

Forgiveness

Richard Dawson

Matthew 5²¹⁻²⁶ /Matthew 18²¹⁻³⁵ /

Twenty years ago, a pastor and his wife went through what was for them the most difficult experience of their lives. They were sued by a young woman ... [whom] they had tried to help. On several occasions the wife had gone over to clean her house, and they'd had her over for dinner. When they received that suit it just felt like they'd tried to wash someone's feet and got kicked in the mouth. She blamed them for things for which we weren't responsible and they got to see how some lawyers work. They were constructing a case that really wasn't there. That suit came after they had begun [teaching at a seminary], and both were low emotionally. They used to walk together and commit the situation to the Lord. This is how the pastor wrote about the experience years later...

"I wish I could tell you I was pure and noble, but at that time, I would have been happy if this woman had gotten run over by a truck. But love doesn't think like that. I found that as we prayed about it every day there came a time when I could no longer talk about it to the Lord. I'd say, Lord, you know what's on my heart, and you know the details. You do it. And then there came a time when I prayed, Lord, you know that I think she's done us wrong. But I may be wrong. If vengeance is necessary, you do it. And again and again I found myself thinking, I serve a God who has forgiven all of my sins, and they are many. And on the basis of that I can begin to forgive her.

I tell this story not because I'm an expert about how to show forgiveness, but I do know that when, in the power of the Spirit and the love of God, you work with it, you can take that truth about love off the page and see it work in your life. Alfred Lord Tennyson said of Archbishop Cranmer: "To do him a hurt was to beget a kindness from him. His heart was made of such fine soil that if you planted in it the seeds of hate they blossomed love." The call of the Gospel is for us to be like

this and we can be because the Spirit of love lives in those who put their trust in Jesus Christ.

To err is human, to forgive divine. We've covered in this brief series on Christian fundamentals 'following' and then 'faith' and today we finish with 'forgiveness.' To forgive is to align ourselves with God and all of life as a Christian is about aligning ourselves with God. To imitate God is not vain flattery but the sincerest form of basic discipleship there is. Imitation is a form of following and we are called to follow – to go where Jesus calls us to go and to do what Jesus calls us to do and Jesus calls us today to forgive our brothers and our sisters. And let me immediately point out that forgiveness like charity – **begins in the home**. It is much harder there than almost anywhere else. It is one thing to forgive an enemy whom we do not know and whose motives are hidden from us – it is quite another to forgive one whom we thought was like us and who we once trusted. The broken trust of a friend or brother is much harder to forgive than expected betrayal of an enemy.

If love is the product of the Christian economy forgiveness is the hard currency. Without it we are paupers. With it we are rich with the richness of Christ. [repeat] For Christ's ministry was, essentially a ministry of forgiveness...

²⁷ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matt 26)

⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace (Eph 1)

What is the nature of our redemption – it is precisely the forgiveness of sin – the great pardon won at the Cross by Christ for us. But the result of this is not just pardon for us. It is, rather a pardon and a pathway – the pathway of forgiveness...

¹³ Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Col 3)

And again...

³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. ³⁸ Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Luke 6)

The principle of relationship with God is thereby changed forever. No longer are we to look at our brother or sister with comparative eyes; with eyes that are testing, assessing, judging against a cold and lifeless law. The law is not a principle of relationship, it is a principle of self-knowledge; the law taught us to view ourselves aright – as sinners in need of a Saving God. But as much as it could teach us to see what was wrong it could not fix that wrong.

Now, however, we have a new principle – the principle of redemption in Christ through the **forgiveness** of sin. And that principle applies not just to our relationship with God but to our relationships with all people. Not only does God proceed with us on the basis of forgiveness but we too must proceed on the basis of forgiveness. Jesus makes this clear so often through the NT that we can almost miss it as we might miss the wood for the trees. But it is clear that this is how we must relate.

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” ²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. (Matt 18)

There are many teachings on forgiveness but I want to concentrate this morning on just two. The first is that our forgiveness releases us from bondage. When we refuse to forgive we not only hold another ransom but we ourselves become subject to a bondage which will prevent us from going on with God, from growing as a Christian.

