

## Forgiveness – January 14, 2018

Wednesday we'll begin our midweek meetings: Dinner discussion on Hebrews. At that dinner we'll begin looking at ch6 and then I'll pick up talking about that the next Sunday. But some time over the holidays I really began to feel like I wanted to start this year off talking about **FORGIVENESS**.

Forgiveness is necessary to our survival. It is essential to human existence. There is no future without forgiveness, not for me or you or First Baptist or the world. Without forgiveness our whole world would be a lost cause.

**But fortunately for us God is indiscriminate in his Love** John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

**Rom. 5:8** But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

**1John 4:10** This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

And because of God's indiscriminate love **God is also indiscriminate in his forgiveness.** Jesus' death on the cross was *the act on the part of the sinless Son of God* that, in absolute finality, dealt with the sin of everyone from the beginning of human history to its end. **Rom. 6:10** For the death that He died, He died to sin **once for all...**

**Heb. 9:12** ...through His own blood, He entered the holy place **once for all**, having obtained eternal redemption.

**1Pet. 3:18** For Christ also died for sins **once for all**, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God...

**Let me say this again: God's forgiveness is indiscriminate.** No caveats, no exceptions. **Once for all.** God's forgiveness is shocking. It's scandalous because, of course, none of us “**deserve**” God's forgiveness. All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. And God's outrageous love for us continues in that - if we are his people- He expects that *we will mirror that same scandalous forgiveness in our living.*

**As in the incident we read about in Matt 18.** In Matthew's context Jesus has just been talking about how to deal with people who sin against us. So **Peter** asks: “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

It was a typical teaching among the Rabbis that God would forgive three times but on the fourth would levy judgment. [This they took from Amos 1 where repeatedly Amos speaks for God saying: “for three transgressions and for four- I will bring some punishment.] This was very gracious of God: to forgive three times. And certainly humans couldn't be more gracious than God. So when smug Peter says: “So, Lord, I'm guessing you'd want us to forgive up to 7 times, right?” “Wrong,” says Jesus.

“How about seventy times seven?”

And so Jesus tells a story about King who forgave a gigantic debt [10K talents –size? Gold or silver? I tried to figure out how this might translate to modern amounts: Gold- nearly 4 billion; silver- 47 million. The annual income for the province of Galilee: 300 talents.]

Jesus exaggerates the amount of the debt to *preposterous proportions* to show it's impossible to pay it back- the man's debt could NEVER be repaid. But the King graciously forgives the debt just the same.

**Matt 18:28** “But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and *began to choke him*, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’

His fellow slave begged for mercy- just as he had with the King. But he didn't listen. He had him thrown into debtors' prison. This got reported back to the King who says to the fellow:

**32** ... ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33** ‘ **Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’** **34** “And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. **35** “ **My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.**”

I can't begin to fathom what v35 means exactly. But I can tell you this for certain: God expects anyone who claims to be his man or his woman to engage in the same scandalous forgiveness that God does. No caveats, no exceptions, no holding back. So this morning I'm going to list a few things about forgiveness that you should think about as we move forward together into 2018.

Let's be honest: **forgiveness is hard.**

And it's hard because **it's costly.** In Jesus' story the King's first plan is to try to recoup some of this slaves financial loss [v25] - by having the man and his entire family and all he owned sold off so he could get some repayment for the lost investment. And the slave, *who's just been forgiven*, walks right out and demands payment from his fellow-worker- not because he's stupid but because to forgive is hard, ...costly.

Forgiveness does not come naturally to us **because when violated we want justice.** We expect it. We demand it. Someone takes something that belongs to us, or borrows ten bucks and doesn't repay it, or hurts our feelings in some way and we want retribution, repayment, shame and contrition. *The last thing our human nature wants is to forgive!* Especially if the thing lost is something so dear that it cannot be made up for- then it is especially hard to forgive.

Much of what I'm sharing with you today comes from some lectures by theologian **Miraslov Volf**, of Yale Divinity School. Volf has written and taught extensively on forgiveness, certainly because of it's central place in the gospel, but also, because of the central place forgiveness played in **his family's story.**

When he was a baby in Croatia his live-in nanny lost track of his 5-year old brother who wandered off to play with some soldiers. He was killed in a senseless accident. But rather than press charges against the soldier or even the Nanny who lost track of the child Volf's parents chose to forgive. Why?

