



# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Doing Right When You Have Been Done Wrong

Sunday, July 11, 2021

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I learned early on in my ministry that there is one subject so important I need to be sure to preach on it at least once a year. So, the time has come for me to preach on it again. The subject is forgiveness.

I love the old story about the business man who took a business trip on an airplane. On his way to his destination his plane crashed on a deserted island and he was the only survivor. He spent the next 8 years trying to survive on this island. After 8 years he was discovered and rescued. As he was being led off the island, one of the rescuers was curious to see that the man had built three buildings on the island, so the rescuer asked, "What are those buildings?" The survivor replied, "Well, the one in the middle of the island is my home. The building next to my home is my church. I have not missed a Sunday in 8 years." "Well, what about the one on the other end of the island?" replied the rescuer. The survivor said, "That's where I used to go to church until I got angry and left."

Christian or not, if you live long enough you will find plenty of opportunities to get bitter about something. No one is immune to being hurt by others. But when someone does us wrong we always have a choice. We can bitter or we can get better. This is one of the most important choices of our lives. Unfortunately, many people choose to get bitter, and they ruin their lives with resentment.

A few years ago, TIME magazine featured an article entitled, "Should All Be Forgiven?" The story was done in the wake of the many school shootings we have experienced over the last several years. They polled a bunch of people and asked them whether or not they would forgive another person for doing certain things against them. The results revealed that the overwhelming majority said they would choose bitterness instead of forgiveness. Forgiveness is rare in our culture.

My good friend Dr. Bill Self noted a professor at the University of Wisconsin by the name of Robert Enright who decided to study forgiveness. It seemed to be a subject that no one had done much work on. He went to a library and he could not find much in the area of forgiveness. So, he went to a theological library and he found many references to God's forgiveness but could not find any significant work on human forgiveness.

Enright applied for a grant and began to do a serious study on forgiveness. He spent several years devoting his life to the study of forgiveness. Here are some things that came out of his study. They may not surprise you:

-When someone hurts us, we want to get even. Ever felt that way? "I'll show him! I'll get him! They won't get away with this!"

-We want those who hurt us to suffer. Ever had those dark feelings at night? "I'll make them suffer!"

-Forgiveness is seen as weakness in our culture.

-There are huge benefits to forgiveness. Once you begin to forgive there is less hostility and less anxiety. There are also fewer stress related illnesses like hyper-tension and cardio vascular disease.

-Forgiveness frees us from the emotional jail that we have put ourselves in. When someone hurts us and we decide to harbor resentment, we go to jail inside emotionally and spiritually. And the only way to get out that jail is not through revenge but through forgiveness.



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I will never forget a man coming to see me in another church I served. I had just preached on forgiveness the Sunday before. He told me that he was released from prison a few years back for a crime he had committed. He served time for many years, but had finally been released. He looked at me and said, “I should be happy that I am free, but I am not. I still feel like I am behind bars. I am still in the prison of hatred, prejudice and retribution, and I want to get out!”

I know a lot of people who live in that same prison. Maybe you live in it today. Perhaps you have been betrayed by a family member or a friend. Maybe you have been unjustly fired from a job. Maybe you are bitter toward your parents for something they did or did not do. Perhaps a business partner double crossed you. Maybe you got your hands caught in the machinery of the church, and you are bitter toward a group of people. Maybe you have been nicked, pushed, bruised, cut, and scarred and you are resentful. And the more you feed that resentment the more the bars of your personal prison grow. Perhaps resentment has become like a chain around your neck that pulls you along, controls your life, and steals your joy.

What is sad is that I know people who take bitter feelings with them to the grave. They were done wrong by someone and became bitter and they remained bitter the rest of their lives. They died angry, bitter people.

James Merritt tells the true story about a 94-year-old lady he knew by the name of Hazel who never married. She remained bitter her whole life about not being married. She was active in her church, and when she died, the pastor planned her funeral with specific written instructions from Hazel. She had listed the songs that were to be sung, the scriptures read, and who was to speak. Her final instructions were as follows: “There will be no male pall bearers. They wouldn’t take me out when I was alive and I don’t want them to take me out when I’m dead!”

We laugh at this story, but it reveals how destructive resentment can be. Dwight Moody, the great evangelist, once said, “The one sin that is keeping revival from coming to the church, more lost people from being saved, and more blessings from the people of God is the sin of an unforgiving spirit.” James Merritt says that “When God closes the curtains of time, and draws the shades on the windows of history, we may look back and see that bitterness ruined more marriages, soured more lives, divided more churches, and killed more ministries than any other thing.”

It comes down to this: *We must forgive because forgiveness sets us free.* Bill Self reminds us that when someone does us wrong there is only one question: “Do I want to be healed spiritually, or do I want to go on suffering from an unfair hurt?” We don’t like to hear this because it seems to feel good to carry resentment around. Someone hurts and that hurt turns into hate and we like to sling it around. We feel so righteous with it. We wear it like a badge and it gives us attention. But soon we discover that the resentment we have been carrying around has been like an acid eating up our heart and souls. We have changed to the point where the only thing we can feel is hate. We hate ourselves and we hate the world.

