Forgiveness

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We have another tough topic this morning. Last week, it was Pastor Pete preaching on Divorce. Today, you and I are taking on “Forgiveness.” It’s a tough topic because, well, we are all sinners in need of forgiveness! After all, we wouldn’t need to talk about forgiveness if it weren’t for the fact that we mess up on a regular basis! We need to forgive, and we need to be forgiven. It’s a two-sided coin. This morning, God’s call to you and to me may be to forgive. Or, it may be to seek forgiveness. Maybe there are those relationships in your life (past or present) where you have been betrayed, or demeaned, or seriously damaged. OR, maybe there are those relationships where you were the one who betrayed, or demeaned, or where you seriously damaged someone else.

Either way, both ways—wherever you find yourself this morning—here is the truth of what we believe. God proves God’s love for us, that while we were/are sinning, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). There is forgiveness in and through Jesus Christ. This is the promise and the hope that allows us to tackle this difficult topic. Because of God’s deep love for us, forgiveness abounds. God never gives up on anyone. The Cross of Christ proves God’s love for us, each one of us. As my Dad said to me recently about forgiveness: “Jesus did it first; and, so must we!” So let’s look now at what Jesus says to us from Luke’s Gospel. You’ll notice that Jesus’ emphasis here is primarily on the work of forgiving others. He’s not talking as much about our seeking forgiveness. That’s a whole other sermon! Luke 17:1-6, using The Message, Jesus speaking to His disciples:

Jesus said to his disciples, “Hard trials and temptations are bound to come, but too bad for whoever brings them on! Better to wear a millstone necklace and take a swim in the deep blue sea than give even one of these dear little ones a hard time! “Be alert. If you see your friend going wrong, correct him. If he responds, forgive him. Even if it’s personal against you and repeated seven times through the day, and seven times he says, ‘I’m sorry, I won’t do it again,’ forgive him.” The apostles came up and said to the Master, “Give us more faith.” But the Jesus the Master said, “You don’t need more faith. There is no ‘more’ or ‘less’ in faith. If you
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have a bare kernel of faith, say the size of a poppy seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, ‘Go jump in the lake,’ and it would do it.

Let me lay out three specific things which Jesus emphasizes in these verses, regarding forgiveness. (Larry Sarver) First, lovingly confront the person who has sinned against you. This is the first half of verse 3, which in the NRSV is translated, “If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender….” This is what is meant by “rebuking” the one who has hurt you: to lovingly confront the person who has sinned against you. In other words, care enough to confront. There’s a best-selling book by that title, Care Enough To Confront, by David Augsburger. “Take the first step; don’t wait”, Jesus is saying. The offender might not ever come to you, because of his/her own ignorance or pride.

And when we take the first step and go to the person directly, we don’t start out by saying something like this: “You no good, son of an unchristian loser, you hurt me!” No, confront the person in Christ’s love and say, “I was hurt by you when you did this to me, or when you said this to me. It caused me pain, and I love you enough to come to you.” First, lovingly confront the person who has sinned against you.

Second, be willing to forgive the person who hurt you, if she/he repents. Jesus says in the second half of verse 3, "If there is repentance, you must forgive.” Repentance? It means literally to “turn around and go in the opposite direction.” For the truly repentant heart, it means a 180-degree turn in the direction of making things right—of making things right with the one you have damaged. Jesus expects us to lovingly confront a person who has sinned against us. And if that person—the offender—upon hearing us, then, repents, Jesus’ expectation is for us to forgive. Here, Jesus is talking about a relationship between two believers trying to make things right. He’s talking about a friend to a friend, a sister to a sister in Christ, a husband to a wife honestly dealing with that hurtful situation, bringing it into the Light, and allowing Christ to repair and redeem. Here Jesus is naming the condition of repentance as a pathway towards forgiveness. But, to be clear, God doesn’t need our repentance in order for God to forgive us. God loves us with grace, God doesn’t need our repentance in order to offer us a fresh start and a second chance. This table before us is proof of this truth!