Simply because God's word said to forgive: **Col. 3:13** Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. **Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**

**Eph. 4:32** Be kind and compassionate to one another, **forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.**

But as Volf tells the story he's quick to say that his mother always explained that while the decision to forgive was easy the practice of it- hour to hour, day to day, year to year, was **very hard**.

Forgiveness is hard because it's costly. If someone harms us or hurts our feelings we feel like we have a *moral high ground as the injured party*. In our victim-hood we have a certain superiority over the one who's hurt us. Forgiveness means we give up that superiority, we relinquish it. We give our "right" to vindication back to God and leave it with him to do something about it or not.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa put it this way: Forgiveness is "...abandoning my right to revenge, to payback. By the fact that you have abused me, or hurt me or whatever it is you have done...you have wronged me. By that you have given me a certain right over you,... I could refuse to forgive you, I could say I have the right to retribution. When I forgive I jettison that right..." That's the cost of forgiveness and that's why it's hard.

### **So Forgiveness is hard and it is honest**

Forgiveness is not pretending no one hurt you. Forgiveness is not employing some sort of emotional amnesia saying it wasn't really that bad. **Forgiveness is honest about circumstances and feelings.**

This is obvious in the passage just before Jesus story about the King's forgiveness where Jesus instructs the disciples **Matt. 18:15** "If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. See? That's the setup, the prep for forgiveness: telling the plain, honest truth about the wrong done & hurt felt.

When Jesus says: "Father forgive them they don't know what they're doing," he is fully aware that the "what they're doing" is crucifying him to death. Even in that short sentence of forgiveness Jesus is being completely honest about the damage being done to him- without malice.

Or in John's gospel Peter denies Jesus three times. Later, after the resurrection, on the beach Jesus asks Peter three times in succession "Peter, do you love me?" This is Jesus honestly confronting Peter with that denial and it's pain and then -hearing Peter's declaration of love- Jesus says: "Come Follow me."

Miraslov Volf wrote a book in 2002 called **Exclusion and Embrace**. In the book Volf argues in the context of forgiveness, evil must be named and confronted- whether it's a neighbor throwing his grass clippings into your yard or a country not respecting a border.

The "evil" must be honestly named and confronted. "You did *this*" and it made me feel *that*." [And I would add this naming and confronting has to be done without malice.] This is the

**Exclusion** part of Volf's idea. After the "evil" and "evildoer" have been **honestly identified** then the one who's been hurt can express their forgiveness to the person who hurt them. That is the **Embrace**. That is true forgiveness.

Now what if the person who's hurt me refuses my forgiveness? If you've expressed your hurt honestly and made your best effort to offer forgiveness and reconciliation then regardless of how they respond to you, you are freed from your anger, and freed from the poison of grudge holding, hostility, contempt.

Remember in Jesus death, once for all God acted in Jesus on the cross to forgive the world while we were still sinners. **God offered up his forgiveness without waiting for us to repent or apologize.** Similarly **on the cross, Jesus didn't wait to forgive.** Obviously forgiveness does not require an apology first- though it does require honesty.

### **Forgiveness is hard, honest, and it is cyclical**

This is a practical observation from my own experience. But it's hinted at in Jesus' response to Peter's question. **Matt. 18:22** Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

The simple point here is: Keep on forgiving, no matter what. Keep on forgiving.

Originally I learned this from **the Incredible Mrs. Cadorette**. There was a person and a situation she needed to forgive. She would seek God in prayer, lift the pain up to Him and forgive the person and the situation in her heart. And then a few hours later it would come back: all of it the anger, the hurt, the unfairness and the unforgiveness and she'd have to go back to God, give it all to Him again and move on. Only to have it arise again later. And some time the next day and so on and so on.

The key to her success was that –though it was hard and costly she kept on forgiving.

**Volf** likens it to Forgiveness coming in droplets: a little bit here and a bit more there. You think you've given it all to God and then you wake up in the middle of the night angry and upset and you take all your forgiveness back. Then you wake up and you wait on God and you pray and you begin to forgive again. It's important in all our discussions about forgiveness that we realize Forgiveness is seldom, if ever, a one time: "I forgive you." And it's done. It is best to think of forgiveness as *a continuous repeated cycle-* not one time, or seven times but seventy times seven times.

