

**July 8, 2018 - The Question: How do we forgive without reservation? Are there any qualifications to forgiveness? – Rev Seth D Jones**

**Scripture: Matthew 6:14-15; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11**

Let's begin with the simple answers: Since God has forgiven us without reservation, we also are called to forgive without reservation. Likewise, since there were and are no qualifications with God relative to our forgiveness, there likewise should be no qualifications in our forgiveness of others. These are easy things to say, but very difficult to do. Of all the practices and acts our faith requires of us, forgiving others may be the most difficult of all.

When talking about forgiveness, the easiest approach is to deal in hypotheticals, to deal in “*But What Ifs...*” I have just said God forgives without reservation. This invites all kinds of questions. *But what if* a serial killer kills someone I love. *But what if* a drunk driver permanently injures my best friend. *But what if* someone I love said things to me that were horrible and leaves me completely devastated. *But what if* I did something horrible to someone else. These are all fine questions, but the thing about forgiveness is that it is not a formula. Forgiveness doesn't work in hypotheticals. Forgiveness is not a math question, even though when Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness in Matthew 18, Jesus answers with a math answer.

*21 Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ 22 Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. (Matthew 18)*

What Jesus is really saying here is that forgiveness is not a one-off deal. It is something we will have to do over and over and over again – sometimes with the same person about the same situation; sometimes with the same person and many different situations; and sometimes with many different people. Forgiveness is personal, direct, and situational.

Paul is trying to teach the Corinthians about Christ-centered forgiveness. Between Paul's first letter and second, something catastrophic happened between Paul and Corinth's church. No one knows what happened. But 2 Corinthians is trying to fix whatever broke between the first letter and this one. The situation may have involved the person in our few verses here today. Paul is asking the Corinthians to forgive and comfort the person who has been expelled from the church. Paul says to do this “*so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.*”

That is interesting, isn't it? When we do not forgive, the sorrow, the suffering, the pain of the unforgiven person is now something we have created. If you are going to be unforgiving, you are now also willing to take responsibility for all the effects, consequences, and suffering the unforgiven person suffers. In our righteousness and anger and hurt, not forgiving distorts the world and we then believe the distortion, rather than the truth. And the truth is that God has created all things and us in the crucible of God's *hesed*, God's loving-kindness.

Psalms 136 says it this way:

*O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,  
for his loving-kindness endures for ever.  
O give thanks to the God of gods,  
for his loving-kindness endures for ever.  
O give thanks to the Lord of lords,  
for his loving-kindness endures for ever;*

*who alone does great wonders,  
for his loving-kindness endures for ever;  
who by understanding made the heavens,  
for his loving-kindness endures for ever;  
who spread out the earth on the waters,  
for his loving-kindness endures for ever;  
who made the great lights,  
for his loving-kindness endures for ever;  
the sun to rule over the day,  
for his loving-kindness endures for ever;  
the moon and stars to rule over the night,  
for his loving-kindness endures for ever;*

This is why Jesus' words in our reading today can be difficult to hear. While there is no formula for *how* to forgive, there appears to be a spiritual formula for why we should forgive. When we forgive others, God forgives us; when we do not forgive others, God cannot forgive us. The withholding of forgiveness is the distance at which we withhold ourselves from God.

Not forgiving others distorts the world. The fiery light of my anger, my hate, my right-ness, what I deserve, bends into my own soul, and then that light creates the dark window through which I now perceive the world. So forgiving others makes a huge demand on us, often a demand we do not like.

The demand, Christ-centered forgiveness, requires us to give some things up. We must give up being right. Relationships rarely work if one person needs to be right and the other wrong, or if I have to agree with you in order to be in a relationship. As we spoke of a few weeks ago, that is a transaction, not a relationship. Most often, we hang out with people who generally agree with us about many things. But when things go wrong, often one person is right and the other wrong. Forgiveness demands we give up that foundation for a relationship.

We also have to give up getting even or resetting the scales or winning. We may be owed something because of what caused the need for us to even be considering forgiveness as an option. Forgiveness means we give up the requirement of the scales rebalancing in terms of what I deserve or demand. This can be hard, especially in a society where the measure of value is what a thing is worth in money. But that is a social problem, not a personal solution to a broken relationship. For you and I, we may have to give up ever being paid back, getting what we are owed, or getting what we deserve if we are also going to forgive the other person.

We will also have to give up being equal. The need for forgiveness may come from power being exerted over you. When we forgive, we recognize we cannot control a person's need for power or domination. You may or may not ever be equal in that person's eyes. But forgiveness does not require that equality.

