

Forgiving—God's Hardest Commandment

Genesis 50:15-21

Colossians 3:1-12

11th In The Series of Great Themes Of The Bible

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On May 13, 1981 Pope John Paul II was shot in St Peters Square by a Turkish assailant. Four days later, while still recovering, Pope John Paul forgave his shooter publicly. Later, he visited him in his cell to tell him face to face, and still later, he asked the Italian Government to pardon the man, which Italy did in 2000. Forgiveness!

History is full of stories of forgiveness. The Jews forgave Germany for the Holocaust. The black South Africans forgave the white minority after the whites were swept from power and apartheid ended. Nelson Mandela forgave his captors after spending 28 years in prison because he spoke against the cruel rule of the white South African Government. As I prepared for this week, I found more and more examples of forgiveness, some great—like the world forgiving Germany and Japan for the disasters of World War II, and some small, like the father of a 6 year old girl shot and killed in 2012 in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, who forgave the shooter and prayed for his family.

Forgiveness is not easy. Not many who are the victims forgive. Oh, they cry for justice, their justice, and not God's justice. You see, God's justice is tempered with mercy. Our sense of justice calls for getting even, for vengeance, for a heavy punishment. When we cry we want justice, we are often using the word in code language to hide our deep feelings of getting even. Our words sound good but they mask the hate and unforgiveness that lingers in our heart. As I studied this concept for today, I was struck by how little forgiveness there really is in this world.

In this series of Great Themes in the Bible, forgiveness is at the front of the major themes, it is at the heart of the first factual story in the Bible. Adam disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit. Adam was not destroyed by God, punished yes, but God forgave Adam and protected Adam the rest of his life and Adam lived a long life afterward. But Adam and Eve were physically separated from God, and if we look at the big picture of the Bible from that day to the last words of the Bible. God tries again and again to get us back together, even sending his son—our risen Christ—to make reconciliation and restoration possible.

Today, I have chosen a familiar story from way back when to illustrate the theme of forgiveness—Genesis 50:15-21. In this passage the Patriarch Jacob has died, and Joseph and his brothers and a huge Egyptian entourage have gone to Israel to bury Jacob. The brothers are afraid what might happen to them now that their father is dead—they worry that Joseph will try to get even for their having sold Joseph into slavery to the Egyptians. They remembered they had acted because they were jealous of him. Let's listen to what happened as the brothers and Joseph talked after their dad's funeral.

Genesis 50

15

Joseph forgave his brothers. He tells them not to worry, that he has long ago forgiven them. And he adds, "while you meant it (selling me into slavery) for evil, God used it for good, by putting me here in Egypt, where I was used to save so many from the seven years of famine that were coming." From

then on Joseph took care of his brothers and their families. The practice of forgiveness is repeated again and again in the Scriptures. It's there not to just fill space or tell us a wonderful story. It's there for a reason.

Esau forgave Jacob for stealing his birthright.

God forgave the Israelites for doubting he would take care of them after Egypt and until they got to the promised land.

God forgave David for being an adulterer and a murderer.

Jesus forgave Peter for denying him 3 times on Good Friday.

Stephen, the first deacon in the Bible, forgave those who stoned him to death,

Jesus forgave Saul for persecuting the early church, and turned him into Paul, who became a missionary and a zealot for the Good News.

And then there's the picture of heaven at the end, where millions who have been forgiven stand with the risen Lord—the Lamb of God, before God's throne..

So, what is this forgiveness God practices on us,

that God calls on us to do,

that Christ came that we all might be forgiven?

Forgiveness is removing the wrongs we have committed and telling the wrongdoer, it's OK, I forgive you. Forgiveness means wiping the slate clean, starting over. Forgiveness is saying we're OK and meaning it and living it. It doesn't mean getting even. It is not an eye for an eye. Instead it is doing what Jesus told Peter, when Peter asked, "How many times must I forgive? To which Jesus replied, "70 time 7 times!" Meaning an infinite number, however many it takes.

I knew a man in Richmond, a contractor who built roads and subdivisions, a tough and a hard man. He learned one day he had cancer and only had a few months to live. Within a week he started going to each person he had been tough with, asking them to forgive him, telling those who wronged him, he forgave them. It didn't matter what response he got; he had to try, he had to forgive, because you see, he knew a truth that we all should learn. He knew he was dying, he knew he was a sinner and had wronged a lot of people, and he knew he had been forgiven by God, and being filled with God's love and God's grace and God's forgiveness, he could do no less.

He had learned that when we realize we are forgiven, when it sinks into our heart and becomes a part of us. He knew the guilt he felt for all the wrongs he had committed had been removed and he was at peace. Then, and only then, when we process God's forgiveness of us and accept it, can we pass through God's open door to a new life, an eternal life, a life where we are changed. Then, we can forgive for the first time, in fact, we can't help but forgive. That's part of what it means when we say we are born again, forgiveness is finally possible—not just saying the words but acting to erase the wrong from our hearts.

