

Message for St. Stephen's Church Sept 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017 by Bob Wahl

Theme: **God's Path to Love and Forgiveness.**

Scripture: **Luke 6: 27 - 37**

Text: **1 John 1:9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

**Introduction:**

**Prayer:** Open my eyes, that I may see  
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;  
Place in my hands the wonderful key  
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Chorus:

Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my eyes, illumine me,  
Spirit divine!

Again it is my privilege to bring a message from God's Word to you this morning. I do so with great humility and respect for the honour placed upon me for this opportunity and responsibility.

The Scripture read today contains a lot of difficult instructions:

We are to love our enemies  
We are to do good to those who hate us  
We are to bless those who curse us,  
To pray for those who mistreat us  
If we are struck on one cheek, we are to turn the other.  
If someone attempts to steal from us, we are not to stop him.  
Give your stuff away; and don't consider it a loan.

The above instructions are practically unthinkable in today's world. But there they are. It is really about putting love and forgiveness into action. Love and Forgiveness is the foundation for all of these difficult instructions. Therefore my topic today: God's Path to Love and Forgiveness."

Love and Forgiveness are the essential elements in your life path for any spiritual growth to take place. You cannot love your enemy, do some good to the neighbor that hates you and curses you, and even mistreats you without knowing the incredible grace of Love and Forgiveness. It is in these impossible conditions of life, whatever they may be, that the growth of our soul takes place. It must take place here, while in our physical bodies. There is a lot of Scripture that talks about that necessity, and very little about growth, of any kind, after this life. There may be, but we aren't told. That means we need to focus on what we are told. To love and forgive in every part of our life experiences.

There is probably nothing that will impact your life and mine more than knowing and experiencing forgiveness. There is an art to learning to love, as there is an art to learning to forgive. I have come to see that you cannot separate them. Love and Forgiveness go together.

Many years ago I read a most interesting book. “The Art of Loving” by Eric Fromm. I have read and reread it many times. I have underlined many portions of it. I would have liked to see him do a follow up book: “The Art of Forgiving”. Because you can’t have one without the other. To truly love, you must forgive. To truly forgive, you must love.

**Forgiveness**, Two examples of love and forgiveness:

1. In the first instance I knew two ladies who won great spiritual victory by forgiving their errant husbands. Both husbands left their wives; both died in the arms of their former wives.
  - a) One lady from our church in White Rock - Love and Forgiveness triumphed
  - b) My sister in law - Again Love and forgiveness triumphed.
2. The Amish who forgave the man who shot 10 of their young girls. Five died.

**Can you accept this one basic Idea: All human events and experiences, are directed or permitted by a God of love.**

First, If we do not accept that concept, it seems to me, we have dethroned God. He is no longer omnipotent and, in fact, can’t exist as God. We are told that in him resides ALL power. There is no place where God is not. There is no power that supersedes his. If that is not the case, he can’t be God. He is at best “a god”.

But practical, total acceptance (of the idea) will require a lot of adjustments to our reactions to the negative events of life, like how to treat our enemy, bless when we’re cursed, forgive when we’re mistreated. Jesus had a long list of how it should impact our lives and how we need to react. It will require a lot of love and forgiveness. In fact, forgiveness becomes the central point of our life.

**First of all, and number one, we need to recognize our own need of forgiveness.**

This is basic. We must understand that we are flawed like everyone else. We are not whole. We are what we might call damaged goods. Imperfect. We are human. The consequence of this we see in our world. We need to try to correct injustice, we need not countenance wrong-doing, but we need to understand that there is no sin committed by others that I am not capable of. When you see someone whose life-style you despise, remember “there but for the grace of God, go I”. I am capable of every sin committed by humanity. We sin and need forgiveness.

But when we ask God for forgiveness, Jesus assures us, we are forgiven. Period. Sin has been taken care of. The slate is wiped clean. Our soul is reborn. Our spirit renewed. We are joined to Jesus and God in one spirit. We are One body. The body of Christ. These are truths almost beyond our comprehension. But we remain human. Jesus recognized that frailty.

