

CARING ENOUGH TO FORGIVE SERIES #1
 “FORGIVE - BY REALIZING WRONGDOING”
 Genesis 3:8-13, Psalm 32:1-7, Matthew 18:15-35
 Lent 1 February 25 & 26, 2023

“Two cars were involved in an accident. One of the drivers had insurance; the other didn’t. The driver without insurance also did not have a job, and his license was expired. The insured driver had a choice after he left the scene of the accident. He could live for the rest of his life sour about his messed-up bumper, or he could use his insurance to get his car fixed. He chose to get his car fixed rather than be held hostage by someone else’s lack of insurance.

“When we sin, we must lay it before God and admit our sin. If someone has sinned against us, we must relieve them of the sin so that we can move on.”¹ We must learn how to forgive each other.

This is the first in the series that I’m calling “Caring Enough to Forgive.” We’ll be looking at the intricacies of forgiveness that are so needed in our world today. In this series, we’ll be looking at five reasons to forgive the one who has wronged us and hopefully discover the ability to forgive one another so that we can develop a deeper relationship, not only with each other, but also with the Lord our God. We’ll be looking at 1) forgiving by realizing wrongdoing, 2) by reaffirming love, 3) by releasing the past, 4) by renewing repentance, and 5) by rediscovering community.

The other part of this series is what we will hear on Wednesday nights as part of our Lenten services. The other part focuses on the counterfeits of forgiveness. “Every virtue has its own shadow side where it is distorted into a vice, and not the least of these is forgiveness.”² So we’ll be looking at “Caring Enough to NOT Forgive,” and we’ll cover when it is appropriate **not** to forgive another - when “forgiveness” puts you one-up, when “forgiveness” is one-way, when “forgiveness” distorts feelings, when “forgiveness” denies anger, and when “forgiveness” ends open relationships.

In the midst of our lives we will have times where we find ourselves hurt, or angry, or wronged by someone else around us. It’s inevitable that in the midst of a relationship, there will be some pain or

¹ (Tony Evans, *Tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 110, #320)

² (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Not Forgive*, [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981] pg. 6)

anger or injustice felt by one because of the words or actions of another. The question is, though, how are we going to deal with that pain, anger or injustice? When something happens in our lives, will we forever keep a record of wrongs against a person, holding a grudge or remaining hurt by that incident? Or will we take the time and energy to work toward forgiveness?

If you're an average human being, there are many times when we want to cry out because of the wrong we've experienced, but we usually claim complete innocence of any wrong doing on our part to the situation. While there are times when one person will do something to another as a sole instigator to violate another person's life somehow, one being the offender and one being the victim, rarely is it so one sided. If we are truly in relationship with that person, there will usually be a part of the problem belonging to each person within that relationship. Broken relationships rarely come from just one person being the cause of the breakdown of that relationship. Both parties are at fault to the struggle in the association that has been established. So it is rare that we can point a finger at a person and claim correctly that they are solely at fault for the pain and hurt of a situation.

But the question is what will we do with that situation that has caused the hurt? Just pointing a finger at one and saying that it's all his or her fault doesn't cut it. We need to begin to look deeper into the situation to see each of our own parts in that relationship that has failed. Only then, can we begin to recognize our own wrongdoing and begin to work at restoring the connection between the two.

Typically, however, we want to place blame upon the other for their part of the problem and use that as the sole response to the situation. If we can place entire blame upon the other, we free ourselves of our part of the problem. But that rarely works because it only drives us to distraction and continues to hide our own part of the problem.

David Augsburger states it like this: "Each of us can see, when clear-eyed, the part each person plays; even though your part may only have been a failure to recognize that I was taking you for granted - so you feel used, or a choice to overlook another's growing irresponsibility - so you feel exploited, or a refusal to talk openly about differences until the other blew up in accumulated anger - so you feel

attacked. Even when the bind that is creating frustration in another is a part of the whole community system which I accept readily, I am a part of the other person's problem. As I accept that part, however small a slice it may seem in comparison to the whole, I am better prepared to confront the wrongdoing without affront. The willingness to appreciate and own my part must, of course, be a sincere recognition of shared participation in the pain of life experiences, and not a strategy to induce guilt, invite an apology or a confession from the other, or to evade the seriousness of the facts or acts in the strained relationship."³

So we need to first admit that we are part of the problem before we can begin to get beyond the hurt or pain or injustice. None of us is innocent of wrongdoing in a relationship, so we need to admit that we, each one of us, is part of the problem.

But there is within each one of us the innate need to place blame in every situation. If we can cast the blame upon someone else, we attempt to release ourselves from any responsibility to the whole situation. And it becomes easy for us to claim, "But it wasn't my fault."

