

July 29, 2018

“The Call to Forgiveness - Questions”

Matthew 18:21-35

FCF: Forgiveness - we know it's necessary but are confused

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus has called us to be a forgiving people.
(magnet) We need to think through what that means.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

God made us as both physical and spiritual beings. And there are parallels between them. Our body and spirit are very much part of what it means to be human. And both are fallen.

On the physical side, say you go to your doctor for a checkup and are told, “Your sleep schedule is a wreck, your exercise regimen nonexistent, and your nutritional habits are a mess.” So you know you need to make changes but don't know how. “Don't worry. We'll show you.”

Move to the spiritual side. Things are a mess here too and it shows in our relationships, especially in our struggle to forgive. Again, we know we need to. But we're confused and don't know how. Well, take heart. We have not just commands but also the counsel for our questions.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 18:21-35](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Let's take a moment to recap the lessons from last week on this parable. The basic idea is this: we are to forgive each other without limit for God has forgiven us without limit. Because of our sin, we owed an unimaginable and un-payable debt to God which, out of mercy, He forgave through Christ. That is the lens through which we must see the sins of others against us. Theirs is the lesser debt. And it demands to be forgiven. That's the basic idea of the parable.

It is a powerful and memorable story. We gain fresh insight each time we study it. It is foundational to whatever else we could ever say on the topic of forgiveness. That said, as a foundation, it was not meant to address everything. That was not Jesus' intent. There are other issues, concerns, and questions raised. And we ought not to ignore them. We should press into them. Jesus has called us to be a forgiving people. We need to think through what that means.

To do that, we can start with two basic questions. The first is, “What is forgiveness?” And the second is, “What does it look like?” We're going to be looking at those for the next few minutes. And I should add that, for those of you who recall our studies in the past from Peacemaker Ministries or RW360, some of this may sound familiar. Well, there's two reasons for that. One, that's just the water in which I swim. And, two, we never really graduate from the basics. We just come to learn more and more how badly we need to grow. So let's dive in.

I. WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

First, what is forgiveness? Given the level of confusion, we'll start with what it isn't. Imagine you arrive at a construction site. It's a mess. What do you do? You clear the debris.

A) Negatively Stated

So we begin with defining this by looking at the negative. Again, we need to clear debris.

1. Not a feeling

To start, forgiveness is not a feeling. It is an act of the will. And it involves a series of decisions.

2. Not excusing

Forgiveness is not a feeling. Nor is it excusing. It is not saying, "It's okay" or "It wasn't really wrong." No, it was wrong and it's not okay. This is being honest and opens the way for healing.

3. Not forgetting

Forgiveness is not a feeling. It is not excusing. Nor is it forgetting. Think with me. Forgetting is passive. Events just fade from our memory. Forgiveness means not remembering. That is active. It is a choice, a decision. (READ Isaiah 43:25) It's not that God can't remember, as though He's feeble and absent-minded. It's not that He can't remember. It's that He won't.

Illustration:

This image of His deciding not to remember our sins is complemented by other images in the Old Testament (READ Psalm 103:11-12). How far is the east from the west? An infinite distance. (READ Micah 7:18-19) Let that settle in for a moment. What if we believed that?

B) Positively Stated

That's forgiveness in the negative - what it isn't. What about the positive - what it is?

1. Debt cancelled

In the New Testament, there are two verbs to consider. The first is *aphiemi*, meaning to let go or to release. It can be used in the context of a debt being cancelled or paid in full by another party.

2. Undeserved

The other verb is *charizomai*, meaning favor bestowed freely, unconditionally. It is undeserved.

3. Costly

So forgiveness involves a debt cancelled and it's undeserved. There's one more thing. And that is it's costly. It's free to the one who receives it. But not to the one who extends it. It's costly.

Illustration:

We see something of that in the parable of the unmerciful servant. We talked about this last week. Think back to Act One and the forgiveness offered by the king to the first servant - the cancellation of an unimaginable and un-payable debt. This came at great cost to the royal treasury. The king's accountant would have had a fit. These funds would never be recovered.

That's a picture of forgiveness - the undeserved cancellation of a debt at great cost.

Application:

So how do we apply this? A sin has been committed against us. Hurt has been caused and harm has been done. Using this imagery, we know there is a payment on a debt to be made.

Which means there is a choice before us. We can either take payment or make payment. If we choose to take payment, we will dwell upon the wrong, grow cold and aloof, give up on the relationship, gossip and seek revenge against this person. We can choose to take payment.

Or we can choose to make payment. We can absorb the debt ourselves. We can cancel it, write it off. This will be once for all. And then perhaps even repeatedly as it comes to our mind.

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II. WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

That's something of what forgiveness is as far as a definition. But what does it look like? We have a vision and a destination. We can see where we need to go. But how do we get there?

