

CARING ENOUGH TO FORGIVE SERIES #4
“FORGIVE - BY RENEWING REPENTANCE”
Psalm 130:1-8, I John 1:8-10, 2:9-11, Luke 17:1-6
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Our discussion of forgiveness over the past few weeks has helped us to see that in order for reconciliation to really take place we have to recognize our own wrongdoing in the situation that has created hurt or pain. Then for the process of forgiveness to begin, love must be shown so that both parties know that despite what has gone on, love is a genuine part of the relationship. And as the process of forgiveness gets going, it is important to release each other from the past, knowing that we cannot change it, undo it, or remake it into anything than what it is at the present time. The past has to be released for forgiveness to be risked.

Today we're looking at the next step in the process of forgiveness that requires repentance to be sought. Listen to this mother's account of an event that caused stress in her family.

“I know Larry is sorry for wrecking the car; he wants me to forgive and forget, but first I need to know if he's learned anything from the experience.

“One week ago, Larry took our new Volvo to go out with his girl. Before the evening ended, he had filled the car with eight kids; they killed a case of beer and sideswiped three parked cars in testing out how a Volvo corners at 40 miles an hour at the center of the town square.

“Yes I'm willing to forgive. Yes I care about Larry. Yes he can be trusted with the Volvo again. But first I want to know that he will be more responsible in the future, that he will respect the whole family's rights to use an un-wrecked car, and that he will help cover the increase in insurance costs from the wreck.”¹

As we see from this account, forgiveness includes repentance. In fact, forgiveness requires repentance, and forgiveness follows repentance. Forgiveness identifies that a problem has happened, that hurt has taken place, and it looks at the other person with integrity, but it also looks for new behavior to be claimed by the offender, so that the future will demonstrate that one's genuine intentions

¹ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, [Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981] pg. 65)

to be different. For that to happen, repentance has to be the core factor in the forgiveness process. But where there is no repentance, there is no true forgiveness.

This, however, is greatly debated. Two contrasting thoughts about forgiveness focus on the issue of repentance. The first thought is that there are times when forgiveness is given initially, and the repentance has come after the loving outreach with forgiveness has been extended. The second thought is that repentance is the absolute necessity for forgiveness to truly be given. Let's investigate both of these.

The first question comes to us, "Can Forgiveness Precede Repentance?" Can forgiveness be truly given if there is not first the intention of the wrongdoer to seek repentance for what they have said or done? Consider this account.

"Albert Tomei was a justice of the New York State Supreme Court. A young defendant was convicted in Judge Tomei's court of gunning down another person execution-style. The murderer had a bad record, was no stranger to the system, and only stared in anger as the jury returned its guilty verdict.

"The victim's family had attended every day of the two-week trial. On the day of sentencing, the victim's mother and grandmother addressed the court. When they spoke, neither addressed the jury. Both spoke directly to the murderer. They both forgave him.

"You broke the Golden Rule--loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind. You broke the law--loving your neighbor as yourself. I am your neighbor,' the older of the two women told him, 'so you have my address. If you want to write, I'll write you back. I sat in this trial for two weeks, and for the last sixteen months I tried to hate you. But you know what? I could not hate you. I feel sorry for you because you made a wrong choice.'

"Judge Tomei writes: 'For the first time since the trial began, the defendant's eyes lost their laser force and appeared to surrender to a life force that only a mother can generate: nurturing, unconditional love. After the grandmother finished, I looked at the defendant. His head was hanging low. There was no more swagger, no more stare. The destructive and evil forces within him collapsed helplessly before

this remarkable display of humaneness.’”² Forgiveness of the offender came before repentance was given. A change came over the young man, but ... was it really forgiveness?

With this argument comes the concept that “true forgiveness restores the other’s freedom with no questions asked, no demands imposed, not repentance required, and no revenge attempted. It does not expect, await, or invite repentance as a means to experiencing forgiveness. It sees true repentance as an emotion arising from the experience of forgiveness. When one knows that he has been loved, accepted and forgiven, then he is free to respond repentantly. When one feels the reality of loving, acceptant forgiveness, then the motivation to repent springs up within.

“But forgiveness comes first [before repentance is given with this mindset]. Repentance is motivated by the experience of forgiveness ... Out of grace experienced emerges repentance, restitution and restoration of relationships. This perspective tends to equate forgiveness with love.”³ So one could ask, “if no repentance occurs after this kind of “forgiveness” is given, has forgiveness really taken place?” There is no reconciliation between the two parties, only a one way giving of forgiveness extended, but not asked for by the other. So the relationship never grows again. Has forgiveness been reduced only to an expression of love?

