

Beyond the Doors: Sharing a Life that Really Matters
“The Door of Forgiveness”

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Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father and son who had a serious misunderstanding. In the story, the boy finally runs away from home. The father however, is not content to let his son go. In an effort to find the boy, the father puts an ad in the Madrid, Spain newspaper. It contained these words:

Dear Paco,

Meet me at the town square at noon on Sunday.
All is forgiven.....Your father

That Sunday, 800 males by the name of Paco showed up at the town square. They all came seeking forgiveness from their fathers.

Alexander Pope said, “To err is human, to forgive is divine.” At the heart of the Christian faith lies the principle of forgiveness. Come let us take a closer look.

FORGIVENESS IS AN EXPERIENCE

I have a friend who raised four boys. They were typical boys prone to get in their fair share of trouble. Even as adults they struggled to grow up. Jim says, “When I answered the phone and one of my boys said, ‘Dad, we have a problem,’ I knew I was in for a long night.”

The Bible says we have a problem. The problem is sin. The disease is deadly. If we want to live we must find a remedy; that is what forgiveness is all about. We are talking about serious business today. The business of wrong and how to make it right.

Some say sin is exciting. Hollywood glorifies sex and violence as if it were an innocent frolic in the sun or a simple punch in the mouth. Movie stars and sports heroes often consider themselves exceptions to community standards. Why abide by the rules when you have the money to do as you please? Meanwhile, children suffer. Teens are confused. Women are raped. Lives are destroyed all in the name of innocent fun.

Some say sin is exclusive. Where I came from the lines were drawn between the good and the bad; the right and the wrong; the moral and the immoral. We used to sing it in a little jingle: *“One door and only one, and yet its sides are two. Inside or outside on which side are you?”* The problem was that sin got on the inside too. It expressed itself in prejudice, gossip, bullying, and rumor mills that destroyed the character of others.

Some say sin is excusable. “We ain’t done anything wrong, we’ve just been lonely too long,” says the country song. Two mothers have daughters on drugs. One mother sticks her head in the sand and pretends that nothing is wrong. In the name of love she makes excuses, ignores the facts, and prays it will all go away. The other mother is devastated. Her heart is broken. The pain is deep. But she is determined to get to the bottom of the problem and get help. Which mother really loves her daughter?

The Bible says sin is a deadly disease; we all suffer from it. *We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is none righteous, no not one.* We err and stray from God’s ways like lost sheep. We follow the devices and desires of our own hearts too much. We have broken God’s laws. We have left undone those things we ought to have done, and we have done those things we ought not to have done. May God have mercy. That is what He does. **God invented forgiveness as a remedy to the past that even he could not change.**

Forgiveness is costly but completely free. That is what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. The first words from Jesus on the cross are “*Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*” Before He prayed for His own pain; before He mentions His mother; instead of calming His frightened disciples, Jesus opens the door of forgiveness to his enemies.

Because of Mel Gibson’s movie our country is abuzz about The Passion of the Christ. From Larry King to Diane Sawyer to the person you bump into at the lunch counter, everybody has an opinion. Some love it. Others hate it. I sense that most of our discussions, and maybe the movie itself, miss the point. The question is not who killed Jesus. The question is why did He die? The point of the Cross is not violence in your face, but God’s amazing grace portrayed there for you and me.

I do not pretend to comprehend the atonement. It remains a mystery to me. Even if the Lord were to send a revelation, I am not sure my small mind could contain it. So I am content to stand in awe. It seems odd to me that Jesus Christ would need to be the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Yet there are times I am comforted to realize that “*there is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel’s veins. And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.*”

That evil is powerful enough to require a ransom from God for my soul makes God seem weak and impotent. But in my most sin-free moments I am happy to sing, “*Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe. Sin had left its crimson stain. He washed me white as snow.*”