The second is that the other side of the coin is that we must also be prepared to **seek forgiveness**; to humble ourselves and ask for forgiveness from others if we are to avoid another sort of bondage for someone who rightly judges us to have sinned will not be prevented by God from receiving full payment from us.

Our reading from Matthew 5 this morning teaches this clearly. God’s priorities are clear. Before even worship of God our relationship with our brother or sister must be pure and it is our responsibility to make it so. If someone has something against us we need to find a way to be reconciled and to be forgiven. Note what Jesus doesn’t say. He doesn’t say that if your brother or sister has something real or right or is justified in having something against us. He simply says... if they have something against us – full stop! And He goes on to emphasize this with the illustration of being taken to court. The issue here again is not whether the case raised against us is justified or fair but that we should seek reconciliation and forgiveness.

²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matt 5)

This is unreasonable; this is, in many ways, unfair – but this is how the economy of the Kingdom works. It runs on forgiveness and the more we forgive the richer we become. And who knows – we may believe we are right but the judge may find against us and we may discover all along that we were wrong. One thing is clear, we cannot earn forgiveness – it must be given and if it’s given then forgiveness is never a something we can boast about.

A young man who was quite strong began work at a construction site and was bragging that he could outdo anyone in a feat of strength. He made a special case of making fun of one of the older workmen. After several minutes, the older worker had had enough. "Why don't you put your money where your mouth is?" he said. "I'll bet a week's wages that I can carry something in a wheelbarrow over

to that building that you won't be able to wheel back." "You're on, old man," the young worker replied. The old man reached out and grabbed the wheelbarrow by the handles. Then he turned to the young man and said, "All right. Get in."

The principle of forgiveness begins with us. God calls us to seek forgiveness from God first and then from those whom we have offended. We must also, however, offer forgiveness to others.

In the parable of the unforgiving servant we must see that we are in the place of that servant for we are the ones whose massive debt God has forgiven. What is clear is that if we don't forgive we condemn others to a prison we ourselves were saved from. What we must also realize however, and what is the main point of the parable, is that we in our unforgiveness condemn ourselves to the very same prison, and, it seems, for a much great time. If and when we refuse to truly forgive our brother or our sister it is **we** who begin serving the time – it is we who are cast into prison and it is we who suffer the punishment or our own unforgiveness; our own unwillingness to release those who have offended us from their prison.

Don't tell me how terrible they've been. Don't tell me how badly they've hurt you. Don't tell me how little they deserve mercy. That's simply not the point. The jail you condemn your brother or sister to is exactly the jail you will stay in. As G K Chesterton once said... [12]

"To love means loving the unlovable. To forgive means pardoning the unpardonable. Faith means believing the unbelievable. Hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless."

[Story of drunk at rugby]

It is not our right to forgive – it is our duty. We don't forgive because we should or because our brother or sister deserves forgiveness. We forgive because this is what Christians do and because we want to avoid the same jail we condemn those whom we do not forgive to.

Let me add just this little rider because I know we can get hung up on what forgiveness means especially in the case of abuse. Where we've been the subject of abuse whether it be physical or sexual we are called to forgive – if only to release ourselves from the prison of hatred and revenge. However, and this especially applies I think, to women who've been sexually and physically abused by men, forgiveness doesn't imply that we need to trust ourselves to the one forgiven. That would be certainly unreasonably. God does not expect us to simply roll over and trust someone who has broken all trust in the past.

It is a Christian's business to forgive. It is what we are about. It is how we shape a community in which trust can flourish again. It is how we sustain our relationships. Let me ask you seriously this morning. Who have you not forgiven? If a name come to mind – then do it this week. Forgive them from the bottom of your heart and release yourself from that prison of hate.

Mother Theresa once said this. "People are often unreasonable and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are honest, people may cheat you. Be honest anyway.

If you find happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough. Give your best anyway.

For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway."

It is hard to forgive – perhaps the hardest thing in the world. But remember – when we refuse to forgive we share the prison we refuse to set them free from.