

FORGIVENESS

A Series of Sermons

from

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Matthew 9:2-8; Luke 5:17-26;
Mark 2:1-12; Psalms 130; 51:4

THE AUTHORITY TO FORGIVE

For this series of four sermons, I have been drawn to the theme of FORGIVENESS. It is said that we cannot truly know Easter if we do not know the Cross. Forgiveness is a subcategory of the Cross. In Christendom, forgiveness ultimately depends upon the Cross.

Next week, I want to talk about the requirement to forgive. It is the most stringent, stern, and unyielding demand made upon us within the New Covenant – the New Testament of grace and love. Christians cannot escape the insistent command to receive forgiveness, and then to become forgiving.

Logically, then, we might begin by reviewing this requirement and admitting that as followers of Christ, we are given no choice. But that seems so heavy and so absolute – at least it often feels that way to me. The law of forgiveness is completely unrelenting, and Jesus leaves us no loopholes and no alternatives. *“Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”* Aaagh! Why is there always a catch?!

So I thought to soften the blow, if possible, by moving to a later subject: “The Authority To Forgive.” It is not quite so scary to think about forgiveness – and the mandate to forgive – when I remember where forgiveness comes from and what makes it possible. **In and of myself, I do not have the power to forgive.** Neither do you. While annoying at first, that realization is what saves the whole situation. If we can get that one thing clear again, all the rest of our thinking on the subject, and all our efforts to forgive, will make sense and become possible. **In and of myself, I do not have the power to forgive.** It will not be my purpose today to make you say that statement; most humans do not react well to being made to do anything. Which is precisely why God had to reveal the WAY through Jesus Christ in the first place. But it will be my purpose to help you to want to know and be able to say: **In and of myself, I do not have the power to forgive.**

Let’s get to the Scripture passage. Mark gives us this marvelous vignette from a day in the life of Jesus. It is early in His ministry, and Jesus is still teaching out of His home in Capernaum. Some of us have had fun with this passage before: musing about teaching and preaching and healing all day, and then having to fix your roof at night. And as far

as we know, Jesus never teaches out of His home again. The incident is marvelous when we think about the friendship of those who carry the paralytic and then tear the hole in the roof to get him to Jesus. Notions of faith and healing and having faith for others all dazzle us. The implied connection between sin and the man's physical condition disturb, appall, and intrigue us. But the apex of the drama is the distress of the scribes. I suspect that Jesus deliberately sets them up. "My son," He says, "your sins are forgiven." Strange! Sort of like hitting a man when he's down, don't you think? Who said anything about sin?! The man is paralyzed. OOPS, nearly forgot: Sin is not a bad deed. It is a condition of being alienated, lonely, isolated from God. Of course, this condition often *leads* to bad deeds; we always make our worst mistakes when we are frightened, threatened, feel all alone. The scribes jump to this level.

"Now there were some scribes sitting there, thinking to themselves, 'How can the fellow talk like that? It is blasphemy! Who but God can forgive sins?'" (In Matthew's version of the same incident (9:3), it reads: *"This man is blaspheming!"*)

Scribes are not idiots. They are often the most technically learned men in the picture. Certainly they are highly knowledgeable in the Law of Moses. Often they are called in to settle disputes or give advice on the most difficult points of the Law. Remember, there is no separation of church and state in the Israel of Jesus' day. The Law is Torah – the Law of Moses – the first five books of the Bible. It is not just religious law, it is state law. The scribes keep records and accounts, write letters, and of course make copies of the sacred writings so that more people may use and study them. Scribes are not the sort of people who "shoot from the hip," making careless or emotional statements. They are careful, cautious, conservative, conscientious, and learned. *"This man is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"*

I wish to stop off here for a while. The reason this incident in the life of Jesus is so powerful and compelling is precisely because the scribes are right! The scribes among us are usually "right." That is what often irritates us the most about them. When healthy, normal people are having fun, raising children, relating, or sharing – the scribes are reading, thinking, writing, working. And so they often correct our little errors, our slips, our careless words and phrases. It is their vocation among us to keep correcting – to keep referring us back to principles and technicalities – and often we are annoyed by their attention to detail. Except they are right, and sometimes they save us much loss and trouble.

Without the scribes present, many of us would miss the magnitude of what Jesus is doing. However, it is also true that the scribes frequently do not see beyond “being right” ... to the truth.

In this case, the scribes are absolutely and gorgeously right. Only God can forgive sins. Only God has the right, the authority, the power to forgive sins. I must get that locked back into my brain waves. You must get it blazed into all your thinking and approaches to forgiveness. It is hard to do, because we live in a time and in a culture that regularly forgets – if in fact it ever knew – that “God alone can forgive sins.”
Only God can forgive sins.

This awareness, or belief, is one of the test points or proving grounds of whether or not we actually believe in God. If God is the Author, then all authorness – all AUTHORITY – comes from God. If God is the Creator, then all rules and all laws that are authentic trace back to God as the origin – to the purpose and the plan; to the “way” in which God made things; to the “way” God intends things to work. If we offend against anything or anyone – if we offend against the plan, against the “way” things are supposed to run – the offense is against God, against the Author. Any human being, any human institution, any family, or any nation is either a reflection of the Author’s ways and purposes, or is itself an offense against the Author – against God. And if so, it tries to run on a false authority. That is the core of all satanic ways: trying to run on false authority; taking shortcuts; not caring about what God cares about; trying to get what we want without caring what we are here for, or what life is about.

God, as Author/Creator, is the only One who has the authority or the right or the power to say what goes and what does not go. Therefore, God is the *only* One with the authority, the right, or the power to forgive! **If, then, God chooses to forgive, the power of the universe will move to restore what has been damaged or broken.** Can you feel that? This is more than a verbal game. This is more than a casual human opinion about something. **If God chooses to forgive, the power of the universe will move to restore what has been damaged or broken.** Things will happen that we often call “miracles.” If God forgives you, the power of the universe will be aligned to restore you. This is not some petty little deal we are talking about here. Witness the paralytic, who suddenly was able to walk.

If I forgive you but God does not, guess what will happen? Nothing! Absolutely nothing. Well, you say, even one human's forgiveness is worth more than none at all. But it is not. I do not have even a little forgiveness to give. I am not the true author of anything. If I grant you forgiveness and God does not, I am play-acting – I am lying. I do not have any forgiveness to give. The fact would be that I am out of tune with God and against God at this point – that is, if God does not forgive yet I pronounce forgiveness. Do you ever pronounce forgiveness when God does not? Most of you have, many times. And whenever you do that, unless you are exceedingly lucky, life gets worse.

But what if you injured me? Does that not mean I have a stake in forgiveness – that I can offer or withhold forgiveness? *“Am I in the place of God?”* (Genesis 50:19) Do I belong to myself? Is your problem with me? We love to think our problems are with each other, don't we?

But that is the easy way around. What is far, far more often the case: If God forgives you, and I still want nothing to do with you, then I am in trouble! Then I am at odds with God. I am working against the Author/Creator of the universe. That is a major sin, and so I am in deep need of forgiveness myself. My only hope then is that you – having been offered the forgiveness of God – will be too full of pride or fear to receive the offered forgiveness. That way, neither one of us will recognize how much trouble we are in, for a little while longer at least, and that will allow us to go on dealing with each other in the normal ways of this world.

The 51st Psalm has puzzled and blessed me since I was a boy. It says marvelous things: *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!... Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me.... The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”*

You understand that these are but scattered quotes from the Psalm. But often, as I would read through the whole Psalm, it felt like the very thing it was talking about was taking place. Nevertheless, there was one phrase (in verse 4) that often puzzled me: *“Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight”*

It seemed to me, in my youth, that the mistakes I made, the wrongs I did, and what we once called “the errors of omission” hurt other people, or animals. It was wrong or bad because of what it did to my mother, father, sister, friends, or the animals. But what could I – a little boy – possibly do to hurt the Almighty, Omniscient, Omnipotent God? (You might think I wouldn’t know such words when I was a little boy, but those particular words I did. It is nice to be raised by Calvinists.)