I do understand the word **remission**. I do know that radical problems require radical cures. I do know that you have to nearly die in order to get a chance to live. I do know that Christ comes to us in the midst of suffering. I do know that

by His stripes we are healed. So I sometimes pray *“Jesus keep me near the cross, there a precious fountain. Free to all, a healing stream, flows from Calvary’s mountain.”*

Here is the gospel as I understand it. At the cross of Jesus Christ your sins and mine are forgiven. Either our sins have been forgiven by God or they remain in us as sin, for only God can forgive sins. Arthur Dimmesdale, in The Scarlet Letter, with his unconfessed and unforgiven sin reasons: I am a person of intellect. I will absorb myself in thought, but reason is not a remedy for sin. I am a minister. I will preach sermons and save souls, but ministers stand in the need of the grace they so freely proclaim to others. I am a servant. I will go door to door helping others, but days are not long enough to rid our souls of guilt. So there is one remedy to the disease that threatens to destroy us. It is the unearned, undeserved, unconditional forgiveness of God. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

FORGIVENESS IS AN EXPRESSION

Jesus said, *“If you forgive people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”* Forgiveness is something to be shared as well as received.

Doris Donnelly says, “Forgiveness is an empowered form of giving.” Forgiveness is not a passive resignation to a bad situation. Rather, forgiveness is a positive, joyful movement in which we change from seeing ourselves victims to seeing ourselves as victors. Forgiveness enables us to move from weakness to strength, from inadequacy to self-affirmation.

Forgiveness is a gift, a present, a favor, an offering. We do not earn gifts, we are given gifts. People do not earn gifts, they are offered gifts. A gift is just that – a gift. Nobody can demand forgiveness. We only give forgiveness. If there is any **ought**, it is the **ought** of opportunity, not the **ought** of obligation. If you choose to forgive someone you will give them the best gift that you can humanly give another person.

The most famous photo of the Vietnam War appeared in June 1971 showing a small girl running naked down the road with an expression of unimaginable terror, her clothes burned off, her body scorched by napalm. U.S. Army pilot, John Plummer, had coordinated that raid. “When I saw the picture, it knocked me to my knees,” said John. “I knew I could never talk about it.” The little girl, Pham Thi Kim Phuc survived and later moved to Toronto. In 1996 she was invited to speak at a Veterans Day observance in Washington, D.C. John Plummer, who lived nearby, decided to attend. In her speech Kim said, “If I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him we cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present.” John Plummer slipped her a note saying, “I am that man.” After the speech, they met and John said, “She just opened her arms to me; I fell into her arms sobbing. All I could say was, ‘I am sorry.’ Kim said ‘It’s all right. I forgive, I forgive.’”

Forgiveness is an active form of freeing. To forgive is to let go. It is to break free. It takes two to reconcile, but it takes only one to forgive. Wouldn't you like to be set free from the weight of wrong that you have carried so long?

Resentment is when you let your hurt become hate. Resentment is when you allow what is eating you to eat you. Resentment is when you poke, stoke, and feed the fire of your hurt stirring up the flames and reliving the pain. Christ wants to set you free from resentment.

A visit to Yellowstone Park discovered the only animal a bear would not fight for food is a skunk. With one swing of his powerful paw the bear could crush the skunk. So why does the bear allow the skunk to eat with him? Because he has discovered the high cost of getting even!

Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison in South Africa. When he was released he said, "Everything and everybody that means anything to me had been taken away. It was all gone and I hated them for it. Then I remembered what Jesus said about forgiveness. God spoke to me and said, 'Nelson, for 27 years you were their prisoner, but you were always a free man. Do not let them turn you into a free man only to make you into their prisoner.' It was then I realized the importance of forgiveness."

Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future. Forgiveness does not cause us to forget, it does set us free. We will know that forgiveness has begun when we can recall those who have hurt us and feel the power to wish them well.

In the name of Jesus Christ we are forgiven and we are empowered to forgive. The time to start is now.

Amen.