

Forgiving Fathers

Once, when I was ten years old, I accidentally discharged a rifle in the house; shot out a window; made one heck of a bang. My baby sister was in the room with me. My parents, of course, were scared out of their minds and came rushing into the room. For the next several hours, they allowed me to feel the full burden of my guilt, then my dad took me aside and said, "It's okay. It's over." There were no words of admonishment, no threats of future punishment, no strings attached. I distinctly remember the lifting of a huge burden off my shoulders. Can you remember an event like that? Has that ever happened to you? This is what the unconditional forgiveness of God is all about. He says, "It's okay." Have you ever experienced such grace from someone who says you don't have to feel ashamed, don't have to feel guilty. I feel your pain, your embarrassment, your guilt. It's okay. And conversely, have you ever offered such grace to anyone? If you did, it came from God.

Guilt and forgiveness are two very complex thought processes.

Referring to our New Testament reading today, the Rabbinic standard in those days, taken from the book of Amos, was that forgiveness should be given 3 times. But Peter thought he was being generous by doubling that amount and adding one more for good measure. But Jesus' answer was 7 times 70, which meant forgiveness was limitless.

But before we can ask God to forgive us our debts, we must feel the need for forgiveness. We must have a sense of sin. We sometimes have the wrong concept of sin. We picture a sinner as someone who is a thief, a murderer, an adulterer. The New Testament uses five different words for Sin.

Anomia – lawlessness – someone who knows right from wrong and does wrong anyway. This is the concept we usually give to the idea of sin. From Kipling’s “Mandolay” the old soldier says “Ship me somewheres east of Suez, where the best is like the worst, Where there ain't no Ten Commandments an' a man can raise a thirst.”

Parabasis – stepping across – Stepping across the line between right and wrong. Do we always stay on the right side of honesty and dishonesty? Is there someone among us who has never been guilty of petty dishonesty? Never an unkind word or discourteous act? When the clerk gave you too much change, did you go back and square up things?

Paraptoma – slipping across – not as deliberate as parabasis. A weak moment, poor judgement, momentary impulse, being caught off guard. Like slipping on the ice.

Opheilema – word used in the Lord’s Prayer for the concept of *debt*. As used in the Lord’s Prayer, it means a failure in duty. We are indebted and we fail to respond.

Hamartia – missing the target – failing to be what we could be. Are we as good as we can be as husbands, wives, sons and daughters, friends? Do we see suffering and look the other way? The bible says we will be known by our fruits. Do you consistently hit the mark on this? If people at work suddenly heard you were a Christian, would they be surprised? When we were children, we played school, played house. Do we now play church? As you become a better Christian, you

become even more aware of your own shortcomings. The Apostle Paul often called himself the worst of all sinners.

So we must have a true sense of sin before we can ask for forgiveness. But after that, Jesus calls us to action, to forgive each other, among other things. He didn't say "Just sit back and I'll take care of everything. So let's talk about forgiving each other. There are many aspects to this, but let's talk about three big ones:

1. Learn to forget - This does not mean develop amnesia. In this case, it means to behave as though it never happened. It takes a step of faith. Even though it happened, God can give you strength to behave as though it never happened, but you must be tuned in to God's wavelength. Webster says forgiveness includes "to cease feeling resentment..."
2. Learn to love. Christian love, *agape*, is that unconquerable benevolence, that undefeatable good will which will never seek to do anything other than the highest good for others, no matter what they do to us, no matter how they treat us.
3. Understanding – Sin doesn't just happen spontaneously. All things we do, good and bad, are done for a reason. Things like background, worry, pain, misunderstanding, life difficulties. Sometimes the root cause of sin stems from a person's inability to overcome something. Did you know that Saddam Husein had been abused as a child? Had he not been abused, would history now be different? Of course, we are all accountable for our actions, but if someone committed a sin against you or against anyone, would you feel different if you knew why? We all have a special, private place in our

humanness that only God knows about. It is that mystical switchboard, a mixing bowl, where everything that makes us who we are is sifted and blended in our own individual, unique way. Who among us knows the inner workings of another human, except for the humanness of the spirit that is within you? In every important way, we have unique secrets from each other with a separate language in each of us, a separate set of values, a separate sense of justice. How many of you husbands and wives, after decades of marriage, are still finding out things about your spouse? So much could be forgiven if we had better understanding of each other.

