

“Forgive for Good”

25 June 2006

Bible passage: **Matthew 18:21** (*The Message*)

At that point, Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister? Seven?” Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.”

The story is told about a woman who claimed to have undergone a religious conversion. She proclaimed that she was a changed person now. She told her friends, “I’m so glad that I got religion. I have an uncle I used to hate so much I vowed I’d never go to his funeral. But now, why, I’d be happy to go to it any time.”

What is that all about? Is she really so changed that she has let go of the hatred she had for the uncle and wants everything to be OK? Or is she still as bitter as ever, and would be happy to see the guy dead? Has she forgiven him, or not? You figure it out, but my guess is that we could take it any way we’d like.

We’re talking about forgiveness today. That’s something we talk about a lot here because it’s important, but I’m well aware that it’s much easier to talk about than it is to actually do. Forgiving is a really tough thing, and it doesn’t seem to come naturally for many of us.

I’m reminded of something that the acclaimed author C.S. Lewis wrote. He was someone who had struggled his way to Christianity and had tried his best to live a faithful life, as he understood it. Apparently in his youth, he had experienced the wrath of a cruel schoolmaster, and he had tried hard to forgive the man. Just prior to his death, Lewis wrote, “I think I have at long last forgiven that cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I thought I had done it many times before, but this time I think I really did it.”

I think what Lewis was trying to say was that forgiveness is not an easy thing to accomplish. When we’ve been hurt, sometimes needlessly, it’s difficult to let go of the anger and pain that we feel. There are even moments when we relish hating the one who has hurt us, and times when we even think of getting revenge.

Sometimes the situations that are tough for us to forgive are relatively mundane, like someone taking our parking space, or a driver going too slowly and creating a traffic jam that makes us late for an appointment. Those are pretty insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

However, some of us have experienced hurts that have cut us deeply. Perhaps a person we thought was with us for life decides the relationship is over, or our business partner bails and leaves us holding all the responsibility and debt. Maybe a friend doesn’t spend as much time with us now as he or she once did, and we feel rejected

and abandoned. Maybe we look back and realize our mother was self-absorbed and didn’t give us enough attention, or our dad came home every night drunk, and all we can focus on is how much damage their lack of care caused us. Or maybe, we become wounded by a careless, thoughtless remark that we just keep carrying with us.

I suspect that most of us here this morning can think of some life situation that has hurt us, and that we haven’t gotten over. The pain feels as fresh today as it did when the hurt occurred, no matter whether than was yesterday, last year, or 20 years ago! Holding a grudge and not letting go of the pain and hurt can cause some big problems in the course of living our lives.

When we cling to the hurt and refuse to let go, we wind up living our lives in the past, rather than in the present. I would even go so far as to say that we become imprisoned by our past, and we give the one who has hurt us continued power over us. In fact, the ones toward whom we harbor the greatest grudge are the ones who have the most power over us.

You see, failing to forgive actually doesn’t hurt the one who has hurt us. The reality is that it hurts us the most. We are the ones who become embittered, and after bemoaning our circumstances long enough and loud enough, we wind up alienating ourselves from family and friends, and feel totally alone.

Holding onto the bitterness from past hurts actually has physical manifestations that can take the form of headaches, back pain, stomach aches, depression, lethargy and lack of energy, anxiety and fear, irritability, insomnia. To put it bluntly, we’re miserable physically, emotionally, mentally, and we make everyone around us miserable.

Frankly, I don’t think that’s the way God wants us to live our lives. God desire is for us to have happy, healthy lives, and learning to forgive is one of the ways that we can come closer to living the kind of life. Forgiveness is the key. As Alan Paton said, “When a deep injury is done us, we never recover until we forgive.” We can never live the life God wants for us until we learn to forgive.

That’s exactly what Jesus is saying in the Bible passage we have for this morning. Our passage from *The Message* reads like this:

At that point, Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister? Seven?”

Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.”

It would probably be helpful to have a little background here. In the Hebrew teachings, a person needed to forgive someone who had wronged him three times, so Peter thought he was going overboard in suggesting that we are to forgive a person seven times. However, Jesus sets him right by saying, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven." That's another way of saying that we just have to keep on forgiving an unlimited number of times. Forgiveness is a continuous process.

Well, what do we mean when we say that we are to forgive to infinity? What is forgiveness actually? Gerald Jampolsky, in his book *Forgiveness: The Greatest Healer of All*, says, "Forgiveness is the willingness to let go of the hurtful past." In that statement, he emphasizes that the most important word is "willingness." We have to be willing and desirous of being happier and more at peace than we currently are. We have to want to let go of our misery, and quit wallowing in our hurt and self-pity.

Webster defines the verb "to forgive" as follows: "to give up resentment against, or the desire to punish, to stop being angry with." Henry Ward Beecher said, "A forgiveness ought to be like a canceled note, torn in two and burned up, so that it can never be shown against the man."

Dr. Fred Luskin, in the book *Forgive for Good*, clarifies the real essence of forgiveness when he says, "Forgiveness does not change the past, but it changes the present." He says that we make a choice to hurt less, and we work to become part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation. We can let go of the pain, and choose not to be in close proximity to the one who hurt us.

It sounds good, doesn't it? And maybe just what the doctor ordered, but how do we go about forgiving? How do we learn to let go of the pain, and go on with our lives?

In my opinion, part of it has to do with readjusting the way we see the world, life and others. Luskin affirms that we have to reframe our expectations about the way others behave, and the way the world is. Some of us have unrealistic expectations, or even demands, about the way things should be.

For example, we insist that life should be fair, life should be easy, our partner should be faithful, my past should have been different. Maybe we need to change those expectations into something more along the lines of changing all the "shoulds" to wishes or hopes. If we were to do that, it changes the way we think of things. For instance, we might say, "I wish things had been different when I was growing up, but I can learn to deal with it," or "I hope that my partner will be faithful, but I realize there are no guarantees."

Changing our expectations can help us see life in a new way, without guarantees, but with realistic hopes. Altering our expectations can certainly be a starting point for becoming a more forgiving person. The point is that we are changing the way we think about the things that happen, and not trying to change the person with whom we are upset. The simple truth is that the only person we can change is ourselves; we simply have no power to change anyone else.

There's yet something else we need to get real about, and that's that there is no perfect person. Just in the course of being human, we will hurt one another, sometimes intentionally, and sometimes quite unintentionally.

You're not perfect; I'm not perfect; no one is. That's the nature of being human, but that's precisely why we need forgiveness. Lewis Smedes has a book on forgiveness whose title I've forgotten, but in it, there is a chapter that's entitled, "Forgiveness fits faulty people." That's who we all are—faulty people.

When we learn to let go of the pain and forgive, life changes. We become free to move on and live the life God intends us to live. We can resolve painful memories, and have less fear in our lives, and we can be free enough to cherish the beauty and goodness that can fill our lives to overflowing. Forgiveness is a good thing. Maybe we should give it a try.

Closing:

There's an Arabic proverb which says, "Write the wrongs that are done to you in sand, but write the good things that happen to you on a piece of marble. Let go of all emotions such as resentment and retaliation, which diminish you, and hold onto emotions, such as gratitude and joy, which increase you." I think that's a good thing to remember. How about you?

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.