It has been hard for me to realize that if there is strife in a family, it is God who is most offended and who is most sorrowful. It is God’s plan and God’s purpose that are being hurt. Humans only dimly discern such things, and even then we twist it all around, often leaving God out of it: If I hurt you but get benefit for myself or somebody else, isn’t that just the breaks? And if it’s not legally punishable, who can complain? Ah, but what if you belong to God? What if I hurt you, and you belong to God? Oy vey! Then the offense is against God! Even if you hurt me ten times more or ten times as often, and I hurt you back – and you belong to God – then the offense is against God. *“Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight”* We love to think our problems are with each other. That way, we get to keep score and pretend we are in control, and we get to react however we happen to feel like it. And what kind of world comes of that? Our problems are not with each other. Our problem is with God.

Some of you have seen it since long ago. But if not, do you now get a glimmer? All concepts of right and wrong – all laws of morality – trace back to the Author. Without an author, there is no authority – no right or wrong – only the pragmatically possible: what we can get away with. And isn’t much of our world trying to operate on “what we can get away with”? But those who believe in God know we never get away with anything. That is not even relevant. That is not how it works. The Author lives, and the reckoning, however compassionate and loving, will come. If any of us could ultimately get away with wrong or evil, *we* would become evil. That is precisely why forgiveness is so important.

“Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight” And thou art the only One who can forgive me.

“Jesus said to the man, ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.’” The scribes say, *“Only God can forgive sins.”* Add it up! We are adding two plus two, and getting infinity. The scribes are right to object. It is blasphemy! Blasphemy, unless ... If God decides to forgive, the very

powers of the universe will move to restore what has been damaged or broken. And they do! And the man walks! So who is this son of a carpenter?

As usual, Jesus just lines it out straight: “*But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – he said to the paralytic – ‘I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home.’*” (Mark 2:10) And still, some say that Jesus never declared Himself to be the Messiah. How deaf can we be? The man picks up the litter and goes out rejoicing. Only God can forgive sins. Add it up! They see forgiveness walking right there in front of them, in broad daylight. And only God can forgive sins.

Clearly, however explained, God has given his own authority to Jesus. This seeming “breach of etiquette” is much too much for our world to handle. We must deny that such authority could walk among us. Pushed to face it or accept it, we must kill Him ... stop the unbearable confusion ... return things to normal. It is logical to suppose that if we get rid of Him, the breach can be closed; nobody else can carry this power, and maybe in time we can forget about what we saw.

That would work, of course – except for the Resurrection. Killing Him only released the power to flow from Him into all His followers: receive the Holy Spirit; new birth; receive forgiveness and, with it, the delegated authority to grant God’s forgiveness (not ours!) to others, in the name of Jesus Christ. That is exactly what we believe happened. That is exactly who we claim to be and what we are supposed to be about. We are a community of forgiven sinners who, having received forgiveness ourselves, announce forgiveness *in His name* to others.

“Then he breathed on them saying, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.’” (John 20:22-23) So, one: You are delegated the authority to forgive. And two: It is not automatic. You must pronounce it – you must declare it.

I usually avoid trying to summarize because it gets me started up all over again. This time I have to try anyway.

1.) It is not possible to just “up and forgive” others – whenever *we* feel like it, on our own authority, out of our own magnanimity – forgiving when we are ready, or withholding forgiveness when we are still feeling hurt. That is the way most of the world thinks of it and tries

to do it. Forgiveness ... but on our terms, with us still in control. None of us will get *anywhere* – or anywhere close to what the Christian Faith means by forgiveness – if this is what we are talking about.

2.) The offense is not against us, or others, but against God. (*“Against thee, thee only, have I sinned ...”*) To forget this means we start dealing in terms of our own hurts; our own notions of justice; our own ideas of what we want, who is right, and what is enough. It will never work! We have only to ask ourselves how well it has worked for us in the past. Five thousand years of human history is telling. It will never work. But in Jesus Christ, we are let in on the forgiveness of the Author. That changes everything! It is not our power, it is not our rights, it is not our authority – we do not make the rules. If that startles us at first ... it is also incredibly freeing.

3.) It is not *our* forgiveness! It comes to us from Another. And if we receive it, then in His name we can announce it – and *must* announce it – to others. Even this (of course) must be done with us trying to stay in tune, obedient, humble – wanting to do His will rather than our own. Nothing in the Christian Life is automatic. Everything is intentional, purposeful, personal, prayerful. We seek the will of God, and the Holy Spirit’s timing. When you pronounce forgiveness, it must be because you believe that the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ really is asking you to pronounce that forgiveness. And it is never automatic. It is only when you believe the Holy Spirit is directing the pronouncement. Not one moment before that – and not one moment after that, either.

Even Jesus did not forgive everybody willy-nilly. That is why we get these amazing stories. Even the Cross is guarded against a blanket forgiveness that requires no repentance or change of heart. That is, we each come to the Cross, ponder it, and find ourselves drawn into its power and promise *only* after much soul-searching and surrender and repentance. Yes, of course it is for everyone willing to do that, but it is *never* automatic.

But mostly – *mostly* I preach this sermon for your comfort and reassurance. From now on, we will be talking about dimensions of forgiveness so compelling, and so difficult, that we would despair if we were in charge. We can keep light-hearted and joyful only if we remember that it is not *our* forgiving that we are dealing with. We do not have to make it work. We do not have to provide the power. It belongs to Another. The power is from God. We have only to receive it – and to stay willing, when we are asked, to declare it to others.

REQUIRED TO FORGIVE

Everything within the approval or forgiveness of God is being nurtured, strengthened, protected, furthered. Everything within the approval or forgiveness of God is progressing toward its destined pattern and purpose. Everything outside the approval or forgiveness of God is in rebellion or disobedience, or is working against God's will. It is moving toward chaos, disintegration, destruction. You do see that, don't you? Vast numbers of humans in our time do not see it.

Some of us keep looking for a game that has no rules. When we find one, we discover it is not much fun to play. Some of us keep looking for a game where we get to make up the rules or, even better, get to keep changing them as we go along. We soon discover these games are no fun for anybody else. No fun for us either, it turns out, in the long run. God gets to make the rules because God is the Creator – the One who makes everything. A game that does not work by God's rules is always a temporary aberration. No matter how God creates, Creation bears the stamp of the principles it is built on. Anything that goes against these principles will be out of harmony with how Creation works, and will not long survive. It might survive for a long time, from our perspective – like the Third Reich, or a bad marriage. But in truth, nothing can long survive if it works against the flow of power that sustains it.

By the way, it is not necessary to posit anger or punishment on God's part, though the wording is often put that way. If we do not cooperate with the way God has designed and created things – if we do not seek God's will and plan for our own lives – then inevitably we move against the flow and power of LIFE itself. In time, that tears us apart. The friction of living against the grain of the Creator's design is more than we can sustain for very long. God is sorrowful that we will not turn (repent) and move with, instead of against, him. The wrath of God is not about God singling us out for special punishment. The wrath of God simply means that God will not put a special bubble around us that repeals or protects us from the laws and principles by which the universe operates.