We see that in our Old Testament lesson of Genesis 3 today. God had commanded Adam, "*You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die*" (2:16-17). It was then Adam's responsibility to let Eve know that breaking that command would bring death to them. And he did that.

Yet, because they were completely innocent of any sin to that point, they were like little children, vulnerable and gullible. So when Satan tempted Eve to eat the fruit, because it would make her like God, knowing good and evil, she made the choice to listen to Satan's voice and eat the fruit because it was "*good for food and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom*" (3:6). And she gave some to her husband, and he also ate and their eyes were opened (3:7).

But when God finds out what has happened, Adam is quick to claim innocence saying, "*The woman you put here with me - she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it*" (3:12). And Eve, was

³ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 12)

also quick to cast blame on Satan, “*The serpent deceived me, and I ate* (3:13). Instead of accepting responsibility, each one wanted to free themselves from their part of the original sin by claiming innocence. Yet they were both guilty of disobeying God’s command, and humanity has suffered the consequences ever since.

So in our shame of doing wrong, we continue to try to free ourselves from our own responsibility in causing hurt or pain in the lives of others by pointing fingers at each other and say, “Not me, it was all your fault.” Blaming seeks to identify the culprit of the problem, give them the role of villain, and then move on to bring about appropriate punishment to that perpetrator.

But forgiveness begins by each of us recognizing our own part of the problem and allowing guilt to bring us to repenting of a specific act or inappropriate behavior. We must confess and seek forgiveness for our own wrongdoing, not try to blame another for what we have done to help create the situation.

But that means we need to move beyond several “fantasies that spring up when hurt feelings reign: *The fantasy* that pointing the finger of blame with angry finality will help reduce the pain. *The fantasy* that repeating a magical ritual apology, like ‘I’m sorry, please forgive me’ will release one from the binding misunderstandings. *The fantasy* that undoing can redo the situation - saying things like ‘I’ll make it up to you’ or ‘I’ll atone by doing some great service for someone else’ or ‘I’ll just act nice in the future to show my heart is right.’ Or *the fantasy* that avoidance (‘if we don’t talk about it, it won’t hurt so much’) or denial (problem? What problem?) will erase the situation and make it easier for us to reconcile. OR *the fantasy* that displacing the pressure by gossiping the tension to someone else, or taking out the frustration on someone else, or ventilating the anger on some person, place or thing will be useful in getting us back together.”⁴

King David gives us a better way of dealing with wrongdoing in Psalm 32:1-7. He tells us that confession of our sins is always the best way to find freedom from the wrongdoing. In fact, he tells us,

⁴ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 15)

*“When I kept silent (when I did not confess my sin), my bones wasted away through my groanings all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. **Then** I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.’ And You forgave the guilt of my sin” (32:3-5).* Confession of our sins to one another AND to the Lord, brings release of our sins, and frees us from the blame game that comes from trying to be an innocent victim.

So by taking full responsibility for our own words and actions and then respect the other one’s taking responsibility for their words and actions, opens up the way for both individuals to see their part of the problem, and then to begin to face the situation for what it is, without blowing it up into an unmanageable condition. Conversation has to be an integral part of the process of initiating forgiveness. Otherwise, as long as I see the other as the sole wrongdoer, without taking responsibility for my own words and actions, there is no possibility for reconciliation to occur. Wrongdoing must be faced. Avoiding it or evading it never brings about a solution to the problem. Restoration of the relationship must start with acknowledgement of our own wrongdoing.

So Jesus gives us some guidelines in effort to help us to overcome a broken relationship. Listen to these words of Matthew 18:15-20. (READ Matthew 18:15-20).

These are all serious steps in restoring a relationship. First we talk with the other person face to face. Don’t try to do it by letter, or email, or Facetime, or Snapchat. Jesus tells us, *“go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over”* (18:15). Is this easy? NO! Most people hate confrontation, but in order to resolve an issue, it has to be faced and talked out. People don’t mind read, so if we have something against someone else, or they have sinned against us, we have to **tell** them before it can be resolved. AND this interaction HAS to happen BEFORE service, or worship and personal acts of response to God. We must be willing to work things out with the other before forgiveness is achieved.

But in order to bring forgiveness, we must see each other as persons of worth, as fellow human

beings that have infinite worth to God, and we must love each other as much as we love ourselves. We're in it together, so it has to be resolved together, otherwise nothing is accomplished, we go on blaming each other for it all, and we continue to neglect our own part of the situation.

If the face to face attempt is not successful to resolve the situation, Jesus tells us, "*take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses*" (18:16). Have others become mediators in your situation so that it is no longer just a personal issue, but one between trusted people. Again, it is an in person visit seeking to bring resolution.