I grew up in the south and became very familiar with a diabolical plant that grows everywhere – kudzu. Kudzu is a savvy plant that does not take much soil to grow in, and it can grow anywhere – over walls, gates, fences, around other plants, on houses. James Merritt likens resentment with emotional kudzu. That is an appropriate metaphor. When we feed resentment, it grows like kudzu inside of us and the tentacles wrap around our hearts and souls and choke us. We become sick spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

Norman Vincent Peale often spoke about preaching one Sunday in New Jersey. After the worship service, an attractive young lady came up to Peale and said, “I’m hoping you can help me. I have an itch that will not go away. It is unbearable. It seems to get worse when I go to church. Today, as you preached, it was just terrible. I also have this low-grade fever.”

Dr. Peale replied, “Well, I have had many reactions to my messages, but never an itch.” She said, “I’m really serious. I have been to so many doctors and no one can tell me what is wrong.” Peale knew that there was more wrong here than just a physical ailment.

Peale got permission to call her primary doctor and the doctor told him that he didn’t think there was anything wrong with her physically. He said, “I think she has some kind of an emotional itch that is manifesting itself physically.” Peale asked the doctor, “Well, do you know of any personal problems in her life?” The doctor replied, “Well, I know that she and her older sister have been at odds for years. They have not spoken to each other in a long time.”

The next day Dr. Peale called the young lady into his office and asked her about her older sister. It was really pretty simple. When their dad died, they had a minor disagreement about the proceeds of his estate. That minor disagreement turned into a major argument and she stormed away and never spoke with her sister again.

Peale asked her when the itching started. She said, “Well, now that you mention it, about a week after this incident.” Then Peale looked at her and asked, “Do you love Jesus?” She said, “Yes.” Peale then asked, “Do you believe Jesus hated anyone?” She replied, “No.” Finally, Peale asked, “Do you believe Jesus can help you with this hate in your heart?” She replied, “Yes.”

Peale said to her, “I want you to do something right now. Tell God you are sorry for this sin in your life, to forgive you and to take your hate away.” She did. Then Peale said, “Now tell God you love your sister and that you forgive her for anything she has done against you.” And she did that as well. She did exactly what Peale told her to do.

Peale asked her what her sister’s phone number was. She gave it to him. He dialed it, and then he handed her the phone. She said, “No, I can’t talk to her!” He said, “Yes you can and will.” She got on the phone and began to cry. She said, “I’m sorry sister. I love you. Please forgive me.” And the relationship was mended right there on the phone.

When she hung up the phone, she turned to Dr. Peale and said, “I can’t believe this. For the first time in four years I don’t itch!” He said, “I bet the fever is gone too.” And it was. What doctors, pills, and psychiatrists could not do, forgiveness could.

We can enjoy our hate and let it kill us or we can let it go, forgive, and be set free. You see, bitterness does more damage to us than it does our target. We think when we choose to be bitter at someone that we are hurting them. This is a myth. Most people we are resentful toward either don’t know or don’t care. The only people we are hurting is ourselves. Some may think, “Well, I will forgive them if they will apologize.” Is that what Jesus says? Forgive people as long as they apologize? No. Besides, most people will never apologize. You can wait all your life and they will never apologize. If someone is a pain in your neck, who neck is the pain in?

We must forgive to be set free. But perhaps, most of all, *we must forgive because we have been forgiven.* Scripture is clear. 1<sup>st</sup> John reminds us that we cannot love God and hate our brother. Everything is connected. We will not grow spiritually if we harbor resentment. It is impossible to be the people God has called us to be when our souls are tangled up in bitterness.

Jesus is also clear that we are forgiven in direct proportion to the way we forgive others. Jesus forgives us if we forgive others. We say in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses, just as we forgive those who trespass against us.” This is a bold prayer. It literally means, “Lord, forgive me in the same manner that I forgive others.” Do we really mean that? So, if we come to God in worship and pray that prayer with resentment still in our hearts, what we are really saying to God is “Don’t forgive me.”

Now, you can argue with God at judgment time about this if you want to, but what Jesus means is this: when we refuse to forgive someone, we are denying what Jesus did on the cross—we are slapping Jesus in the face and saying, “What you did on the cross really does not mean anything to me.”

Think about it for just a second and it will become very clear. Think about all the ways we have sinned against God, offended God, hurt God. How did God respond? By dying on a cross for us, by forgiving us, by giving us grace. Knowing this truth, do we have any right not to forgive? You see, we always judge other people a lot harder than we judge ourselves.

Charles Spurgeon said, “Let us go to Calvary to learn how we may be forgiven; and let us linger there to learn how to forgive.”

Forgive to be set free. Forgive because you have been forgiven. Amen.