The other position in this debate states that “Repentance Precedes Forgiveness.” It is the realization that we have done or said something that has brought hurt or pain into the life of another. As we come to that realization of what we have done, we seek out the one we have hurt and seek their forgiveness. We stress a new behavior for the future, recognizing that the old behavior is no longer appropriate. We receive forgiveness as we seek it through repentance.

David Augsburger says it like this, “Forgiveness is an act of integrity which recognizes that wrongdoing has occurred, has been acknowledged and has been dealt with responsibly by both parties involved. When repentance is overlooked, ignored, bypassed, or postponed, the appropriate response is love, not forgiveness. Love chooses to see the other as a valued person once more in spite of the

² (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 107)

³ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 67-68)

wrongdoing. Love restores its attitudes of prizing and caring for the other. Love is the basis for forgiveness, but it is only the first step. Repentance is the second.”⁴ And when repentance is sought and forgiveness is given, then trust can be restored once more and the relationship can be rebuilt again.

The debate can be argued from both ways similar to the riddle which came first: the chicken or the egg? Does forgiveness precede repentance or does repentance precede forgiveness?

Jesus states in our Gospel lesson today that it is the repentance that happens before forgiveness is given. Listen to these words of Luke 17:1-6. (READ Luke 17:1-6)

Look at the sequence of events that is presented; 1) a wrong has been done to another 2) who is considered a brother or sister. That means that they are fellow followers of Jesus Christ. 3) Then there is a confrontation where the wrong is exposed. 4) IF THE PERSON REPENTS 5) we are to forgive them 6) without any rehashing of past events, 7) even if it was for the same thing that the person is still working on getting right, 8) even if it is a repetition of the same wrong, 9) but the person adamantly wants to make changes and is genuine in their wanting to start again to do better in the future. It’s a cycle of hurt, expressed love, confrontation for the wrongs being done, repenting of the wrongs, and the forgiveness given.

Repentance shows that the offender is diligently seeking a renewed relationship with the person they have hurt with words or actions. Without the recognition of a wrong being done, there is no need for any behavior to be changed and so that relationship continues to degrade and fall apart. Repentance is what initiates the forgiveness process.

But there is a necessary clarification of terms here that often brings confusion. We are not talking about penance here. Penance is not a renewing of a relationship, but rather the individual self-imposing punishment on themselves in order to try to earn acceptance from another after a wrong was

⁴ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 68-69)

done. Nor are we talking about regret or remorse. These are emotions felt by the one who realizes wrongs they have done. They can help lead the person to repentance, but they are not one and the same. Let me give you an example.

“When a pastor named Michael was still in seminary, he took a required course in ‘clinical pastoral education.’ Each seminarian was assigned to be a chaplain in a hospital or other institution, and one night each week was on call for emergencies. Late one night, the phone rang, and Michael was called to Alexian Brothers Medical Center in the Chicago suburbs.

“A 16-year-old girl had been driving at night with friends, and she had backed into a light pole. The pole had broken off and then fallen forward, crashing down onto the car. A 12-year-old friend in the car had been severely injured; in fact, she was brain dead when she arrived at the hospital. Michael walked with the 12-year-old’s family as they went through the wrenching process of realizing the truth and allowing the life support to be removed.

“The following morning, Michael visited the hospital room of the 16-year-old driver. Physically, she was recovering well, but emotionally, she was distraught knowing that her actions had killed her friend. ‘I’m going to be like a daughter to her parents,’ she told Michael. ‘I’m going to go over to their house every day and baby-sit for them. I’ll wash dishes for them every night. I’ll go over there every week and mow their lawn.’

“Michael gradually helped her realize the truth that no matter what she did, she could never replace their daughter. She could never do enough to make up for her actions. All she could do was ask for forgiveness and hope that the parents would find it in their hearts to forgive her.

“The parents who lost their daughter, amazingly, did forgive this girl. She was set free from trying to pay back a debt she could never repay no matter what she did.”⁵

This girl experienced remorse and regret and tried to do penance to the parents of the girl who had died. She was willing to do everything she could to make the wrong right, but it wasn’t possible.

⁵ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 113)

Even though she was willing to sacrifice the rest of her own life to repay the debt of being the one responsible for the other girl's death, the remorse she felt would only have driven her to destruction. Realistically, all she could do was to repent of her actions and ask for the parents and family to forgive her. Only then could forgiveness be given. And graciously it was given to her.

Often we get stuck with actions of remorse trying to make a situation of the past be different than it is. We so want things to be different, that we're willing to do just about anything to make things right. But that does not lead us to repentance.

