

The Living Forgiveness Sermon Series Week 3: The Repentance Problem

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Matthew 18:21-35

'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' 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?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

This morning, I will be sharing with you a story that I have been saving for this sermon ever since it first appeared in the Sunday Washington Post Magazine on March 22, 2009. I am greatly indebted to this excellent piece of journalism in my preparation for today's sermon. When I post today's sermon manuscript to crozetumc.org/sermons, I will include a link to the full article.¹

The title of the article is "The Truth About Forgiveness," and it tells the story of Baltimore resident Bernard Williams and his son Vernon. Nearly sixteen years ago Vernon was shot to death by his neighbor, one month after turning seventeen. The shooter's name was William Norman. He would later tell police that the neighborhood kids had been intentionally setting off his car alarm, sometimes multiple times a night, and on this night in May, it happened again. He said that he wanted to shoot near the kids with his military-grade semiautomatic rifle, but that the window blind had fallen and caused him to shoot Vernon. In 1995, he pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and received the maximum sentence: 30 years in prison. He was 30 years old.²

Norman, who appealed his receiving of the maximum sentence. He wrote, "I believe that I received this severe sentence not because of my own background, but because of the victim being 17 years old and the fact that his family placed much pressure on the Assistant States Attorney and on the Court, After days of having my sleep interrupted, in desperation on the night in question, I fired a rifle several times out the bedroom window with the intent of merely to

¹ Karen Houppert, "The Truth About Forgiveness," in *The Washington Post Magazine*, March 22, 2009, p. 8-13, 21-24.

² Ibid.

frighten not to intentionally harm anyone . . . It was an injustice that I should receive a harsher sentence because the deceased person was 17 years of age and had a caring family.”

These words would haunt Bernard for years.

In this morning’s text, Jesus is teaching on what to do if someone sins against you, saying “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” This text provides what would later become the legal justification for excommunication.

Peter responds to this teaching with a question: “How many times must I forgive someone in the church who sins against me?” It’s a good question, and Peter thinks he has a good and tremendously gracious answer to his own question, especially since, in Peter’s illustration the guilty party has not repented: “Seven times?” he asks?

Yet even this great grace is not enough. Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times!” The ancient Greek text could be read seventy-seven or 490 times. In saying this, Jesus is taking two longstanding teachings from Genesis 4 regarding vengeance and turning them on their head. When Cain murdered his brother Abel, God still promises to give sevenfold vengeance to anyone who kills Cain. Later in that same chapter Lamech, the father of Noah proclaims that anyone who harms him will be avenged seventy-sevenfold.” Yet in Matthew’s gospel, seventy-seven times is the number of times one is supposed to forgive another within the Christian community.

However, the point here isn’t that all we have to do is make it to 77 (or 490) before we’re off the hook for forgiving them. We’re not allowed to look at the sister or brother who sins against us, make a mark in a notebook, and say, “Seventy-four.” This conversation between Jesus and Peter isn’t about math or linguistics. It’s about a radical new idea: forgiving one another as God forgives, a forgiveness that cannot be calculated, a forgiveness that is rooted in a love that, in the words of Paul, “keeps no record of wrongs.” Perhaps Jesus’ point is that we shouldn’t be counting to begin with. Perhaps it is that there is more to forgiveness than counting.

If you are like me, then you may hear this text as I have. It goes something like this: forgiveness is hard. Forgiveness is very hard. It goes against our primal instincts for revenge against the person or persons who have inflicted harm upon us. Yet, God commands us to do it anyhow because loves us all and wants us to love each other, and because through the act of forgiving, we are somehow transformed into being the Christ-like people God wishes for us to

be. Therefore, God pushes us, painfully extruding us through a forgiveness-shaped hole, until we better resemble the divine and less resemble our old, primal selves.

Consider what Jesus says about conflict within the church: when someone sins against you, point it out one-on-one, then with one or two others, then take it to the church, and if the person still does not listen to you, treat them like a Gentile or a tax collector. Of course, Jesus himself was pretty good to Gentiles and tax collectors, showing them uncharacteristic grace and hospitality for a Jew in his day, so that says something right there.

Of course, all of this raises the issue of the repentance problem; whether we need to forgive someone who will not repent for what he or she has done. I believe it is God's will for us to forgive others regardless of whether or not they believe they need our forgiveness (remember, we are being extruded here, right). In this morning's text, after Jesus has laid out this complex plan for dealing with those who have sinned against us, using one-on-one, witnesses, and then the whole church, yet when Peter asks how many times all this needs to be done, Jesus replies "seventy-seven" or "seventy-times-seven." His reply seems to be, "You are to forgive as long as there is something to be forgiven."

This leads to what I believe is the most common mistake we make regarding forgiveness: we regard forgiveness as something done purely for the sake of the one being forgiven, as if the offender needs forgiveness, and the forgiver is but a doormat.

In June of 2007, Williams' youngest child was about to graduate from high school, and he was heading for a breakdown. He had grieved the death of Vernon by pouring himself into raising his other children. Now they last one was about to leave home. He was sick, physically and emotionally, and heading for a breakdown. He was dying of anger and grief. So in 2007, he decided to reach out to Norman. He was able to meet him through a restorative justice program at Johns Hopkins University.³

His contact began with a tellign Norman's girlfriend that he was thinking of writing him a letter. After the conversation, he felt lighter. He began to wonder if getting to know and eventually forgiving Norman would help him find the peace that had eluded him all these many years.

Williams was able to meet Norman. On their second visit, he said to Norman, who was less than halfway through his sentence, "I went down avenues dealing with this that I thought I'd never go down," Bernard says, and proceeded to describe his deep grief, his drug addiction, the depression, the way his anger was so profound that he would have killed Norman if given half a chance. "If I knew you was in the house that night, it would've been me locked up in here with

³ Ibid.

you," he says. "I'm not going to sit here and lie and say everything's cool, but allowing things to go on this way, it's going to destroy me."⁴

According to the Washington Post article "a survey of the scientific literature in 1997 turned up only 58 studies on the topic of forgiveness. By 2009, the number was 1,000."⁵ These studies suggest forgiveness can decrease your cardiovascular risk, elevate your immune system and reduce your chances of depression, anxiety, anger disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. Scientists say that research indicates that we have a biological need for vengeance when we've been wronged. However, with the passage of time, we have a biological urge toward empathy and reconciliation.⁶

Could it be possible, that forgiveness is more than simply God extruding us through a forgiveness-shaped hole, because the pain involved in doing so is intrinsically valuable? Could it be that the scientific evidence that points towards a deep-seated biological need to forgive is just science finally realizing the truth behind what Jesus is telling us in this text? Could it be that offering forgiveness is not about being someone else's doormat, but instead is about healing and about claiming both our humanity and the freedom that comes from being children of God?

In December of 2007, Williams went before the parole board, as he had each time Norman came up for parole. However, this time, Williams shocked the commissioners by saying this: he told them he had met with Norman, that he found him genuinely contrite and remorseful, and that it was "[his] intention to ask that Mr. Norman be granted parole and release today. I hope the board takes this into consideration and grants my family and Mr. Norman some relief."

One of the commissioners replied, "I'm about to pass out on the table. I've been here 19 years and only heard a victim say this once before." The other commissioner said to Norman, "This man has shown incredible mercy to you today, I don't know how you pay this back in the future."⁷

Is this not the question the gospel of our Lord asks of us? How can we live in response to the great grace that has been shown to us in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ? And because it is grace, we know we cannot pay it back, just live as a forgiven people, who live the words of the prayer the Lord teaches those who love him, "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.