

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.

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

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(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.”