

## What We Believe: Forgiveness

We've taken a few months to look at some of the core beliefs of the Christian faith ... and then at some of the implications of those core beliefs. Core beliefs would be things like "God created the heavens and the earth" and implications of that belief would include things like, "We don't have the right to take the life of any person, because that life doesn't belong to us, but to God - including the lives of unborn children and aging adults."

Today, I'm going back to talking about something that is a core belief; in fact it is so central to the Christian faith that Jesus says, if we don't do this to others, we can't expect this to be done for us. As you can see, I'm talking about this challenging act that seems so radical to the world, the act of forgiveness.

I was disappointed with the definition of forgiveness offered in Wikipedia - it seemed to be completely self-centered and non-relational. Here it is:

*Forgiveness is the intentional and voluntary process by which a victim undergoes a change in feelings and attitude regarding an offense, lets go of negative emotions such as vengefulness, with an increased ability to wish the offender well.*

This definition would make you think forgiveness was a totally internal effort. When I read about forgiveness in the Bible I don't see God struggling to have a change of feelings about our offenses against Him. I see Him taking on the pain of our sin, suffering Himself in our place, and I see that in other characters as well. It's Joseph saying to his brothers who have sold him into slavery, "Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Gen. 50:20) It's David asking his soldiers to spare Absalom, his son, who has been leading a massive rebellion against his own father and was even then trying to kill him. (2 Sam. 18:5) Supremely, it is Jesus on the cross, saying "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." This is not a change of feelings, although a change of feelings is often associated with the choice. Forgiveness is saying, "I will not seek revenge; I will not demand justice." The person who forgives takes the pain of the injustice, the harm he or she has suffered, and does not try to get even in any way. They are willing to let it go, to refuse to be swallowed up in anger or bitterness or with the desire for revenge.

I remember having a conversation many years ago with a businessman who, along with his two partners, had brought a franchise business to B.C. and had seen it expand to, I think, maybe 25-30 stores throughout the province - maybe a bit more. At one point the various franchise holders got together and decided that they had just as much right to the company name as did the three partners and so they demanded a new structure for the company where they would be equal shareholders - something like that. And this business owner, who had done the hard work, who had gotten each of these guys started in this business and who had helped many of them along the way, went to his two partners and told them, "We have all the legal right on our side, but we can't win

this. We are more likely to lose sleep, lose our health, lose a lot of money to lawyers, and for what purpose? We're all doing well; we don't need to fight this fight because we'll all lose in the end." And he persuaded them to give the company away, even though it was worth a significant amount of money and even though the cause that was being brought against them was not justified. He had a different perspective, and it involved forgiveness.

The Greek word that is translated "forgiveness" is the same word that is translated "divorce". It means "to send away" and it involves "sending away" the offense that has been caused, removing it from one's thoughts and intentions. This businessman had the idea that fighting for justice for himself was worth less than what the struggle would cost him and so he "sent away" the offense ... and the amount of money he might have made had he been able to sell what was rightfully his.

In the stories I told last Sunday, you see how essential forgiveness was for the people who won something for God's Kingdom in those accounts. Dano forgave the hostility of the people in his village and was glad to pray for them and to see God answer his prayers. Peter had to forgive and accept Muhammad, even knowing that the man's intentions towards him were not good, and so an ISIS prince came to faith. The Fijian missionaries had to forgive the generations that had killed previous missionaries to the Kwaios people of the Solomon Islands. They had to "send away" the offense that had been instigated against Christian believers and replace it with the love of God for these lost tribesmen.

Let me tell you one more, somewhat similar, story that illustrates how important forgiveness is to the mission of the church. Reports from Bangladesh, a Muslim country, indicate that thousands of people are turning to Jesus there. One pastor, a former Muslim himself, reported last spring that 20,000 Muslims had converted to Christianity in the previous 12 months. Another with a similar background reported 6,000 new believers from his district. One pastor said that, after he converted in 2007, his rickshaw shop and tea business were taken away from him and he was disowned by his family. Two imams caught him talking about Christian faith in the market and attacked him, tying him with ropes and leaving him in front of a nearby mosque. His sons ransomed him only after they agreed that they would force him to reconvert to Islam, but they failed in that attempt. They then beat their father, nearly to death, took all his possessions and left him for dead. In this pastor's rural village, he has seen more than 700 Muslims convert to Christianity in the last two years.

