

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 18:21-35
Sermon Title: "The Road of Forgiveness"

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{SLIDE 1} Today is the 15th anniversary of one of the most horrible things that has ever happened to us in our lifetimes, if not in the history of the United States. In the early to midmorning, 15 years ago, two airplanes hit the Twin Towers in New York City. People on the ground thought that a small commercial airplane had hit the first building, not a Boeing 767 full of passengers going to California. During these attacks, a third airplane, a Boeing 757, crashed into the Pentagon outside Washington DC, and passengers on a fourth plane helped to thwart another attack possibly on the White House or the Capitol Building. Sadly, those brave men and women lost their lives when the plane came down in Shanksville, PA.¹

Nobody could imagine such a horrible thing happening to our country or any country. How could a group of people be so hateful and so monstrous as to perpetrate an act that would kill thousands of people and injure thousands more? Such a thing would make anybody angry. We could understand someone wanting to go after the terrorists, and the US military

¹ <http://www.history.com/topics/9-11-attacks>, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks.

did. We can understand families of those killed and injured not forgetting the events of 15 years ago, and even feeling as though it just happened last week or a few days ago.

Yet, what God calls us to do today is to remember what happened, but not to remember with hate in our hearts. We may replay events as we recall them, but then God wouldn't want vengeance and fury to linger within us. Like any other situations that happens, causing us grief and pain, God calls us to forgive and forgive and forgive again. Such a spiritual act leads to our physical and mental well-being.

{SLIDE 2} In Matthew 18:21, Peter has a question about forgiveness. He wants to know if a member of the church sins against him, obviously he should forgive the person, but how many times? Before we move on, notice how interesting the question is. Peter doesn't ask Jesus if he *should* forgive the person – he asks *how many times*. Wouldn't we ask the first question to Jesus: Should I forgive so and so? When we are so upset with someone, we might not be able to talk to him or her. We don't want the person in our presence. We don't want to see the person at least for half an hour or an hour or more. Our disappointment may be fueled by anger. We eventually wrestle with the issue of forgiveness. Sometimes we are able to cool

down and feel less disappointed, and then we may forgive. That which hurt us hurts us no more. But there are times we hold on to the disappointment. We allow anger to continue to fuel the memories of what happened. We stay upset. At those times, we may question if forgiveness is an option or not.

Lewis Smedes is a Christian author who wrote a book about forgiveness. It is called *Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*. Toward the end of his book, Smedes says that there is much to be said “for not forgiving people” if we desire to choose that path.² “Why should people cut and thrust their way through our lives, leaving us bleeding in their wake and then expect us to forgive everything and act as if nothing went wrong?” Smedes dedicates the last chapters of his book addressing the need to forgive. We cannot choose the option, which is not to forgive.

{SLIDE 3} Forgiveness makes an unfair world fair. We do not live on a level field with others. Some people have more power and others do not. Some get away with things and others do not. Life is not fair in many regards: Some have more advantages than others. Forgiveness, however, levels the playing field, especially when it comes to hurting people.

² Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive & Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, 160.

“Forgiveness is fair to wrongdoers because it holds them [responsible for the things they did].”³ Whether somebody hurts us or we hurt somebody, forgiveness places the hurt in front of us all. We have to become responsible to it, address it as the sin committed.

{SLIDE 4} Once we do that, then we can move toward resolving the problem. This is called reconciliation. “It is an opportunity for a life together instead of a death together. Forgiveness is a miracle of the will that moves away the heavy hindrance to fellowship, a miracle that will be fulfilled when the two estranged people come together in as fair a new relationship as is possible...”⁴ I like how Smedes put it at the start: sharing a “life together” instead of a “death together.” When a certain hurt is not acknowledged, it continues to kill the person who was hurt. The one who did the hurt may never know what sort of killing he or she did. Forgiveness creates fairness, in which the person who is hurt addresses the hurt, making the other person aware of it. And then life may begin. A new relationship with two or more people understanding each other, and refusing to hurt each other again, is born.

Peter, in our Scripture passage today, doesn’t ask the question we might have asked Jesus. “Lord, if

³ Ibid., 167.

⁴ Ibid., 169.

another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?”⁵ Forgiveness is the best option that leads us to healing.

{SLIDE 5} Now, Peter asks Jesus if he should forgive his brother or sister seven times for an offense committed. According to the prophet Amos in the Old Testament, God will forgive three transgressions committed but will not forgive a fourth. For example, the city of Damascus had committed three sins against God which God could overlook, but the fourth one would be punished severely.⁶ Peter might have been thinking about this when he asked about forgiving somebody seven times. Maybe according to his divine leader Jesus, three sins could be committed and then three more plus one could be committed, and Jesus would forgive all seven out of his great mercy.⁷

Jesus seems to know what Peter is talking about better than we do. However, Jesus isn't concerned about numbers of times like Peter is. Jesus tells him to forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven. If you do the math, that would be 490 times to forgive somebody, which is a lot. Some translations says seventy-seven times, which isn't as large as 490

⁵ Matthew 18:21.

⁶ Cf. Amos 1:3 (:4-5). There are others throughout Amos, which I did not list.

⁷ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, cf. 657.

times.⁸ Once again, Jesus is not concerned about numbers of times. Jesus is concerned with unlimited forgiveness. The number seven is the perfect number. When we forgive seventy-seven times or seventy times seven, we are looking to add forgiveness upon forgiveness. We are striving to make our forgiveness as perfect as possible.

