

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our Redeemer. Amen. So I got my hair cut last week. Uh, and for the last six months or so, something new and sobering, uh, has happened when I've got my hair cut. Uh, I take out my wallet to pay, and the stylist asks me two questions. "Are you military?" Uh, actually, that one's not new. I've been asked it ever since I moved to Montgomery. It's the other question that has only recently been posed and that causes me distress. "Do you want the 65 and older discount?" Now, I have a charming way of answering this question. It's no But this time I responded with grace because I'm starting to appreciate the good things about aging. Uh, for one, those haircuts don't take as long as they used to, but they still cost the same. For another, I can blame my awful memory on getting old, and people believe me. For yet another, I'm enjoying doing things slowly, knowing that the process is more enjoyable when you stop to look at the view and smell the roses. My biggest joys in getting old are that, uh, things that used to make me angry don't so much. People who used to aggravate me seem more tolerable, and arguments I had to win now seem pretty unimportant. I'm looking forward to the day, I pray it comes, when I find forgiving people easier. Because I don't want to be that fool in Jesus' story, that pitiful, hopeless, tragic fool The shocking parable of the unforgiving servant. There's this servant of a wealthy man who owes his boss 10,000 talents. Now, we need to understand something about Roman money here if we're going to get the full gut punch that this parable is. A day's work in Jesus' society was worth one denarius. Um, and there were 6,000 denarii in one talent. So to earn a talent, a man had to work 6,000 days. That's 20 years. So one talent, 20 years wages. Let's translate that into Alabama money. That's \$7.25 minimum wage, uh, which for a year is a bit less than \$15,000. So 20 years wages would be around 300,000 in our money. So one talent in Jesus' time, the equivalent of \$300,000 to us. Now, the servant owes the master 10,000 talents. 10,000 times 300,000, which is \$3 billion. You thought your credit card

balance was high Jesus creates this absurd situation. It's impossible for this humble worker to begin to repay even the slightest fraction of this debt, and in utter desperation, he begs his master to have mercy on him, and the master cancels the debt. Three billion How grateful must this servant be to be forgiven that amount of debt? Well, as it happens, not much. As he leaves, he sees a fellow servant who owes him 100 denari, 100 days' wages, \$5,800. And his colleague falls on his knees and begs for mercy. Now, amazingly, even though he had just been let off a debt of three billion, the first servant is untouched by the cry for mercy of his coworker who owes him a few thousand, and he has him into thr- thrown into the debtor's prison. I did warn you this was shocking. And the meaning of this crazy story is actually quite straightforward. God has forgiven us a massive debt, a debt that is impossible to repay. We don't have the means to make a slight dent in it. And that debt is the greed, the hate, the self-absorption, all the sins great and small that hurt ourselves, harm other people, and damage our friendship with God. So considering we have been excused this impossibly large debt, should not we then forgive the sins that other people have committed against us, which by comparison are pretty tiny? This is a parable of healing. Like disinfectant on an open wound, this stings to heal. It pains us to cure us. That's the thing about forgiveness. It's a remedy for the soul, but not the soul we think. I resist the command to forgive because I assume that it will make the person who wronged me feel better, and I will be facilitating their healing. But my instincts are wrong. It's not the person who hurt me who receives healing when I forgive, it's me. When you forgive, you are doing yourself a favor. You are pampering your soul, taking it to the spa for the day for a massage, a facial, and a pedi. Your soul will thank you because it will sleep better, focus more, and be free from the obsession your enemy has become.

Dr. Everett Worthington of Virginia Commonwealth University has found that people who won't forgive the wrongs committed against them tend to have more stress-related disorders, lower immune systems, and worse

