

Seminar: Forgiveness

FORGIVENESS:

A Path for Resilience

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Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:32

*"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other,
just as in Christ God forgave you."*

Introduction

Our goal today is to learn some techniques needed to handle the challenge of loving an offender and having a forgiving heart. Most of us are struggling with forgetting and forgiving. We do not know how to forgive as graciously, freely, deeply, and repeatedly as Christ our Savior forgives us. But this lesson to learn is a matter of life or death.

We need to grasp the eternal significance of what a loving and forgiving heart does for you, the offended person, and what your loving and forgiving heart can do for the offender. Storytelling is an effective method of understanding spiritual truth. Someone else's narrative becomes the model for your own story.

Esau was preparing to go to war with his brother Jacob. He was filled with rage and wanted revenge. But in a dream that night, Esau was given a loving and forgiving heart toward Jacob. Meanwhile Jacob spent the entire night literally grasping and wrestling with God before he was able to accept God's forgiveness and blessing which allowed him to receive the (unexpected) forgiveness of his brother Esau.

STORY ILLUSTRATION OF A LOVING AND FORGIVING HEART

If that ancient tale with the 360-degree miracle-working vision and the all-night wrestling match with a spiritual being seems difficult to apply to your life, perhaps this modern-day narrative will help you grasp the significance of having a loving and forgiving heart for your own story.

A group of teenagers were joy-riding at night when they spotted a car approaching them. One of the teenagers, an 18-year-old college freshman, impulsively threw a rock into lane of oncoming traffic as the car passed by. The rock found its mark on the head of the female driver and broke every single bone in her face. The impact was so severe that she nearly died at the scene.

After suffering through several surgeries and months of recuperation, experiencing indescribable levels of pain, and facing the fact that her facial scars would live with her for a lifetime, she decided to attend the final court session of the teenager who threw the rock when he would hear the judge's sentence for his crime.

The judge gave the woman, the victim of the crime, permission to speak in the packed courtroom. With a steady voice, she said, "Young man, there is no room in my life for vengeance. I've asked the judge to be lenient on you. And if my generosity will help you mature into a responsible, compassionate, honest man whose graciousness is a source of pride to your loved ones, then I will truly be gratified, and my suffering will not have been in vain." She said in effect: "Father, forgive him; he had no idea what he was doing that night."

Upon hearing her forgiveness, this tough young man broke down in the courtroom and sobbed with remorse. He walked over to the victim of the accident, and hugging her, he cried out how sorry he was for that act of stupidity. The judge was so moved by all of this that he sentenced the young man to six months in prison instead of the maximum penalty of twenty-five years.

This story illustrates radical forgiveness:

- It is a powerful act.
- It strikes our hearts and takes our breath away.
- It causes us to ask the question, "How could you find it in your heart to forgive such a heinous act? The natural human heart seeks revenge."

How Can You Find It in Your Heart to Forgive?

When we understand the principle of forgiveness as this woman certainly did, we have already answered the question, "How can I find it in my heart to forgive?" It is through the power of the Godhead. We have just seen how Holy Spirit moves on hearts to change.

Forgiveness is a process we cannot ignore if we want to become the people God created us to be.

Many of us have spent years in bondage because we are unable or unwilling to forgive someone. When we finally understand and act with forgiveness, we will experience awesome freedom.

Let us examine the teachings of Jesus Himself to find the framework of forgiveness. We will read the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17 as He describes a scenario of an offended person with a forgiving heart who confronts an offender. We will learn what Christ's instructions are about forgiveness.

“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17, NIV).

The instructions for reconciliation and forgiveness are clear:

- The offended person should initiate a meeting with the offender.
- The goal of the encounter is to bring about reconciliation and healing.
- The offended person should treat the matter with secrecy, careful not to make public the offense or the meeting.
- If necessary, this step may be repeated with an additional witness or two at the meeting.

If we follow Jesus' simple instructions of going to the encounter in the spirit of reconciliation, quickly and alone, the problem is often solved. It usually results in strengthening the relationship and can transform an enemy into a better Christian, even a close friend.

