

Sermon for February 15, 2009

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

8:30am, 9:16am & 11am Worship

Title: Stethoscope

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Matthew 18:21-35 (The Message) A Story About Forgiveness

²¹*At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, "Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?"* ²²*Jesus replied, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.*

²³⁻²⁵*"The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. He couldn't pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.*

²⁶⁻²⁷*"The poor wretch threw himself at the king's feet and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.*

²⁸*"The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, 'Pay up. Now!'*

²⁹⁻³¹*"The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, 'Give me a chance and I'll pay it all back.' But he wouldn't do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.*

³²⁻³⁵*"The king summoned the man and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?' The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he paid back his entire debt. And that's exactly what my Father in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn't forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy."*

Background

This year we are studying the words of Jesus. The "red letter" parts of the Bible. Today we going to continue to look at words of private instruction, words spoken to the disciples after the crowds had dispersed. The words read today come later in Jesus' ministry. At this point Jesus is well known. Wherever he goes, large crowds gather. They are eager to hear his words of wisdom and to feel his healing touch.

Life for this travelling band of disciples had gotten tougher. Jesus continued to face growing opposition from religious leaders. They were threatened by his growing influence and refusal to do things their way. By this time Jesus had also announced privately to his disciples “it was now necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, submit to an ordeal of suffering at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and then on the third day be raised up alive.” *Matthew 16:21 (The Message)* It is in this context of life together, on the road, under pressure, and bumping against one another, surely sometimes hurting each other, that the disciple Peter raised the question about forgiveness.

You can imagine the scene. One of the other disciples had probably just irritated Peter again. Someone had helped themselves to his private drinking cup, his electric shaver, or made a remark about his clothes still smelling like fish. The same person does something that is not right, realizes it, and comes and asks for forgiveness, again and again. Peter, who was perhaps up too late helping Jesus the night before and now sleep deprived, goes to Jesus and asks, "Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?" Good question! How often do we have to forgive the SAME person?

Forgiveness in the Bible

The word “forgive” is found 161 times in the Bible. In 2Chronicles 6:24, 25 there is a great promise to the nation of Israel concerning forgiveness: "When your people Israel have been defeated by an enemy because they have sinned against you and when they turn back and confess your name, praying and making supplication before you in this temple, ²⁵ then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of your people Israel and bring them back to the land you gave to them and their fathers."

In the Psalms there are prayers for forgiveness. In Psalm 19:12 King David writes “Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.” Later in Psalm 103:3 he reminds us that it is God “who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases...”

Words of Jesus

This is not the first or only time Jesus speaks of forgiveness.

1. In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Matthew 6:12

2. He also had taught the disciples what would happen if we chose not to forgive. “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” *Matthew 6:14,15*

3. Jesus taught his disciples by this own example. “He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” *Luke 3:3*

4. He even proved by his miracles that he had the power and authority to forgive. “But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” He said to the paralytic,” *Mark 2:10*

5. Jesus was questioned by other religious teachers about this practice of forgiving. “The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, “Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” *Luke 5:21*

6. Jesus reminds how forgiveness works both ways. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. *Luke 6:37*

7. Finally, on the cross, Jesus pleads for each of us when he says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. *Luke 23:34*

Jesus is recorded in the Gospels 36 times speaking about forgiveness. Now some of those times are witness accounts of the same event, but each writer found it central to include Jesus’ words on forgiveness. Peter is asking a very pointed question about forgiveness. How many times do I have to forgive the same person when they come and repent and ask forgiveness?

Definitions

It might help to first define “forgiveness.” The definition that will best apply here has a few parts.

- The first is to give pardon (release from further punishment).
- The second part is to give up the right for revenge.
- The third is to give up resentment (again/feel bitter hurt).

One definition of forgiveness may be the excusing of an offense without exacting a penalty and giving up the desire and right for revenge. Simply put, you let it go and you give it up to God.

Peter's question was "How many times do I forgive?" The rabbis of the day suggested that three times was plenty. Peter ventured a generous answer...seven times? Seven is a holy number and a number symbolizing completion. Surely, seven times would be enough chances for anyone! Now, Jesus might have said, "How many times has God forgiven you?" That would make anyone pause. God has forgiven you and me thousands, even millions of times. Rather, Jesus says, "Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven. In other words, if you are keeping count, you are missing the point of forgiveness."

Why Forgive?

Why should you and I keep forgiving someone who keeps repenting?

1. The place to start is because Jesus said to forgive. Trust that Jesus knows what he is talking about. The God who created us knows best how we should live and interact with each other.
 2. One reason we forgive each other is because it frees us from bitterness. When we refuse to forgive someone, bitterness begins to build up in our hearts. Painful, putrid thoughts and feelings pollute our souls. You and I become a walking, talking garbage dump. Not a pretty picture is it?
 3. Another reason we forgive is to regain control of our lives. When you and I refuse to forgive someone, they have control over us. Every time we think about them, we get all worked up. It is like they have an invisible fishing line attached to our hearts. One thought about them and we are hurting. Do not give someone else that kind of power over you. Cut the cord. Forgive them. Quit beginning hurt by someone who has probably forgotten about you a long time ago.
 4. Finally, we should forgive because it frees us to respond to God. God has important work for you and I to be about. If our time and emotional energies are consumed by un-forgiveness, we are in no position to hear and respond daily to the voice of God. The bonus in all this is that forgiveness can open the door to heal a relationship. That is what we really want, to be in healthy relationships with God and others. Forgiveness is the key to that door.
- Forgiving once, or three times, or seven is not enough. To remain healthy and connected to God and others, we forgive every time someone repents.

How to I Forgive?

There are a number of good resources on how to forgive. Let me suggest a way to get started today. Close your eyes. Think of one person who has hurt you. Do you have them front and center. Say his or her name. Say it again. Now say to them, "I forgive you." Say, "I pardon you without exacting a penalty. I give up my desire and right for revenge." Open your eyes. Every time that person comes

to mind and there is pain in your heart, say out loud, “I forgive you.” With God helping, you will be free of the hurt caused by that person. You will forgive them. You will be free from bitterness and revenge. If appropriate, look that person in the eyes and tell them you forgive them. Maybe a letter will work better. You may send it, you may tear it up. Either way, commit yourself to forgive that person each time.

A second way to enter the process of forgiving is through prayer. In your bulletin is a pink insert titled, “Praying for Healing – Practical Suggestions.” Forgiveness starts in your heart. Look at the subsection with the heading “Praying for Healing of Self.” Ask God, “Lord, what do you want to heal in me now?” Sit and see what comes to the surface for you. Allow that need for healing to take shape. What does it look and feel like? How were you hurt and by whom? Invite Jesus to sit with you and talk to him about it. How does Jesus respond to you? What does he ask you to do? What do you want Jesus to do for you? Tell him. Allow the Holy Spirit to work in you to heal you, transform you, and to send you out to heal others.

Prayer: Dr. Jesus, come into our lives. Examine our hearts. If your song of love is not there, forgive us. Make us clean again. Free us today to forgive others. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Closing Quote

We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies. *Martin Luther King, Jr.* http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_forgiveness.html