

Dr. Hugh Hamilton
Trinity Presbyterian Church – Pensacola, FL
July 4, 2010 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT: 6. Forgiveness: Humans Before Each Other
Matthew 18:21-35

The Bible says a lot about God’s forgiveness of us.

- *As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us* (Psalm 103:12).
- *If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness* (Psalm 130:3-4).
- *You have put all my sins behind your back* (Isaiah 38:17).
- *I—yes, I alone—am the one who blots out your sins for my own sake and will never think of them again* (Isaiah 43:25 NLT).
- *You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean!* (Micah 7:19 NLT)
- *Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name* (Acts 10:43).
- *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of his grace* (Ephesians 1:7).

God’s forgiveness initiates our salvation. God’s forgiveness lifted from us a load of guilt that otherwise we would have to shoulder forever!

The Bible also speaks to our forgiveness of one another.

- *And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins* (Mark 11:26).
- *and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors* (Matthew 6:12).
- *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you* (Ephesians 4:32).
- *So shall my heavenly Father also do to you if each of you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”* (Matthew 18:35)

Our unwillingness to forgive is detrimental to our spiritual health. Can we really forgive as God has forgiven us? Yes, because the Holy Spirit is at work in us transforming us more and more to be like Christ. Without the Spirit, we cannot do what God asks of us.

Let’s first consider **What forgiveness is NOT:** It is not ...

Denying the wrong that was done, acting as if it never happened.

Excusing sinful behavior.

Glossing over the pain others caused you.

Removing all consequences for wrong behavior.

Overlooking wrong and harmful behavior.

Letting others continually abuse you.

Forgiveness is NOT pretending you weren’t hurt.

Forgiveness is not a magic trick that we use to force others to become our friend again.

It’s not a tool to manipulate others into confessing what they did that hurt us so greatly.

So what, then, is forgiveness? Forgiveness is pardoning someone, releasing him from his obligation to you, her indebtedness to you, because of some past offense. You forfeit your resentment against them. *“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”* is not about money people owe you – it means to forgive any offense that keeps us indebted, obligated, obliged to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. Hence, forgiveness is truly a gift – a gift from God, a gift we give to one another.

Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. God doesn't say, “Forgive them if you feel like it.” We rarely *feel like* forgiving someone! Forgiveness is a choice, a conscious decision, an act of the will. You choose to let go of your anger and your desire for revenge. Sometimes we protest, “He doesn't deserve to be forgiven.” Of course he doesn't. No one “deserves” forgiveness. You can't earn forgiveness, you can only ask it. Forgiveness is a gift of mercy.

Let's look at Jesus' story of the merciless servant

Apparently Peter is troubled by fellow who continues to do him wrong again and again, and though Peter forgives him, the man continues to do Peter wrong. How long do you have to take it; what's the legal limit until you can say “No More Mr. Nice Guy!” and finally let the guy have it? When can you blow your stack and retaliate and not get in trouble? Jewish rabbis taught you had to forgive 3 times, but no more, so maybe Peter thought he was being very generous to suggest seven times: double the old standard plus one extra for good measure. But instead of commending Peter, Jesus says forgive 70 times 7 - - implying that there is no reasonable limit to forgiveness. You don't count and say to yourself, “299...300,...301... alright, only 189 more to go!” Instead, by the time you've forgiven someone 490 times you've developed the knack of continual forgiveness.

That says to me that **forgiveness is a process, not just a one-time event.** You may have to forgive that person over and over before it takes hold of your heart and frees you to wish goodness for the other person. That also means that **forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation.** Forgiveness depends on you; reconciliation depends on you plus the other person or persons. Sometimes both parties are not willing, and reconciliation is not possible; sometimes it's not wise.

Jesus then tells the story of the servant forgiven a great debt by his king and who then dealt mercilessly with a fellow-servant who owed him a fraction of the money he had owed the king. The king gets word of this merciless servant who had been forgiven much but who forgave nothing, and there won't be forgiveness this time. Instead the king called for his torturers and handed over to them the man to be punished until he could pay back all that he owed the king!

How dare we refuse to forgive others when God has freely forgiven us so much! But we do. Verse 35 warns us of the danger: *“The same will happen to each of you unless you learn to forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”*

Unless we learn to forgive the tormentors will torture us. What tormentors? Tormentors like anger and bitterness and frustration and malice that give us ulcers and high blood pressure and migraine headaches and back pain; the tormentors that keep us awake at night stewing over every rotten thing that happens to us. The tormentors like unresolved guilt and resentment and

hardness of heart that bug us day and night, who never leave our side, who steal our joy and suck the life out of us. Unless we learn to forgive we will be tormented.

