

Teach Forgiveness

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Psalm 16
Acts 2:14a, 22 – 32
1 Peter 1:3 – 9
John 20:19 – 23

Text: “If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” – John 20:23 (NIV)

You have said this prayer a thousand times, and perhaps for some of you, many thousands of times. What prayer am I talking about? I am talking about the Lord’s prayer, and, we all know it by heart. We know this prayer so well, I hazard to say, that the words really don’t mean much of anything to any of us anymore. To show my point, let me focus on one small part of the Lord’s prayer (as reflected in Matthew Chapter 6, and in your Worship bulletin):

“And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” What could that possibly mean to me? I’m not a bank or lending institution.

What if I were to change this portion of the prayer to the following: Replace “debts” with “sins,” as is done in Luke, and it reads:

“And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Or, what if I were to replace “debts” with “wrongs,” as is done in Matthew Chapter 6 in the Good News version of the Bible.

“Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs others have done to us.”

Wait, you can’t do that, Rick. Debt is an easy word. Sin is a hard word. Wrongs is a hard word. I can forgive my debtors, but I can’t just forgive those who sin against me, or do wrongs against me. After all, it is too easy to do otherwise. It is too easy to hang on to the anger and hard feelings. It is too easy to retreat within my shell, within my fortress, keep my anger, and tell that person, “the hell with you” or “go to hell.”

OK... I better get back to this morning’s message... In our modern world, the word “debt” is used more often as a “finance” term, and thus for most of us, it is rarely associated with the term “forgiveness.”

The word, "forgiveness," has been tossed around self-help circles for years, so let's look for what psychology has to say about forgiveness.

Let's start with what forgiveness is not. Much of the self-help world has suggested that forgiveness does not mean you become best friends with the person who wronged you. Forgiveness is not saying what happened was OK. Forgiveness is not saying you accept the person who wronged you. Instead, forgiveness is choosing to accept what happened as it happened rather than what could or should have happened. Forgiveness can mean that you let go. Forgiveness can mean you love from a distance. Forgiveness can mean you step into your present rather than anchoring in the past.

Forgiveness is the cornerstone of any relationship, romantic or otherwise. Jesus the Christ could also see that, and that is why he emphasized it to the disciples in today's passage from John.

We assume people see life the way we see life. However, there are as many perceptions as there are people in this world. Our lack of understanding of other people's perceptions can create gaps built on miscommunication, anger, animosity, and emotional disconnection. The good news is... our relationship with forgiveness can help bridge these gaps.

We can intellectualize what forgiveness is as long as we want, but it's a process that takes time for most. When betrayal and miscommunication inhibit our ability to forgive, it's OK to feel those feelings. Shock and anger often come before forgiveness. We must first deal with the hurt feelings before moving into forgiveness. Let us respect that process - a process that can happen without us even realizing it. Sometimes by simply exploring the situation and acknowledging our own anger and animosity, the process begins.

When I turned to the Bible to understand the process, I found little help with how to move through the process. Oh sure, the Bible says you should forgive, and the Bible says you should not hold on to your anger, but I found very little on "how" to do it.

Then I turned to stories of Jesus in the Bible. We all know that Jesus (the human Jesus) was a mild-mannered soul. Few biblical examples exist of Jesus showing anger. One example, however, was in Mark Chapter 3. In verse 5 of Mark Chapter 3, Jesus showed anger, not because someone had done something bad to Jesus, but instead, Jesus showed anger because the authorities were acting inappropriately against someone who was less fortunate than the authorities.

Then there's the story of Jesus on his way to the cross. We all know the story well. From the time Jesus was arrested, Jesus was subjected to inflammatory words, beatings and torture. But none of the Gospels indicate that Jesus showed anger – which, to this day, I still find amazing. There is a part of me, however, that says the human part of Jesus had to have felt anger at the way he was treated. And, somehow, along the way toward his death on the cross, Jesus processed this anger and animosity to the point where he could forgive. Luke chapter 23, verse 34, has Jesus stating the following when he is near death on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

Immediately forgiving someone isn't always the best idea. We don't want to deny ourselves the right and the opportunity to feel the hurt and anger. We can only work through that

which we first acknowledge. Some people can forgive in just a few seconds, while others need their time. Jesus' forgiveness response on the cross was fast, but that is what I would expect from Jesus. The act of forgiving is one of realizing that holding onto the anger and resentment no longer carries the same weight on us. Instead of seeing something as good or bad, we begin to see things with full acceptance, as they are, however that is.

Although there are a variety of definitions of forgiveness, psychological research has suggested they all have three common components:

1. Gaining a more balanced view of the offender and the event.
2. Decreasing negative feelings towards the offender and potentially increasing compassion.
3. Giving up the right to punish the offender further or to demand restitution.

Jesus appears to have accomplished all three of these before he died on the cross. Jesus showed amazing strength to forgive. Staying angry and bitter would have certainly been the easier way to go. It takes a lot more work to forgive. So for anyone to suggest that forgiveness equals weakness, that is incorrect. Forgiveness takes hard work, and, is a sign of strength.

Forgiveness is also good for your health. Psychological research has shown that people who reported higher levels of forgiveness have better health habits and decreased depression, anxiety, and anger levels. Greater levels of forgiveness have been shown to be associated with more satisfied relationships, a stronger parenting alliance between mother and father, and better perceptions of parenting from the children's eyes. Physiologically, higher levels of forgiveness have been shown to be associated with favorable blood indicators that help to fight off diseases and infections. Together, these research results highlight the importance of forgiveness—not for the other person, but for you. So, please use this knowledge not only for yourself, but to teach others about forgiveness.

And throughout the process of forgiving, keep God involved by asking for guidance. God is willing to help. Jesus Christ, the crucified, the accomplished healer, said it well, "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

Amen.