### **Forgiveness is hard, honest, cyclical and it is reconciling**

Forgiveness is about reconciliation- about relationships put right. Volf likes to say that when someone wrongs us it's like we tattoo their offense on their forehead. And whenever we look at them we see not the person they are, but the tattoo: thief, thoughtless, gossip, liar. The goal of Forgiveness is to get that tattoo removed. And part of that process is **apology and repentance from the offender.**

And though we must forgive indiscriminately as God does, it's not possible for forgiveness to come to its full fruition without apology and repentance.

**Desmond Tutu** likens it to a window shut tight with the curtains pulled. It's stuffy and dark and close inside, while there is bright light and fresh breezes outside just waiting. But they can't come in unless the one inside throws back the curtains and opens the window.

**Wolf** likens forgiveness to sending a gift. He says: I can send a lovely gift to my sister. And UPS may deliver it. And she may put it on the table but she might say: "You know, I don't think I want this thing from my brother" and she just leaves it unopened.

**Sure the gift was given but it's not been truly "received."**

When we forgive we give a gift, but for the full fruit of forgiveness to appear that other person has to receive it. They receive it by **apology and repentance** and when that happens the result is **reconciliation** which is the full fruition of Forgiveness.

Without forgiveness there is no reconciliation. Without reconciliation there is no future for the world. So there is no future without forgiveness.

### **Forgiveness is hard, honest, cyclical, reconciling, and supernatural**

When someone sins and hurts you there's more than just their guilt toward you to be dealt with, there's also their moral guilt before God. *There's nothing you and I can do about that.*

The only way to put right their guilt before God is to separate the doer from the wrongdoing. **This takes a miracle.** The tattoo of the wrong has to be unstuck from them, removed. **This can only happen if the doer dies and is resurrected a new creation.** But this supernatural act has happened! *As has been said- Jesus died once for all.* All humanity vicariously died and rose again in Christ. **1Cor 15:21** For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. **22** For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. All have died as Christ has died for all and been resurrected for all.

**The perfect Son of God soaked up all the sin of mankind from the beginning to the end of history and it died with him on the cross.** And when he rose the sin—the wrong doing- of every human who had ever or would ever live had been "unstuck" from the doer- once for all. The gift of forgiveness was sent off to everyone. It just has to be received and accepted. The air is clear and bright and fresh. The window just has to be opened. God's forgiveness is the result of the supernatural death and rez of Christ!

But also, Forgiveness is a supernatural endeavor within us because in our self-centered, me-first world forgiveness has little value. If someone hurts you in even the slightest way the natural human response is forget 'em, dump 'em, leave 'em. Write 'em off as a loss.

But Jesus commands us to keep on forgiving- "...not 7 times but seventy seven times." How do we do that? **Well, first** we remember that we, ourselves, didn't deserve

forgiveness, but God sent Jesus anyway. [Remember the ridiculously large debt forgiven in Jesus' story?] The truth is we're no better than the one who has hurt us. **And second** it is expected that we who choose to be followers of Jesus will give our anger, our hurt, our desire for justice/revenge, our victim's superiority over to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ who lives within us. And we submit ourselves to the supernatural power of His Holy Spirit. Even forgiving, even at the human level requires the supernatural power of God's Holy Spirit.

**Forgiveness is hard, honest, cyclical, reconciling, supernatural, and it is essential.** We will not survive if we will not forgive. However good followers of Jesus we may try to be- even with God's Holy Spirit- until our salvation is complete we are human beings with egos and pride.

And that means that sooner or later I will do something that will offend you and sooner or later you will say something that hurts me- yeah even here among God's people. And walls can grow up and separation can happen, and relationships that should be solid- because of Christ- become tenuous because of background anger and grudge-holding- cherished contempt and hostility.

**Forgiveness is the only antidote for that poison.**

And that's why God calls us to it throughout the scriptures.

Mark 11:25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." Luke 6:37 ... Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Matt. 6:14 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Forgiveness is essential because unforgiveness is sin. It separates us from our brothers & sisters and from God. This is not God's desire. His desire is for us to be intimate with him and with one another. This is why he tells you and me: don't ever stop forgiving. Because there's no future without forgiveness.