

Date: September 13, 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

Title: THE ACTION OF GRACE

There's a story about a little boy who was saying his prayers one night. As he went down the list of his family, asking God to bless each one of them, he omitted his brother's name. His mother asked, "Why didn't you pray for Danny?" He said, "I'm not going to ask God to bless Danny because he hit me." And his mother said, "Don't you remember Jesus said to forgive your enemies?" The little boy said, "That's just the trouble. He's not my enemy; he's my brother!" Sometimes it's hard to forgive a brother or sister, someone close to you.

In today's lesson, Simon Peter wanted to know exactly, what the Master expected out of him, when it came to forgiveness. The prominent Rabbis of the day were teaching that one should forgive his brother three times. Simon Peter wondered, was that enough? So, one day he asked Christ this important question: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him, as many as seven times?" Peter was exceeding the demands of the rabbis, but he still was unsure that he was doing what Christ expected of him.

Some of us probably would like an answer to the same question. Forgiveness, is a big problem in our lives. There have been persons who have wronged us and it's so, so difficult to let go of our feelings of anger, resentment and even hatred.

For many Christians, forgiveness of people who have hurt them is the biggest obstacle to their mental, emotional and spiritual well being. In one of his books, business guru Brian Tracy tells about a man who called him one day from the Netherlands. The man had a testimony to give. He said he was raised in a dysfunctional family; he didn't get along with his siblings. He had a bad marriage, was cheated by a business partner, lost all his money, and now he was very sick.

To this, his doctor said quite bluntly, "You're going to die. Your system is so shot, it's just like a worn-out car, everything's gone. You've got about six months to live, so you should make peace, with whomever, or whatever, in your life, you are unhappy with, because there's nothing that modern medicine can do for you."

The doctor went on to confront the man about his issue with anger. The man was angry with many people. The doctor told him he needed to "let it all go." This got the man's attention, and there were thirty-nine people he needed to make peace with. Some of the people were difficult to forgive.

He put all his affairs in order, he wrote his last will and testament, he sold all his worldly goods. Then he phoned or personally visited all the people on his list, and he asked for their forgiveness . . . and he forgave them. For six months, he traveled around Europe and the U.S., in order to forgive people, and ask for their forgiveness.

As he did this, his health improved, and he got better, much better. By the end of the six months, he had forgiven every single person that ever hurt him. He went back to the doctor. The doctor couldn't believe it: "You're completely symptom-free," the doctor exclaimed. His health was much better. He was feeling great toward himself and

others. At the end of only six months, the man was a transformed person. He called Brian Tracy, to tell his story, because he had heard Tracy talk about the power of forgiveness, in one of his seminars, and he wanted Tracy to know what forgiveness had done for him.

I hope you understand, our refusal to forgive one who has hurt us, can have devastating effects, not only on them, but also on ourselves. It can shorten our lives, poison our memories, weaken our relationship with God, and even afflict our feelings of self-worth. This is in addition to, the damage to the relationship with the person, we can't forgive. That's a high price to pay, in order to hold on to resentment, anger and even hatred. But how, do we forgive those who have wronged us? How, do we let go of the pain, the resentment, the sense of betrayal?

First, we let go, by recognizing, we ourselves have been forgiven. We have been forgiven, and thus we're able to forgive others.

Jesus followed his answer to Simon Peter, with an interesting parable of a king, who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One of his servants owed him ten thousand bags of gold. Since he wasn't able to repay the king, the king ordered that the man, his family, and all that he had, be sold to repay the debt. At this, the servant fell on his knees before the king. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." At this, the king took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed his fellow servant and began to choke him. He demanded, "Pay back what you owe me!"

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay it back." But, the servant who had been forgiven a debt of ten thousand bags of gold, refused. Instead, he had the man who owed him a hundred silver coins thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and told the king everything that had happened.

Then the king called the servant in and said, "You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?" In anger, the king handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. Then Jesus added these ominous words, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matthew 18:23-35).

That's a serious indictment for the sin, of having an unforgiving heart.

Some of us, every time we pray, we ask God to forgive us of our sins. That's a countless number of requests for forgiveness, over a lifetime. And yet, we may carry in our hearts, grievances toward others, that we should have let go of, long ago. We let go grievances of pain and resentment of betrayal, by recognizing, that we ourselves, have been forgiven through the grace of Jesus Christ. Forgive as Jesus Christ forgives!

Second, we need to recognize, that forgiveness is the most powerful witness, we have to the activity of grace, in our own lives. Want the world to know that you are a follower of Jesus? Forgive someone who has done you a terrible wrong.