Since we are pretty new and inexperienced at life, we keep making mistakes. Mistakes are destructive. Some people never get that clear. Mistakes, by definition, are destructive. They damage us and others, and if left uncorrected, they keep on doing damage. Forgiveness is one of the most important categories of life for us, because it is a process whereby

we identify the mistake, turn away from repeating the destructive behavior, repair whatever damage we can, and – most importantly – move back into a restored relationship with God so that we can:

- a.) be protected from further damage by the mistakes we set in motion, and
- b.) feel the acceptance and love of God again, so we can move on toward our real life and purpose here.

As usual, trying to describe it in words makes it sound more wooden and complicated than it really is. Nevertheless, it is especially important for Christians to understand forgiveness, since the world around us talks glibly and constantly about such matters – without having the faintest notion what it is talking about.

Only God has the authority to forgive. We talk about our own forgiving when really we should talk about receiving and cooperating with God's forgiveness. In Christ Jesus, we are offered forgiveness. Our lives change if we receive this forgiveness. Having received forgiveness ourselves, we are delegated to declare (in appropriate times and ways) that this forgiveness from God is available to other people also. The rule is: "If God accepts and forgives you, then I do too." For some people, that is the hardest part of the Christian Life. On the other hand, apart from that, there is no Christian Life.

It is imperative to remember this as we look at today's topic. We cannot give what we do not have. But in fact, if we ourselves have received Christ's offered forgiveness – if we have any authentic relationship with Jesus Christ – we do have to cooperate when He offers forgiveness to others. You remember the old category? "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine." Well, we are all supposed to be saying to Christ Jesus: "Anyone You forgive, I will consider forgiven."

I realize that many of you know all these things. But we are breeding a generation of people who do not know even the core concepts of the Christian Faith. We are not born knowing these things. Someone has to teach us. It has to be transmitted from generation to generation. So I hope you will not mind the review.

Further, I urge you, PLEASE: if you are not an old hand at these concepts of forgiveness, do not take today's sermon without last Sunday's

sermon and the next two Sundays' sermons. I am not trying to swell attendance, though that might be a good idea – and perhaps we should try it sometime. It simply is not possible to say everything in one day – or in this case, even in this one series. But it is particularly *dangerous* to hear about the requirement to forgive, without pondering the different levels of forgiveness (which is next week's topic).

We do not like rules and we do not like requirements, but Jesus is adamant on this point: Christians are required to declare and support Christ's offer of forgiveness. The Old Covenant had Ten Commandments. The New Covenant has ONE. Forgiveness is not optional for us. We have moved beyond the Old Covenant of adherence to the Law ... to the New Covenant of mercy and grace. That is, our relationship with God is not based on our first keeping all the precepts of good and right living and *then* God will accept us. Our relationship is based on the conviction that God already loves us and *then*, in the confidence of God's affection and support, we move on toward truer life. So we have this relationship with God, and this relationship is not in doubt. The marriage is sealed by God's love, not by our performance. This is not a courtship based on good behavior. Therefore, in gladness, we wish to use our days, our time, our gifts, and our opportunities with ever-increasing wisdom and skill. And we desire to serve our God and the new Kingdom that we have seen and know ourselves to be part of already. But in our view, God is always the initiator – God's love comes first – calling us into life.

God's love is never the reward for how we got it right or did it right. There are, of course, wonderful rewards for getting it right and doing it right. If I ever get it right or do it right, I will let you know what they are. But God's love is not among the rewards – it is already granted. That, by the way, is the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ: God's love is already granted, already operative. It is never the prize, never something we can earn or deserve. It does not increase for services rendered. It does not depend upon us – not even on our believing it perfectly, saying it correctly, or belonging to the right church or even the right religion. (Though only the Christian Faith has this perspective, and much of Christendom has lost or forgotten it.)

But you see, all of this depends upon forgiveness. It rests upon forgiveness. The requirements for good life, for life appropriate to our Creator – *indeed*, for life according to any of the hopes and dreams that we ourselves have and long for – none of it is as we want it to be, and know it *must* be, to be worthy of existence. Therefore, all that is

worthy and worth keeping is resting on forgiveness (stayed judgment, borrowed time, restored relationship that has not yet been earned or deserved).

If we were to “freeze” life at the level on which we presently find it, what would be the verdict? We know very well. We are rushing toward destruction. We have not “learned” to manage anger; to control sex; to feed and house everyone; to share resources in a fair or just manner. We do not balance need with resources; desire with wisdom; information with honesty; offense with correction instead of punishment. On more personal levels, we walk around shy, frightened, prickly, and anxious; there is too much activity and too little peace; there is far too much sorrow, loneliness, fear, and shame. If we were to “freeze” life as it exists on our planet at the present moment, the verdict is obvious: We have not figured it out yet. We are not yet living on a plane or level worthy of LIFE. If God took us into Heaven at our present level of development and left us the way we are, we would destroy Heaven! In short, life would be exactly the same way there that it is here. Talk about a nightmare! All hope would be gone if we could not imagine progress – if we were stuck with the way things are at present.

We have a long way to go – a long way to grow. At our present level, hard as we may be trying – and full of promise and potential though we may be – at our present level, we are not worthy of life; we are not able to sustain life unaided. Everything depends upon forgiveness. God’s forgiveness holds back the judgment. God’s love lifts and holds and encourages us, and God’s forgiveness holds back the judgment while we go on growing and developing. But if for one instant the forgiveness faltered or was repealed – if for one instant God withdrew grace and operated on pure justice – there would not be any flood, there would not be any fire, there would not be any Armageddon. It would just be OVER. *Ex nihilo*. The void. Nothing. El Zippo. The Zilch.

Unless you pray a lot, you have no concept of how much God is carrying and sustaining every single human life: Atheist, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian. The basic level of the Creator’s personal caring – apart from any awareness or acknowledgment on our part – is keeping us alive from moment to moment. We take it for granted. “[T]hen the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7) If God withdrew this *ruach* – this breath, wind, spirit – even for an instant, you would be gone. By the way, this *Adam* – this man

into whom God breathed life – was he Jewish, Christian, Republican, Democrat, American? Had he been baptized? Did he believe in the Resurrection? When do we stop creating God in the image of the organizations we build to honor God? To listen to us Christians talking, you would think that Jesus invented God, or at least that God did not know what he was doing until Jesus came along to show the way. Poor old God didn't know how to be loving until Jesus showed him how? It's no wonder Jesus loves His enemies; His friends are unbearable.

All life here in this realm rests upon forgiveness. Christ did not come to invent that; He came to reveal it. Those of us who see it – who move into the covenant promise of love and mercy – know that the judgment has not been and cannot be canceled. That is, God does not just start telling lies about our true condition. That is not what forgiveness means. God holds us in mercy and grace until we have a chance to grow and develop beyond our present level. Meanwhile I, in my imperfection and need, do jeopardize you, your peace, your need to grow and learn ... and you sometimes make it more difficult for me too. Sometimes, indeed, we help each other. But often, we also hinder each other, even when we are trying our hardest to be helpful. The fact remains that we, at this moment, do not qualify for life on a level that any of us would be content to live with for endless ages. Sometimes we get depressed just thinking about more than one day at a time.

I know that the flowers are pretty at this time of year. It's spring. The sun is shining and we live in a lovely place. And I am very glad to be alive, and very happy to be on pilgrimage with people like you. But if it were not a pilgrimage, if we were not on THE WAY with Christ our Lord – in short, if it were going to stay this way, stay like it is now, with so many people hurt, starving, abandoned ... running out of time and space and love and hope; if it were going to stay on this level and not go on developing, not get lifted by the Holy Spirit, ever; if it were going to stay this way and none of us could ever grow or change or improve – then I would know that I had gone to Hell.

It is beautiful here *because* we know we are on THE WAY. It is wonderful here *because* the days keep coming, things keep changing, and we keep growing and learning. It is lovely here *because* we sense the process and we trust God to move us out of here, and on from here, until we are able to live on a level worthy of LIFE (eternal life).

