

“Forgiveness 101”

Matthew 18:21-35

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You might have heard the story about this little boy who had a big fight with his brother. As the day went on, he had nothing to do with his brother. He didn't even speak to him. So, at bedtime the little boy's mother said to him, "Don't you think you should forgive your brother before you go to sleep? After all, the Bible tells us that we should not let the sun go down on our anger." Well, after some thought, the boy replied, "Mommy, how can I keep the sun from going down?"

No, that right there is a perfect example of our human nature. It can be so hard for us to forgive someone who has hurt us. In fact, for some, it's much easier to cut that person out of their life rather than forgive them. This is something we have all seen again and again in marriages, and families, and in friendships. They could indeed be forgiveness, but people simply refuse to do so.

Well, this is the issue that we are dealing with in that passage from Matthews Gospel that we read today. But you know, it's kind of funny that, as I was reading through these verses for the umpteenth time, it struck me that this was almost like a classroom setting, where Jesus was teaching, "Forgiveness 101". So, that's how I want to look at this today. Are you ready for class?

Well, first of all, Peter wanted to know exactly what the Lord expected of him when it came to forgiveness. You see, the rabbis of the day thought that you should forgive your brother, three times. So, Peter wanted to know, was that enough? That's why he asked, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (Matthew 18:21b) Now, Peter was exceeding the demands of the rabbis here, but still he was unsure if he was doing what the Lord expected of him. Now, maybe he came up with seven times because seven is the number of completeness, but still, he wanted a definite number. Of course, Jesus responded by saying, "I did not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." (V 22) In other words, Jesus was saying that we are to forgive an infinite amount of times. Well, do you think it was hard for Peter to hear that? Is it hard for you to hear that?

Now, if you look closely at Peter's question, I really don't think he was asking about how many times we are to forgive, but rather I think he was asking, "Lord, how do we forgive?" So, that is where I want to focus our attention today.

OK, let's begin by asking, why don't people forgive? Well, there can be different reasons for this. Perhaps it has to do with "pain". Folks, when we have been hurt by

someone, we do indeed experience pain, a deep, empty pain within us. In fact, I consider it to be the worst kind of pain. What I mean is that, I have experienced the pain of a hip replacement, a heart attack, and dozens of kidney stones. But I can tell you that, none of them compare to the empty pain I have known when someone who I trusted hurt me deeply. And I am sure that many, if not all of you, know exactly what I'm talking about.

In fact, what I have noticed in my years in the ministry is that, some folks, for some reason, prefer to hold onto that pain. They simply refuse to let go of it. They even feed off of it, so much so, that it becomes part of them. It's almost as though, that is what is normal for them, and they find a weird kind of comfort in that, because they're familiar with it.

Another reason why people have a hard time forgiving is because of "pride" and a "mistaken sense of principle". They feel that they have been treated badly, so they have a right to hold onto their anger, their resentment, their coldness, their wrath. They believe that if they forgive, they are letting that person off the hook. And they simply cannot do that, because they need to pay for what they did. It doesn't even occur to them, that when they forgive, the only one who they are letting off the hook is themselves.

Folks, I hope you all realize that the inability for us to forgive can have a devastating effect on our lives. Of course, it damages our relationship with the person we will not forgive. But it also poisons our memories, it affects our ability to trust immensely, it weakens our relationship with the Lord, and according to studies, it can even contribute to shortening of our life. Now, that's a very high price to pay to hold onto resentment and anger. So then, how do we let go of this? How do we forgive?

Well, I believe that the first thing we need to do is to take hold of the truth, that forgiveness is a gift of God. If anyone has a perfect right to hold onto a grudge, it's the Lord. He would be perfectly justified in not forgiving us for the countless times we have hurt him deeply with our sins. And yet He offers us perfect forgiveness. Not because we are such great people, but because His forgiveness comes from His grace, His amazing and undeserved love, which is a gift to you and me.

Jesus offered himself up for us on that cross purely as a gift. Suffering, bleeding, dying there with our sins on him, with His gift of love to us. And through His gift and resurrection we have His promise of forgiveness, restoration, life, heaven, all as an amazing gift.

