

Total Forgiveness, Part 1

Matthew 6: 14 – 15

¹⁴ For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Mark 11:24-26

²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. ²⁵⁻²⁶ And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

Keith Miller, Executive Vice President of Christianity Today, International, shared this recently in a sermon:

When I was five-years-old, I first fully understood the message of these words:

*He sees you when you're sleeping,
He knows if you're awake,
He knows if you've been bad or good,
So be good for goodness' sake!*

Until that moment, I had lived in this childhood bliss, in which Christmas was the best day of the year. I had always believed that the gifts at Christmastime were there because Christmas always came with gifts. You could count on them. But now I painfully understood that if I wanted any gifts at Christmas, I had to be good. It was all riding on me. There was this all-seeing, all-knowing Santa, and if there was going to be any gifts, I had better shape up.

But then I thought, "How good is 'good'? Can a person be 'pretty good'? Does Santa understand that I have a twin brother, so I have more reasons to be provoked than other kids?" It was all so worrisome to me.

I grew up a little more and went on to elementary school. In the fourth grade, when I was 9, I continued to learn that all the good stuff in life depends on my effort. We had a reading program called SRA. Here's how it worked: There was a giant box of color-coded cards on the side of the classroom. You went and got one of the cards in the front of the box, read what was on it, and then answered questions about what you'd read. If you got most of the answers right, you moved up to the next highest color—red, yellow, blue, and if you were good enough and worked hard enough, you reached exotic colors, like magenta.

Moving up in SRA was all we cared about, because if you were still on one of the lower-level colors—red or yellow—you were a loser. Everybody's goal was to move up—to work really hard and reach the ultimate pinnacle of fourth-grade glory: *aquamarine*. But if you wanted the glory, you had to hustle. We would literally run from our desks to the box. No pain, no gain! You had to be good enough, to work hard enough.

Total Forgiveness, Part 1

I grew up a little more. I was 14-years-old, and a friend invited me to a meeting after school called Campus Life. There was a guy there who had a beard, which automatically made him cool. He also had a guitar, which made him even cooler. He started saying stuff I'd never heard before. He said that if you wanted the good stuff from God—stuff like peace and forgiveness and the Holy Spirit—it didn't work like Santa, where you had to be good or you got nothing but coal in your Christmas stocking. He pointed out that it didn't work like SRA, where it all depended on your being smart enough and good enough and hustling enough. He said there was a thing called grace. God had decided to take all my sin, all my screw-ups, and forgive me. Grace had something to do with Jesus dying on the cross for me, and all I had to do was believe.

This man read from the Bible, which I hadn't really ever read. He read that “*God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him, will not perish, but have everlasting life.*” This message was different from anything I'd heard before. It was not what I expected. It wasn't all on me. It was all on him—on Jesus. That message was so freeing, that as I took it in, I almost started to cry. But I was a 14-year-old guy, and we didn't do stuff like that. The next week, I thought, I better not go to that meeting again, because I almost started to cry last week, and I cannot be humiliated by breaking down in front of my friends. But I did go. And I did hear the message. And I did believe. And I experienced “amazing grace.”¹

Now, I tell you, I never get tired of hearing testimonies of how people have come to ‘hear’ the Good News of Jesus Christ for the first time. The news of God's love and unconditional grace is still Good News; as that song says, “Your Grace *Still* Amazes Me”. It does amaze *me*, I hope it amazes you, too!

But for today and the next two weeks I want to think together with you about the *other* side, another part, of that message of grace. The part that we seldom talk about – which is a rather amazing thing, too, considering the consequences of ignoring it.

In an issue of Christianity Today magazine released not long before that Keith Miller quote I just shared with you, they featured a cover story entitled “The Forgiveness Factor”. And the main point of this article was the author's (Gary Thomas) understanding that this teaching – about person-to-person forgiveness – has been greatly overlooked by the church. He quotes a Professor Robert Enright, who is the president of the International Forgiveness Institute, who commented that prior to a 1984 book by the theologian Lewis Smedes (*Forgive and Forget*), “If

¹ Kevin Miller, executive vice president, Christianity Today International

Total Forgiveness, Part 1

you collected every theological book about person-to-person forgiveness [as opposed to divine-human forgiveness], before Smedes' book, you could hold them all in one hand."²

You can certainly wonder how a doctrine that seems so basic in Scripture could be ignored for so long by people whose identity is centered around our frequently proclaimed desire to be followers of Jesus Christ! And those of us who are church leaders should be repenting over not only our neglect of this important teaching of Jesus, but perhaps even more so for not putting it into practice in our own lives.

One of the things that they don't teach you in seminary (but you learn very quickly when you arrive in the 'real world' of a local church) is that forgiveness is *not* the default response to offense in the church community at large. And sadly, we have simply accepted that angry criticism, grudges, bitterness, leaving the church, spreading stories (true or not), and on and on are going to be more likely responses; so much so, that when forgiveness *is* extended in a difficult circumstance, it tends to be surprising to the recipient!