The new birth, being born again, can be a glorious experience. And I am aware not all have a Paul-like conversion experience. I did. One night in July of 1951, 66 years ago, while driving our farm tractor on my way home late at night, I was compelled to stop. I knelt down beside the tractor in that summer evening, and prayed for understanding and faith and there and then committed my way (my path) to the Lord. It was a marvelous moment and I have never swerved from that commitment but with many failings. The experience may be an instant eye opener or a gradual unfolding of truth. But it will impact your work, your career, your business, your home life. It is really wonderful. We

sing with joy that old hymn “What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought, since Jesus came into my heart”. So simple; yet so profound.

**Then the hiccups start: Irritations, disappointments, stress, failures, adversity, sickness, disease, deaths, sorrow, suffering, realization of our human weakness, etc.**

This is where soul-growth begins. We don't grow when all goes well. Growth occurs in the dark. Daylight reveals the growth of the night. “Oh God, I didn't think it would be this tough. I had no idea what all would be required of me”. Like a child learning to walk. Or a boy learning to ride a bike. It can be very painful. For the young person painful embarrassments, exclusions, rejections, fights, and then as adults the struggle with our own selves, the disappointments, heartaches, the competition, the angry words, love affairs, addictions – alcohol and drugs, and then you may find you've been cheated; by your spouse, or by a close associate or friend or some so-called investment advisor who took all your money. The list is endless. And I'm supposed to forgive all that??

Deep, deep down, we probably knew that since I had been forgiven, I would need to forgive. And we certainly heard often enough: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us”. It's just that some things, some people, are so hard to forgive.

**But perhaps the greatest struggle is forgiving Myself.**

Failing here will likely result in an inability to forgive others. But if I am serious in following the Master, and becoming like him, I will despair of my own shortcomings. I will need much grace to forgive myself. Not once or twice but over and over, day by day, until life ends.

I was struck by a paragraph in a novel by Colleen McCullough “The Thornbirds”.

Ralph is a priest, who falls in love, and has a short affair. He is devastated because he took his priesthood very seriously. He goes to his Father-confessor and pours out his heart in confession. I was struck by the Confessor's thoughts because I think it applies to all of us, maybe especially those of us who are, or have been, in ministry or church leadership. But really for us all. The Father-confessor says to Ralph:

“Ralph, we are priests, but we are something else before that: something we were before we became priests, and which we cannot escape, in spite of our exclusiveness. We are men, with the weaknesses and failings of men. There is nothing you can tell me which could alter the impressions I formed of you during our years together, nothing you could tell me which will make me think less of you, or like you less. For many years I have known that you had escaped this realization of our intrinsic weakness, of our humanity, but I knew you must come to it, for we all do.

I am not shocked, Ralph, nor disappointed. It is as Our Lord Jesus Christ will, and I think perhaps you had a great lesson to learn which could not be learned in any way less destructive. God is mysterious, His reasons beyond our poor comprehension. But I think what you did was not done lightly, your vows thrown away as having no value. I know you very well. I know you to be proud, very much in love with the idea of being a priest, very conscious of your exclusiveness. It is

possible that you needed this particular lesson to reduce that pride, make you understand that you are first a man, and therefore not as exclusive as you think.

Ralph asks, “how can I forgive myself?”

The pride, Ralph, the pride! It is not your place to forgive, do you not understand that yet? Only God can forgive. Only God! Mark 2:7. You can’t and it’s not your job.

I may have some small disagreements there since we are asked to forgive as well in the Lord’s prayer. Forgive us our transgressions as we forgive ---. But I would say only the one sinned against can forgive. That always includes God.

If God has forgiven me, what is left to forgive? I’m really only left with the emotion of guilt, not the guilt itself. The sin has been removed. As far as the east is from the west. Gone. I need to let go. What keeps it in my mind is only the disappointment I have in myself for falling short. That’s just my pride. That just a belief that I’m not that bad. Yes, you are. Yes, I am that bad, and worse. Only your pride is keeping you from enjoying the experience of total release. Let it go. Accept forgiveness.

**We also need to forgive Others.** All those who touch my life. All those Jesus points out to us in our Scripture. Enemies and crooks, but also wife, husband, children, co-workers, colleagues, acquaintances, friends, family, father, mother, grandfather, all whose genes I carry, and who carry my genes. All are human and sin and often hurt me. I will need **to learn** to forgive all. I also want people to forgive me when I fail. Have you lost friends, family acquaintances who will not forgive you. I have and it hurts. Even when I have apologized for my wrong, I have a former friend who will not forgive me for a wrong he feels I did to him. I feel bad about that and sorry for him.

