

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

When Forgiving is Hard to Do

Matthew 18:21-35

Sunday, February 12, 2023

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I am convinced that there is one thing that will change our world – forgiveness.

The church talks a big game about making a difference and changing the world. If we are serious about changing the world it begins with love and forgiveness.

But to get real – it is never easy to forgive. All of us have scar tissue in our lives to prove it. All of us have been hurt, betrayed, cut down, rejected and wounded by others and the last thing we feel like doing is forgiving.

I can tell you that I have never felt like forgiving anyone. I've done it, but I never felt like doing it. In fact, a while back someone did something to me that hurt me very much. What did your sweet loving pastor want to do in response? Not forgive! I wanted to retaliate! I wanted to hurt them the same way they hurt me. You will be glad to know that I didn't do that. But I wanted to!

I know I am not alone with the way I feel. I know there is a lot of emotional and spiritual scar tissue here today – the betrayals, the lies, the deceit, the abuse, the insults, the bullying, the infidelity. We all have been wounded by others.

And I know the whole idea of forgiveness may sound insane to some of you. You could forgive someone who made a mistake or didn't know better, but someone who willingly hurt you? Well that is something else entirely!

You may be thinking, "I know you are supposed to preach on forgiveness Charley, but quite frankly it is easier said than done and you have no idea what some people have done to me. I know I am supposed to forgive but I just can't bring myself to do it."

It has been my experience that one of the reasons it is so hard for us to forgive is because the idea of forgiveness is misunderstood. There are great myths about forgiveness. I think the greatest myth about forgiveness that keeps so many people from experiencing the freedom of forgiveness is the idea that forgiving means forgetting. Somehow it has been presented that if you are truly a Christian you will forgive and forget. You will

forgive the person and ask God to give you spiritual amnesia about what the person did to hurt you. When you see them, you will put a smile on your face and you will trust them again.

Well, folks I am here to tell you today that is not what the Bible calls us to do. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. Forgiveness is not spiritual amnesia. It is not for the simple reason that it is humanly impossible to forget when someone has hurt us. God gave us memories so we would remember to avoid being hurt again. In fact, trying to forget the pain inflicted by another is emotionally unhealthy and will lead to further mental issues down the road.

When God asks us to forgive He is not asking us to pretend like nothing ever happened and to go on trusting the person who hurt us at the same level we trusted before. Nor is God necessarily asking us to continue the same kind of relationship with the person. In fact, when God calls us to forgive He is not necessarily asking us to feel all warm and fuzzy about the person either! Forgiveness does not mean forgetting the need for boundaries nor does it mean forgetting that there are consequences to hurtful behavior.

Another myth of forgiveness is that it is something that happens overnight. No, it is not! It is a process. It takes a great deal of time and healing before we can truly forgive.

So, what is forgiveness exactly? What is biblical forgiveness and how can we bring ourselves to do it when it is so hard to do? Well, I want to answer that question today because learning how to forgive is one of the most liberating things you can do. Because the unwillingness to forgive is what keeps many of us spiritually and emotionally stuck in life. It's also terrible for your mental, physical and spiritual health. I don't know any happy healthy spiritually mature people who hold on to resentment. But I know a lot of mean, hateful, unhappy people who do. Resentment is the cause of more emotional and mental turmoil than you could ever imagine.

Maybe you are filled with resentment and bitterness and it is destroying you and you can't seem to let go of it. Maybe you are estranged from people you love and it is just tearing you up. Maybe you can't seem to let go of the past. You want to find healing and restoration in your relationships but you don't know how to do it. It's affecting work, your faith, your family life, and your ability to enjoy life. If this is not where you are today, I bet you know someone who is in this place who desperately needs to learn how to forgive.

Well, let's begin with something part of a prayer we say just about every week in worship. We've said it so many times we really don't see its power. It begins: **"Forgive us our trespasses...."** We pray that one loud and proud. Oh, we like the first part. "Oh yes, forgive us Lord. Forgive us. Yes, forgive us. I screwed up. Where would I be without your grace? Forgive us." We will pray that all day long.

It is wonderful to ask God for forgiveness and know that He is faithful to forgive, but there is more to this phrase. There is not a period after "trespasses." Instead, there is a tiny little word that makes this phrase a huge, mind blowing prayer to God – "AS." **"Forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us."**

We just want to ask for God's forgiveness but the word AS will not let us off the hook. Because of that inconvenient little word this is what we mean when we pray this phrase: "Lord, forgive me in the same way that I forgive others. Forgive me as long as I forgive other people." Here is another way we can put this phrase: "Lord, if I refuse to forgive others, do not forgive me." Ouch! Wow!

If this is not challenging enough, we notice in Matthew 6 after Jesus gives the Lord's Prayer to his disciples he says some of the hardest words we have to swallow in scripture:

"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive you."