Remorse is a hurt borne within the individual doing their best to change things, but too many times it is self-destructive, leading to the death of the person. They may turn to drugs or alcohol or destructive behaviors in an effort to relieve their own pain for their actions, but it only leads to further wrongs being done.

Repentance on the other hand, is that hurt within the individual that turns them toward healing, letting the pain lead to life again with new guidelines and greater respect for the other. "Repentance is owning what was, in full acknowledgment of the past, and it is choosing what will be, in open responsibility for one's behavior in the future. Past injuries are fully recognized, future intentions are truly genuine, and right relationships are now being expressed and experienced with each other."⁶

The word repent actually means to turn around. It is changing direction to face another way. It is turning from the past mistakes and wrongs and turning toward new alternatives for the future. It is turning from thinking inaccurately that one thing is right, to finding the truth in what is really right. It is no longer dwelling in the past with all its mistakes, but living in the present and letting our words and actions today bring a positive and hopeful future. Repentance turns from denying the wrong and pursues the accurate.

Psalm 130 demonstrates true repentance. "*Out of the depths I cry to You, Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let Your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If You, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who*

⁶ (David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 72)

could stand? But with You there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve You” (1-4). The writer recognizes his wrongs, and seeks the Lord for His forgiveness. He is desiring a new relationship with the Lord, and that comes as he proclaims his guilt and desires a new start in his life. When one’s heart is exposed to the wrong and given opportunity to find the renewing refreshment of the Lord’s forgiveness, there is hope that the relationship is restored and a closeness can be achieved again.

But without repentance, there is no acknowledgement that any wrong has been done, and there is no need for a change in our behavior. We keep on saying and doing things that bring hurt or pain to those around us, and there’s no need to stop doing anything.

Yet, as confrontation takes place, as we are given the opportunity to see the negative effects that our words or actions have on another, there is the possibility for new life to begin as the wrongs are exposed, and the behaviors are changed.

The author of I John makes the great case in chapters 1 & 2 about the necessity of repentance, if we are to find forgiveness from the Lord or from one another. He says, *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He (the Lord) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word is not in us” (1:8-10).*

We are all sinners in need of God’s grace, and the grace of others around us. But if we fail to recognize our wrongdoing, we make ourselves out to be perfect with no need to change anything in our lives. Yet none of us is perfect, and we need to repent and confess our sins to each other so that in love, the reconciliation process can begin. As we love one another and learn to forgive each other, there becomes room for deeper relationships to develop between us, and our love for each other can help us become closer to each other. But without repentance, those relationships continue to splinter and we find ourselves divided more and more. Repentance is absolutely necessary for us to truly have life.

So “When forgiveness foregoes repentance, don’t trust it. When forgiveness forgets the real enduring unresolved issues of justice, integrity and the righteousness of right relationships, don’t believe

it. When forgiveness takes justice, integrity and right relationships seriously, risk it.”⁷

But realize this: complete reconciliation is not possible. We cannot turn back the clock and make history different. We can only realize what we’ve done, claim our part in it, and then seek forgiveness and move on from right now. We cannot forgo repentance, lest the resentment continues, and the condition of distrust remains, and we keep on offending each other.

Then, too, we have to remember that reconciliation is a painful process, because coming to grips of the wrongs we’ve done is never easy to face. We have to remember our differences, and lovingly accept each other as being different, and rejoice in those differences. Imagine what life would be like if we were all the very same? All of you just like me would drive us all into distraction, and there wouldn’t be any life. We cannot forget repentance, denying our uniqueness, and expecting others to be just like us. That would only create more confusion and unrealistic expectations.

We need repentance so that we can turn from our past mistakes and find future hopes as we take it upon ourselves to change our behavior, to show love toward each other and recognize each other as fellow servants of the Lord our God. We need to trust each other again as we release them to be fully engaged in our lives again. Then relationships can blossom and flourish, and we can find care for one another. Let’s pray.

Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do. Give us the eyes to see the need to repent of our wrongs done to each other and to You. Only then can we begin to see the process You are taking us through to learn to truly live with each other in Your peace. Help us to accept each other as You have accepted us, and to seek to grow closer to each other as fellow servants of Christ Jesus. We’re not perfect yet, as You well know. So help us to give up our pride and arrogance so that we might humble ourselves and seek repentance for the wrongs we have done against one another. Help us to show love to those who are brothers and sisters, so that we might build each other up and grow together in love. This we pray in Jesus’ Name. AMEN.

⁷ David Augsburg, *Caring Enough to Forgive*, pg. 73)