

The Power To Forgive

Romans 14:1-12 & Matthew 18:21-35

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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Romans 14:1-12 (NIV)

¹ Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. ² One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. ⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ⁵ One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

¹¹ It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" ¹² So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Matthew 18:21-35 (NIV)

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."

The Power To Forgive

Pastor John Ortberg tells a humorous story concerning an umpire in a softball league in Colorado. One day, during the off season, this unfortunate umpire got stopped by a police officer for speeding. He pleaded for mercy. He explained to the policeman that he was a good driver, and told why this particular day he had to be in a hurry. The officer didn't buy his argument. "Tell it to the judge," he said.

When softball season rolled around, the umpire was umpiring his first game of the season. Guess who was the first batter to the plate? It was the same police officer who had ticketed the umpire for speeding. They recognized each other. It was awkward for the officer. "So, how did the thing with the ticket go?" the officer asked as he prepared to swing at the first pitch. With a menacing look on his face the umpire replied, "You better swing at everything." The umpire was set to get his revenge.

Sometimes revenge can be deliciously sweet, yet most of us understand that vengeance is not a satisfactory response to being hurt, especially for those who follow Christ. But neither is carrying around a lifetime of hurt feelings. The answer as we all know is forgiveness. But how do we forgive someone who has hurt us? How do we overcome our painful emotions and reconcile with someone who has done us wrong? That is what our lesson for the day is about. How do we go about forgiving?

Simon Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Simon Peter's question was a sincere one. He wanted to know exactly what the Master expected out of him. The prominent rabbis of the day were teaching that one should forgive someone who has done us wrong three times. Was that enough Simon Peter wondered? And so he asked Christ this important question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Some of us would like an answer to that same question! Forgiveness is a big problem in our lives! There have been persons who have wronged us, and it is so, so difficult to let go of our feelings of anger, resentment and even hatred. How many times shall we forgive?

Jesus' answer was, of course, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." That is a demanding stance! Some of us may feel it is asking too much of mere mortals, and yet Jesus, believe it or not, was looking out for our best interest. Forgiveness is to our benefit as much as it is for the person who has injured us.

And so our question for the day is, how do we forgive? Forgiveness is a redemptive act that is essential to our mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. It is not enough to simply “act civil” toward a person who has wronged us — to let “by-gones be by-gones.” We must move from our hurt to reconciliation, or else we leave an open wound that is not allowed to heal. But how? How do we forgive?

LET’S BEGIN BY ASKING, WHY DO WE FIND IT SO HARD TO FORGIVE?

Obviously, one answer is that the pain is simply too deep to forgive.

There is a man whose name has become synonymous with forgiveness. It is retired South African Bishop Desmond Tutu. After the final defeat of apartheid in South Africa, it was Bishop Tutu who set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by which black persons in that country publicly forgave those who had done them serious harm. It was one of the most stunning events in history — literally. People who had family members tortured and murdered by police confronted the officers who had committed these crimes and publicly forgave them.

Maybe the reason Desmond Tutu could be so effective in this role is that he himself had to deal with a very personal battle of forgiving someone who had harmed someone he loved.

In a book titled *The Book of Forgiving* Tutu tells how as a young boy, he had to watch helplessly as his father verbally and physically abused his mother. He says that he can still recall the smell of alcohol coming from his father’s lips, he can still see the fear in his mother’s eyes, he can still feel the hopeless despair that comes when we see people we love hurting each other in incomprehensible ways. He says he would not wish that experience on anyone, especially not on a child.

He writes, “If I dwell in those memories, I can feel myself wanting to hurt my father back, in the same ways he hurt my mother and in ways of which I was incapable [of understanding] as a small boy. I see my mother’s face and I see this gentle human being whom I loved so very much and who did nothing to deserve the pain inflicted upon her. When I recall this story, I realize how difficult the process of forgiving truly is. Intellectually, I know my father caused pain because he was in pain. Spiritually, I know my faith tells me my father deserves to be forgiven as God forgives us all. But it is still difficult. The traumas we have witnessed or experienced live on in our memories. Even years later they can cause us fresh pain each time we recall them.”

Some of you can relate to Tutu’s experience with an abusive parent. Or it may have been a teacher or a friend or a sibling or a spouse who abused us, but somewhere along the way someone has hurt us deeply and we can still feel the pain. For some the pain is so intense that it is simply easier to cut that person out of our lives than to forgive. That is one reason it is difficult to forgive — the pain is too deep.

Pride can also get in the way of forgiveness, as does a mistaken sense of principle. We think to ourselves, “This will teach him or her a lesson.” Then there are family members and friends who may

encourage our bitterness towards the other: “You surely are not going to forgive him or her after what he or she has done to you, are you?”

They probably mean well, but they may not understand our own need for healing. Pain, pride, other people — these are usually the reasons why we do not forgive. And our inability to forgive can have devastating effects on us as well as on others. Holding on to resentful feelings can shorten our lives, poison our memories, weaken our relationship with God and even affect our own feelings of self-worth. This is in addition to the damage to the relationship with the person we cannot forgive.

Several years ago a book came out titled *To Forgive is Human — How to Put Your Past in the Past*. It was written by 3 doctors who evaluated the various benefits that come when you move past resentment to forgiveness. Here are three of those benefits:

First of all, when you let go of past hurts and learn to forgive, there is a physical benefit to you. Attitudes of bitterness, hostility, and resentment are like poisons and toxins to your body. Chronic anger and hostility can be more toxic to your health, say these doctors, than being a smoker or eating a high fat diet.

