

Forgive One Another

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series: One Anothering

Psalm 103:1-5; 21-22
Colossians 3:12-17

When we calculate the immeasurable riches of God's forgiveness... our capacity for forgiveness enlarges accordingly.

Microsoft Windows Millennium and Windows XP have a capability called "System Restore." It allows users to restore the system to a previous state without losing their data. Suppose your computer crashes on Thursday, which jeopardizes the financial data you entered on Wednesday and your daughter's history report, written on Tuesday. All you have to do is select System Restore and specify the date to which you want your machine reset. Problem solved. All the things lost in the crash are restored to their earlier configuration.

Wouldn't you like to do that in human relationships? Perhaps you can remember the day when things crashed. You'd give anything to restore things as they were. You'd love to return to the day before you had that bitter argument or spoke that regrettable remark.

There is a way to create "system restore" in human relationships. It's called forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't promise to erase every consequence of our actions, but it does offer us a way to restore interpersonal relationships.

We are focusing this series of sermons on the "one another" passages of Scripture. We'll be

examining nine of the 20 one another passages in the New Testament. We began the New Year with Jesus' command to "Love one another." Today we turn our attention to "Forgive one another."

Paul writes in Colossians, "Bear with each other and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive one another; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (3:13). The key to this verse are the words "The Lord has forgiven you." We will never really know how to forgive until we realize what it's like to be forgiven.

This verse is like a deli sandwich. If the forgiveness of one another is the bread, God's forgiveness is the good stuff in between. Our forgiveness wraps around God's forgiveness.

God's forgiveness features prominently in Paul's letter to the Colossians. In the first chapter, we read, "God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:13-14). In the second chapter, we are told, "When you were dead in your sins... God made you alive with Christ and forgave us all our sins" (2:13).

We need to understand the gravity of our sins in order to appreci-

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ate God's gracious pardon. Our sins are not mere flaws or human foibles. Sin is any thought, word or deed which separates us from God. In the great prayer of confession from the *Book of Common Prayer*, we acknowledge ourselves to be "miserable offenders." I almost choke every time we sing, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." We are not people getting better and better all the time; our wretched sins are worthy of God's punishment. But the good news is that God's mercy offers us forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

General Oglethorpe once commented to John Wesley, "I never forgive and I never forget," to which Wesley replied, "Then, sir, I hope you never sin."

Our forgiveness is predicated on God's pardon through Jesus Christ. When we calculate the immeasurable riches of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ, our capacity for forgiveness enlarges accordingly.

We prayed earlier in worship, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (although some of you felt obliged to confess your trespasses!). It's the only petition in the Lord's Prayer with a condition attached to it. We forgive as (the adverb "as" means to the same extent) we have been forgiven.

Jesus often spoke in parables about forgiveness. In the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:23-35), a servant owes his master an exorbitant amount of money (the equivalent

of ten million dollars). The servant begs for more time in repaying the debt and receives, instead, the king's pardon. Rather than emulate the king's kindness, this servant demands repayment of a rather trifling debt owed by a fellow servant. When the king hears about his unforgiving gesture, he throws this servant into debtor's prison. Verse 35 cinches the parable: "This is how your heavenly Father will treat you unless you forgive from your heart." Jesus said our experience of God's forgiveness of ten million dollars enables us to forgive people their \$20 debts.

This parable responds to Peter's question in verse 21: "How many times should I forgive my brother?" No doubt Peter has in mind rabbinic law which specified a "three strikes and you're out" approach to forgiveness. Peter must have felt magnanimous when he suggested forgiving someone seven times. Jesus' response must have blown Peter away: "I tell you not seven times but seventy times" or "seventy times seven." Jesus teaches that forgiveness should be extended infinitely.

I've been rather methodical about establishing that our forgiveness is grounded in God's gracious pardon. I'm convinced we will never make much headway into forgiveness if we do not comprehend God's gracious pardon for us. Let me forewarn you, this sermon will conclude by directing you to identify people you need to ask for forgiveness or extend forgiveness to.

