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A Sermon Preached by
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“Damaged Relationships” Matthew 5:21-24 (Common English Bible)



Listen for God’s Word:

*“Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift.”
Matthew 5:23, 24*

Thomas Long once shared with me that worship depends upon a congregation of people who seek to be reconciled with each other. Damaged relationships among the people of God diminish worship. That is why Jesus teaches here in Matthew’s Gospel that if your relationship is damaged with another, don’t worship. There is relationship work to be done first. And I believe there is nothing that speaks more powerfully to our need for a Savior than our human condition that seeks to hurt others when we have been hurt.

Many of you are aware that I enjoy country music. My new book, *Nurture Faith*, has about twenty meditations based upon some of my favorite country songs. Naturally, the themes that speak powerfully to me are love, longing, forgiveness, and expressed desire for a second chance. However, there is a new song I cannot listen to: *I Hope* by Gabby Barrett. That is because it captures powerfully that part of the human condition that desires to hurt another because she has been hurt: “I hope she makes you smile. I hope you know she’s the only one for you by the end of the night. And then I hope

she cheats like you did on me.” There is a damaged relationship. There is a damaged soul. For such a person, worship is difficult. Jesus wants more for each of us than that. So, if there is relationship work to be done, stop your worship, and go and do that first. Then return to church and complete your worship.

Jesus asks that we do relationship work by forgiving the person who has hurt you.

Relationships are damaged by one of two ways: You have hurt someone or someone has hurt you. It really is that simple. This message is limited to the latter: Someone has hurt you. Jesus asks that we do relationship work by forgiving the person who has hurt you. The best place to begin is to explore what forgiveness is not.

Forgiveness does not require reconciliation.

First, forgiveness does not require reconciliation. You are the person who has been wounded. The relationship work you do to heal, to extend forgiveness to another, does not require a response. If the other person refuses your forgiveness – or dies before it is given – you are not held hostage. Forgiveness is primarily a work that we do internally. How it is received is of little importance.

*Forgiveness does not condone
the other person's
action or behavior.*

Second, forgiveness does not condone the other person's action or behavior. The gift of forgiveness is the decision not to hold onto the pain any longer. It is releasing the pain and hurt so that we can move on unencumbered by what has been done to us.

*Forgiveness does not mean that
there will be no consequences for
the behavior or action of another.*

Finally, forgiveness does not mean that there will be no consequences for the behavior or action of another. There may be legal consequences. We may establish parameters for a continuing relationship with that person.

*Forgiveness is about the process
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rather than the process of seeking
to get even or revenge.*

What Is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness is about the process of moving forward in our lives rather than the process of seeking to get even or revenge. Someone once said that holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Forgiveness is letting go, not necessarily because the other person deserves the forgiveness, but in order for you to move forward. Without forgiveness, resentment grows and resentment is very corrosive. Your own life is diminished as a result.

There is a marvelous story of two men who belonged to a religious order that forbade any contact with women. Members

of the order took vows never to physically touch or speak to a woman. One day an older, wiser member of the order took a long walk with a younger member. They journeyed for several hours into the surrounding forest. Along the way they crossed through a small brook. Another hour or so passed and heavy rains arrived. The two turned around and began their walk back to the monastery through the rain. When they arrived back at the brook they previously crossed it had become a mighty rush of water from the rain. A woman stood on their side of the water struggling with the need to cross. The older monk silently took the woman in his arms and carried her across the rushing water and gently placed her down on the ground on the other side. She thanked him and went on her way. The two men then quietly walked several more hours back to the monastery.

After the two men arrived home the younger man was strangely silent. The older man asked what was on his mind. He answered that he was deeply disturbed that his mentor could so easily break their solemn, sacred vows by carrying a woman across the rushing water. His mentor said, "I placed her down on the other side and moved on. You are still carrying her." That is precisely what we do when we refuse to forgive. We carry the greater burden.

*Forgiveness is an act of
generosity.*

Forgiveness is an act of generosity. Yes, it may be argued that the other hasn't asked for forgiveness nor deserves forgiveness. Yet, the generosity I speak of is not for the other person. It is an act of generosity that you give to yourself.

Michael Brown shares a story of a woman who was struggling to recover from what should have been a routine surgery. What should have been only a two night stay in the hospital stretched on for many more nights.

Her pain increased, her appetite decreased, she maintained a low-grade fever, and she had virtually no energy at all. Countless tests were run, all with negative results. One morning her surgeon, while making his rounds, sat on the edge of her bed and began to speak. "I am a good surgeon," he said. "You could've gone to any hospital in the country and not received better care than you have received here. I did my job. I removed from your body that which was making you ill. By now, you should be home, getting ready to return to work. Instead, if anything, you appear even sicker than when we admitted you." He looked her in the eyes and continued. "I did my part. I removed everything a surgeon can remove. But I think there is something else inside you that only you can remove. And until you do, you will not be well." Thereupon he took his clipboard and exited the room.