Secondly, there is a psychological benefit to forgiveness. People with angry, bitter thoughts become angry, bitter people held hostage by their own bitterness.

And finally there’s a relational benefit. Any time you move in forgiveness toward someone you consider an enemy you open the door to the potential of reconciliation.

These doctors say there is a high price to pay from holding on to resentment and hatred. But how do we let go and forgive? That is the question. Let me suggest three ways.

We let go, first of all, by recognizing that forgiveness is a gift from God. We have been forgiven, and so we are able to forgive others.

Jesus followed His answer to Simon Peter with a well-known parable of a man who owed his king ten thousand bags of gold. Gold today sells for a little over \$1,300 an ounce. Think how much 10,000 bags of gold would be worth today — maybe trillions. Amazingly, the king forgave the man this enormous debt. And here is the second amazing thing: This same man who had been forgiven this enormous debt had an acquaintance who owed him a hundred silver coins, perhaps worth a few hundred dollars. And this very man who had his enormous debt discharged by the king could not forgive the tiny debt owed him by this acquaintance. To make matters worse, he had this acquaintance thrown into jail. The contrast could not have been starker — a man had been forgiven a trillion dollars and he was unwilling to forgive a debt of a few hundred dollars.

Of course Jesus was not simply telling about one man in one particular place. He was talking about you and me. We have been forgiven by God. We are sinners saved by grace. We have been forgiven an enormous debt. If we can see that, it can be a powerful antidote to our feelings of resentment over a

wrongdoing someone has done to us. We remember just how much God has forgiven us, and we are enabled to forgive.

It's like a little boy who had done something very naughty. His mother was quite disturbed by his behavior. In the kitchen there was a chalkboard on the wall where they wrote down phone messages. When no one was around, this troubled little boy wrote on that chalkboard, "Dear mom, if you forgive me, please wipe this message out."

He went to his room, and about an hour later returned, and, to his great joy, discovered that the chalkboard had been completely erased! That is what God has done for us. Can we not do the same sort of thing for people who have hurt us? We forgive because God has first forgiven us.

IN THE SECOND PLACE, WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE THAT FORGIVENESS IS THE MOST POWERFUL WITNESS WE HAVE TO THE ACTIVITY OF GRACE IN OUR OWN LIVES.

The great Christian scholar and writer C.S. Lewis struggled for many years to forgive a childhood teacher who made life miserable for him. Just before his death he wrote a letter to a close friend in which he said, "Do you know, only a few weeks ago I realized suddenly that I had at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my childhood. I'd been trying to do it for years; and...each time I thought I'd done it. I found, after a week or so it all had to be attempted over again. But this time I feel sure it is the real thing."

Lewis was one of the most influential Christian writers of the twentieth century, yet, like us, he was a human being. He struggled to forgive this headmaster. But he knew that his witness for Christ would not be completely authentic until he somehow managed to forgive this one who had caused him so much pain. That he was finally victorious is testimony to the power of Christ's amazing grace, for there are some wrongs that can only be righted with Divine help.

For some of us the nursing of a grudge has become a deep spiritual problem. It weakens our witness to Christ's presence in our lives. Besides the damage it does to us personally, it prevents us from being effective in our ministry to others. We need to recognize that forgiveness is a gift from God to be passed on to others, and that it is the most powerful witness we have to the reality of God's grace in our own lives.

WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE, FINALLY, THAT FORGIVENESS IS A POSITIVE ACTIVITY NECESSARY TO THE HEALING AND WHOLENESS OF OUR OWN HEARTS AND SOULS.

Reader's Digest once asked its readers to complete this sentence: "I Never Regret..." Think about that for a moment: "I never regret..." Here is how some of their readers responded: "I never regret... the day I quit smoking." Sandy Biss, Elbow Lake, MN. "I never regret... taking naps and leaving large tips." Rhiannon Rae, Hershey, PA. "I never regret... serving my country." Sharon Parsons, Oak Hill, OH. "I never regret... eating the last cookie." Christina Hicks, Clarksville, TN. And listen to this last

response: “I never regret... forgiving the person who caused me pain, which gave me relief I never thought I could have.” Erika Jones, New York, NY.

Erika Jones is a very smart person who learned about the power of forgiveness. “I never regret forgiving the person who caused me pain, which gave me relief I never thought I could have.” The Jewish philosopher, Hannah Arendt, once had these wise words to say, “Forgiveness is the only power which can stop the stream of painful memories.”

Now please understand. Forgiveness is not passive resignation to a bad situation. We do not shrug our shoulders and say, “Well, there’s nothing else to do. I might as well forgive.” There is little healing in that kind of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a positive, joyful activity in which we change from seeing ourselves as victims to seeing ourselves as victors. Forgiveness allows us to move from weakness to strength, from inadequacy to self-affirmation. Forgiveness allows us to experience within our own lives the power and the presence of the indwelling Christ.

Is there someone you need to forgive? An unfaithful spouse — an overbearing parent — a friend who has stabbed you in the back — an employer who has taken advantage of you? I know there is pain. There may also be pride, principle, and other people to consider. The most powerful witness we have to the action of the grace of God at work in our own lives, however, is the ability to forgive others. As we forgive, we heal not only the wounds of a broken relationship, we find healing for wounds inflicted in our own hearts by anger, hurt and resentment.

God has forgiven each of us for every soiled thought, act, and deed of which we are capable. Can we not forgive one another? Three times? Seven times? Yes, even seventy-seven times? Forgive and find the emotional, mental and spiritual freedom that only Christ can give.

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