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There is something we must be willing to relinquish when it comes to forgiveness. We must surrender our right to get even. We derive pleasure in getting even. We find a certain measure of delight in hurting someone in the same way they have hurt us.

The problem with revenge is there is simply no end to it. Max Lucado writes, "Resentment is when you let your hurt become hate. Resentment is when you allow what is eating you to eat you up. Resentment is when you feed and fan the fire, stirring the flames and reliving the pain. Resentment is the deliberate decision to nurse the offense until it becomes a black, furry, growling grudge."

There is an old Chinese proverb which says, "The man who opts for revenge should dig two graves." Revenge hurts two people: the person we resent as well as us. Often we think of forgiveness as a gift to another person, but it's also a gift to us. Forgiveness sets us free! If we do not forgive, we allow the person who hurt us to go on hurting us.

Revenge has a deleterious effect on our bodies as well as our souls. Bitterness gives us ulcers, migraines and insomnia. Medical researchers have determined there is a correlation between unresolved anger and heart attacks.

We all know bitter people who are consumed with revenge. They wallow in self-pity. They talk at length about the ways they have been hurt. They catalogue every single offense committed against them. Who wants to be around

such people? They are no fun to be around!

A teacher asked her students to bring a plastic bag and a sack of potatoes to school. She directed them to call to mind every person who had hurt or wronged them. For every person who came to mind whom they refused to forgive, she instructed them to choose a potato, write the person's name on it and put it in the bag. She instructed them to carry this bag around with them, putting it beside their bed at night, on the car seat and next to their desk during class.

Some of their bags became quite heavy. Carrying this bag everywhere became something of a hassle. Over time, the sack of potatoes became moldy, smelly and began to sprout "eyes."

In forgiveness, we surrender the right to get even. But we also gain deliverance from the perpetual, wretched cycle of resentment.

Forgiveness places a premium on restoring relationships. When it comes right down to it, relationships are more important than who is right or wrong. Forgiveness allows relationships to begin in earnest again. "Love keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:6).

There is incredible power in the words, "I am sorry." These three little words do more in human relationships than any amount of excuse-making and alibi-giving. I marvel at how these little words can disarm a conflict.

During a children's sermon one Sunday, a minister held up an ugly-looking summer shirt he wore

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around the house. He explained that someone said the shirt was ugly and should be thrown away. “This really hurt me,” the minister explained. “I’m having trouble forgiving the person who said these mean things. Do you think I should forgive this person?” Immediately his six-year-old daughter Alicia raised her hand. “Yes, you should,” she said without hesitation. “But why?” he asked. “This person hurt my feelings.” To which Alicia wisely answered, “Because, silly, you’re married to her!”

You might be saying, “I cannot forgive someone for all the hurt and pain they have caused me.” The alternative is worse! You could live your whole life enslaved to revenge and resentment.

If you can’t forgive someone for all the hurt done against you, start by taking small, baby steps. Forgiveness takes time; it’s not instantaneous. Forgiveness is a journey toward wholeness. C. S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, “When you learned mathematics, you did not begin with calculus; you began with simple addition. In the same way, if we really want to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo. One might start with forgiving one’s husband or wife, parents or children for something they have done or said in the last week. That will probably keep us busy for the moment.”

I do not subscribe to the theory that to forgive is to forget. The Bible does not tell us that. But

forgiveness is the only way to forget. Forgiveness is not pretending nothing happened or that what happened didn’t hurt, it is refusing to let anything permanently destroy the relationship. We place the highest value on restoring relationships.

Who among your family and friends do you need to ask for forgiveness? Jesus said, “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go, be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23).

Where do you need to extend forgiveness? Are there people coming to mind right now? Call them or meet them face to face. Even if they are dead and gone, forgive them. Is there somebody in this sanctuary you need to forgive?

“Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you.”

