

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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Matthew 18:21-35

### *Forgiveness And Reconciliation*

Another excellent question from our "Ask the Pastor" series: "Regarding forgiveness, how to apply what Scripture teaches in a real-life, practical way, not just in theory?"

#### 1) *Forgiveness and Grace*

First: not too much "theory," but a bit of background. Forgiveness is part of the character of God. He proclaims himself to Moses as "the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exodus 34:6). If that were not true, none of us would be here.

God forgives those who come to him in repentance and faith, on the basis of the work of his Son Jesus Christ. That is "Basic Christianity 101." But Christianity 102 is that because God forgives us, we are to forgive each other. God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others are logically and necessarily linked. "If you forgive others, your heavenly Father will forgive you," said Jesus (Matthew 6:12-14); "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

At issue here is whether we have ever grasped and embraced the principle of *grace*. People who know they have been forgiven

much by a just but merciful God not only love him much (Luke 7:36-50), but know that they must forgive others the much smaller offences that they experience. Jesus' parable of the king and the servant who owed him "10,000 talents" – in our language, "millions" – shows that when the king "forgives the un-payable debt," the servant does not grasp what has happened (he was promising to repay the king every penny, but of course he never could). So the servant takes by the throat someone who owes him a tiny amount and demands repayment. He does not understand what he has been forgiven – his heart is untouched by the king's grace, and he is therefore incapable of extending it to anyone else. The king's response to him now is to bring him under judgment: the king's forgiveness has limits, he is angered, and the man's debt is re-instated.

#### 2) *What is Forgiveness?*

But down to practical matters. *How* do you forgive?

Perhaps its helpful first to say *what forgiveness is*. It is a graceful response of a victim to the hurt caused them by another accountable person. We are only called to – we can only – forgive those who hurt *us*. We are not asked to forgive those who hurt others; indeed our response there (like the king's) is apt to be a cry for justice. It is not for you and me to forgive what the Nazis did to the Jews – nor is it for us to proclaim "I can never forgive what X did to Y."

That is the principle, although I think everyone knows there are hard cases that test this principle. Can a wife ever forgive her husband for sexually molesting their daughter? The hurt caused in that case spreads far beyond the immediate victim. Can anyone forgive a drunk driver who kills an innocent pedestrian who was a much-loved and valued member of a community? It is doubtful. It is much more likely, and I think proper in such cases, to require *justice*.

But back to the definition of forgiveness. It is essentially personal –the response of the victim to the perpetrator. The root meaning of “forgiving” – which may already help us to grasp something of how to do it in practice – is that of “releasing,” “leaving behind,” and also (in the case of debts) “remitting” or “declaring paid.” So when God forgives us, he “puts our sins behind his back” (Isaiah 38:17); removes them from us “as far as the East is from the West” (Psalm 103:12). God leaves our sins behind in the past, he releases us from them, and them from us. He declares that the debt we owe him has been paid. So when we forgive another person, we “leave behind” what had come between us. We “release” both the pain that was caused us and the person who caused it, and in an over-used but accurate phrase, we “move on”.

Forgiveness, according to Jesus, must be *repeated* and extended as long as necessary – up to “70 times 7” or “77 times” – if the perpetrator continues to hurt us. That strikes us as altogether too much to ask! Who can forgive repeated harm, insult, pain from the same person? And who can forgive someone who is clearly *not repentant*? Someone said to me recently that parenting teaches you more about grace, and more about how God sees us, than any other human activity. I think that’s right, and it reminds us how we can and do continue to forgive our children for multiple and repeated offences against us as parents. We do it because we love them, and we believe that only by forgiving will we maintain the loving relationship we want. In many cases we forgive because we think our

children are not yet old enough and wise enough to be fully aware of or responsible for their actions.

Does there come a time when *forgiveness ends*? I think so: when children become mature enough to bear responsibility for their own actions and consequences; or when we (like the king in Jesus’ parable) see that our forgiving someone has taught them nothing, and that they are now inflicting suffering on others. At times even our beloved children may need to face justice and not forgiveness. That of course does not mean we stop loving them! But in some cases, we need to be humble enough and self-aware enough to know that justice and/or vengeance does not belong to us, but to God.

Are there things that *don’t need forgiving*? Certainly! Some “offenses” against us are so small in the great scheme of things that we should shrug them off with a laugh, “get over it.” Not every small pain that we receive at the hand of others is intentional; not every small disappointment should cause us pain or anger. Paranoia is not an option for a Christian, because we have the Spirit of God within us to help us deal with the “darts and arrows” that come our way in a fallen world. The truth is that not every trouble that comes to us is “someone else’s fault.” So not every pain we feel triggers the issue of whether or not to forgive someone else for hurting us!

