

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.