Well, R. T. Kendall, pastor of Westminster Chapel in London for 25 years, has written a challenging book on this subject (as you've see in the bulletin). In his introduction says this:

*"Had this teaching been the emphasis and lifestyle of all of us who are in church leadership, there might not have been the division, hurt, and strife that have characterized many Christian circles. Though these strivings may often be described as a doctrinal battle for truth, so often the veneer is paper thin, and underneath are the age-old jealousies, petty agendas, and sheer humanness that affect us all."*³

I think the key word there is 'humanness'. It's not *surprising* when we act like humans – for obvious reasons! [It's what we *are!*] It is, however, *totally* surprising when we act in a Christ-like manner, which is most clearly evident in the act of forgiveness. Especially forgiveness which is extended as a way of life, as our first response to an offense (even if we know it is going to take us awhile to get there). To simply assume that this is where we need to end up...

² Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," *Christianity Today*, vol. 44, no. 1 (10 January 200): 38

³ R. T. Kendall, *Total Forgiveness*, Charisma House, 2002, p. 9

Total Forgiveness, Part 1

The Power of Forgiveness is a collection of seven short video stories that, taken together, reveal the limits, difficulties, healing qualities, and unforeseen effects that an act of forgiveness can have in the lives of the people who give it. One of those 7 stories focuses on Kathleen Lawler-Row, a professor of psychology who has conducted extensive research into the effects of forgiveness on the human body.

In her segment, Dr. Lawler-Row discusses her experiments probing the connection between forgiveness and symptoms of physical stress, like blood pressure. *“When I bring people into the laboratory,” she says, “I ask them to tell me about a time when someone deeply upset you, hurt you, betrayed you, etc. And some people say, ‘Well, where do you want me to start? I have a long list.’ They could talk about lots of different people in that context. Other people sit and think and think and think, and they struggle to come up with something. And I think that’s part of the forgiving personality—more-forgiving people are just a little less aware of being offended.”*

What a wonderful thing if that were a basic description of all Christians. But I once heard someone describe Christians as the ‘litmus paper of society’ – i.e., we’re the *first* to be offended. The video then shifts to Dr. Lawler-Row’s laboratory...

“When a person walks into the laboratory, we have a few minutes where they sit, and we try to get a resting level—and interestingly, highly forgiving people have lower blood pressure just walking around in the world every day. But when we bring them into the lab, we ask them about a time when someone betrayed them, and everybody’s blood pressure increases when they talk about this emotional moment.”

“But the amount of the initial increase is really not the critical factor,” Dr. Lawler-Row continues. “The critical thing is how long that blood pressure remains elevated. And people who are talking about a time that they are still very unhappy about, and that they have not been able to resolve or forgive, their blood pressure stays elevated for a [much] longer period of time.”

Back in the lab, Dr. Lawler-Row shows a female patient how her blood pressure changed during the telling of her story. *“Your blood pressure when we started out is very normal—121 over 83.*

Total Forgiveness, Part 1

But as you start talking about this event, it goes up to 156 over 87, then 164, and here it's 184 over 127. This is an event that really triggers a reaction in you.” The patient is very surprised—even exclaiming, *“I don't like that guy very much, do I?”*

Dr. Lawler-Row continues, *“Many of the stories I have heard have been profoundly disturbing, and the person will never forget what has happened to them. But I have seen instances of people completely coming to resolution about it, and they show the pattern of the forgiving person—their blood pressure increases, but it drops off as they talk about it, and they are very quickly back to normal. Where someone else may have a far more trivial incident, but if they're hanging on to it for dear life, you see the pattern of the maintenance of blood pressure and the slow recovery. So I don't think the severity of the experience determines the health effects. It's really how the person is able to incorporate this past experience into their lives.”*

Now, Dr. Kathleen Lawler-Row is not the first researcher to come to the conclusion that forgiveness may help lead to victims' emotional and even physical healing and wholeness. In the early 80's a researcher, Dr. Glen Hamden, went to the University of Kansas library and looked up the word *forgiveness* in Psychological Abstracts. He couldn't find a single reference! But *that* is changing.

Former President Jimmy Carter, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and former missionary Elisabeth Elliot have been promoting a \$10 million “Campaign for Forgiveness Research,” established as a nonprofit corporation to attract donations that will fund forgiveness research proposals. So, we could say that the world is catching up – and sadly, in some ways – is charging ahead of the church, which has known for 2,000 years the mandate of our Lord: Forgive as you have been forgiven.

In other ways, however, things are worse than ever when it comes to demonstrating an attitude of forgiveness in today's world. I have frequently commented to friends about what I've been noticing recently: a great increase in political anger. It seems to me that there is a lot more screaming and personal attacks going on these days, very little civil discourse. I was not surprised then, to catch an NPR news radio segment last weekend called ‘The Politics of Anger’,

Total Forgiveness, Part 1

which pretty much confirmed my impression. Its not just me; they documented that there are a growing number of media entertainers and politicians today who are choosing to attack people on personal levels, instead of talking reasonably about issues, and who frequently resort to innuendo and outright falsehoods in order to generate and maintain an audience, or get votes.