What about forgiveness and *forgetting*? They are not the same, and are very often not connected. The only one who truly forgets what they have forgiven is God. We do not; in fact some ethicists say that it is precisely what we have *not* forgotten that we need to forgive – and that for our own sakes, so that we do not carry the heavy burden of non-forgiveness around with us. Forgiving is “releasing,” “letting go,” “leaving behind;” not allowing the clanking ball-and-chain of old resentments about “what someone did to us” to continue to ruin our lives and our relationships.

What about *repentance*? Do I only forgive those who repent of hurting me? Well, they may not be able to repent – they may not be morally culpable, they may (as Jesus said on the cross) “not know what they are doing.” If we wait for repentance, or even for an apology (which is not the same thing), we may carry the burden of the hurt forever, trapped by the other person’s unwillingness to admit what they have done. We can only *escape that trap by forgiving* them – for our own sakes; because it is the Godly thing to do; because we know the meaning of grace. I suspect that God has forgiven us for a million things that we are unaware of, let alone repentant for; I believe the sins we are aware of and confess are only the tip of a very large iceberg below the surface of our conscious lives. In this I am an Augustinian and a Calvinist, believing that we are by nature corrupted and depraved at very deep levels of our being; that our motivations, our desires, our heart-yearnings, are seriously disordered; and that when God forgives us, he deals also with that perverse inner disposition that we sometimes call “*original sin*.”

Forgiveness, then, is *a new start* to a relationship that has been harmed. It is a conscious decision not to let the past stand in the way of a better future. It is *only a start* – it is not complete restoration of relationship. That may take a long time, as may the healing of memory that truly and finally does allow us to both “forgive and forget.” Forgiveness is not a one-time event; it is the start of a process that may need to be repeated often as we little by little repair a relationship – which may perhaps never regain its original form; some people, even when forgiven, should probably not be put back in the same situation again where the temptation to repeat their folly and evil may be very strong – but that is a prudential judgment in each case, and goes against the presumption that forgiveness means “releasing,” “leaving behind.”

So forgiveness may go along with ambivalence, with residual anger, with confusion. But it must contain the essential

components of letting go, leaving behind; it needs a *new disposition that wishes well* on someone whom we may for a long time have wished ill on. It requires that we see people in a new way; that we grasp *a new vision* of who they are and who they could be, and what our relationship could be. That means *letting go of the past*, and looking at the future, and refusing to let the past dictate the future.

If your spouse has deceived you, or your parents abused you, or your children dismay you; it’s better – if you are a Christian who has been touched by the grace of God – to come to a time when you forgive them. In the case of your parents, don’t wait until they are dead to forgive them for being imperfect. It’s better to deal with things while they are still alive, and be able to say to them “I think I now understand a bit better why you behaved as you did..,” and in your heart to wish them well.

### 3) *Why Forgive?*

It’s better to forgive, because we are healed internally by forgiving, even as our relationships are renewed. *We need to forgive, as well as to be forgiven*. Without constant forgiveness, community is doomed – whether that is the community of a family, a church, a neighborhood, a workplace. Carrying resentments; nursing memories of “what X did to me all those years ago,” means that current relationships are soured too.

And among those relationships is the one we have with God. If we are unwilling to forgive other people, it hinders our relationship with God. A question relating to this also came up in “Ask the Pastor”; “*When the Scripture says ‘leave your gift on the altar and go reconcile with the person you offended,’ what ‘gift’ is it talking about?*” The simple answer is that it was the thank-offering or sin-offering that a worshipper was bringing to the temple as a sacrifice in order to repair or enhance their relationship with God; and Jesus said “first be reconciled with the person you have offended” – that is, go and ask for forgiveness – *before trying to worship God*.

For us in the post-temple world of relationship with the Father through Jesus the Son, "the gift" would be *our* "gift of worship" – coming before him with praise, thanks, prayers, dedication. If we are not reconciled, not forgiven and forgiving, then our worship is hindered. If we are sitting in church mentally criticizing and holding a grudge against another Christian for something they did that hurt us, we are not worshipping God, whatever our bodies may be doing. We may, in fact, be proving that we have never understood grace; have never received grace.

So we need to be very clear-minded and practical about this: if there are people we need to forgive, let us begin; let us make a new start in our *view* of them, in our *wishes* for them; which will certainly mean *praying for them*. Forgiving may or may not involve speaking to them about it – if they show no sign of awareness or repentance over their offence, to tell them that you forgive them may be exactly what Jesus meant by "casting pearls before swine." Start with views and wishes; then determine that forgiveness means *refusing to allow the hurts of the past to stand in the way of a better future*.

Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ that we have a better future with God because he has forgiven us!

Let us pray...