It all rests on forgiveness. Forgiveness holds back the judgment – buys us time. As we comprehend, or get converted – as we move consciously into the covenant of grace and love – we also realize that everything is surrounded by forgiveness, and that our only hope is to receive this forgiveness and to live in this forgiveness. But forgiveness does not minimize our mistakes. Nor does it ever pretend that they do not matter.

Therefore, the New Law of the New Covenant is a law of forgiveness. We trade the notion that we can do life right and then God will accept us, for the notion that God loves us already and therefore we are granted time to grow and learn. By the way, this does not imply that the old rules are repealed. If they were, we would not need forgiveness. We still honor the precepts, find wisdom in the principles, work very hard to match our behavior to our best understandings of God’s Torah. Feeling the mercy and grace of Christ does not make us want to be murderers, thieves, adulterers, liars, or idolaters. It is just that our relationship to God is no longer based on how well we are doing with those precepts. Our relationship to God rests upon our trusting God’s love and receiving God’s offered forgiveness.

So we are left with the law of forgiveness: Since we are no longer required to keep all the precepts of the Law before we find acceptance, caring, love, or status with God, neither are our fellow humans required to keep all the precepts before *they* find acceptance, caring, love, or status with God – before they get “room” or “space” to grow and learn.

There is no escaping it, is there?! The New Law is clear and, in some ways, more unyielding than the old one, but only on this one point: If you receive forgiveness, you must know that this forgiveness is extended to others – and at times, you will be asked to declare it to them. Only God has the authority to forgive. But we are *required* – if we receive this forgiveness – to cooperate with it, and to align our own lives with God’s offered forgiveness.

Jesus is totally uncompromising on this point. You may think of Him as kind, understanding, compassionate, and unconditional – if you like, and all you like – but you will be very much mistaken when it comes to the subject of forgiveness itself. When it comes to the requirement to forgive, Jesus is completely *unforgiving*. I think it is because when humans talk about forgiveness, they become absurd, play word games, deal in logical impossibilities. And Jesus cannot afford to leave us unclear

on this subject: Forgiveness is not optional. It is *required* that we add our acceptance to what God forgives. There are no exceptions. (Red alert! Red alert! This is not a drill.)

You heard the parable. A man is forgiven a billion dollars. Whereupon he goes to his friend and demands that he be paid back the hundred dollars that is owed him. And when the man cannot pay, he has him thrown away.

At the end of this story, the Master (who is obviously God) is truly angry. On the spot, he repeals the forgiveness of the billion-dollar debt. All judgment and condemnation come into full play on that man again, with the added ire of God on top of it. Now, you might claim that God is still hoping that the weight of judgment, hopelessness, and condemnation will cause this man to take a second look at his condition and perhaps beg for forgiveness once again – only mean it this time. (You see, you cannot mean it for yourself if you do not mean it for others. That is the very issue of the parable.) And we can promise each other, without qualm, that if the man does indeed see it – repent and seek forgiveness again – God will again release him from the full billion-dollar debt. And after all of that, if he goes after his hundred bucks again, he will be in even deeper trouble – and so it will go until he learns, if ever he learns ... if ever we learn.

We are stuck – spiritually and emotionally stopped and stuck – until we learn the law of forgiveness. We can take Jesus' word for it or we can test it out for ourselves, or both. It comes out the same. This precept is amazingly difficult to learn, despite the fact that it operates with terrible precision all the time. If you go apart to a quiet place and look within – to the condition of your own soul – it will be as if your soul is a beautiful and productive field. But everywhere in your life where something is unforgiven, it will be as if a huge boulder sits there in the middle of your field. Nothing grows near it, and always – no matter what else you do or how productive you are trying to be – always you must work around that boulder. It is always in the way. All other furrows and crops are twisted to go around it. And if the field is strewn with boulders, trying to work the field is more and more a nightmare. They are all too heavy for you to lift and none of your machinery can budge them. There is only one way to get rid of the boulders.

“And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with every one of you, unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.” It is a

chilling reminder – a hard-core requirement for every Christian. You would think that the necessity would be so obvious that we would not resent the requirement. But I have not found this to be so. The requirement to forgive remains one of the chief barriers to the Christian Life. That is, we avoid Jesus and put off whole-heartedly joining His Kingdom because of this requirement to receive, and then to declare, forgiveness.

Should it cross your mind, this parable is not an isolated instance of Jesus being adamant on the subject. We know that His chief argument with the Pharisees is over this very issue. It is at the core of the core issue of Law versus Gospel. It is built into the primary understanding of discipleship by standing within the very prayer that identifies us as followers of Jesus and gives us the terms of the contract (covenant): *“Forgive us the wrong we have done, as we have forgiven those who have wronged us.”* (Matthew 6:12 REB) And just in case that went by too fast or got too familiar, Jesus adds: *“For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs that you have done.”* Does that sound obscure, confusing, difficult to grasp? Don’t we wish!

Christians never hear this parable without realizing that the man who was forgiven a billion dollars is like any one of us when we first come to the Cross. From no possibility of ever making it, we get eternal life handed to us – both here and coming – partial fulfillment and full promise. To leave the Cross and then go demand that others be perfect in their dealings with us – that is what the parable is about. It is ludicrous, to be sure, but we forget anyway. And so we have to go back to the time when we first realized that God in Christ forgave and accepted us. Then the law of forgiveness shines forth again, and it is no longer difficult or hard to understand. Then forgiveness truly does flow from the heart, as our own gratitude returns.

Eventually we come to see that the law of forgiveness is Jesus trying to teach us a sacred principle of life: If we do not forgive, we have not yet received forgiveness. If we have not yet received forgiveness, we are not able to forgive.

Therefore, there is only one unforgivable sin in the Bible. (Matthew 12:31-32) And it is the refusal to accept forgiveness.

Matthew 10:5-15; 23:13-33;
Acts 5:29-31; I John 1:8-9; Luke 17:1-4

DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF FORGIVENESS

So much to say – so little time to say it. If you have accepted the sermons thus far, we have established that all authentic forgiveness traces back to the authority of God. And secondly, if we have entered God’s Kingdom – chosen the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ to be our God – then for us, **forgiveness is not optional**. That is, if God moves to forgive someone, we second the motion. Many times, in fact, God chooses *us* to carry and declare his forgiveness to others. Sometimes even whether we like it or feel like it, or not. (Remember Jonah?) We are not in the morals business. We are in the forgiveness business.

Today I have the assignment of convincing you that forgiveness, though not optional, is not automatic. That is, many of you have assumed that as a Christian, you should forgive all people, all of the time, regardless of the circumstances. You do not really do this, but you think you are supposed to, and sometimes you actually do try to live this way. If so, you have become unwitting enemies of God’s Kingdom because forgiveness which is automatic has lost all its meaning. That means the sinner has no opportunity for reform, change of heart, growth, restoration. Forgiveness without content encourages self-centered, irresponsible, even evil behavior. There really are rules and principles and standards that are authentic and necessary to life, or forgiveness would be irrelevant. To “FOR-give” means to give acceptance, love, affection, approval *before* it has been proved or established that this is appropriate – before a person is certified to be worthy of such acceptance. That means, for openers, that if you join Christ’s band of forgiven sinners – willing to extend the forgiveness you have received to other sinners – then clearly you are in danger of being betrayed by those you try to forgive (in Christ’s name, by Christ’s authority).