In other words, Jesus wants us all to enter a process of forgiveness that is unlimited, uninterrupted.

{SLIDE 6} Let's take the extreme of what happened 15 years ago. If we do not forgive what happened in NYC, Washington DC, and Shanksville, then we continue to die to the hurt. We continue to move away reconciling the situation, settling on some new life in which we may live at peace and we may heal. This would take the families and friends of those who died a much longer time to do, and yet it has to be done. If they wish to live without stress or strain, they need to place forgiveness upon forgiveness, until it gets easier, until they see the face of God and know that all will be okay.

Let us not take it down a few notches. Let us consider an offense that wouldn't hurt as much but hurts quite enough. Jesus tells a parable about a

⁸ Cf. Matthew 18:22.

servant, Servant #1, being forgiven of a huge debt that he had with the king.⁹ Servant #1 then turns around and is confronted by another servant, Servant #2, who owes not as much money. The debt that Servant #1 had with the king, 10,000 talents, is not as large as 100 denarii. We can see that. And yet, Servant #1 could feel as though he was taken advantage of. He could feel that Servant #2 has hurt him in some way that needs to be addressed.

Let us say that we are Servant #1, and another person hurts us. Calls us a bad name, ruins our day by something she did, got the job that we were interviewing for, gossiping about us behind our backs, breaking a promised that he made to help us one day: it could be any of those or others. We feel slighted. Expectation have been broken. There is a tear in the relationship that hurts.

We enter the process that Jesus calls us to enter. We forgive and forgive and forgive again. We acknowledge that something wrong occurred, and we proactively work toward making it right. We refuse to let the hurt keep hurting us. We refuse to continue to feel slighted, which then makes us feel vengeful. All of the negativity will not touch us. We are in the process of forgiving, healing, restoration, wholeness.

⁹ Cf. Matthew 18:23-35.

We cannot act like Servant #1 acted toward Servant #2.¹⁰ Screaming at someone, threatening to ruin his or her life, never letting go of the pain: This is not forgiveness. Servant #1 does everything opposite to forgiveness. The wound in the relationship stays open. The possibility for restoration doesn't exist. Servant #1 stays angry, demanding, hardhearted, unsympathetic.

{SLIDE 7} Unlike the king in our parable.¹¹ Servant #1 held a huge debt with the king. The debt was so large that Servant #1 couldn't ever pay it all back, not in his lifetime. The king knew this when Servant #1 did not. And yet, the king forgives the debt. He listens to the servant's cry for mercy, and he pities him. The king was moved to compassion for Servant #1, feeling all the way to the core of his being. The king did not want to punish his servant. He wanted to restore him. Forgiveness is the way to do so. Forgive the debt. Do not let it be the issue between us. Do not let it spark any anger or jealousy or vengeance. Forgive and forgive and forgive. Forgiveness upon forgiveness, whether it is seventy-seven times or 490 times. Be in the process of forgiveness.

It is not always an easy road. We cannot say that

¹⁰ Cf. Matthew 18:28-30.

¹¹ Cf. Matthew 18:23-27

we have forgiven somebody totally, because there are times the thought of what happened comes to our minds. We might replay the entire scene from start to finish. Anger begins to rise within our hearts. We think ugly thoughts toward that person, even though we see him or her on a regular basis. It can happen – we do not entirely forget some hurts caused toward us. This is why forgiveness is a process not a destination. We keep forgiving. It doesn't stop. When those feelings and thoughts surface, we combat them with the process that Jesus calls us to enter into. Forgive and forgive and forgive. If we think we have forgiven enough, forgive some more. The debt is cleared – let it remain cleared. It is not an issue between us and that person – let it remain not an issue. Do not let it spark any angry or jealousy or vengeance. It is a process that gets easier over time. It is a process that becomes more natural to us as we exercise it. We remain calm, satisfied, gracious, sympathetic.

{SLIDE 8} We know what happens at the end of the parable.¹² The king catches Servant #1 not wanting to forgive Servant #2. The king rescinds his forgiveness. He places the debt back on the shoulders of Servant #1, locks him in prison for torture, and will not let him

¹² Cf. Matthew 18:31-35.

out until all the overwhelming debt is paid.

This is not the way we want the parable to end. We may wish that Jesus chose a different, more pleasant ending. Yet Jesus does what he does as a warning. Who is the king in his parable? It is our God. Who are we in the parable? Servant #1. We owe God big time. We have sinned against God so terribly that we can never pay it back in our lifetimes. We should be thrown into some hole left to be tortured, left to rot away. Yet God doesn't want this to happen to us and anybody. He wants to forgive our sin. He wants us to admit we have sinned against God and others, and even ourselves, so that God may remove the pain that we have caused.

God is serious about forgiving us. God is so serious that he has given forgiveness as a gift to us not to set on a shelf and admire it but as a tool to restore lives. No matter how large or small the sin is against us, God wants us to forgive it. Forgive and forgive to lessen the pain. Forgive and forgive to remove the debt. Forgive and forgive to promote life. Because, let's face it, we owe God big time, and yet through Jesus Christ God is willing to forgive, when we ask. If somebody has hurt us, how much more should we forgive? We enter the process and everyone is free.

Assurance of Pardon:

In Christ, we are offered a new design for living: open hearts, abundant forgiveness, yearning to serve others, desire to be one with God. The old is gone, and a new life has begun. Accept Christ's sacrifice, and be healed of your sin. Through him you and I are forgiven - thanks be to God. Amen.