

You are in a series that addresses the number one desire among believers in America. If you asked followers of Christ what they want most, it would be spiritual growth. This is our sixth message in a series dedicated to spiritual growth. Let's review — Admit your need; Believe in Christ; Commit your way to him; Dig deeper; Eagerly seek God for transformation; Forgive others.

We are talking about relationships today. You know how incredibly important and significantly complicated relating to others can be. It is impossible to relate to others without getting hurt. It just happens that way. The problem is when our hurts impede our growth. That is our subject today. I invite you to turn to **Matthew 18:21-35**.

“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”  
Matthew 6:14 & 15

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”  
Ephesians 4:31 & 32

\* **God's forgiveness** — “As he (the king) began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.” (vs. 24) The king represents the Lord. The debt in the parable is the most attention-getting part of the story. It is an insurmountable number. According to the number, it would take 193,000 years to earn this much money. The foundation of the parable is the ernormity of God's forgiveness. The parable reveals the character of God. The word that is used is compassion. Your vertical experience of forgiveness will directly affect how you experience forgiveness horizontally.

\* **Ask For forgiveness** — “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’” (vv. 26 & 29) These two verses are essentially the same. They represent making amends. Each time the person is willing to make things right. They may not be able to, but they are willing. God's forgiveness allows you to humble yourself before those you have hurt. It gives you the safety net of God's forgiveness so that you might be honest about your behaviors and ask people to forgive you for the hurts you have caused.

\* **Withhold forgiveness** — “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.” (verse 30) “I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” (2 Corinthians 2:10b & 11) The devil wants to encourage unforgiveness. It is how he can get a grip on our lives. This grieves God because it is as if we don't understand his grace and we are giving the devil a foothold. “See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” (Hebrews 12:15) This is the result of unforgiveness. Hebrews refers to it as a root. I may be something underground but it will eventually show itself. The root determines what kind of fruit the tree will produce.

\* **Offer forgiveness** — “Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (Colossians 3:13) This teaches us to have forgiveness like that of the Lord. God's forgiveness is one that is offered even before we repent. Jesus Christ forgave you and me before we repented. It did not become active until we received it. But God was not up in heaven holding a grudge until we got around to repenting. He is not up there bitter until we ask for forgiveness. He has forgiveness in his heart before we appropriate it. This is the kind of forgiveness that God has and it is the kind of forgiveness that he wants us to possess. Having a heart of forgiveness is the fruit of living in the power of Christ. Spiritual growth will be impeded without forgiving others, but it will be propelled as we forgive like Jesus forgave us.

**Prayer** — “Oh God, put in me the heart of forgiveness so that I may commune with You in the fullness of fellowship and joy, and not experience the discipline that comes when You don't forgive me because I won't forgive a brother or sister in Christ. May I remember that for everyone who sins against me I have many more times sinned against You. Yet You have always forgiven me. At no time has any of my sin caused me to forfeit my eternal life; therefore, no one else's sin should cause me to forfeit my love and my mercy toward them.”

## **Reflective Questions:**

1. Why are relationships so important? Why are they so complicated? How do they get especially complicated?
2. How important is forgiveness to your spiritual life? How much have you been forgiven?
3. Why do you think making amends is such an important aspect of spiritual growth? How have you experienced the challenge of making amends? What have you learned?
4. What is produced through unforgiveness? How does that damage your soul? Is there any reason that you would be justified in withholding forgiveness? Why or why not?
5. How might you forgive in a new way? Who will you need to forgive?

### Reading Schedule for March 15-21, 2010

Most of this week we will read about Ruth. Ruth is someone significant to me because her words of pledge to her mother-in-law are words that Wendy and I used in our wedding. "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." (1:16) Ruth's story is a marvelous example of God's grace in the midst of very difficult circumstances. Ruth's courage and perseverance are a great example to us. I hope her story inspires you as it does me. We have been reading for almost three months, and we are in page 381 in my Bible. Isn't it meaningful to progress through the Bible, learning more about God's truth!? I want to encourage you to continue to ask God what he wants to say to you through his Word. As you apply his Word to your life, you will be stronger and on the pathway that God has for you.