FIVE STEPS TO FORGIVENESS

Sometimes the hurt is so deep that we need the desire to forgive. These five steps will guide the process in developing a loving and forgiving heart.

Step 1: Recognize that we ourselves have been totally forgiven by God. Once we understand the depth of our sin and the distance it created between us and God—and once we get a glimpse of the sacrifice that He made to restore fellowship with us—we will not be able to contain the joy that His forgiveness gives us. If we comprehend God's forgiveness toward us but refuse to forgive those who've wronged us, then we're like the wicked, ungrateful slave Jesus described in Matthew 18:23-34. Although his huge debt was forgiven, the slave immediately

demanded repayment of a trifling amount someone owed him. Realizing God has totally forgiven us of a debt we can never repay helps us learn the importance of forgiving others.

Step 2: Release the offender from the debt we feel is owed to us. This involves mentally bundling all of our hostile feelings and surrendering them to Christ. We can accomplish this by meeting face-to-face with the person who wronged us or when necessary by using an alternate approach. In cases where this person lives far away, has died, or is totally unapproachable, it may be necessary to use the “chair substitution” method. Sit facing an empty chair, imagining the other individual seated across from you. Then, confess your resentment. You can also use this technique when you want to practice confessing a wrong attitude before attempting it in person.

Step 3: Accept people as they are and release them from any responsibility to meet our needs. We all know someone who blames feelings of acceptance or rejection on others. You may even be like that yourself. Certain individuals can make or break your day, depending on the amount of attention they pay you. This is a common trait in those who are unable or unwilling to forgive. However, when we decide to forgive as an act of the will, we absolve others of any responsibility to meet our needs.

Step 4: View those we've forgiven as learning tools. The Lord uses situations and people to help us grow in our understanding of His grace. Joseph certainly grasped this principle. He saw his brothers as instruments God used to place him in a position to save his family during famine. His brothers feared what he might do to get even, but he responded, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, in order to bring about as it is this day, to save many people alive” (Genesis 50:20, NKJV). Whatever our pain or situation, we cannot afford to hold on to an unforgiving spirit. We must get involved in the process of releasing others from the debt we feel they owe us.

Step 5: Make reconciliation. Because God “has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18, NKJV), we are called to do our part in restoring fellowship with those who have hurt us. We can attempt to re-establish contact with estranged friends, former co-workers, or family members. A good place to begin is by asking for the opportunity to make an apology or to tell the offender you are releasing him or her from meeting your needs and expectations. Once forgiveness is complete, reconciliation will be much easier.

FOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

Sometimes our struggle to forgive others comes from questions we have about forgiveness.

Question 1: Does forgiveness mean that we should consider the sin or offense is of no consequence, that it is not really so bad and can be ignored? Absolutely not!

Forgiveness is not approval of the offender's words or actions, but rather it is letting go of our desire to seek retribution and revenge. It is relinquishing to God our perceived right to be judge of the offender. It is remembering how much God has forgiven us. It is recognizing that God's forgiveness toward us doesn't mean that God approves of what we have done—because our sin causes God real hurt and pain—but it is realizing God chooses to let go of His own right to seek revenge, because He longs to be reconciled with us.

Question 2: Does forgiveness mean that there will be no consequences or punishment for wrong doing? Absolutely not!

Breaking the law of God and reaps its own consequences. When Adam and Eve sinned by eating from the forbidden tree, we do not find an angry Creator stomping through the garden in revenge seeking to destroy them. He came softly, saying, "Where are you?"

The LORD God had said, "For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die," (Genesis 2:17, NKJV), yet with a loving and forgiving heart He did not strike them dead that day—although it was surely the day they began to die. God graciously preserved them from immediate death when He gave His promise of the Savior and then provided a new home for them.