Now, if we can take hold of this gift and make it our own; if we know to the depths of our soul that even though we don't deserve God's forgiveness, still He offers it to us

freely, as a gift, then maybe, we, in turn, can forgive others as a gift. This is the point that Jesus is making with the parable of the man who owed his king 10,000 talents, which is equivalent to about 15 years of wages. As you know, the king forgave the man the entire debt. This same man then went to another man who owes him 100 denarii, which is about a single days wage, and demanded his money. Because the other man could not pay back his debt to him, he had him thrown in jail. Even though he had just been forgiven this enormous debt, he refused to forgive a tiny debt that was owed to him.

Of course, Jesus is really talking about you and I in this parable. We are sinners who have been saved purely by the grace of God. There is no way that we could ever repay God for all of the times we have rebelled against him and hurt him terribly with our sins. That's an impossible debt for us to pay. That is what the cross is all about. Jesus paid for us, the debt that we owe, so that now the debt is forgiven. The question that we need to ask ourselves now is, can we forgive a tiny debt that might be owed to us? Think about it. Is there someone in your life who you need to forgive?

All right, now let's take a look at a couple of other very important points. First, forgiveness is a redemptive act that is essential to our mental, emotional, and spiritual welfare. That means, it is not enough to simply act civil towards a person who has hurt you. Forgiveness is not a passive resignation to a bad situation. We don't simply shrug your shoulders and say, "Oh well, I guess there's nothing I can do about it. So, I suppose I'll have to forgive." Folks, there really isn't any healing in that kind of forgiveness.

I understand, forgiveness can be very difficult and painful, just as it was for Jesus on the cross. He literally carried the weight of our sin on him and suffer through hell itself, facing the complete rejection of His Father, all to bring about this forgiveness. He left himself wide open and was totally vulnerable. We do the same when we choose to forgive.

However, at the same time, choosing to forgive is a positive, joyful activity in which we change from seeing ourselves as being the victim, to seeing ourselves as someone who has won that victory. Forgiveness allows us to experience the presence and power of Christ working in our lives. It is like He is increasing in us, and that sinful self is decreasing. It really is a positive healing force that moves us from that pain to reconciliation. That is what forgiveness does.

Now, there is one more very important point about forgiveness. Forgiveness is the most powerful witness we have to the activity of God's grace in our lives. When we can forgive someone who has hurt us, it tells us, that person, and whoever else is aware of the situation, that God is alive and well in us, and that gives God all the

glory.

I'm sure many of you remember what happened in June 2015. A 21-year-old white supremacist named Dylan Roof, slaughtered nine African-American adults who were in Bible study at the Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. It was a horrible event. But for quite a few, including myself the horror was replaced by complete awe over the response of many of the family members of the victims when they confronted Dylan Roof in court. One family member said, "I forgive you. You took something very precious from me. But I forgive you."

Another person said, "I forgive you. My family forgives you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. And give your life to the one who matters most... Christ."

Still another said, "May God have mercy on you." And this continued.

One pastor commenting on the families statements said, "These people had just gone through the most terrible storm you can imagine. But there was no hatred in their voice. Sorrow, yes, but no hatred. Only love and forgiveness." Can you imagine a more powerful witness to the grace of God and being able to forgive the murder of someone who you dearly loved?

Yes, forgiveness can be difficult and painful, but understand, forgiveness does not come by focusing on ourselves and what has happened to us. Forgiveness comes from lifting up our eyes to the Lord and His grace, and letting that grace, which has wiped out that enormous debt of ours, take hold of us, enabling us to forgive a debt that someone might owe us. When we truly forgive, we not only heal the wounds of a broken relationship, but we actually find healing for our own wound; healing that comes from Jesus is increasing in us, and "self" decreasing. And what that does is it makes an incredibly powerful witness.

So, that concludes our class in "Forgiveness 101". The question remains though, can you and I pass the test when it comes to forgiveness? So, let's pray about it now.