Some of you will want to ask me, after today’s sermon: “But how do I know when another person is truly repentant? How will I know when it is safe to forgive?” The answer to that is simple: It is *never* safe to forgive. Look what it has cost our friends in the Faith down through the ages! Look what it cost Jesus! It is never safe to forgive. It is God’s ultimate gamble. God asks us to participate in this gamble with him and accept the damage when it comes, and to go right on doing it to the end. Otherwise there is no hope for any of us. And the truth is, it is not safe

to forgive you either. But God goes on doing it, and so do some of God's servants.

If I arranged it so that right in the middle of this sermon – while you were trying to concentrate on the difficult concepts of the different levels of forgiveness – somebody sneaked up behind you and sprayed you with smelly fish-water, would you ever forgive me? Some of you would never forgive me. For you, this would be in the category of unforgivable sins. Actually, some people I know have quite a long list of unforgivable sins. On the other hand, there are probably a few people here who would laugh and think that was a funny prank, and at least more interesting than trying to listen to sermons. I even know one or two of you who would say to yourselves: “Now, what's Bruce trying to teach us this time? It's probably some obtuse way to get us to be more serious about becoming fishers of men.”

But I suspect the majority of you would do “The Standard American Approach” to forgiveness. That is, you would be furious at me for weeks. You would find a number of ways, official and unofficial, to register your annoyance and outrage. You would have a lot of conversations among yourselves about how or why I had never “grown up,” and even more conversations about what this might portend for the future. And in the end, some of you would leave the church because such erratic behavior just made you too uncomfortable. But most of you would “forgive” me. That is, you would decide not to fire me – at least not yet – but you would never trust me in the same way as before, and the strain in the community would be overt, including people sitting sideways in church to make sure nobody was sneaking up on them with smelly fish-water.

But one thing is almost certain: you would not deal with the real process and precepts of forgiveness, nor would you *truly* forgive me – that is, restore me to full acceptance, trust, and status in the church community. The church no longer knows how to do these things. It has lost these core concepts and convictions. New England Puritans would have known exactly what to do. And they would have done it quickly. The whole community would have been involved. And in the end, I would be truly forgiven, with no trace of strain left to undo the community – OR I would be banished.

Today we rarely clean up our errors and mistakes. We just keep smearing the mistrust and resentments around, letting them get deeper and wider. And we say dumb things like “Forgive and forget.” If you have a bad memory, you have no need to forgive. If you have a good memory,

then pretending to forget is a lie, a pretense. And the very next argument you have will prove it: out comes the life history of every mistake ever made, and it was just seething down under the surface, waiting for the curtain to go up so it could dance across the stage one more time.

Within the context of real forgiveness ... within the power of the Cross ... within the necessity of the kind of life we want and the kind of people we long to be – there are three levels, or dimensions, in which we can deal with the imperfections, sin, and damage going on in us and all around us. Part of the problem is that we use only one word for all three levels. Your first exercise in forgiveness this morning will be forgiving me for the hokeyness of making up new words. We will talk, at least this morning, about FORHARMNOT, FORHEALING, and FORRESTORING. Consider with me, if you will, the three levels of forgiveness.

LEVEL ONE

Think of **purpose**. Purpose helps to clarify theory. The three levels of forgiveness each have a clear purpose. The first purpose of forgiveness is to stop the harm from spreading. This is essential, which is not to say that our world always knows or remembers how essential it is. There is, nevertheless, vast literature and anecdote about this level of forgiveness: “Pray for your enemies.” “Do good to those who spitefully use you.” “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Stop the harm from spreading. Retaliation and vengeance are ways of endless damage and destruction. Where will it ever end if somebody does not stop spreading the harm?

Some people think mostly on this level. That is, when you use the word “forgiveness,” this is what they think of and what they think you are talking about. For clarity, let us call it FORHARMNOT. That is **the purpose of this level of forgiveness – to stop the harm, to keep the evil from spreading**. (*Ahimsa* = noninjury.) (Reverence for life.) We will FORHARMNOT rather than repay injury for injury.

Remember the Hindu story of the yogi and the scorpion? The yogi was meditating by the bank of the Ganges, and a scorpion walking up the bank tried to crawl over a little clod of dirt that came loose and rolled down the bank, throwing the scorpion into the water. The yogi, seeing the scorpion’s plight, reached out, scooped up the scorpion in his hand, and placed it back on the river bank. For thanks, the scorpion stung him. The same thing happened a second time. As the scorpion wandered closer and closer to the water for the third time, a watching American

tourist said to the yogi: “Are you crazy? Twice you have tried to help that scorpion, and twice it has stung you. If you let it sting you a third time, you will surely die. Kill it or let it drown.” To which the yogi replied: “It is the nature of scorpions to sting. It is the nature of yogis to help those in trouble.”

Why would a yogi want to turn into a scorpion? We will not retaliate, for hatred breeds hatred, and all efforts to “pay back” those who hurt us put power into Satan’s hands and increase the power of evil on earth. “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” sayeth the Lord. *Leave it alone.* FORHARMNOT is not true FORGIVENESS. That is, it does not restore relationship. But it is a close cousin to forgiveness – it stops the harm from spreading by absorbing the evil, rather than turning evil itself in order to retaliate.

Surely it is part of our pilgrimage to move from “pay back” to FORHARMNOT. To become people of FORHARMNOT, instead of people of vengeance and retaliation, is to enter an entirely new and different way of life. Do not think of the vast illustrations – blood and gore and total annihilation. Those count, to be sure. But that is not where we live most of the time. What about the little jab, the cold shoulder, the little annoyance, the little hurts that fill our common, ordinary days? I am talking about mates, children, co-workers, friends. FORHARMNOT is a principle of life which is hard to apply on a daily basis – and that is precisely where it is needed the most. Many families and friendships and businesses and churches fall, or at least live as flickering ghosts of their true identity, because they have settled for the principle of getting even ... of *payback* ... of “see how you like it” ... of endless forms of vengeance.

LEVEL TWO

The second level of forgiveness is about inner healing. Trying to keep clarity, let us call it FORHEALING. This also is not true forgiveness – it does not restore relationship – but it is a sister to forgiveness. FORHARMNOT tries to stop the damage from spreading on the outside. **The purpose of FORHEALING is to stop the damage from spreading on the inside. The purpose of FORHEALING is to cleanse our own inner beings of the residue of hurt and damage that comes from being abused and mistreated.**

I was talking to a friend whose mother had sexually abused him as a child. (Only God knows what somebody had done to his poor mother.)

In later life, he had lots of sexual contact with women, but never a loving relationship. Counseling had helped him to understand, but not to heal. He had then concluded that he was incapable of true relationship with a woman and should resign himself to a celibate life. Why did *he* need forgiveness, he wanted to know. It was his mother who had wronged him – she was the one who needed forgiveness.

“So you are whole, healthy, and happy?” I inquired. “No,” *he quickly admitted*. “You have no leftover traces of anger, fear, or resentment?” I asked. “Well, yes, lots of that. Mountains of it, of course.” “And this ‘junk’ left over, unhealed, from your experiences – is it not doing damage to you and to other people who try to care about you or get close to you?” This time he was fast. “I get it,” *he said*. “I do need forgiveness. I’ve never felt right or like I could be important to God or anybody, ever. I guess I kept thinking others needed to be punished, and then I would be okay. But I guess I need forgiveness with God, or I’ll never be okay.” He was talking about the FORHEALING part of forgiveness – about reconciliation with God – about getting healed on the inside.

Part of that is our forgiving God for putting us into such hard places, and we will return to that another day. But upfront for today: We need God to FORHEAL us of the residue of hurt and damage and resentment that goes on re-wounding us, stopping our love and our life. And that cannot and must not depend on how other people are treating us, or whether or not they are repentant or want to restore relationship with us.