Many of us remember, the horror we felt on June 17, 2015, when we learned that

a 21-year-old white supremacist named Dylann Roof had mercilessly slaughtered nine African American adults during a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. It was a terrible event.

But for some of us, the horror of that terrible event, was replaced with awe at the response of some the family members of the victims, when they confronted Dylann Roof in court. They said things to him like, “I forgive you. You took something very precious from me. But I forgive you.”

Another person said, “I forgive you, my family forgives you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the one who matters the most . . . Christ.”

Still another said, “May God have mercy on you.”

As one pastor described it, “These people had just gone through the most terrible storm you can imagine. But there was no hatred in their voice. Sorrow, yes, but no hatred. Only love and forgiveness.”

Can you imagine a more powerful witness to the grace of Jesus Christ then being able to forgive a murderer, of someone you loved dearly? Forgiveness is tough.

The great church father Augustine once said that, sometimes people in his church omitted the phrase from the Lord’s Prayer that says, “and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” They “just passed right over that phrase silently,” he said, “because they knew it would be lying for them to say that phrase aloud.”

I suspect that would be true of many Christians, if we took seriously this segment of the Lord’s Prayer. We wouldn’t want to utter those words, “as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Forgiveness is hard. It may be the most difficult requirement of our faith. But it will be easier, if we acknowledge, that we ourselves, have been forgiven. If we acknowledge, that forgiveness is the most powerful witness we have, to the activity of grace in our own lives.

Forgiveness is a positive activity, necessary to the healing and wholeness of our own hearts. When we don’t forgive, two people suffer, the one we can’t forgive, and we ourselves. In other words, forgiveness **is not** only something we do for the person who hurt us; it’s something we do for ourselves. Let me give you an example:

A man named Byron Johnson has interviewed hundreds of inmates in penal institutions. He tells about many of these interviews in a book titled, *More God, Less Crime*. He interviewed one prisoner on multiple occasions. The prisoner was Ron Flowers, a convicted murderer from Houston, TX. Flowers was convicted of shooting a teenage girl named Dee Dee Washington. She was in the car of another person who, unbeknownst to her, was attempting to purchase drugs. In other words, she was simply an innocent bystander, collateral damage. But she was killed.

Ron Flowers became a Christian in prison, but he still refused to admit, that he was guilty of this murder. While in prison, Flowers began to participate in a faith-based prison program, where he met a pastor of a church in Houston, who did volunteer work at the prison. One day, the minister mentioned, to one of his members, that he was working with prisoners, at a nearby prison. Intrigued, Arna Washington, a

schoolteacher, asked the pastor if he had met or had heard of Ron Flowers. Then she added, “That’s the name of the man who killed my daughter fourteen years ago”

The pastor replied, “He’s in my group, would you like to meet him?”

Mrs. Washington, did, want to meet Ron Flowers, a person she had come to hate. Not long after her daughter’s murder, Mrs. Washington’s husband and son also died. Though a devout Christian, Mrs. Washington was clearly bitter and had written letters to the Texas parole board in an effort to ensure that Flowers would stay in prison as long as possible. Now she would actually have the opportunity to meet him and ask him the question she had been struggling with for fourteen years.

When the meeting took place, several unexpected things happened. The moment they met face-to-face, Flowers, even to his own surprise, for the first time, confessed to the murder. Mrs. Washington then asked the question she had been waiting to ask: “Why did you shoot and kill my daughter?”

Flowers explained he had been a crazed teenager who was strung out on drugs, and he just started shooting and she happened to get shot. He went on to say, “I don’t know if you can forgive me, but I’m sorry for what I have done.”

To Mrs. Washington’s surprise, she heard herself saying, “I forgive you.”

Later in an interview with Byron Johnson, Mrs. Washington confessed, “That was the moment I got my life back. A huge load was lifted, the instant I forgave him.” Forgiveness of another, is the best thing we can do for ourselves.

The story doesn’t end there. Mrs. Washington went on to develop a strong and lasting relationship with Ron Flowers. In a sense, she adopted him as her son.

“Ron got out of prison in 1998 and visited Mrs. Washington weekly. He sat with her in church on Sundays, and she played a crucial role, in his successful transition back to society. Byron Johnson writes, “Now happily married, Ron has been out of prison for more than a decade, has been employed at the same company for nine years, has a four-year-old son, and has a bright future.” Mrs. Washington died in 2007, filled with the peace, that only forgiveness can bring.

Is there someone you need to forgive, an unfaithful spouse, an overbearing parent, a sibling, a friend who has stabbed you in the back, an employer who has taken advantage of you? I know there’s pain, but the most powerful witness we have, to the action of the grace of God, at work in our own lives, 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. So, by the Grace of God, let’s continue to forgive, Trusting, Believing, and having an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.