What really disturbs me in all this is when Christians take up the same mantras – when we can't see the conflict/ the contradiction between attacking those who disagree with us, destroying reputations based on flimsy reporting and the like, with the teachings of Jesus to do things like “pray for our enemies”, to “bless those who persecute us”, or Paul's admonition to ‘*gently restore those who have fallen*’⁴; nor do we heed James' advice: “*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because our anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires*”.⁵

The world is getting angrier and angrier, and we (i.e., Christians) are once again being absorbed into the culture instead of modeling something different. So this is where we'll spend most of our time in this short series. Yes, there are possible health benefits to forgiving. Yes, the world, our families, our nation, (and the church!) would be better places if we not only learned about this, but *did* it. But, the main reason for me to preach this series, and to share what may amount to some disturbing messages here in the heat of summer is because this is *clearly* biblical teaching.

There is a spiritual blessing that comes to those who take Jesus' teaching about forgiveness seriously. In some circles we might say that there is ‘a greater anointing’ of the Spirit when we actually do what Jesus told us to do. I totally believe that!

In that same article in Christianity Today, another writer (Michelle Nelson) is quoted. She speaks of degrees of forgiveness, or different types of forgiveness. And she lists three categories: which I want to share with you because this will give a good perspective on where I'm going to be coming down in these messages:

⁴ Galatians 6:1 *Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.*

⁵ James 1: 19 - 20

Total Forgiveness, Part 1

1. **Detached Forgiveness** – *there is here a reduction in negative feelings toward the offender, but no reconciliation takes place.*
2. **Limited Forgiveness** – *there is a reduction in negative feelings toward the offender, and the relationship is partially restored, though there is a decrease in the emotional intensity of the relationship.*
3. **Full Forgiveness** – *there is a total cessation of negative feelings toward the offender, and the relationship is fully restored.*

Those are interesting observations, and perhaps they reflect the reality of how people actually appropriate Jesus' teachings on forgiveness into their lives. And, I suppose it's obvious that restoration of a broken relationship would always be the most desirable outcome. But, what I'm going to be sharing with you in the next two weeks (and in an introductory manner this weekend) is the concept of Total Forgiveness in *all circumstances* – i.e., forgiveness that is put into effect *even if there is no restoration of the relationship*, even if there is no reciprocity, and even if the offender remains unrepentant.

Restoration may or may not happen... Total Forgiveness is something that comes from *us*. Well, it comes *out of us* – it really, as we will see, comes *from* God. In other words, again, we are not given *any* spiritual exemptions to forgiveness in certain circumstance. We are nowhere in Scripture given permission to hold grudges and bitterness towards those *who will not be reconciled with us*. It's not an option. If the relationship can be restored, great; total forgiveness does not demand restoration.

And something perhaps even more difficult: Nowhere in Scripture do we find that there are exemptions, or limitations to the amount of *times* we are to forgive someone, or the *types* of sins that 'merit' forgiveness. Forgiveness is total. Our forgiveness of others is to be like Christ's forgiveness of us – i.e., unconditional.

Now I know that we are going to struggle with this (I think we *should!*)... and so in one of the next two messages I'm going to be addressing the difference between forgiveness and holding

Total Forgiveness, Part 1

people accountable for their actions. They are not mutually exclusive: you can forgive someone *and* still hold them accountable for their decisions/ actions.

So, we're not talking about opening the door to anarchy (where anything goes), or unrestrained abuse, or anything like that. But we will be talking about something that, like pretty much *everything* Jesus taught, is culturally *radical*. And you know the basic meaning of 'radical', right? "Making ...changes of a sweeping or extreme nature". Forgiveness is a radical change from the 'human' way of doing things. It is *completely* opposed to our natural inclinations.

But for now, let me just put this out here: even if there is no reconciliation, there can still be total forgiveness. And that means that this forgiveness can even apply to those who are no longer alive! And, in fact, that may be significant to some of you. There may be someone in your past, someone long gone, who needs to be forgiven – because *you* need to be set free from the bondage that still ties you to them. And God willing, you will see that it is time to let some things go.

As you hear these things, even this very basic introduction, I suspect that many of you are already thinking of people that you, perhaps, need to forgive. And, judging from my experience in talking about this in the past with Sunday School classes, Bible study groups, Stephen Ministry training classes, and people in personal counseling sessions, many of you are *also* thinking – right now – of reasons as to why *this* [your] particular circumstance is somehow different. You're thinking of why it would, in fact, even be *wrong* for you to forgive this person, or, how maybe this is right, but the truth is that you simply *can't* do it. And you could *never* do it.

Friends I believe, I have *always* believed that Jesus, would not command us to do something that is impossible for us to do. And, perhaps more importantly, any teaching so central to his message ultimately must result in our own peace, our well being, our increased joy. Remember God's purpose: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."(Jer. 29: 11)

Total Forgiveness, Part 1

How could we not understand that Jesus' most basic command to his followers – to forgive as we have been forgiven – is part of the great plan of God to prosper us, to bless us, to give us hope and a future? Let's be willing to allow the Spirit of God free access into all those boarded up and hidden places in our minds and hearts, so his plan can be fully realized in each of us.