From my perspective, we all think ourselves too weak or too strong. The “too strong” assume they can walk on through the hurt and pain without paying much attention to it. They think they do not need FORHEALING; they can just forget it and go on. But the weight of it gets us in the end. FORHARMNOT puts an enormous strain on all our inner systems. To refrain from retaliation leaves us holding all the poison of injustice and devaluing and disrespect *inside* ourselves. That is, if we refrain from payback – from returning evil for evil – and just leave it there, well, sooner or later that will kill us spiritually and emotionally – leave us either terribly neurotic, or flip us over to a terrible aggression later on. If we absorb evil, we must go to the Lord to get restored, reaffirmed, recommissioned, healed. It is healthier to retaliate than to absorb evil and damage all by ourselves alone, as if by our own intention or authority.

The “too weak” assume that they cannot get any genuine healing from the Lord. They are so hurt and sensitive and damaged that God will have to fix all the outer circumstances for them and straighten out all the people causing them grief, or they simply will not be able to carry on. So they are just going to sit there and wait – of course complaining bitterly all the while – until God takes care of these things for them. Strangely enough, these people seem to live as long as the rest of humankind, even though they “cannot endure it any longer.” But for a while, they like to insist that going to God does not help them to heal. Actually, they do not *want* to heal. That is, they think nothing is wrong with them; they just want somebody to fix other people and circumstances for them. Their hurt serves as their credentials for demanding justice, so healing their hurt would be disastrous, and they will not allow that to happen.

But there *is* hope: The “too weak” are often greatly gifted with sensitivity and awareness and the ability to tune in to other people. And the fact is that the Holy Spirit has helped hundreds of thousands of others, down through time and through all the annals of this hard and challenging life. Realizing this, the “too weak” sometimes decide they *want* to be healed too. That makes all the difference.

In any case – whether we feel ourselves to be weak or strong – if we have chosen in faithfulness not to retaliate, the FORHEALING level of forgiveness is essential. And we need to do this FORHEALING about as frequently as we shower or bathe. A little more often, for some of us.

LEVEL THREE

The third level of forgiveness we shall call FORRESTORING. **The purpose, as you will surmise, is for restoring relationships to full operational level.** If you say the word “forgiveness” to me, this is what I think you are talking about. It is clear, nevertheless, that FORHARMNOT and FORHEALING and FORRESTORING, though very different in purpose, are each genuine dimensions of the Christian Life. But the choice under Christ not to retaliate is quite different from the willingness to restore a relationship to full bloom. And *neither* is the same as going into the presence of the Holy Spirit to get healed of our own inner wounds and the loss of spirit and identity that inevitably comes from those wounds.

In short, FORRESTORING always takes two. FORRESTORING is always a two-way street, and its purpose is the full restoration of a relationship. FORHARMNOT and FORHEALING do not require other

people to participate or cooperate or be ready for spiritual growth in any way. It is imperative and essential that we not confuse and mix up these different levels, or expect actions of one to produce the results of the others. Yet in our language, they are all called by the same name, “forgiveness.”

You would think it would be obvious, by now, that working these three different levels of forgiveness is also very different. Yet frequently I discover, to my dismay, that it is not obvious. That is, again and again I find people smashing themselves, and sometimes wrecking their faith, because they have mixed these levels of forgiveness all together, and then feel obligated as Christians to apply the rules that fit one level to the practice of the other levels.

For instance, if you say, “We have to forgive everybody,” that may make sense if you are talking about FORHARMNOT. But that is ludicrous if you are talking about FORRESTORING. All three dimensions of forgiveness are part of our spiritual pilgrimage, but Jesus and the New Testament talk about forgiveness *as reconciliation* – the restoring of relationship.

FORRESTORING forgiveness is *always* linked with repentance – always, always, always! **If restoring a relationship is the issue, then repentance is mandatory.** God will not forgive us if we do not repent. That is, the offered forgiveness will not take – it cannot stick – if we do not *want* the reconciliation, do not *want* to be close, do not *want* to change the things that caused the split or the distance or the hurt in the first place. And we do not – and should not – try to FORRESTORE those who have harmed us *if they are unrepentant*.

If you are talking about true forgiveness – the FORRESTORING level – then the person is back with you in a relationship of trust, acceptance, affection, and sharing as if the damage or harm had never taken place. If this is not happening, then forgiveness has not taken place, no matter what words are being used. And if you restore fellowship, acceptance, affection, and love in a relationship wherein the other person is doing harm and is *not* repentant, then you side with evil – you encourage the damage to continue – you are an enabler in the worst sense of that word. You may stand willing to forgive or even make it known that you are ready to forgive, but if you grant forgiveness to a person who is unrepentant, you have done great harm to them, and set yourself and others up for more abuse and mistreatment.

The highest and ultimate purpose of forgiveness is to restore relationships to love and growth – to light and laughter – to joy and going on together. Jesus is about such forgiveness and love and reconciliation – the kind that will make the Kingdom of Heaven possible for us. Yet Jesus Himself had a very long list of very bad relationships. He was Himself resented, unforgiven, and hated to a degree that most of us can only dimly imagine. This forgiveness thing is *not* automatic! This also means that when you say to somebody “I forgive you” – shorthand for “In the name and by the authority of Christ, I declare that you are forgiven” – you should really mean it. It does not mean: “I tolerate your presence here but wouldn’t trust you as far as I could throw the city bus.” It does not mean: “I don’t want any more unpleasantness, but I’ll be watching you like a hawk and hoping to have as little as possible to do with you from now on.” Is that what you think God means when God in Christ Jesus offers forgiveness to you?

No! Forgiveness means the person is back on the inside with you, and that if the repentance was false or they make another mistake, it will hurt you as much and as fresh as the very first time, because you will have no shields up against it. Yet you have decided that they are worth enough to you to risk it, and you want to go on with them and share life with them anyway. And that is what God means when God forgives you.

Now, I hope you will all think about the three levels of forgiveness this coming week, and I hope you will come to greater clarity within yourself than ever before. But the real reason I preached this sermon today is so that I can talk about the third level – real forgiveness – next week, and not get hopelessly misunderstood.

Matthew 18:15-18; Luke 17:1-4;
Acts 5:27-32; James 5:13-20

THE PROCESS OF FORGIVENESS

Through this series of sermons, we have been looking at various principles and considering the different layers of “forgiveness.” Have our meditations been merely theoretical? I suspect we really want to greet our Lord each day in open joy, and eager for the future. That will not be possible unless we ask Christ to free us from all our past hurts and resentments. It is becoming clearer and clearer that we cannot walk in the New WAY of Christ our Lord, or serve Him in gladness, if we keep carrying all the weight and wreckage of past mistakes into every new day God tries to give us. Some of those past mistakes are ours. Some are the mistakes of others. Either way, they keep us in bondage until we are freed from them.

Whether the hurt and resentments are of our own doing or are from what others have done to us, the fact is that we cannot be free and whole – cannot love as we were designed to and long to, cannot respond to the guidance of the Holy Spirit with true faith and devotion – unless we can find healing and freedom from the burdens of past sins: our own sins, the sins of others, and their endless intertwining.

Once into the subject, most of us realize that *forgiveness* is a much bigger topic than it looks like on the surface. Can you imagine what the world would be like if a wave of true forgiveness swept across our globe, touching everyone? We cannot imagine. It would transform everything we know. Life would be so beautiful and full of light, I’m not sure we could endure the joy. Jesus knew this more clearly than anyone else who has ever lived here. He saw us scrambling and squabbling over money, power, sex, and even who gets to be called “good,” and He realized it was all a charade – a substitute for what we really want: forgiveness, grace, acceptance. After all, if you know you are forgiven, you do not need security. If you know you are forgiven, nobody is trying to hurt you. If you know you are forgiven, only little things that will not last can go wrong. Oh my friends, do we ever truly see it? Do we ever comprehend what Jesus really came to do *for* us – and *with* us?