If that doesn't work, Jesus tells us, then we are to bring it before the church in an effort to lovingly restore the relationship. Again, it's not to cast blame upon anyone beyond their own part of the situation, but to create a path to allow open communication for the situation so that each person might find their part of the problem and begin to bring resolution to the broken relationship.

But if even bringing it to the church doesn't work to resolve the conflict, Jesus tells us that we are no longer to treat that one as a brother or sister in Christ, but to consider them as a pagan - one that has no faith. These guidelines are for those within the community of faith, but if one of the offenders is not willing to seek reconciliation, they are to be treated as one without faith. They are no longer to be counted as a believer.

The goal here is to bring resolution to the conflict so that forgiveness is offered and accepted in love toward one another. And that can only happen as we love the other person enough to initiate reconciliation. Without love being shown, the conflict will not be resolved and the sin will not be forgiven. There must be love given for forgiveness to be achieved.

And that is the reason for the rest of our Scripture reading for today, Matthew 18:21-35. Listen carefully please. (READ Matthew 18:21-35)

Jesus tells Peter that we must keep loving our brothers and sisters, even if they sin against us. We must keep on forgiving them, even if they sin against us 490 times in one day. Now it's not the number that counts here, it's the mindset that we are to love each other so much that we keep no record

of wrong between us. In the words of the Apostle Paul, *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”* (I Corinthians 13:4-8).

So Jesus gives us the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant so that we can see the absolute necessity of accepting wrongdoing on our own part, and to seek forgiveness from those we’ve wronged. But we are also to extend forgiveness IN LOVE to those who have wronged us.

The king in this parable looked beyond the offense, to see the person behind it. In seeing the person, the king decides that the huge debt that he owes could not possibly be repaid, so he loves the person so much that he forgives that huge debt. But the now-reconciled man decides to look at the offense of his fellow servant rather than the man himself, and decides that restitution has to be paid for, even in that small debt owed to him. There is no love shown from the first servant to the second one, so punishment is exacted. The first man fails to show love even as he has been shown love, and as a result, finds punishment coming back to him as the king reconsiders his first offer to forgive him of the huge debt that had just been wiped away.

Love has to be shown before any relationship can be restored. We all make mistakes, on a regular basis, even daily. Only love for each other gives us the ability to restore the broken relationship. Without love, only punishment is desired. But we need to be careful, lest the punishment we give to another (rather than the forgiveness they need) will be given right back to us. Jesus ends His parable with these powerful words, *“This is how My heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart”* (Matt. 18:35).

Forgiveness always restores a broken relationship. As we show love to each other, we begin to see the wrongs we’ve done as clearly as we see the wrongs that have been done to us, and we can love the other person enough to work on the reconciliation of the wrongs we’ve done toward each other. But without love, there is no forgiveness and the anger, hurt and pain remains a part of us.

“Trust is severed in an interpersonal crisis, and it stands frozen until conversations can be resumed. Negotiations of trust are a constant intermingling of risking openness and trusting in response which then leads to further openness and increased trust. Trust and risk go hand in hand.”⁵ As we risk openness to confront one another for the sins we commit against each other, we can regain trust as we communicate with each other, in love, to resolve the crisis and extend forgiveness. As forgiveness is given, the relationship grows stronger. But both forgiver and the forgiven have to risk openness.

The forgiver risks starting over, seeing the genuine repentance of the offender, and receiving the trust that comes with forgiveness. That trust risks being wronged again, even if that offender wrongs you over and over again during the day. Jesus tells us to keep working on it so that trust can be fully restored. That involves new ways to relate to each other as communication continues to bring openness out of love so that trust can continue to be built.

The one receiving the forgiveness also needs to be willing to be open to affirm that repentance is genuine and that change will be made. It is vital that the forgiven willingly trusts their own responses so that they can risk spontaneous words and actions, fully knowing that it could lead once more to failure.

When the forgiver and the forgiven work together to resolve the crisis in love for each other, there will be a gradual change in the words and actions between the two, thereby building trust and caring for the other. Then each one can be open and free to be themselves once again, growing closer once more without the anxiety of the possibility of another crisis.

None of us is perfect. We all need to find forgiveness and to give forgiveness so that “*whatever we bind on earth will be bound in heaven*” too (Matt. 18:19). The key is willingness to confront each other, in love for the other, so that we continue to learn how to live together in happiness and peace.

Father, give us the courage to be open with each other so that we might work out our faults between us. Allow us to show such love to each other that we risk talking out the hurts and pain and anger we experience. Help us to be willing to give forgiveness, even as You have forgiven us. Thank you for guidelines of Jesus to help us reconcile with one another. Give us the grace we need to learn from our mistakes and live at peace with each other. This we pray in Jesus’ Name. AMEN.

⁵ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 20)