Do you see what that story left out? How did that father respond to the imams, or to his sons? Did he seek or get revenge on them for their attacks against him? Did he build a wall of bitterness between himself and those Muslims who had taken his businesses, between himself and his family, between himself and the imams who had tied him up in front of a mosque? No. The reason 700 people are now enjoying the presence of the risen Christ in their daily lives is because this man, battered and bruised no doubt, forgave, let it go, and moved on with his mission. His focus wasn't on himself, his rights, getting justice; it was on the cause of Christ in his little corner of Bangladesh.

In "The Christian Leader" Don Ratzlaff retells a story from Ernest Gordon's Miracle on the River Kwai. The Scottish soldiers, forced by their Japanese captors to labor on a jungle railroad, had degenerated to barbarous behavior, but one afternoon, something happened that changed these men. A shovel was missing. The officer in charge became enraged and demanded that the missing shovel be produced, or else. When nobody in the squadron budged, the officer got his gun and threatened to kill them all on the spot ... Then, finally, one man stepped forward. The officer put away his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the man to death. Then came the second tool check, and a recount that showed nothing missing - the first check had produced a miscount. The word spread throughout the camp - an innocent man had been willing to die to save others! This incident changed the atmosphere of the camp as the men began to treat each other as brothers. When the victorious Allies swept in some time later, the survivors of this camp lined up in front of the soldiers who had treated them so brutally and, instead of taking revenge of any kind insisted: "No more hatred. No more killing. Now what we need is forgiveness."

Moses understood that it is in God's nature to forgive human sin, and so did the writers and prophets and psalmists who came after him. After the Israelite people had made a golden calf to be their object of worship, Moses asked God, "Please forgive their sin." And a couple of chapters later, in Exodus 34, when God reveals His nature to Moses, one of the ways He describes Himself is as the God who forgives wicked-ness, rebellion and sin. God said to His people, "This is who I am - the God who forgives!" Again, in Numbers 14, after the people had rebelled after the spies had come back from journeying through the land of Canaan, Moses pleaded with God to forgive them and God assured him that he had forgiven them - but that there would have to be consequences for their rebellion - a longer sojourn in the wilderness.

In Solomon's dedication of the magnificent temple in Jerusalem, he prays that when disaster comes and the people respond by seeking their God, that He would forgive them and the LORD God responds in the next chapter with these familiar words:

*When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among My people, if My people, who are called by My Name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. (2 Chron. 7:13,14)*

So there's an understanding that God is a forgiving God, that He will extend mercy to those who humble themselves before Him. You see this in David's life, especially in the Psalms as he asks for God's forgive-ness for his sins.

There is a strong message in a couple of the prophets that, I think, prepares the way for the coming of the Messiah. Especially in Jeremiah, where God's spokesman declares:

*"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts I will be their God and they will be My people.*

*No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD' because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD*

*"For I will forgive their wickedness and I will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:33,34)*

A couple of chapters later, Jeremiah prophesies the return of the people of Judah from their exile and says:

*I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against Me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against Me. (33:8)*

And he goes on to describe the blessing, the prosperity and peace of the city that will bring honor to God's name among the nations of the earth.

And the prophet Micah, writes about God:

*Where is another God like You, who pardons the sin of the survivors among His people? You cannot stay angry with Your people forever, because You delight in showing mercy. Once again You will have compassion on us. You will trample our sins under Your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean! You will show us Your faithfulness and unfailing love as You promised ..." (7:18-20)*

In the book of Nehemiah we read about an amazing observance conducted by the people of Judah in response to the reading of the law. It was in the month of October, 445 B.C. and the Jews had celebrated the Festival of Shelters earlier that month and now returned to Jerusalem for a time of repentance. The law was read and the people would then repent for their sins and the sins of their ancestors. And then there was a time of worship and declarations were made, including this:

*You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and merciful, slow to become angry, and full of unfailing love and mercy. You did not abandon them (the people who rebelled in the desert), even though they made an idol shaped like a calf and said, "This is your god who brought you out of Egypt!" ... But in Your great mercy You did not abandon them to die in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud still led them forward by day, and the pillar of fire showed them the way through the night. You sent Your good Spirit to instruct them, and You did not stop giving them bread from heaven or water for their thirst. (Nehemiah 9:17-20)*

What we see in the Old Testament is a God who demands a lot, but then shows grace to people who are unable to meet His expectations. Even to proud and stubborn and rebellious people, He offers forgiveness. His love is not turned away from people who stumble and fall in life, and His prophets look ahead to a time when He will pour out even more grace, making it even easier for people to know His forgiveness and love.