A) *A Question*

We have to start with a question. And that is, "Should this be overlooked?" There are texts that speak to this ([READ Proverbs 19:11](#)). We have at least a couple of factors to consider.

1. The context

The first would be the context. What were the circumstances? Is this a pattern of behavior?

2. The parties

We need to consider the context. And then the parties. Has it created a wall between you and the other party, caused you to feel differently towards them for some days? Is it causing harm? That is, is it causing harm to God's reputation, to others, and to the offender themselves? These are questions to consider. If the answer is "no", then this may be a time for the sin to be overlooked.

B) *Four Promises*

But perhaps it's more than that. In which case, it demands not being overlooked but being forgiven. In which case, if we are to forgive, we will then be making four promises.

1. The Peacemaker

Ken Sande lists these as "The Four Promises of Forgiveness" in [The Peacemaker](#) ([READ quote](#)):

First, I will not think about this incident.

Second, I will not bring this incident up and use it against you.

Third, I will not talk to others about this incident.

Fourth, I will not allow this incident to stand between us or to hinder our personal relationship.

2. The Young Peacemaker

Ken's wife, Corlette, customized those for children in [The Young Peacemaker](#) ([READ quote](#)), "Good thought. Hurt you not. Gossip never. Friends forever." That's worth memorizing.

This is what we're saying when we say, "I forgive you." And it's what God says to us.

C) *Two Stages*

There's something else worth pointing out. Ideally, repentance will be there. That is, the other party will own what they've done and confess it. But what about when they don't?

1. Positional

It's at this point we have to recognize that biblical forgiveness is a two stage process. The first stage is a positional forgiveness. Jesus speaks of this ([READ Mark 11:25](#)). This is unconditional and involves our attitude towards the offender, arising not from our relationship with them but with God. Our position is a readiness to forgive and resolve the matter. It's that first promise.

2. Transactional

It awaits the full transactional forgiveness, the second stage ([READ Luke 17:3-4; Matthew 18:15](#)). Unlike the first stage, this second stage of transactional forgiveness is conditional on the other party's response. It is dependent upon them. That is, there has to have been a rebuking and repenting, a confessing for forgiving. Which then opens the way to a full reconciliation. Which then brings in those other three promises. And it's what we should long for and pray for.

All of this is what forgiveness actually looks like. This is how it plays out.

Application:

I have to tell you that, in my experience, there is a lot of confusion on this idea of two stage forgiveness. And the tragic effect is that people end up assuming Jesus is unrealistic and naive. And, once that hooved foot is in the door, we become cynical to everything else He says.

But it's vital we understand this. This applies not just in cases where someone is slow and unwilling to repent. It can apply to cases in which they are dead and unable to repent. How do you forgive then? You recognize that there are these two stages. And that first stage frees you from all the crippling bitterness and resentment in which you would otherwise be imprisoned.

Let me hit a couple more questions that come up at this point. "If I forgive this person, does that mean I can't ever mention it again?" This would have to do with that second promise. Those promises aren't meant to be mechanical gears but relational guides. Let's say someone you know struggles with anger, lust, or greed. There was an incident for which you've forgiven them. But if this is a deep-seated thing, it's likely going to happen again. And for you to mention it would not be unkind, assuming there was clarity of motive and kindness of speech.

"What about consequences?" Forgiveness does not necessarily erase consequences. We see that pretty clearly with God's dealings with His people. Sometimes the consequences stay in place so as to teach us and warn others. If a teenager blows off the rules about the smartphone, the parents should consider taking the phone. If an employee makes off with some cash, there may need to be restitution. All those are wisdom issues to be taken on a case-by-case basis.

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CONCLUSION:

Much has been said on the power of forgiveness - that is, the transformative effect it has on our relationships, our witness, and even our health. That's the power of forgiveness. It's real.

But it's vital we remember also the power for forgiveness - that is, where it comes from. Corrie ten Boom, the author of [The Hiding Place](#), wrote of this some years ago as she recalled the struggle to forgive a guard at the concentration camp where her sister died ([READ quote](#)):

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavyset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear.

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown.

"When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever."

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, *fräulein!* How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course – how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." No, he did not remember me.

"But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. *Fräulein!*" – a gain the hand came out – "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there – I whose sins had every day to be forgiven – and could not. Betsie had died in that place – could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it – I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality.

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion – I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

"Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!"

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.

That's a powerful story. And it's worth every telling.

Here's something worth remembering. That same power at work in her heart that day is at work today. The Holy Spirit is just as real, as present and needed, whether we're struggling to forgive a Nazi guard, a stubborn spouse, a rebellious child, an ungrateful boss, or an obnoxious neighbor. That same power is equally real, present, needed, and available. Now. For us.

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