**WHY SHOULD WE FORGIVE ?**

Matthew 18: 21-35

1. Ignoring God’s forgiveness – by not forgiving others

Are you ignoring God’s forgiveness of you by not forgiving someone – a friend,

family member, your fellow church member - who has hurt or offended you?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – who’s sermon on Forgiveness is the basis for much of my

remarks – asked the question this way - “ Do we know anyone from our own circle

of friends and family whom we have not forgiven…?” If my remarks today don’t do

much for your understanding, then try reading Bonhoeffer’s sermon – it’s in the

*Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.*

I had to answer the question myself in preparing for today – a benefit of giving the

sermon. Just like the unforgiving slave in the story Jesus told Peter, I haven’t forgiven

everyone I should have - which means I’m guilty of ignoring God’s forgiving me. More

about me a bit later – what about you? Is it worth a little soul searching this morning

to see if there’s someone in your circle you need to forgive?

Answering this question honestly is difficult – we don’t want to forgive those who have

disrespected, hurt or offended us – we feel they don’t deserve to be forgiven – and

they’re not asking for forgiveness. There’s a certain satisfaction viscerally we get from

holding their offense against them, punishing them either by withdrawing from any

relationship with them – or by telling them off angrily, accusing them of all kinds of

things. Taking revenge by holding onto the grudge festers inside us, making us bitter

and resentful. Bonhoeffer aptly describes it; we feel our “ right to be treated respectfully

and fairly simply cannot be violated again and again. A wrong must be called for what it

is!”

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 That’s just how I felt with one person I couldn’t forgive. When I was serving as Exec.

Director of a local health clinic , the new medical director who came two years after I

started there began criticizing me to the Board of Directors. A mistake had been made

on the health insurance plan of a new part-time employee. The medical director made

it into a larger issue of my leadership. Despite my efforts to resolve the conflict –

including 1 to 1 mediation by a professional mediator – the complaints to the board

continued. Rather than forgive and continue to work to resolve the conflict, I had had

enough – I resigned as did the President of the Board – a fellow Presbyterian who was

as unforgiving as I was. Because he too was unforgiving, I justified to myself we were

right to resign. I wanted to show the Board of Directors that I didn’t accept the medical

director’s continual criticisms and the Board’s ineffective attempts to resolve the conflict

For a couple of years my anger and resentment towards this person infected my soul -

until I read Bonhoeffer’s sermon on forgiving - and found it written as though it was

directly to me – and realized I had to forgive this person to release myself – but also to

get right with God. Because a face-to-face meeting posed challenges I wasn’t up to, I

wrote a letter forgiving the person and mailed it. Even though I sent the letter, I hadn’t

fully forgiven them – but as I continued to tell myself I forgave, I grew into really feeling it.

I never received a reply to my letter – but that hasn’t bothered me. Now when I think of

this person there is no resentment and bitterness.– I feel I’ve really forgiven that person –

as I should have.

Many of us recently heard how a long-time Southern Baptist church leader Paige

Patterson was fired by his seminary for what he said to and about women who had been

abused by their husbands or raped by an assailant. Patterson said a woman’s proper

response to abuse by her husband “depends on the level of abuse, to some degree,”

and that in many cases an abused wife’s best course was to pray for her husband and

remain forgiving. When we compare his advice to the example Jesus gave Peter about

the unforgiving slave, we see that the King punished the unforgiving slave who threw the

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man into prison. The King didn’t go to the man who had been thrown into prison and ask

him to forgive the unforgiving slave. So a husband who doesn’t show mercy to his wife

and instead beats her is like the unforgiving slave the King punished. God isn’t asking a

wife to accept continued immoral and illegal acts such as rape and physical assault.

God doesn’t want a woman to be raped or beaten by her husband – God holds the man

who assaults a woman accountable. God asks a wife rather not to judge her husband as

beyond saving, not to write her husband off. The husband’s sin is for God to judge – we

are not the judge, God is. By forgiving her husband, a wife is not judging him. But a wife

is not asked to condone or excuse what her husband has done – or to continue to expose

herself to abuse and physical injury when the abuse continues.

