

THE FREEDOM OF FORGIVENESS

The first Friday of 1982 was a day that Kevin Tunell wishes he could forget. He was at a party and had too much too much to drink. On his way home he hit and killed an 18 year old girl. He was convicted of drunk driving and spent time in jail for manslaughter. After his release he spent 7 years campaigning against drunk driving (6 more than his sentence required). Was taken to court by the family of the girl he had killed and sued for 1.5 million, but the family settled for \$936. The amount was to be paid 1 dollar at a time every Friday for 18 years (in the year 2000).

The girl's family demanded 936 payments for the crime. How many payments do YOU require? No one makes it through life free of injury. Somewhere in the past you were hurt. You were a victim like the 18 year old girl killed by the drunk driver. How many payments will you demand until "justice" is done?

Today we are concluding our series "Love Is ..." and we are looking at the fact that love keeps no record of wrongs. If you are going to be a loving person, and if this is going to be a loving church, we must be people who forgive one another.

Matt. 18:21 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. 23 "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. 26 "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. 28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' 30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32 "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

1. Resenting - forgiving is a choice we make

Everyone in life gets hurt to some degree. Notice that Peter begins here by asking Jesus "how many times shall I forgive my brother WHEN he sins against me". Not IF but WHEN.

On March 24 1989 the tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh Reef dumping more than 11 million gallons of crude oil into one of the most beautiful bodies of water in the world. Within hours petroleum blackened everything in sight including the surface of the water, the beaches and the animals. Alaska was infuriated and Exxon was humiliated. Millions of dollars went into the cleanup.

This collision, as terrible as it was takes place daily in our hearts. The collision of your heart against the reef of someone else's actions. The result is a hole in your heart. Precious energy escapes coating

the surface of your soul with a deadly film of resentment. A black layer of bitterness darkens your world, dims your sight, sours your outlook and suffocates your joy.

In the rough seas of life, reefs are everywhere. No one gets through life without running aground from time to time. While we do not have a say in WHAT is done to us in life, we do have a say in WHAT WE DO with our pain. Like the family of the girl who was killed, we each must decide – will I forgive. How many payments will I demand? The normal response to attack is to fight back and get angry. It is a decision we make. Do I put out the fire or heat it up? Do I release it or resent it? Do I get over it or get even? Resentment is when you let your hurt turn to hate. It is nursing an offense until it becomes a grudge.

Say that word with me – GRUDGE. The Grrrrrrr sound at the beginning is what others usually hear in those who are nursing one – it is like a dog saying “keep away”. The next part sounds like “mud” which it is like walking through when you carry one. The ending sounds like “sludge” which is what coats the lining of your heart when you are holding one.

Resentment is cocaine to the soul. It makes our heart beat faster and our energy level to rise. However, like a drug it also requires more frequent and larger doses to achieve the same high. There comes a point in life when anger ceases to be an emotion and becomes a driving force behind our lives. A person bent on revenge moves further and further away from being able to forgive because anger has become their source of energy and comfort. This explains why bitter people complain to everyone who will listen – they need to have the fire of their anger flamed. It explains organizations like the KKK and skinheads who feed off of each others anger. They are addicted to bitterness.

Resentment is when you replay an offense in your mind over and over again. You refuse to let it go. A guy complained to his buddy that whenever he argued with his wife, she got historical. His friend said, "You mean hysterical." He said, "No, historical. She dredges up the past and reminds me of every time I've failed her."

Have you ever had someone say to you “I forgive you” but you knew that the account was still open? Every time they had the opportunity they would remind you of the offense.

Forgiveness is not saying, "I will forgive, but not forget." It is not to bury the hatchet with the handle sticking out of the ground, so you can grasp it the minute you want it. – D.L. Moody

When should we forgive? This is the question Peter brings to Jesus. Jewish law said that a wounded person should forgive up to 3 times. Perhaps feeling generous Peter doubles this and throws in an extra one for good measure. Notice the answer of Jesus – not just 7 but 77 or 70 times 7! If you are trying to add that up you are missing the point. Jesus is saying you should ALWAYS forgive. Why should we forgive, because God forgave us.

