

## **Introduction**

My topic is one that is, I think, important to all Christians. It is the topic of forgiveness.

As we all know, Jesus forgave his enemies. While still on the cross, he famously prayed that God would forgive those who had crucified him.

Jesus also called his followers to forgive their enemies. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In case we didn't quite get the point, Jesus said, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heaven Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Forgiving the people who wrong us and hurt us, is one of the most difficult things Jesus has commanded us to do.

## **What Forgiveness Is**

It is difficult because it is contrary to what we instinctively want to do.

Let us say that you have been deeply hurt by someone. Maybe it is a friend or a family member. Maybe it's a co-worker or a fellow church member. You aren't perfect, but you did not deserve the hurt you have experienced. It's not fair.

How do you respond when you are hurt unfairly? You know that Jesus has told you to forgive. But what does that mean?

It means, I think, that you suffer in a special way. In order to forgive, you must experience two distinct kinds of pain.

First comes the pain of being treated unfairly. That is a kind of pain that all of us experience, and there's no way to avoid it.

But in order to forgive you must experience a second kind of pain.

When you're treated unfairly, you become angry. No one has to learn to do this; it is a natural instinct. Even small children do it.

Because you are angry, you naturally want to retaliate. This is an instinct also, and we all have it. We want to hit back. We want to hurt those who hurt us. We want revenge.

I believe that you are entitled to retaliate. It's only fair. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a

tooth—that balances the scales. That’s justice.

But it’s not forgiveness. Forgiveness goes beyond justice. It is an act of generosity and grace toward the one who hurt you.

In forgiveness you do not express the anger you feel by retaliation. Instead, you voluntarily embrace the pain of your anger. You absorb your anger. You don’t repress or deny it, but you accept it and then live through it, in such a way as to drain the poison off it.

That is what forgiveness is: absorbing the pain caused by people who hurt you, and also absorbing the anger you naturally feel because you have been hurt, in such a way as to neutralize your anger and so to end its destructive power in your life and in the lives of others.

Now, I want to tell you that this is not fair. You didn’t hurt the other person; the other person hurt you. You shouldn’t have to suffer; the person who hurt you should have to suffer.

But in the real world of moral relationships, it is the injured party alone who can forgive, and that means that it is the injured person who must suffer.

### **What Helps You to Forgive**

That is hard to do, and because it is so hard, we need all the help we can get if we’re going to do it.

One thing that helps is simply to decide, intentionally, that you want to forgive. Because the natural response to being hurt is to retaliate, forgiveness is a response we have to make intentionally.

Another thing that helps is to belong to a community that supports you as you attempt to practice forgiveness. There are communities which do not believe in forgiveness. They are opposed to it. They think that forgiveness is a sign of weakness or else of moral indifference. Those communities will support you in your natural inclination to retaliate. They encourage you to seek revenge.

The church should never do that. The church, when it is faithful to the message of the Lord Jesus, will support you as you attempt to practice forgiveness.

A third thing that helps is to try to understand those who hurt you. Maybe you can see why they acted the way they did. Maybe they have been hurt themselves. Maybe they are having a lot of problems right now. You don’t excuse them, but you do try to understand them, to see their humanity, and so not to demonize them.

Another things that helps you to forgive is to think about the future, about what will happen if you don't forgive and what will happen if you do.

If you don't forgive, you'll continue to live with your anger. It may take the form of hot rage or of cool resentment. Either way, it is still anger, and you know what it will do. It will eat you up. It will make you miserable. It may even make you physically ill. If you bottle up your anger, if you let it make you seek revenge, you can get hypertension, ulcers, lesions, headaches, and insomnia.

And it will hurt others, too. As Gandhi said, if the world lives by the principle of *an eye for an eye*, it will become a world full of blind people.

On the other hand, if you do forgive you will neutralize the pain that is destructive of your health and happiness. Then you can begin to experience healing from your hurts. In this sense forgiveness is something you should do for yourself as well as for the Lord.

And, of course, often there is a possibility that you and the person who hurt you may become friends again. That doesn't always happen, but at least there is a chance. In any case, you can do your part to make that happen.

### **Steps toward Forgiveness**

I have been saying that forgiveness is difficult. Fortunately, there are some small, practical steps that will move you toward the great goal of forgiveness.

**First**, you can name the person or group who hurt you, and you can name what that person or group did that was unfair and caused you pain. You cannot begin to forgive until you are acknowledge honestly that people have hurt you.

Here is the South, this is difficult to do, because we Southerners like to imagine that we don't have any enemies. We like to believe that, as the old saying goes, we don't have an enemy in the world.

But we do have enemies. We all do. And, if we are going to forgive them, we must begin by naming them and by naming the ways they have hurt us. You can't forgive generically.

**Second**, you can live in such a way as to do your enemies no harm. You can refuse to believe the worse things about them. You can refuse to gloat over their mistakes or misfortunes. You can refuse to wish them ill. You can refuse to be rude to them. You can refuse to say ugly things about them. Talking about our enemies is one of the principal ways we retaliate; another is to withdraw and to be cool. Do your enemies no harm.

**Third**, you can refuse to stoke the fires of your anger. Don't replay in your mind the events in which you were mistreated and hurt; you don't mull them over.

**Fourth**, you can pray for God to help you to forgive.

**Fifth**, you can begin to pray for your enemies. You may want to pray that God will punish them, but that's not helpful. Instead, begin by praying simply, "I pray for this person who hurt me." If you will do this repeatedly, a time will come when you will be able sincerely to pray, "I pray that you will bless this person who hurt me." When we can do that sincerely, you are well on the way to forgiving the person.

**Sixth** and finally, you can be patient. Sometimes it takes a long time to forgive. It can be a slow process. But it's worth waiting for and praying for.

The important thing is to begin to do it, to set the process of forgiveness in motion.

### **Abuse**

Before I close this sermon, I want briefly to address an important, related issue. In this sermon I have treated the experience of being hurt as a single, discrete event, and that is often the case. But sometimes the hurting we are experiencing is not a single, discrete event but a continuing pattern of behavior. Today we have a word for that; we call it *abuse*.

Our Christian faith calls us to forgive. It does not call us to continue to accept abuse. If abusive behavior occurs, with very few exceptions, you should take steps to get out of harm's way. The Lord Jesus, who in the end would lay down his life, made it clear that he would do so only on his own terms, when he said: *No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it back* (John 10:18, TEV). So do you. If your friend is abusive, stop seeing your friend. If your boss is abusive, take steps to get that changed, or move. If a family member is abusive, do what is necessary to avoid the abuse. Jesus calls us to forgive; he does not call us to allow people to do whatever they like with us.

### **Conclusion**

Forgiveness is hard work, but it can be done, and it is worth doing. We do it for ourselves, so that our anger will not ruin our lives. We also do it for those who wronged us, so that they will know that they do not need to continue to feel guilty about hurting us, and in the hope that they and we can be reconciled. We do it for the church, which cannot be faithful to Jesus except by being a forgiving community. And we do it for the Lord Jesus Christ, who loved us all and gave himself for us.

My final word for you comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians: "Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you."