But I think that just as Jesus used the seventy times seven we are to forgive, what he is trying to get us to understand here is the need to live with a forgiving spirit. At times, I have felt the church has missed that. Too many times we are so judgmental of others, of their ways, their culture, their religion. I have even been critical of the United Church!!! I’m sure you have never done that.

**And perhaps we need to include God:** yes, we may not admit it but when we question painful experiences and events, we are questioning God. Why Lord? Why did you allow this to happen? I can't handle this. This is too much. Refusing to accept God’s SDDS means we fail to believe, trust.

Go back to the **Basic IDEA. All human events and experiences, are directed or permitted by a God of love.**

David was a great man and a great sinner. He was also a man after God’s own heart. God gave him some incredible insights like the one that seems to indicate that God has a vast heavenly library filled with a book for each individual ever living in the history of the world. According to David for every day of our lives God had a “planner” written long before we were conceived. We read in **Psalms 139:16 All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of those days**

came to be” For me that is as best I can calculate today 30,491 days. That’s a fat book. He new exactly what would happen each day long before I existed.

### **Customs:**

Canada has border customs. Whatever you want to bring into the country has to go through customs.

We have the same guard on our lives. I call it **Divine Customs**. **Can we believe that nothing touches us until passed through Divine Customs? Even if the fault is all my own and I am totally responsible? The problem you created for yourself had design and purpose. The pain caused by another had design and purpose. Nothing passes those gates without Divine inspection.**

I have come to the realization that the practical life of a Christian can well be summed up in one word, “**Forgiveness**”. If I am totally forgiven, sanctified. As though I had never sinned, then that “forgiveness” should lead me to live a life of forgiveness. That means accepting what comes to me by accident or by people or from God or the devil. The good and bad. God **forgives me my failure; I forgive others, and their failures, and God**. It is the key to resolving all life’s issues. Not forgiving creates issues that express themselves in physical and material ways, in relationship problems, health issues, addiction, depression, anger, resentment, feeling betrayed, feeling used and rejected, etc. Forgiveness means freedom.

So let’s talk about **blame**. History is full of casting blame. The Devil made me do it. We have been set free from all blame. **1 Corinthians 1:8** *Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Should we not be careful at casting blame? **Matthew 7:3** *And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?* And is it not really God we are blaming? After all God allowed it. It was meant to bring growth, spiritual growth. For us as Christians all events have this objective. There may be many benefits we enjoy, or conversely, losses, but spiritual growth is the goal.

Will the person responsible for your pain benefit if you forgive him? I doubt it, but I don’t know. Perhaps God will take your forgiveness of that person into account on judgement day. If there is any bases for that idea, and some believe there is, it adds another very important motive to forgive. But at least on this earth anyone who steals from you or takes your pride, your esteem, your money, will not benefit – even when you forgive him, unless he/she repents, Forgiveness benefits the forgiver.

You can forgive, without forgetting. You can decide to forgive, but make sure the harm done to you is not repeated. You can decide to forgive, even when emotional scars remain. That too we need to accept God has allowed.

Let me end this message with a prayer as written and sung by Matthew West:

"Forgiveness"

It's the hardest thing to give away

And the last thing on your (my) mind today

It always goes to those that don't deserve

It's the opposite of how you (I) feel

When the pain they caused is just too real

It takes everything you (I) have just to say the word...

Forgiveness

It flies in the face of all your (my) pride

It moves away the mad inside

It's always anger's own worst enemy

Even when the jury and the judge

Say you got a right to hold a grudge

It's the whisper in your ear saying, 'Set It Free'

Forgiveness,

Show me how to love the unlovable

Show me how to reach the unreachable

Help me now to do the impossible

Forgiveness,

It'll clear the bitterness away

It can even set a prisoner free

There is no end to what it's power can do

So, let it go and be amazed

By what you see through eyes of grace

The prisoner that it really frees is you

Forgiveness

I want to finally set it free

So show me how to see what Your mercy sees

Help me now to give what You gave to me

Forgiveness, Forgiveness

Amen.