

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.