rates of cardiovascular disease than the population as a whole Remember Jesus' statement that it is more blessed to give than to receive? Nowhere is that more beautifully experienced than in forgiveness Voices travel at seven hundred and sixty-seven miles an hour, which means you can start to heal yourself now. It begins with three words: I forgive you, or her, or him. It's vital to begin with a decision, a level-headed, reasoned, clinical decision to utter those words and start your journey to health. Because forgiveness is not a sensation. If I wait for a warm, fuzzy feeling for my wrongdoer to wash over me before I forgive, I will be waiting until I die. So come on, take the medicine if you dare. Who knows? You may find your feelings for that person may change over time, but the key to that is uttering those three words first YouGov has researched how eager people are to sit around the Thanksgiving table with extended family in these days of extreme political divisiveness, and their findings are nearly as shocking as Jesus' parable. 65% of Americans actively dread political discussions at Thanksgiving, and 23% consider skipping their holiday plans entirely to avoid those conversations. We're still many weeks from Thanksgiving, but remember this piece of advice from Anne Lamott this holiday season Families. Hard, hard, hard. No matter how cherished and astonishing they may also be. At family gatherings where you suddenly feel homicidal or suicidal, remember that in half of all cases, it's a miracle that this annoying person even lived. Earth is forgiveness school. You might as well start at the dinner table. That way, you can do this work in comfortable pants. Like all medications, forgiveness can be misunderstood and misapplied. But read the instructions on the label. Forgiveness is not excusing your wrongdoer's actions, or letting them off, or denying the painful consequences for you, or pretending it was nothing. Forgiveness is fully looking the wrong in the face and naming it for what it is. No excuses, no minimizing, no denial. You can't forgive something unless you actually recognize that they are guilty of something that needs forgiveness. That's the easy part of taking the medicine. Now, that's just unscrewing the lid. The difficult part,

the nauseating part, the hold your nose and swallow hard, then immediately eat something delicious to take the taste away part, is choosing not to let that pain influence how you treat your wrongdoer. Choosing not to hold it against them. Deciding not to call in the debt that they owe you. To forgive, I must be willing to let go of my need to be God's instrument of justice in that person's life. Not denying my pain, but choosing not to hold onto their part in causing it. Take that medicine if you dare I said forgiveness is a decision, but it's followed by a process. Like ringing a bell in a church tower, you can let go of the rope, but you might hear a few more dongs. The energy and the momentum of the pain can be so overwhelming that those dongs can persist for quite some time before gradually dying away Stephanie Dowrick goes as far as to say that forgiveness may be the supreme virtue, the highest declaration of love, because it declares, quote, "I will attempt to go on loving the life in you or the divine in you or the soul in you, even when I totally abhor what you have done or what you stand for. What's more, I will attempt to see you as my equal and your life as having equal value to my own, even when I despise what you do and everything you stand for." Tomorrow, God will give you a basket of ingredients, and he'll give you appliances and kitchenware, and he'll give you the freedom and choice to create whatever you wish. You can take the ingredients and the appliances, and you can cook something nutritious that will sustain life, that will serve high ideals, that will point people towards goodness and light and God. You can take those raw ingredients and transform them into something of overwhelming beauty, some hearty meal that is delicious on the tongue and invigorating to the body, a casserole of glory and grace. You don't have to. You have other options. We can do other things with those ingredients, but they won't make us smile. They won't allow us to climb into bed tomorrow night and contentedly fall asleep knowing that we changed the world today. These ingredients that we cook with are the insults, the slights, the yells of impatience, the roars of anger, the wounds of ignorance and prejudice, the sting of hostile words

and dismissive looks, the sneer of envy and resentment. These are the veggies that we cook with. They are thrown at us. They hit us and hurt us. But we bend down, pick them up, and by the power of God, we transform them into opportunities to bless and encourage and serve and love and forgive, and we create monuments to grace. We use evil as an opportunity to do good. I wish I could avoid this. I wish I could reassure you that we don't need Jesus' parable, that you probably won't be hurt by someone this week. But I'd be kidding myself and you. Here's the truth: this week, someone will hurt you. Maybe they'll do it by accident, a moment's carelessness, a second of thoughtlessness. Uh, maybe they just don't realize what they've done, and they certainly didn't intend it. But maybe someone will hurt you on purpose. They will mean to cause you pain or embarrassment or insult. How will you respond? Will it be with the courage, the humility, and the gratitude that honor God? Will you forgive because you live with the awareness of how much God has forgiven you? May God give us the strength and resolve to obey His words. Amen. Amen.