March 15: Ruth 1:1-22 – "Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!" (vv. 12 & 13) Naomi was bitter towards God. God had taken away her husband, and she was also sad that God had taken away her sons. Five times in the verses in this chapter Naomi holds God accountable for her bitterness. There are many people like this today. Not only are they bitter, they enjoy being bitter. They somehow like it and they feed on it. They wouldn't know what to do if they got rid of it. Why is bitterness destructive? What did we learn about bitterness this past Sunday through the sermon message?

March 16: Ruth 2:1-23 – "Boaz replied, 'I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.'" (vv. 11 & 12) Boaz will affirm Ruth's life and her admirable qualities. She gained a good reputation through what she did for her mother-in-law. She was the same person no matter where she was – faithful, hardworking and brave. What do you like about Ruth? What qualities does she have that you want in your life?

March 17: Ruth 3:1-18 – "Then Naomi said, 'Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.'" (verse 18) Not only do we learn that Ruth has a marvelous character, but so does this man Boaz. Boaz would follow through with his promise. He obviously had a reputation of keeping his word and would not rest until his task was completed. Reliable people are rare, but he was one of them. Do people regard you as reliable? Why is follow through so important to your Christian witness?

March 18: Ruth 4:1-22 – "The women said to Naomi: 'Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.'" (vv. 14 & 15) This is the culmination of the story. From the beginning of the Book of Ruth until the end her kindness towards others remained unchanged. Ruth was most fortunate as God took care of her, even through the most difficult of situations. But Ruth is not only a marvelous woman, she is also a part of the legacy of Jesus Christ. David would be born as one of her descendants and the Messiah would follow. Her rewards would far outweigh any sacrifice that she had ever made. What does Ruth teach you? How does her example help you to persevere?

March 19: 1 Samuel 1:1-28 – We are enjoying reading about godly women in the Bible. We will be introduced to Hannah in this chapter. Hannah trusted God for a son and committed him to the Lord if he would bless her with a child. "'I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD.' And he worshiped the LORD there." (vv. 27 & 28) Hannah gave up what she wanted most, her son, and presented him to the priest, Eli. She has been an example of a godly parent who knows that a child born is a gift from God. Hannah dedicated her son to a lifetime of service to the Lord. Have you dedicated your children to the Lord in your heart? How does Hannah's example motivate you?

March 20: 1 Samuel 3:1-21 – In this chapter we see how God speaks to Samuel. It is inspiring to know that God seeks us out as we are called to seek him out. "The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD." (vv. 19 & 20) An affirmation of Hannah's son, who would be known as a prophet of the Lord. Everyone in Israel knew that Samuel was called by God to be a spokesman for God's truth. How can we help our children be everything that God intended them to be? Who might God be calling your sons or daughters to serve him? Are you willing to release them? Do you want to fan the fullest expression of service and faith in their lives?

March 21: 1 Samuel 8:1-5 – This short paragraph is a very succinct and upsetting paragraph at the same time. "They said to him, 'You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.'" (verse 5) The disappointment of Samuel's sons not following in his footsteps cannot be underestimated. I'm sure Samuel would have given it all up just to have his sons walk in the ways of the Lord. So Israel wanted a king to be like the other nations. I get the sense throughout the following chapters that this was not God's primary desire. What might these five verses say to you in your life? Why would the approach of the world to appoint a king not be God's best plan? How do you think God wanted his people to respond?

**Prayer: Please pray for the Easter season. We are a little over two weeks from Easter. Pray for the Food Bank this Saturday, that we might bless many families and enjoy partnering with Cristo Vive for this ministry. Pray for the Seattle Youth Mission, which will be leaving on this coming Saturday also.**