

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.