Now, wait a second! Did Jesus really say that? Did Jesus really mean that if we hold resentments and don't forgive then God will not forgive us? "I thought that there were no conditions to God's forgiveness and grace! I thought God's forgiveness has no strings attached! I'm in trouble!" Maybe you are thinking, "It's hard for me to forgive! I still have not forgiven people

in my life. Does that mean my eternal salvation is in jeopardy?"

Well, what I believe Jesus meant by that statement is not God's forgiveness of our sin is the direct result of our forgiveness of others. God's grace is not given because of what we do. It is given because of who God is. What I believe Jesus meant was that our ability to forgive hinges on our understanding of what forgiveness means. Once we understand what it means we will not hold back our forgiveness of others.

So, what does forgiveness mean? What was Jesus driving at?

Well, Jesus expressed how he wants us to understand forgiveness by telling a parable. It is called the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

**Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."
-Matthew 18:21-22**

No, Jesus didn't want us to get our calculators out. 77 times is another way of saying forever. 7 is an eternal number, complete. No limit!

As the Peter's jaw is on the floor, Jesus said, "Let me explain with a story." And Jesus told this parable:

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold (or talents) was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt." -Matthew 18:23-25

Just to give you some perspective, one talent was worth about 20 years of a day laborers wage. One talent is what the laborer would make in 20 years. Now imagine how much 10,000 of those talents was worth! This laborer owed a crazy amount of money.

Of course, the laborer couldn't possibly pay that back! So, the master was going to sell the family and their possessions to repay the debt. But look what happens:

"At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be

patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go." -Matthew 18:26-27

What a gift! That's like you owing a two million dollars to the IRS and they say, "Don't worry about it. Forgiven!"

But the story is far from over:

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins (or denarius). He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded."

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt." -Matthew 18:28-30

Did you see this? Right after this servant was forgiven millions of dollars he went after someone who owed him just a few hundred dollars, beat him up and said, "Pay me!"

And even when the man begged just like he had a moment ago, he showed no mercy even though great mercy had been shown to him. He threw him into prison.

This man had a short memory. Take a look at what happens next:

"When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." -Matthew 18:31-35

So, it comes down to this – Are you refusing to forgive someone? Just go to the cross and see Jesus hanging there gasping for breath. He did it all for you. He forgave you and you didn't deserve it. He paid your debt

and you didn't deserve it. He forgave you and does not hold it against. He had mercy on you.

Knowing that how could we ever deny forgiving someone else? You see, when it comes to forgiveness most of us are terrible at math. We overestimate the sins of others and underestimate our own sin.

Forgiveness does not make any sense unless you understand the magnitude of God's forgiveness of you. The point of this parable is that if you really understood the forgiveness of God for you, you would never hesitate forgiving others.

If you are a Christian, you aren't expected to treat others the way you have been treated by others. You are expected to treat others the way God has treated you. So here is the message. We don't forgive because the other person deserves it, or has apologized, or feels terrible enough (chances are they never will). **We forgive because we have been forgiven.** Period.

A good exercise when we get to this part of the Lord's Prayer is to ask, "Have I forgiven those who have hurt me? Have I stopped holding it against them? Have I stopped bringing it up and torturing them with it? Have I given them a clean slate? Have I created a new beginning for them in our relationship? Have I begun the process of letting go of the resentment and bitterness? Have I sought a new beginning with that person even though it may be different than before?"

Forgiveness is the one thing that will change our world. We should know. Jesus demonstrated the ultimate power of forgiveness on the cross. And that event forever altered the world as we know it.

I loved Mr. Rogers growing up. I was raised on his TV programs. What many don't know is that Mr. Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. Once when he was invited to deliver the Commencement address at Pittsburgh Seminary, he told a story about one of his professors there, Dr. William Orr. Fred Rogers had gone to see Dr. Orr, toward the end of his life after a stroke left him partially paralyzed, but his professor was still bright in mind and spirit. Mr. Rogers asked him about something that puzzled him for a long time. It had come up again during the Sunday morning worship service earlier that day. One of the hymns sung that morning had been Martin Luther's *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. What puzzled Mr. Rogers was the verse that says:

*The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for
him; his rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is
sure, one little word shall fell him.*

“Dr. Orr,” Fred Rogers asked, “what is the one little word that will fell the prince of darkness? That one word Luther claimed would strike down evil?” After a quiet moment, the professor answered, “Forgive. The word is forgive. Forgiveness is the only thing evil cannot tolerate” (Christianity Today, March 2000).

Immediately after 9/11 the Washington National Cathedral held a national service of mourning. When the people were dismissed from the service this is the prayer that was used:

“Go forth into the world in peace; Be of good courage; Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint hearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted. Honor everyone. Love and serve the Lord.”

This should be our prayer today! For Jesus told us that it is unlimited acts of love, mercy and forgiveness repeated over and over again by those who will not give in to hate or give up on love that will always overcome evil.