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

2. Receiving - forgiving is rooted in Christ's sacrifice

Jesus illustrates His point with a parable. The servant in the story owed a great debt. When brought before the master he begged to be allowed to pay back the debt. Instead, the master eliminated the debt. The servant was thinking works but the master was thinking grace.

The actions of the master are that of God to us in Christ. Though we owed a great debt it has been paid for and we have been freed from it. We have been given grace - but have you accepted it?

When the forgiven servant confronts his co-worker he demands payment of the debt. When the co-worker could not pay it he is thrown into prison. This seems strange since prison is the one place where it is impossible to work off a financial debt. One way or another the forgiven servant will make his co-worker pay. The actions of the servant show that, although he had been given grace, he had not accepted grace.

Heb. 12:15 See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

The first step to forgiving is to truly understand and receive the forgiveness that we have been given in Christ. Many believers miss the grace of God because they have not truly understood their own desperate need for forgiveness.

Louis XII of France was treated very badly by his enemies before coming to power. He had been cast into prison and kept in chains. Later when he did become king, he was urged to seek revenge but he refused. Instead, he prepared a scroll on which he listed all who had perpetrated crimes against him. Behind every man's name he placed a cross in red ink. When the guilty heard about this, they feared for their lives and fled. Then the king explained, "The cross which I drew beside each name was not a sign of punishment, but a pledge of forgiveness extended for the sake of the crucified Savior, who upon His cross forgave His enemies and prayed for them."

3. Releasing - forgiving brings freedom

We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it. -- C. S. Lewis

If the first step in forgiving is receiving recognizing the love and grace of Jesus Christ, then the second step is applying that grace which we have received to another. This is an act of the will and involves several things. First, it means to forego the right of striking back. One rejects the urge to repay gossip with gossip and a bad turn with a worse turn. Second, it means replacing the feeling of resentment and anger with good will. Third, it means seeking to restore the relationship.

To forgive others as Jesus forgave us means that we not only forgive but we seek to forget.

A retentive memory is a good thing, but the ability to forget is the true token of greatness. -- Elbert Green Hubbard

At this point you may be saying, "But you don't know what that person did to me! If I forgive them then I am saying what they did is OK and letting them off the hook". The only person on the hook is you. If you don't let go of the line it will destroy you. Unforgiveness is like cancer to the soul. When Jesus taught us to pray He warned of what failing to forgive can mean.

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.

General Oglethorpe once said to John Wesley, "I never forgive and I never forget." To which Wesley responded, "Then Sir, I hope you never sin." By failing to forgive we miss the grace of God in our own lives.

The next time you are hurt and feel that someone must pay for your pain, remember that someone already has. Jesus died for your sins. He loved you enough to give himself for you.

After the Civil War Robert E. Lee visited a Kentucky woman who showed him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her home. She cried bitterly that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Union artillery fire. She waited for Lee to condemn the North and sympathize with her loss. Lee paused, and said, "Cut it down, my dear madam, and forget it."

Is there anything in your life that needs to be cut down and forgotten? Am I saying that you should put up with abuse and sin because you must always forgive? Not at all. But if you are holding on to something demanding payment it is time to forgive and let it go. Forgive because you also have been forgiven.

Years after her concentration camp experiences in Nazi Germany, Corrie ten Boom met face to face one of the most cruel and heartless German guards that she had ever contacted. He had humiliated and degraded her and her sister. He had jeered and visually raped them as they stood in the delousing shower. Now he stood before her with hand outstretched and said, "Will you forgive me?" She writes: "I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed, Jesus, help me! Woodenly, mechanically I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down into my arms and sprang into our clutched hands. Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. 'I forgive you, brother,' I cried with my whole heart. For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard, the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so intensely as I did in that moment!" To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover the prisoner was you.

Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a permanent attitude. -- Martin Luther King, Jr

Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father and his teenage son. In the story, the relationship had become somewhat strained, and the teenage son ran away from home. His father began a journey in search of that rebellious son. Finally, in Madrid, Spain, in a last desperate attempt to find the boy, the father put an ad in the local newspaper. The ad read: "Dear Paco, Meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father." The next day, in front of the newspaper office, hundreds of Pacos showed up. They were all seeking forgiveness. They were all seeking the love of their father.