2. My second point concerns our relationship with God. Bonhoeffer says when we don’t

forgive, we forfeit God’s grace – by not forgiven others we are showing contempt for

God’s grace. You see the other’s sin - - but you don’t see your own. And when we don’t

see our own sin – and don’t ask God’s forgiveness for it – we are lying to God about

who we really are. We have no integrity before God – we become like our fellow

Presbyterian, our President. When asked if he has ever asked God for forgiveness,

the President said –

 *Quote “I am not sure I have. I just go and try to do a better job from there.*

 *I don’t think so. I think if I do something wrong, I think just try and*

 *make it right. I don’t bring God into that picture, I don’t”*

Now you know why our President is so unforgiving of others. Sadly, he doesn’t bring

God into the picture of forgiveness- he doesn’t realize he needs forgiveness, that he’s

a sinner like everyone else. I hope none of us distance ourselves from God like our

President – thinking we can do without God’s forgiveness - forfeiting God’s grace

 3.

 Jesus warns us in the parable about the unforgiving slave to expect God will not

continue to forgive us if we don’t forgive others. Listen to how Bonhoeffer describes

what Jesus might say to us about refusing to forgive.

 *“You cannot forgive, you do not want to forgive, the other person does not*

 *deserve to be forgiven - indeed, who do you think you are, talking like that?”*

Jesus is saying – you better understand your place when it comes to God your King.

You’re not the King deciding who should receive mercy and who should be punished –

you’re the slave. And God will give us a taste of our own unforgiving judgment - and

who wants that?

Why not reciprocate? It’s a simple proposition - as God has forgiven us, we should

forgive others. – only when we recognize and accept God’s mercy for us, can we

 become capable of forgiving others. Then grace from God comes to us in the Holy

Spirit which provides us the strength to forgive when we think it’s impossible to forgive.

We don’t have the power to forgive on our own, we need the Holy Spirit within us to

forgive. And we don’t have the Holy Spirit within us if we lie to God and don’t confess

we are a sinner who needs God’s forgiveness

3. My last point is about the consequences of forgiving.

Do you recall the Amish school house shooting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania back in 2006

when 5 young Amish girls were killed and 5 others were wounded by a local dairy truck

driver who lived nearby and was known by some of the Amish families? Within hours of

the shooting, the Amish community said they had forgiven the shooter – Charles Roberts

 – who shot himself when police arrived at the school. Media around the country told

how incredulous many were when they heard several Amish families went to the Roberts

house the evening of the shooting with food to comfort the wife. Six days after the

shooting, the Amish families who had just buried their daughters attended Charly

Robert’s funeral to comfort his mother as well as his wife.

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But here’s the truly extraordinary act of the Amish – the money that poured in from

around the world was given to the Roberts family – even though the five Amish families

who’s daughter’s were wounded had sizeable medical bills. Two weeks after the

shooting, Mrs. Roberts, the widow of the shooter, released a public statement thanking

the Amish for “their forgiveness, grace and mercy.” She went on to say “Your love for our

family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need.”

Can you see the impact forgiveness had not only on the entire Lancaster community, but

the country as a whole? Forgiveness transcending tragedy and making it suddenly

evident that forgiveness was the one thing that could do that. And if you think the impact

was only fleeting, then listen to the sequel.

 On the 10th anniversary of the shooting , a local newspaper reporter interviewed the

Amish families who had lost their daughters . Linda Fisher, who lost her daughter Marian,

said this.

 *“It’s not a once and done thing, It is a life long process.”*

Confirmation of Jesus telling Peter it’s not forgiving seven times – its forgiving all the

time. Chris Stolzfus, a father who lost his daughter said,

 *“But you see forgiveness is a journey. I made the immediate choice to*

 *forgive, but it took me a few years until I could feel I really meant it inside me.”*

That feeling, he said, doesn’t come if you forgive merely out of obligation. Now he thinks

of Terri Roberts, mother of the shooter, as a friend. Terri has also become a friend to

several of the Amish families. She’s invited to Amish gatherings and regularly visits one

of the girls who was severely wounded – Rosanna King – confined to a wheel chair,

unable to talk and fed thru a tube.

Several of the Amish families went to help Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook families and

Terri Roberts went with them. What an example the Amish have given all of us –

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an example that can lead us to answer the question I asked at the beginning.

Are you ignoring God’s forgiveness of you by not forgiving someone in your circle?

I hope your answer will be - Yes I’m going to stop ignoring God’s forgiveness of me

and forgive that someone I haven’t yet forgiven - AMEN

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