The Hebrew word for mercy is *Chesedh*. It does not mean to simply sympathize with someone, but to really get inside the other person's skin, to feel what the other person feels, to see through the other's eyes. If we see our own faults in others, if we experience true *Chesedh*, how can we not forgive?

When you forgive, the result is more about you than it is about the wrong doing or the one you are forgiving. Yes, forgiving is a pardon for the one who wronged you, but it does something powerful for you. It absolves the perpetrator, but it lifts a tremendous burden from you. Sorting out who did what is nowhere near as important as ejecting that unholy blob from the spotlight of your spiritual landscape. Failure to forgive will allow it to remain and take root and become a barrier to your connection with God. He understands our feelings and knows the power these feelings have over us. Forgiveness is not a natural human act. It is not something we can do alone, but we are not alone. However, to make that connection, we must take the first step and ask for help. As C.S. Lewis said, "The gate to hell is locked from the inside." The invitation to forgive reminds us that we have the key to that lock.

So God forgives us. He told us to forgive each other. What if you just can't bring yourself to do it? One reason may be a matter of feeling superior toward the other, something close to feeling you are sinless. Remember, other world religions function by a system of rules for Man to climb to reach God. Only in Christianity does God reach down to Man. God, having come to earth in human form, has set aside his own superiority in order to be with us. Who then, are we, to feel superior to anyone else? What right do we have then to ask for forgiveness? We don't have the right. It comes only thru grace. Can you imagine anything worse than humanity killing the very human incarnation of God? But that's what happened and God says he still loves us and forgives us. Other religions are climbing up to God. Christianity is God reaching down to us. How far down must God reach, compared to the short difference between human beings. Can we really draw parallel lines of comparison between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of each other? Not really. It's like comparing ice cream to a day of the week. But God reconciles that difference through the cross and that's another sermon.

Another common reason given for reluctance to forgive is the fear of being seen as weak. Does forgiveness mean we should see Christianity as weak and unfitting in today's workaday world? Does this idea of a meek and mild God prevent us from speaking the plain truth with love? Are we afraid of appearing as a meek and mild image? Ever heard of someone who was regarded as a saint because they never saw any fault in anyone or who never spoke a word of criticism? If that's the definition of a saint, then Jesus was no saint. He taught us to not judge each other, but that didn't mean turn a blind eye to evil. To speak the truth was to him more important than to just make other people comfortable. His genuine love was spiced with tact, wisdom, and sympathy. He was Love in action.

So, as we follow Jesus' leadership, we cannot isolate forgiveness. It is totally inseparable from love. So how can we tie this all together? Let me close with a story you may have heard, but it is so appropriate here:

A man was led down a dark corridor with a door on each side. Through the first door, he saw a large group of people sitting at long tables, waiting. He noticed they were all malnourished and thin. He also noticed that as they moved about, there was something peculiar about their arms; they were locked at the elbow, all in stiff extension. When food was brought, they scrambled with increasing frustration trying to guide the food into their mouths, but because their elbows didn't bend, they could not eat. Eventually, they all fell to weeping and the food was taken away. The man was then led to the other door in which he found the same type of stiff-armed people sitting at tables. But these folks all had smiles and full well-fed faces. Their demeanor was kind and loving. The food arrived and they ate. How did they eat?

They fed each other. They did not wait for a specific person to come feed them, not the head chef, not the head waiter, they simply fed each other.

And now, the compelling question is – can we do this?

I wrote this sermon seven years ago and something about it has troubled me ever since. I am not so naïve as to think that forgiveness is not hard. It is hard, I know that. We all know that injustice lives in our world and we should have no hesitation in pointing it out. Just remember that sin takes up residence in people who are God's children. Condemn the evil, but forgive the children.

God says we can. God says we should. Christ commanded that we do.

Amen