But why should we even bother with forgiving the one who has hurt us? I mean, don’t we sometimes feel like we want the person to pay for what he/she did to us? Why even bother with forgiveness when
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we live in a world of revenge and vindictiveness? The answer is “because (deep down) we love God more than we love this world, and we want to please God by doing what God asks of us.” The other answer is a selfish one, really. We ought to forgive others because the real loser in the game of “getting even” is the one who is trying to get even. It is painful when someone deceives us, hurts us. God knows. But the truth is we never hurt ourselves more than when we are bent on hurting the other person back. A wise preacher I knew once said, “Forgiveness is the doorway to freedom from the poison of resentment and the raging torment of a tortured memory. When we forgive,” he said, “we are free!” (Ed Danks, 2/14, ’93). Be willing to forgive the person who hurt you if s/he repents.

Third, be ready to forgive repeated failures. It’s in verse 4: “And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.” Jesus teaches that even with genuine repentance there will be repeated relapses. We’re sinners, after all! We get stuck again and again in the muck and mud. We repent and, yet, we fall short. This isn’t new information, is it? For me, just ask Connie, my wife. She can tell you about my “signature,” repetitive sins better than anyone! Our tempers, our gossiping, our judging, repeatedly. Our sinful nature results in repeated failures. It’s why we need a Savior.

Jesus says, be ready to forgive repeated failures repeatedly. And here’s what ought to blow us away. Jesus is not limiting the number of times we are to forgive! He uses the number seven here to imply an infinite, unending life of forgiveness—of forgiving and of being forgiven. Jesus says to his disciple Peter in Matthew’s Gospel: “I tell you not seven times, but seventy-seven times are you to forgive a brother (or sister) who keeps sinning against you” (Matthew 18:21-22). “Seventy-seven times means “unlimited forgiveness”! What Jesus means by “77 Times” is “never give up on anyone.” Because of His mercy and grace, Jesus does not give up on anyone, and neither should we (Dale Bruner, p.235).

And the disciples’ reaction to “unlimited forgiveness”? “Holy cow, Master, then give us more faith, please, to be able to forgive this many times! Lord this is too much; I just can’t forgive others like this, it’s beyond my abilities. I need more faith than this” (Luke 17:5). Jesus replies, “Even a little mustard seed size faith can do great things. It’s really not about the size of your faith,” Jesus is saying, “It’s about your willingness to trust
But when we forgive someone who has really damaged us, when we humble ourselves and ask forgiveness, that is when the world is watching and will stand up, and take notice of us.

Forgiveness means literally a brand new beginning. The goal is to reconcile and restore relationship with God and with one another. When “debts/sins” are forgiven, it is a new day, a new start. With forgiveness comes a freedom and a peace.

With our willingness, and because of our own awareness of God’s extravagant forgiveness—offered to us in Jesus Christ—we can take the steps to extend Christ’s forgiveness to others. William Barclay puts it, “...nothing done to us can in any way compare with what we have done to God; and if God has forgiven us the debt we owe God, we must forgive the debts those who have hurt us owe to us. Nothing that we have to forgive can even faintly or remotely compare with what we have been forgiven” (Luke, p.195).

Forgiveness. Honestly? It’s one of the very few things that will set us apart. There are plenty of so-called “good” people out there. There are plenty of people making decent “moral” decisions. But when we forgive someone who has really damaged us, when we humble ourselves and ask forgiveness, that is when the world is watching and will stand up, and take notice of us. That is when the world is watching and will see something powerful and distinctive about us. The world will see a people trying to follow Jesus and to love Jesus more. Jesus. He paved the way. He forgave us when we were absolute wrecks and wretches. Yet, He loved us. He allowed His body to be broken, His blood to be spilled, so that we could and can and do have new life, a forgiven life, a redeemed life in him.

Holy Lord ~ Nothing is hidden from you. May this truth not paralyze us, make us cringe or run or hide. May we run into your arms and find in you the mercy, the strength, the grace to be forgiven and to forgive. In Jesus’ name and for his sake, Amen.