Even though the loving heart of the LORD extended forgiveness, He did not excuse disobedience. The rebellion of man and woman reaped consequences. Because they broke God's law about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the natural consequence was losing their innocence by gaining a knowledge of evil and sorrow and toil. Because they caused the painful separation of the Creator from His Creation, the consequence was experiencing similar pain through separation from their sons—the death of one and the banishment of the other—in one day. Because they disobeyed, the consequence was losing immortal life with its perfect nature while inheriting a mortal life filled with sin and death. The greatest consequence of all was that sin affected not just themselves, but all of their descendants and even the earth itself.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that we excuse people's actions and behaviors. We do not let them go free to avoid the consequences, but we do let go of the anger and resentment in our own

hearts. This doesn't come easily or quickly to us in the natural world of revenge and destruction. But our hearts and minds can change through the forgiveness of our Redeemer.

Question 3: Are we supposed to forgive people even when they don't ask for it?

Absolutely!

While hanging on the cross, Jesus looked around at his tormentors who were abusing Him and said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34, NIV). Jesus forgave the Roman soldiers who nailed Him to the cross. Jesus forgave the disciple who failed Him. Jesus forgave the religious leaders whose unjust verdict sentenced Him with death He did not deserve. Jesus forgave all those gathered there that day before anyone asked for it. So, yes, we need to learn to forgive people before they ask for it.

The truth about forgiving others, whether they ask for forgiveness or not, is that if we do not forgive, we continue to poison our hearts and lives with growing resentment and bitterness. Another compelling reason we should forgive others before they ask is that sometimes our act of forgiveness brings them to a place of repentance. You saw that happen in the story of the young man whose crime almost killed a woman driving by, yet she who forgave him.

From the cross Jesus interceded for all of his accusers, abusers, and deserters, and a Roman centurion standing nearby heard His selfless prayer. Astonished by the supernatural activity surrounding the Crucifixion and by the supernatural spirit of tenderness and forgiveness in Jesus of Nazareth, the centurion exclaimed, "Truly, this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39, NKJV). That Roman soldier witnessed forgiveness flowing from the heart of Jesus, and it changed his own heart, bringing him to a place of belief and trust.

Question 5: How can we forgive our enemies? Like Jesus Christ!

We should treat the person who has offended or hurt us with grace and love. Jesus teaches us this principle in the Sermon on the Mount, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44, NIV). The apostle Paul counsels us, "Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21, NIV).

When faced with seemingly impossible situations, Jesus says, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26, NIV). The apostle Paul writes, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13, NKJV).

Forgiveness is possible, but only through the power of God. Forgiveness is possible, but only because God gives us the ability and strength to release our anger and resentment and to receive the life-giving freedom from revenge and bitterness.

God wants us to be forgiving to become healthy and strong in body, mind, and spirit. Without the willingness to forgive, we cannot be healthy. Forgiving others is not easy and it does not always come quickly, but it is important to maintain the vital connection of a healthy relationship with God and with everyone we meet.

FOUR TOOLS FOR A HAVING A LOVING AND FORGIVING HEART

These four tools can reap the harvest of a loving and forgiving heart.

Tool 1: Name the offender. Acknowledge that what the offender did hurt you and that you are struggling to forgive.

Tool 2: Pray for the offender. As you seek to forgive, assume the best in the offender and remember your own sin. Pray for the offender. Pray for yourself. Ask a friend to pray for you. Ask your small group to pray with you.

Tool 3: Claim Bible promises. Forgiving your enemies seems impossible, but with God, all things are possible. Memorize scripture texts such as mentioned earlier.

- “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”—Matthew 19:26, NIV
- “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”—Philippians 4:13, NKJV
- “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”—Matthew 5:44, NIV
- “Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.”—Romans 12:21, NIV

Tool 4: Practice forgiveness. Read stories of people (both biblical and biographical) who have offered “impossible” forgiveness. Even when you do not feel like it, let go of anger and hurt, resentment and bitterness. This process will bring healing and you can resume healthy relationships with others and with God.

We must forgive those who hurt us, because God has forgiven so much in us.

Closing Song: Hymn # 518, Standing on the Promises

Benediction

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