And aren't all these things that Jesus gave up on his journey to the Cross? Jesus gave up being right in the eyes of the Roman Empire and the leadership of the religion of his day, which meant, of course, in their eyes he was very, very wrong. Jesus gave up getting even or what he deserved. Even Satan in Jesus' temptation knows that Jesus deserves to be the earthly king of all the kingdoms of the world, but Jesus gives it up. And Jesus gives up any idea that he will be considered an equal to the Emperor and his rulers on this earth. These are some of the things Jesus takes to the Cross.

Notice that all these concerns – being right, getting even, and being equal – are all dependent on the past. Once we sacrifice being right, getting even, and being equal to the act of forgiveness for others, we also discard the past. It is not that the past didn't happen, nor that we do not remember it; rather,

it is that our lives going forward are no longer determined by the past. In forgiveness, we live into the future, and by living into the future, we live into the continual revealing of God's love for us.

Soren Kierkegaard speaks of the one who lives in the knowledge of God's loving-kindness, with a forgiving spirit, as a person who lives a hyphenated life. You know how certain words are hyphenated – like loving-kindness, or one of my favorites from Homer, the wine-dark sea? Kierkegaard says that the forgiving person, when faced with a broken relationship in their lives, always lives in a hyphenated state. What he means is that there is always the possibility of that word being completed by the healing of the relationship. Or to put it another way, the forgiving person always lives with the pain of not being reconciled.

If we are willing to live in a mindset of forgiveness, and that is the mindset of loving God and Christ, then we know a few things. We know that in God's loving kindness, right and wrong are not a concern. Right and wrong is the 'wrong' category for thinking about God's love once we see the world from the loving-kindness of the Lord. We also know that winning, getting even, getting what I deserve, are all absurd ideas in the shadow of God's loving-kindness. What is there to win, get, or deserve when we are already confident in the knowledge of God's love for us? And equality becomes a non-issue if God loves every person, individually, with the fullness of God's love.

There is a humility and a confidence in what we have spoken of here that goes very deep, and that is the foundation upon which forgiveness takes place. The scope of God's forgiveness knows no boundary. Forgiveness comes from the outside in, always. In Scripture and in the ancient world, there would have been no conception of 'forgiving myself'. We have to hear the words directly – "I forgive you" – from someone else. This is why, in my mind, the single greatest loss to the Protestant faith is the Rite of Confession. As Protestants, we now have no formal avenue whereby to hear those words spoken to us, and as a result, we have no model for forgiving others.

Luther still retained both a public and individual Order of Confession and Absolution for precisely this reason. We need a process that allows us to hear we are forgiven. The person would request that the pastor, or a willing congregant, hear their confession in order to pronounce forgiveness according to God's will. The confession takes place, and then concludes with these words.

The confessing person says, *I am sorry for all this and ask for grace. I want to do better.*

Pastor: *God be merciful to you and strengthen your faith. Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?*

Person: *Yes.*

Pastor: *Let it be done for you as you believe.*

Then the pastor places his or her hands on the head of the confessing one and says: *In the stead of and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Go in Peace.*

Forgiveness is not a one-off thing. It is a discipline of the faith. In fact, it may be the defining discipline of the faith. Christians are the ones who love as they believe God loves them, and Christians are therefore the ones who forgive as they have been forgiven by God. It is hard, hard work. Some things seem unforgivable to us. Some acts are so heinous and horrible, they seem beyond the love of God. Some situations are so complex and convoluted, it is almost impossible to see how forgiveness could wedge its way in. But these are all questions for the Holy Spirit to figure out and answer.

And while we are to be as forgiving and loving as God has been to us, I don't want anyone to hear this as some sort of advocacy for staying in abusive relationships. Some people simply desire to cause harm and pain to others. Some do not care if they have caused harm and pain. And some have no idea this is what they have done to you. Forgiveness may seem out of your reach because of the harm done to you. The act of forgiveness may never be able to take place in the presence of the person who has done you harm. You may always live in an incomplete hyphenated state. We need to do what we need to do to take care of and protect ourselves. Having said all that, you also need to know that when we choose to follow Christ, we are also committing to a life of forgiveness – for ourselves as much as the one that must be forgiven. It is the act which allows us to discard the past and live into the future. And that is why we have prayer, worship, community, and faith – so we can give over to God the things we cannot do ourselves. Then, we leave the completions and the endings and the new beginnings to God's will and promise, not our hopes and failures, and dreams and nightmares.

Take a moment, now, and think of someone with whom you live in an uncompleted, hyphenated state.

Maybe you are the one who needs to be forgiven. Maybe you are the one who needs to forgive.

Bring that person to mind.

How have they affected your past? How do they impact your thinking? Are they also suffering? Or not?

If there is no direct way to forgive them, can you forgive them anyway, now?

If there is a direct way to forgive them or request their forgiveness of you, can you imagine that happening? How?

Now, in the act of forgiveness, what does your future look like? Can you leave the past in the past?

*Let it be done for you as you believe.*

*In the stead of and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*