Back to what we call reality: Having felt forgiveness in actual operation within us, sometimes it has also led us to the realization that, beneath the first layer of hurts and resentments, there are deeper pools

of pain and anger that have been festering within us for years. We suspect these have been impacting our way of relating, holding back our creativity, and poisoning our hope for years. My greatest hope with this series is that individually and together, we will go to our Lord and openly and sincerely ask Him to help us be rid of all the weight of the past that is holding us back: all resentment, and hurt, and guilt, and shame. Such things have no legitimate place in our New Life in Christ Jesus. The Cross of Christ is more than authority enough for us to be rid of all of it. Yet knowing the truth does not mean we fully live by the truth. Easter is still very close, and there is much brokenness in our world and we seem to pick up new pieces of it every day.

So we do not get perfect, but we can make progress. I already know that I will be traveling without some of the junk I was carrying before. I have lots of reason to believe that many of you will be traveling much lighter too. I also know that the Lord has a habit of coming up with extra help and wonderful surprises when we stay patient and humble on the WAY. Some of us are going to lose still more of the pain and resentment of old aches we thought were too tough to handle. You watch and see.

So we have been dealing with principles and theories, and hopefully we have it clear now that forgiveness operates on different levels and for different purposes. Today I hope we can talk about forgiveness as the restoring of relationships – what we called last week FORRESTORING, which is distinct and different from FORHEALING and FORHARMNOT. Hopefully we are aware now that we must not thoughtlessly apply principles from one level of forgiveness across categories to the other levels of forgiveness.

In general, all Eastern religions tend to focus on FORHARMNOT, and all Western religions aim toward FORRESTORING. Intimate, personal relationship is not the focus or intent of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shintoism, or their derivatives – not between individuals and God, and not between humans as individuals. But Judaism, Islam, and Christianity *are* desirous of personal, specific contact between God and humans, and therefore, relationships between the followers are also of primary importance. You can be a good Buddhist or Hindu if you refrain from harming others. We *cannot* be Christians on that basis alone – we must come to love as we have been loved. Christianity always hopes for, longs for, and strives toward the forgiveness that restores relationship, whether it is between us and God, between us and other members of

our faith family, or between us and any of God's other children that we happen to encounter.

Christianity assumes that the "church" – the fellowship of believers – is essential to the process. The church invites people into its "community," where faith is practiced, studied, thought about, prayed about – lived and practiced in real life. A church that does not invite is, by definition, not a church. Church (the faith community) is the context in which the life of faith is lived, and so it is "where" much of the healing and restoration take place. To talk about Jesus and not invite people into the church is like talking about food but not inviting anybody to the banquet. Now, I realize as well as any of you that some churches serve lousy food, and some hardly serve any food at all. We can only weep and try not to be like that ourselves.

Yet a double standard exists in that we expect different things inside the church than we do outside the church. We keep throwing the double standard away because it is so dangerous, but we must learn to keep this particular danger because if we throw it away, the church goes with it. People within a faith family *must* keep practicing forgiveness – restoring relationships – or the church quickly ceases to *be* the church. So the requirements of forgiveness are far more stringent *within* the church than they are outside the church (or for that matter, between churches). Any individual who comes to a Christian church needs to come to a place where it is safe to be real, where perfection is not expected, where chances are endless. But they also need to be coming to a place where people truly desire to walk in the Christian Way, to participate in the New Life in Christ Jesus – where study means learning to *do*, and where doing comes out of *prayer*. That means, categorically and by definition, that mistakes will be knee-deep, and that these mistakes will be glaring in the light of what we believe and how we want to live. Therefore, admitting mistakes (which is necessary to learning), correcting mistakes (which is necessary to survival), and granting and receiving forgiveness (which is necessary to restoring relationships) are the very warp and woof of the Christian Life.

As an aside, I think we need to at least mention the fact that modern Christianity has managed to twist the double standard. The nineteenth century dreamed up the notion that really "good" Christians must love everybody. With this notion came the Social Gospel Movement and the idea that the church should go into the world and love all people everywhere – love them so well that they would be helped, inspired,

redeemed, and saved ... right there where they were. They would not have to come into the church; they would not have to know Jesus; they would not have to believe in anything or come to serve the Kingdom. They would just be changed and sanctified by the awesome generosity and love of Christ's people, as if no response were required – as if love would just automatically convert people into being good and loving creatures. No need to trouble them with getting into the fellowship of the church, with giving and receiving true forgiveness, or with learning or growing or training or serving the Kingdom themselves. Your Puritan ancestors turn over and squirm in their graves. Yet, in large measure, the mainline denominations of the twentieth century have followed this nineteenth-century miasma.

Nevertheless, back to the sermon: From here on I want to talk about the FORRESTORING level of forgiveness, and when I use the term “forgiveness,” that is what I mean. In the society in which we live, people will often say “Please forgive me,” when they are not talking about a friendship bond or a relational bond at all. They neither want nor intend to build a relationship of love, understanding, caring, or affection. They are not eager to accomplish something that might require cooperation. They do not intend to commit to any fellowship in any kind of true community. All they really mean is: “Please don't hurt me. Don't try to make things more difficult for me.” Often there is an additional plea: “Please let me go on being the way I am – doing things the way I've been doing them.” Such “forgiveness” means: “Don't get in my way, and don't ask me to change.” That is *not* forgiveness!

All true forgiveness requires and is based on repentance: a desire to change, a desire to repair past damage, a true sorrow for harm done and pain caused. Lots of times people want a counterfeit forgiveness so they can go on using or abusing: using or abusing you; using or abusing alcohol; using or abusing a system or an organization; using or abusing anything they think will get them what they want.

Forgiveness that allows, encourages, or supports a person to use and abuse is *not* a saintly, godly, nice, caring, or loving response. It will draw a lot of superficial gratitude and praise and compliments, but it serves the Dark Lord. It helps people to stay in bad places. It helps to get innocent people hurt, and more deeply and more often. And sometimes it helps to get people dead. When I was a pastor in Paxton, Massachusetts, there was a father who kept covering up for his son's driving tickets. The boy had wrecked six cars, but the father kept dealing with the police

instead of with his son. One day the boy did not make a turn in time, and that was the end of that problem. Counterfeit forgiveness – sometimes called *indulgence* – can be very expensive.

Forgiveness is the very antithesis of “live and let live.” What a lot of people try to pass off as forgiveness is merely indifference. But forgiveness is never neutral or indifferent. It hungers and hopes with great eagerness to return to love. Christians, as you know, have never been very good at indifference; we do not like things lukewarm. (Revelation 2:20) That is because nobody we ever admired or respected thought indifference was worth diddly, or if they did, they never mentioned it or acted like it. You might want to do a study sometime of the concept of indifference in the Bible. It will take you about four seconds. If you love people, indifference is anathema – and God is about loving. Do not get suckered into the assumptions of our time that wisdom is just staying cool and not caring enough to get excited. “*I the LORD your God am a passionate God ... showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*” (Exodus 20:5-6) And the Son of God, if you have noticed, is passionate as well. Like Father, like Son. So who is *your* true Father?

Christians forgive in order to restore relationships to full operational level. That is because that is how God forgives *us*: Sins washed white. Affection, caring, trust, respect, appreciation, value ... *fully restored*. Let us go on with LIFE ... let us go on together. We are aware of the damage and have corrected it to the best of our ability. And now, with additional experience, we head for the same goal as before – maybe seeing it more clearly than ever. And indeed, we *need* to change – we *want* to change – and we trust God’s mercy and power to make that possible.

