

WHEN IT'S TIME FOR FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:21-35

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A Gallup Poll asked Americans what they try to do when they are wronged? Forty-eight percent said they try to forgive; eight percent said they try to get even. In our minds at least, forgiveness outdoes revenge six to one. Forgiveness—what a wonderful idea!

Forgiveness is the oil that lubricates the human machine. Without it, all of life becomes hot and squeaky. Or as my favorite author on the subject Lewis Smedes says, “God has invented forgiveness as a remedy to the past that even He could not change.”

Jesus said, “*Forgive and you will be forgiven.*” (Luke 6:37) So, if we want to move from the house of hurt and hate to a home of love and grace, we must learn the fine art of forgiveness. Here are some places where we can start.

Forgiveness is first of all an experience. Only the forgiven have the resources to forgive. It is the experience of grace that empowers us to be graceful to others. We learn to forgive by being forgiven. I suspect that one of the reasons we are so chintzy and cheap about forgiving other people is that we have yet to open our hearts and our lives to the full and wonderful grace of God’s goodness to us. God forgives.

Once upon a time a man found himself billions of dollars in debt. How he got that way, nobody really knows. As Jesus tells the story it would have taken the annual income of five countries just to have paid the interest on what he owed. Yet, this entrepreneur pleads for more time to save himself; this self-sufficient, positive-thinking person thinks that somehow by his own effort and his own energy he can do it himself. He pleads with the king, if you’ll just give me a little time, I’ll take care of it myself. It seems to me people are waiting in this story for the hammer to fall, knowing there is no way he can pay his debt at all. But, just as they wait for the hammer of justice to come, the king steps in, cancels the debt, and gives him a full pardon. What a terrible way to do business and what a wonderful way to live life.

This parable is trying to teach us the profound truth that God forgives our debts. Do you know that? Do you know how deeply God forgives you today? Sometimes we sing it in an old song:

*Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe
Sin had left its crimson stain,
He washed me white as snow.*

In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Will you turn to somebody around you and say that? In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Do not go home today until you know that.

Don't try to live your life without receiving that kind of grace. I have said it to grown men and watched tears roll down their cheeks. I have said it to elderly ladies and seen a spark come in their eyes. I have said it to children and teenagers struggling with adolescent guilt and seen a sense of hope come to their eyes. In the name of Jesus Christ you and I are forgiven.

The psalmist put it this way: *“As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”* (Psalm 103:12) I have said that all of my life. I learned it as a little kid when I got a prize for memorizing Psalm 103:12. *As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.* But it was only a couple of days ago I started thinking, why did the psalmist say east to west? He could have said north to south. Imagine a globe in my hand. You can see it; it is round. Had he said north to south, you could go north far enough until finally you are going south. You could have gone south far enough until finally you are going north. There is an end to north and south. He could have said what we used to sing:

Buried in the deepest sea, yes that's deep, deep enough for me.

But now in our day and time, we know the bottom of the sea. We can explore the bottom. We know there is a floor to the sea. We have been there. That is not what the psalmist says. He says as far as the east is from the west. When you start going east you can just keep going and going and going and going. The psalmist in his wisdom says that is how far God has removed our transgressions from us.

In the name of Jesus Christ you and I are forgiven. Don't go home today until you know that in your own mind

People who experience the grace of God are able to extend it to other people. God forgives. People forgive. In their finest hours people have found the grace to look an enemy in the eye and offer forgiveness. The world is a better place and we are better people because others have tempered justice with mercy and faced the facts with a forgiving heart.

There are hundreds of places we could go to illustrate it. I think of Nelson Mandela emerging from 26 years of imprisonment in South Africa. He could have released revenge upon the supporters of apartheid and turned loose hatred in that country. Instead, this Methodist Christian stepped forward with a message of forgiveness and reconciliation and because of his Christian witness, South Africa avoided a blood bath. People forgive. The forgiveness of people has international consequence.

On December 1, 1997, Missy Jenkins pulled her hair into pony tails, slipped on her sweat pants and a long-sleeved shirt and went off to school. She joined her classmates in a prayer meeting. At 7:45 that morning they said their last prayer together, she and 35 classmates. As they dismissed the prayer meeting, another classmate by the name of Michael Carneal walked into their midst and opened fire on them. Missy took a bullet through her left shoulder and it lodged in her spine. Missy will never walk again.

About a year or so after that she was in Louisville. At a press conference, here is what Missy said. "Michael took so much from me that day, but I believe hating him is a wasted emotion. Besides, hating Michael won't make me walk, nor bring my classmates back to life. The media especially wants to know how I could forgive? It's what God teaches us to do." People find the grace to forgive others.

When I think about the times I have missed the mark of my high calling and surrendered to some temptation strong, or lost my soul in the heat of ambition, stumbled at some leadership position, failed some pastoral responsibility, or felt the sting of defeat only to have a family member say, "I forgive you," or a church member say, "I won't hold it against you," or a superior say, "neither do I condemn you." When I pause to think about moments like that, I think again how it is grace that has brought us safe this far and how grace will get us home. People and God have been merciful to us. Thanks be to God for grace is real.

If God can forgive that much and by God's grace other people can be that graceful, then it flows logically that being forgiven we ought to extend forgiveness. Freely we have received, freely give. How can we do that? Let me suggest a few ways. I teach a whole workshop on it, but let me give you some pointers.