What do we find in the New Testament? The fulfillment of the prophecies of Jeremiah, the new heart that God promised, and the gift to be able to walk in forgiveness, and the command to extend that forgiveness to others.

Here is a passage from Luke's Gospel on loving our enemies - one that we've seen followers of Jesus respond to in some of the stories I've been sharing:

*Love your enemies! Do good to them! Lend to them! And don't be concerned that they might not repay. Then your reward from heaven will be very great and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for He is kind to the unthankful and to those who are wicked. You must be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. Stop judging others and you will not be judged. Stop criticizing others, or it will all come back on you. If you forgive others, you will be forgiven. (Luke 6:35-37)*

Do you pick up that spirit of grace and gentleness and love and can you imagine how radical that would have seemed in the harsh world of the first century? I must love my enemies? Do good to them? Lend to them without any concern about getting repaid? Jesus is making a strong statement here: this is what our Father in heaven is like, and that's what He wants His children to be like. As in the verse from Matthew's Gospel when Jesus is sending out His disciples on their first mission:

*Give as freely as you have received! (10:8)*

That's the core of the Gospel teaching on forgiveness, that if we forgive others, we will receive forgiveness, but if we refuse to forgive the wrongs that have been done to us, we forfeit the forgiveness that God offers us. It's so simple, but so hard to do. There's a story I like about Robert E. Lee that took place after the Civil War in the States was over. He was visiting a Kentucky lady who took him to the remains of a grand old tree in front of her house. There she bitterly complained that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal artillery fire. She looked to Lee for a word condemning the North or at least sympathizing with her loss. After a brief silence, Lee said, "Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it." That comes pretty close to explaining the process of forgiveness - you have to let go, let go the desire to see the person who did the wrong thing punished, let go the idea of trying to let them know how badly they've hurt you, let go of the wish for justice; just cut it down and forget it.

Corrie ten Boom had forgiven a person who had wronged her badly, but she kept rehashing the incident in her mind and it affected her sleep. After two weeks of not sleeping she confessed her problem to a Lutheran pastor who told her that it was like the bell ringer in the church tower nearby. After he lets go of the rope, the bell keeps swinging, and ringing, for awhile until it slows down and stops. When we forgive, we take our hands off the bell rope, but if we've been tugging at the grievance for awhile, those old angry thoughts will keep ringing in our ears. But it will slow down and ultimately it will stop, and you'll be at peace. And that proved to be right and soon the ringing of old bitterness had stopped and she slept well again.

So, to forgive, which we must do when we have been wronged, we let go of the right to justice or revenge. We say, in some form of speech that makes sense to us, "I forgive, I don't want to hurt you, I don't want you to suffer as I have." Another really good thing to do is to begin to pray for that person, to pray that God would bless them, would heal their woundedness, would give them grace. And then we wait, wait for the swinging of that bell of emotion to slow down, and stop.

Elizabeth Barrett grew up in the home of a very demanding and controlling father. He hated strangers, regularly forbade his children to meet with others, and prohibited them from marrying - ever. He had eight children and he threatened to disown them if any of them were to marry. Even when she was in her late thirties and falling in love with Robert Browning, they had to hide their romance from her father and when they married, they had to do so in secret. But, once he found out, the father disinherited her and cut off all communication between them. The Brownings sailed for Italy and lived there for the rest of their lives.

Almost every week, Elizabeth Barrett Browning would write her father a letter. Not once did he reply. After 10 years of this she received a large box in the mail and inside the box, all of those letters. Not one had been opened. Today those letters are among the most beautiful in classical English literature. Without the grace of forgiveness, we cut ourselves off from joy and the freedom that is readily available to us, commanded for us, patterned to us by the One who loves us completely. Forgiveness allows us to open the letters and receive a new experience of beauty.

So, whatever damage has been done to that grand old tree in your front yard and no matter how angry and hurt you are about it, it's time to cut it down, so that you can move on, forgiving others as God in Christ has forgiven you, forgiving others so that you can be like your Father in heaven, who is good to all, who has compassion on all He has made. (Psalm 145:9)