose to heal over hate. Revenge is contrary to the Gospel. Any action we take based on revenge violates the clear teaching of Jesus Christ himself.

Immaculée Ilibagiza stood before her family's killer and said, "I forgive you." Thousands of Rwandans faced their enemies and chose mercy over hatred. Jesus told His followers, "Love your enemies."

And now, he turns to us and asks: Will you do the same?

When we choose forgiveness, we set ourselves free. And when we forgive, we move the world closer to God's dream.

This week, I challenge us to take one step toward forgiveness—whether it's praying for someone who hurt you, writing a letter you may never send, or simply surrendering your bitterness to God. You don't have to feel forgiving to offer forgiveness. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. Offer the prayer, extend the hand, and God will provide the grace.

If Jesus calls us to love our enemies, do good to those who harm us, and forgive as we have been forgiven, expecting nothing in return, then this is not just a suggestion. It is our calling. It is our work. It is our freedom. It is our response to God's mercy. Forgiveness of enemies will bring glory of God and good of the world.

When we choose to forgive, we step into the very heart of God. When we give the gift of forgiveness, we receive the greatest gift of all—freedom in Christ.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.