We who have received forgiveness are called to express forgiveness and here is how to start. We surrender our right to revenge. "I don't want him killed, I just want him maimed," said a hurt wife one day to me. I suspect we have all been there, haven't we, at one time or another?

The rest of the story goes something like this. Here is a man who is forgiven billions of dollar and what does he do? He goes out and finds somebody who owes him a few bucks. If you read the parable carefully, you discover that the dialogue is exactly the same in both of these conversations. So what does the guy say? "If you'll be patient with me, if you'll give me a little time, I'll pay it back in full."

But this guy who has been forgiven billions of dollars now looks at the guy who owes him a few bucks and dares to say to him, "I will have justice now. I want a pound of flesh for everything you've ever done." So he throws him in jail. Not even God can stand that. This is not a pretty parable. It ends with a brutal kind of justice because there is just something incongruent about being forgiven and then not expressing forgiveness to others.

We start the road of forgiveness when we surrender our rights to revenge. Let me suggest some ways to surrender. We admit the pain. We stop denying. “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.”—Wrong! “It doesn’t matter to me.”—Wrong! “I don’t care what other people think or say.”—Wrong! Just stop fooling yourself. Come out of denial. You see, we hurt; we hate; and we heal. If we don’t move through that process, we get stuck in it somewhere. If you get stuck in that process, you are going to die bitter. The way to get the healing is to own the hurt at the start and understand the feelings that come with it, so eventually you can move to health and wholeness. Just admit the pain.

Seek the truth. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.” I must tell you, it will probably make you miserable first. It will hurt so bad that you don’t want to hear it. But, the only way you are going to get through it is to face the facts. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God.

And then, just turn it loose. Lou sat in a sharing group one night sharing his pain. As he did, he took his handkerchief and began to twist it and turn it as if the twisted handkerchief represented the kind of twisted spirit that was existing inside of his hurt soul. As he began to talk about it, he twisted it more and more and more and more until it was a knot. A wise leader of the group said, “Why don’t you turn it loose?” Lou released it and let it go. That, my friends, is surrender. Somebody else in the group then said, “Why don’t you just leave it there when the time is up?” We surrender our right to revenge.

We offer a gift. Forgiveness has to do with giving. It is for giving. I think the best definition of forgiveness I’ve ever heard came from Doris Donnely. In one of her books, On Learning to Forgive, she defines forgiveness in these words: “Forgiveness is an empowered form of giving.”

A gift. A gift is a present, a favor, an offering. We don’t earn gifts. We are given gifts. People don’t deserve gifts. They are offered gifts. A gift is just that, a gift. Nobody can demand forgiveness; we can only give forgiveness. If there is any ought in forgiveness, it is not the ought of obligation, it is the ought of opportunity. Here we are in this discussion. Before this parable, there is Jesus giving instructions on how people ought to settle their differences one with another. After Jesus has shared a formula in the first part of Matthew 18, Peter says to him, “Oh, Lord, what should I do? Should I forgive my brother seven times?”

Now you’ve got to understand what is going on here. The rabbis had a saying that if you forgave somebody three times you were a perfect person. Look at what Peter does. He doubles the formula, adds one for good measure, and says to Jesus, “How about it, Jesus, isn’t seven enough?” Jesus says, “If you’ve got to use your calculator to work on forgiveness you’re not going to get there at all, folks.”

Forgiveness is a matter of conscience. It is not a matter of calculating. If you are still asking, "When is enough, enough?" You are not ready to forgive yet. If you are still asking how much, and how far, and how long, and how many, and who, and where, and is it just, and is it right; you know all the questions, I've asked them a million times, you haven't caught it yet. Forgiveness is a gift. Does the other person deserve it? That is not the question. Will they recognize it? Probably not. They are probably convinced they never did anything wrong anyway. It is not going to change them. It is going to change you. It is an empowered form of giving. It is a gift and a gift is a gift is a gift is a gift. Here, you can have it.

To forgive is to offer a gift. And when we forgive, we discover freedom. Forgiving is not forgetting. Forgiving is not excusing, but forgiving is freedom. And the person who is freed is the person who is forgiving. You see, there is something about the act of forgiving that somehow loosens the noose around your neck, unlocks the lock on your heart, and takes the bars away from your soul. It will set you free. Let me tell you, it will set you free if you forgive.

For several years Terry Anderson was held hostage in the Middle East. Then, in December 1991, he was brought back to Washington. I was in Washington at that time to bury one of his colleagues and comrades who did not get home alive. The media stormed Terry Anderson. Terry Anderson had had a religious experience while imprisoned. The media asked him, "How are you going to treat your captors? Are you going to forgive them?" Anderson replied, "I'm a Christian. I made it through these days by simply praying the Lord's Prayer every day. I can't pray the Lord's Prayer without dealing with forgiveness." Then he said this. "Could I ever be free if I failed to forgive, however hard it may be?" I ask you that question. Can I ever be free if I fail to forgive, however hard the forgiving may be?

Forgiveness is not a magic wand to wave over human relationships so that everything will be all right. It is to draw a line in the sand and to turn your face from the past to the future and to say to Almighty God, could we start again, please? Could we start again?

So, as the forgiven and forgiving children of God, let us pray the prayer that he taught us to pray. Amen.