In the words of Frederick Buechner

“To forgive someone is to say one way or another, “you have done something unspeakable, and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you have done and though we both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend.” (Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 29)

What about the person who says, “I can forgive but I can’t forget?”

Haven’t you experienced the problem of forgiving someone as best you can, the best way you know how, only to harbor angry thoughts toward him/her? I remember a woman admitting, “Oh, I forgive my husband, I just forget that I forgave him!” In Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 7, God says of our sins, “*Their sins and their lawless acts I will remember no more.*” I...will...remember...no...more. God chooses not to remember our sins.

Forgiveness does not mean we magically wipe out of our mind the record of what happened. Rather, we choose not to dwell on it. There is a big difference between remembering something and dwelling on it. We can all remember people and events in the past that have hurt us deeply. Forgiveness means we choose not to dwell on those things or to make that event, that encounter, the sole basis of your relationship. We choose not to nurse our wounds and grudges, but choose to work through them and past them if possible.

The story is told that Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross, was talking with a friend when the name of a person they both knew came up. That person had done some very mean things to Clara. The friend asked her, “Don’t you remember when she did that to you?” “No,” Clara replied, “I distinctly remember forgetting that!”

If we choose to dwell upon the hurts of the past and if we choose to let that past dominate the present so that all of our relationships are negatively colored by what has happened in the past, then we have not forgiven in a biblical sense.

How do you forgive if the other person will not admit he/she was wrong? If they won’t own up to what they did, if they won’t ask forgiveness, how can you forgive them? Usually when someone admits his/her wrong, comes to you, asks your forgiveness, you grant it and you maintain your relationship, even though everything is not back to normal yet. But unfortunately sometimes reconciliation is not possible. Some people will not admit their guilt no matter what we do. If you say, “I forgive you,” they resist, professing “I didn’t do anything that needs to be forgiven!” Sometimes they will lie to cover up the truth. Sometimes they will cut off the relationship rather than face the hard work of reconciliation. Sometimes they will keep right on hurting us on purpose. Plus, how do you forgive someone who has died, or has moved away? How do you forgive a corporation or an institution that has wronged you, when you don’t even know their names or their faces?

How can you forgive in a situation like that? Remind yourself that your forgiveness does depend on them. You don't need their permission to forgive them. You can choose forgiveness in your heart and move on with your life. Shake the dust off your sandals and move on. Confess to God your anger, your resentment, your bitterness, your sadness, your disappointment; then ask God to help you drop the rope that binds you. Refuse to let the hurt dominate your life. True, the relationship remains broken. It may never be healed. But you can choose not to carry the sins of others. You can choose to seek goodness where you may find it and leave bitterness behind where you found it. That's not easy to do but it's far better than living in the past nursing a wounded spirit.

What about the feelings of anger and sadness and remorse that come back long after we've forgiven someone? That's very common when we feel deeply and repeatedly mistreated.

First, acknowledge the humanity of the person who hurt you. Without diminishing what he/she did that hurt you, admit that he/she is a sinner just like you are.

Second, surrender your right to get even. This is hard because you want him/her to pay for all the pain they caused you. But in the end, it is God, not you, who judges.

Third, surrender your hatred and forfeit your bitterness. Turn them over to God and let him help you to heal. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). You'll know you have reached total forgiveness when you are able to ask God to bless those who have hurt you so deeply.

You'll know you have forgiven others

when you no longer think about it day and night

when you no longer feel a need to talk about your hurt all the time

when you no longer feel the need to seek revenge

when you no longer live in bitterness and anger

when you can wish well even to those who hurt you.

Can you forgive like that; can you reach that state of being? Yes!

Yes, but only with God. Without God it is impossible.

That's why forgiveness is a miracle, a gift, a blessing from God to us, that we might share the gift with one another. Goodness knows we need it!

During communion, receive God's loving forgiveness once again.

Admit your need of it and accept it.

Admit your struggles to forgive those who have hurt you.

Ask and receive help from God to put in motion the forgiveness you have withheld.

PRAYER: God, Grant that we may discover the freedom that comes from being a great forgiver. Break the chain of remembered hurts that binds us to the past. We want to forgive others, Lord, but we lack the courage and we don't want to relinquish the power we have over them. Show us what we must do and then give us the strength to do it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sources

Barclay, William. *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Matthew: Vol 2*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977.

Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

Pritchard, Ray. *Is Total Forgiveness Realistic?* <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2003-06-01>.

07-04-10 *LIFE IN THE SPIRIT 6: Forgiveness...Humans Before One Another.doc*