The woman said her first inclination was to call him back and say, "How dare you speak to me that way?" However, she reported, "Instead of doing that, I simply broke into tears. I sat alone in my hospital room and wept because I knew he had guessed correctly." Many years before, the woman's husband (whom she'd loved and trusted) walked out of her life and married someone else. She had very little warning and was not given a chance to try to salvage her marriage. He simply announced that he was going, and almost that quickly, he was gone. "He was the man I thought I would grow old with," she told Michael. "He was the one I believed in, but he betrayed me. And from that day on, I was never able to get past the anger. I simply managed it. At least, I thought I did. I believed I kept it under control, but that day in the hospital I realized that perhaps it was controlling me."

So the woman sat in her hospital bed that afternoon and wrote a letter to her former husband and his wife. In it she wrote, "I forgive both of you and wish for you a long and happy life." The following day, her fever

broke. The day after that, she was released from the hospital. One week later, she was back to work. "Perhaps," writes Michael Brown, "her ultimate step toward physical healing was something neither the surgeon nor anyone else could do for her. She embraced wellness only when she practiced forgiveness."ⁱ

*Forgiveness is not a single act
but a disposition, an attitude.*

Forgiveness is not a single act but a disposition, an attitude. We must not approach forgiveness as if it is available in a limited supply. Forgiveness is a commitment to a way of life and the manner we decide to address the wounds and pains that will inevitably come our way.

Some years ago, in Meridian, Mississippi, I volunteered in a local soup kitchen for the homeless and others who simply needed a complementary meal at noon. As I was serving, I was made aware of someone who was standing in line along with everyone else – a local judge. When I had served everyone who had been in line I served myself and asked the judge if I could sit with him. Naturally, I was curious about his presence at the local soup kitchen and asked him his story. Looking around the dining area he told me he knew nearly everyone there. For one reason or another they had appeared before him in the courtroom. After several years of handing down sentences for various minor offenses he began to grow cynical and he didn't like who he was becoming as a result. His wife noticed. His children noticed. His friends noticed. He realized that he had to do something before his attitude toward the poor and homeless became corrosive. After considerable time in prayer about this he sensed God calling him to get to know these people outside of the courtroom. That is when he began sharing lunch with them at least once a week. They all know him now.

He said that they still appear before him and he still has to hand down judgement for their offenses. But now he does so with a broken heart, a softer heart. And he continues to look for opportunities to connect them with public services to help them with long-term needs. No longer does he see the people as lazy and unlawful. He sees them as children of God who are broken and struggle to get by day after day. His whole disposition has been changed. Practicing an attitude of forgiveness accomplishes the same thing.

All this leaves the question, how do I forgive? What on earth can we do to move past the wounds we have and arrive at a place where there is healing? Permit me to share a few things I have learned from others in thirty-two years of ministry.

Ground yourself in the knowledge that God has forgiven you.

First, ground yourself regularly in the knowledge that God has forgiven you. In Christ, God has shown what forgiveness looks like. Romans 5 teach that while we were sinners and not worthy, God died for us that our sins may be forgiven.

When we have been hurt, name it.

Second, when we have been hurt, name it. Forgiveness is not trying to ignore the pain or trying to forget. That will eat you up inside. It is naming what happen to us and saying, "This is awful and this is how I feel" that permits healing to begin. That is why community and friendships are so important. We need to name our hurt to others as a starting place for moving forward.

Once we have named our hurt we then begin to look at the other person through a different lens; we begin to look at the one who hurt us as a broken person who desperately needs to experience love. Resentment, bitterness, and anger only compound the hurt that we experience. But when we begin to view the other person as someone who has also been hurt at some time in their life, as someone who also wants to be understood and loved, we empower healing for both parties to begin.

Do not neglect prayer.

Finally, do not neglect prayer. Pray for the person who has wounded you. If praying for them is difficult in the beginning, ask someone to pray for them on your behalf. That may be the most difficult thing to do, depending upon the depth of your wound. Yet, the power of prayer can change both parties and can result in a new relationship with the other.

Each of these actions can move you from the pain of a damaged relationship to a new beginning; one free of the weight of hate and pain that diminishes our life.

Amen.

¹Michael Brown, *Love is the Way: Ten Steps to Discovering Personal Happiness* (BrownHouse Press, 2018), 72, 73.

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