I grew up thinking a separation of the races in our country was OK, as long as all were treated equally. As a teen and after becoming a Christian, I came to see how wrong that was, and to admit

that I was wrong,

that my people were wrong,

that even my church was wrong.

I joined thousands who asked God to forgive us and to send us to tear down the walls that had wrongly divided us. There are still walls and they too need to come down.

That wasn't the first wrong I needed forgiveness for and that I needed to learn forgiveness about. And, sadly, God keeps showing me more walls, some of my own making, that need to be taken down, places where God shows that I still need to forgive.

Our second reading today comes from the writings of Paul, this time from his letter to the churches in middle Turkey today—the Colossians. Paul's letter is a circular letter, meant to be read here, then there, then passed on to another church, and ultimately to us here. Let us listen to God speaking to us through Paul In Colossians 3: 1-12

Colossians 3

12

The Word Of The Lord!

Paul is a great one for making lists, lists of do's and don'ts. In the text we just read Paul includes a list saying that since you are Christians, here are some things you must not do, a negative list, markers that will show the world that you have yet to stand with Christ as a Christian. Paul also gives a second list of some, a list of some of the positive things we are to do to show Christ lives within you, the first and the last of which are to show mercy, God's mercy, justice premised upon forgiveness.

Bottom line of these lists? You can't be a Christian, a real Christian, a true Christian, unless you can forgive, unless you can show mercy. As Paul puts it, salvation is a process, It is more than just mumbling a few words, such as I accept Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior. Paul reminds us that we must live with Christ within us, we must show Christ within us, and we must share Christ within us. Words without deeds are what Paul calls "tinkling cymbals," noisy but not true, and forgiveness has to be at the heart of who we are.

A second thing about this forgiveness that God is asking us to practice is that we, as the ones hurt or injured, we, as the Christians are the ones who must take the first steps in forgiveness. We are to begin the process. We are to forgive first, long before the perpetrator comes to his or her senses.

The Amish in Pennsylvania reached out to the family of the killer of their children the same day and brought them help and forgave the killer publicly then.

Members of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina forgave the young man who killed 8 at a Bible Study shortly after the incident.

Esau forgave Jacob long before Jacob ever sent gifts or arrived in person.

Another aspect of forgiveness is that it's like a coin or a dollar bill. There is something on both sides of the coin or the bill. So, there are two sides, two parts, to forgiveness. It's like breathing —IN/OUT In/Out. One side of forgiveness is the word "Accepting," and on the other "Extending." Not heads or tails — like an ordinary coin, but a Christian's coin, saying I accept the forgiveness God gives me and once it is in me, once I know it and can feel it, once I have no more guilty feelings, then I must share it —extend it.

We must do both.

Robert Enright writes in his book, "Eight Keys To Forgiveness," that forgiveness does not mean we should deny the event being forgiven ever happened or that we should make excuses for the person who needs forgiveness, saying he or she couldn't help it. Bad acts have consequences, They are real.

Accountability must be real. But, aside from the act and the hurt and the pain, there is the question of how and where we will hold on to it, how we will let it live within us, whether it will control us or not. That's the time and place where we are to forgive. Enright says we should first address our own personal inner peace, see where the act has moved us. We have to examine ourselves and determine if what has happened has made us anxious? Or depressed? Or full of rage? Or self pitying? If any of these emotions has taken control of us, we must address them first and remove them. We must hear God speaking to us saying, let it go, saying forgive, saying get your heart right. At the same time we must remember what Christ has asked of us.

Forgiveness!

Forgiveness is a process; it is a learned and patterned response to every slight, every wrong. It starts with our initial response. It must not be a knee jerk negative reaction. We must look to understand what caused the event that has triggered our response, we must understand our own reactions, and we must turn our negative response into a positive, "I forgive you," response.

Jesus practiced forgiveness regularly. He forgave the sins of those he healed. He forgave Peter's denial. He forgave his executioners. He forgave the thief on the cross. He has even forgiven us, each one of us. And by his example, Christ has shown us what we are to do.

I want us to end with this. Salvation is renewal, it is change, it is hope, and it is based on one act—our forgiveness. Our heavenly Father has forgiven us for turning from Him, for rejecting him, for ignoring him, for joining the executioners of His son. I started this Sermon acknowledging that it is hard to forgive, but if we are to be the Ambassadors for Christ we are called to be, then we must.

Is there someone you need to forgive today? Then, why not start right now?

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Colossians 3:1-14

- 1 Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.
- 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.
- 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.
- 4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you will also appear with Him in glory.
- 5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.
- 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.
- 7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.
- 8 But now, you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips.
- 9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices
- 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed (though your growing) knowledge of the things of its Creator.
- 11 Here, (in Christ's family), there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is (for) all, and is in all.
- 12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.
- 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another, if any of you has a grievance against someone.
Forgive as the Lord forgave you.
- 14 And over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Genesis 50:15-21

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?"

16 So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died:

17 "This is what you are to say to Joseph; I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly. Now please forgive the servants of the God of your father." When their messenger came to Joseph, he wept.

18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him, "We are your slaves," they said.

19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God??"

20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.