We are *not* talking about “forgive and forget.” Forgiveness does not impair the memory or the mental functions in any way. Guilt impairs memory. Shame can bury memory beneath layers of subterfuge, rationalization, fairy tales, and just plain blankness (sometimes even making brilliant people dull). Forgiveness does not impair memory, and often restores it. You think I don’t remember my drinking days? I see them more clearly now than I ever did at the time. Will I ever be rid of those memories or where people do not occasionally bring up something about them? Unlikely. And if I ever did lose the memories, would I not be in dire peril of repeating them?

The *unbearable* part is gone, but not the memories. Is that not how it works with you? I get to go on – I get to live differently. It does not matter if somebody mentions the past. “We are as sick as our secrets.” But nobody gets angry at me anymore for drinking too much. They have invented a whole new string of reasons for getting angry at me. Isn’t that wonderful? We never get to the place where everybody approves of us ... except at retirement parties and funerals. Even those who approve of us a lot don’t approve all the time. Isn’t that wonderful? So the need for fresh forgiveness is never gone either.

What do we know about the process of forgiveness? I read to you from our manual a few minutes ago – Matthew 18. Do we follow instructions?

1.) If you have been offended, if you are involved, if the Holy Spirit seems to be making it part of your assignment – and if no apology or remorse is forthcoming from the offending party – YOU ARE REQUIRED TO CONFRONT. Most of us do not like to do this. The response can be unpleasant. Maybe we have a wrong perspective or do not know the full picture. It is always uncomfortable to go speak to somebody and say, “I think you are in error on this matter.” But it comes to us as clear instruction from Jesus. It is neither fair nor productive to believe that somebody is on the wrong track and not give them a chance to deal with it in the open.

If they then give us information that changes the picture or, as sometimes happens, shows us that in fact we are the ones in error – well and good. We have learned something and no longer harbor bad feelings toward them.

If they make excuses, get angry, deny it, get defensive – well and good. We have done our part – done what we were supposed to do. If the matter is serious or threatens others, we move on in the Scriptural pattern: get witnesses, etc. Often, by this time, we have already had to move from FORRESTORING to FORHARMNOT. We have all learned long since that it is not always simple. Our motives are often wretchedly difficult to keep clear. That is why we have mentors and support groups, so we can process this stuff.

2.) In any case, you do not have a *real* problem unless the other person confesses: agrees with your perspective, says they are truly sorry, repents, asks for forgiveness. Whether you confront or the other person

comes to you seeking forgiveness, if the error or harm is admitted and the person claims distress at what they have done, then you are *obligated*, as a Christian, to enter the forgiveness process. Remember? Forgiveness is not optional for us. So:

a.) You will listen to the person's confession, apology, or admission with a true desire to understand what happened and why. (Sometimes it will become clear that this is a superficial apology, and that the person is only interested in getting off the hook without discomfort. In which case, you state this impression, and see if the response confirms it, or moves to a deeper level. If it becomes clear to you that the apology is superficial, break off the conversation and go back to your prayers for a couple of days and see what develops.)

b.) You will set penance (amends, correction). Most often this is best done with the cooperation of the offending party. That is, the two of you try to decide what has been damaged and what would best repair that damage. The purpose is *not* punishment! The purpose is correction – correcting that which has been hurt or has gone wrong. **If there is no penance, there is no forgiveness.** The process has been short-circuited. Even if you forgive, without penance the other person cannot receive forgiveness. There must be an effort to amend the wrong. We must remember this – especially with our children. **If there is no penance, there is no forgiveness.**

c.) Once penance is set and accepted, it is up to you to declare forgiveness – right then and there. Not after the penance has been completed, but at the moment of acceptance of the penance. We need the forgiveness for encouragement and strength to do the penance, and to move into the required changes in our way of living that are necessary. Again, the relationship is restored *before* the penance is accomplished.

Forgiveness *means* we are full-bond friends again. When God forgives us, it does not mean, “Hey jerk, I don't much like you and don't really trust you, and I'll be watching you like a hawk from now on and I'll get you if I can – just give me a chance, I dare you.” I swear some people try to receive this kind of forgiveness from God. They look and act just as guilty afterward as they did before. But that is not what Jesus died for. It is full-bodied restoration of love and affection and trust and respect. Without any loss of memory, without any subterfuge or escape clauses, the relationship is *at least* as strong as it was before the error or damage occurred.

THE PROCESS OF FORGIVENESS

This is the “seventy times seven” kind of forgiveness that Jesus taught us. It is the most challenging thing about our New WAY of Life – and the most essential. Indifference is simple; “forgive and forget” is an easy pretense when we do not really care that much about each other in the first place. Most forgiveness in our society is a false “peace that passes over misunderstanding.”

Truly we get new life – new chances – and full restoration from the Christ whenever we will receive it. And that is what we are expected and commanded to give to all our brothers and sisters who seek forgiveness from us.

One wrinkle: Even after we all choose to live this way within the church family and within our own homes, what if you grant forgiveness but the person *remains* guilty, shame-faced, sorrowful, apologetic? It happens, doesn't it? You forgive, but the person does not really receive it. Two things: One, it gets annoying when somebody wants to stay fixed on the error instead of moving on into the new life offered and available. Two, a person who stays fixated on the mistake is bound to repeat it.

In short, if you have forgiven but the person will not receive the forgiveness (though they presumably want it), you have a serious problem – the very problem that God has with all of us. If the person will not receive the offered forgiveness, it will all backfire, big time! That is, they will not find the power and healing that forgiveness brings, even though you have tried to restore them to your good graces. Believe me, if they have not received forgiveness, they are not yet trustworthy, even though they are penitent.

What can you do? You can keep asking them why they do not believe you – why they keep insulting you by refusing to accept the forgiveness you have offered. And especially you must watch for the performance of the penance. Within this pattern, there is almost always a lot of talk about remorse yet no action about changing or correcting the problem.

After a reasonable time, confront the person about the untouched penance and make it clear that you have *withdrawn* your forgiveness on the grounds that they do not really mean their repentance. Then, if they still say they want a relationship with you, set a new and harder penance – and stay hard-nosed – until the person performs the amends

(in which case, they will also begin to accept the forgiveness), or you are required to reject them outright. That is, you move from FORRESTORING to FORHARMNOT and FORHEALING. People of honor and integrity want true forgiveness, and they want to follow through on amendment or penance. Being Christian is not a synonym for being sappy. It is a deep insult to treat other people as if they have no souls of their own – no integrity or honor. Forgiveness restores, it does *not* excuse!

Unconditional love is a figment of modern American imagination. No self-respecting person wants to stay a charity case or an object of your “pity” (that is, the modern definition of pity; the old concept is a word of power). No honorable person wants to leave others beholden or damaged or in perpetual limbo. Folk who like that sort of thing are into manipulation and control over others. Genuine love has many conditions: honesty, respect, trust, purpose, dedication. That is the very reason forgiveness is so frequently necessary.

True forgiveness requires a lot more thought and prayer, a lot more love, and a lot more risk than are being made clear by most churches today. And yet, to cheat or go shallow here is to betray everything that Jesus came to reveal and call us into. The satanic twist is this: Having reduced forgiveness down to a grudging level of tolerance, we have people all over the landscape trying to live off of this counterfeit level of grace. That, in turn, means we are inadvertently ducking the requirement to truly forgive – and most of the time, we are not even fully aware of it. Hence, the power to transform is pulled from the life of the church, and the relationships between church members become, in many cases, a mere formality – a bond that would not bear the stress of a backyard quarrel, never mind a New WAY of Life in which people are sent to transform the world.

Relationships designed for eternal life must be built to last, and must be maintained with diligence. Without forgiveness, “we haven’t got a prayer.”