

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Various

"Forgive and Forget?"

THE CORE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL

If someone were to ask you what is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, what would you say? We know that Gospel means good news. It is the good news of Jesus Christ. So when we say the Gospel - that can mean everything that Jesus represents – who He is and what He does, and what He means for this world. Some may sum it up as the Kingdom of God. But what is at the core of the Gospel? We find the answer in all four Gospels. We heard last week from the Gospel of John when the risen Christ is with His disciples in **Jn. 20:22-23**. Do you remember what Jesus said? We read that He breathed on them and said, ***"Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."*** What is the main point of Jesus' words? Forgiveness of sin and the work of the Holy Spirit.

We see it again in today's gospel reading from **Luke 24:46-47**, when Jesus says again to His disciples, ***"thus it is written, the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."*** We find the same emphasis in Matthew's and Mark's gospels.

The core message of the Gospel is that our sins can be forgiven and our relationship with God can be restored. We can be reconciled to God in Jesus Christ. And the reason we can be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ is because of Who He is and What He has done for us through His death and resurrection. He died for our sins to demonstrate God's love for us and to satisfy God's justice so that we can truly be forgiven by the mercy of God.

Forgiveness was at the heart of everything Jesus did and said. He began His ministry with the words, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand." In fact, Jesus said there can be no forgiveness without repentance. He told His disciples to forgive 70 x 7 when asked how many times we should forgive our brother who sins against us. He forgave the tax-collector Zaccheus and the woman caught in adultery. Before he healed the paralyzed man in **Mk. 2:5**, He said, ***"My child, your sins are forgiven."*** In fact, the reason why he healed the young man was not just to show His compassion and power, but by virtue of His supernatural power displayed, He demonstrated His authority to forgive sins! Remember Peter? He forgave Peter who denied Him three times; and even from the cross He prayed for those yelling "Crucify Him!" ***"Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."*** And when the disciples asked the Lord to teach them how to pray, He told them to pray ***"forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."***

So contrary to what you will hear in some seminaries and churches, Jesus did not first come to establish a just society. In other words, He did not come to simply proclaim a social gospel of creating a fair and just community where no one should be poor and that everyone should be equal. He did not come simply as a revolutionary or a reformer. Rather, He came to testify to the truth – that

He is the Only Son of God and Lord of heaven and earth. And as Lord and God, He came to deal with the problem of sin, once and for all. He came to reveal the truth about God and man.

Not that we don't work for justice and peace and help those who are poor, but Jesus knew that the most important issues in life are issues of the heart, issues of right and wrong, of dealing with our sin and selfishness. Once those are dealt with everything else – greed, racism, materialism, poverty and so forth, can be addressed. It is why I said on Easter Sunday that everything in the visible and physical world is first determined in the invisible and spiritual realm

Jesus wanted to pave the way for a transformation of the heart. And that can only come when we recognize our spiritual bankruptcy before God and our need to be forgiven. And that forgiveness is to be extended by us to others. And so that brings us to a core element of the Christian life – *our* need to forgive others. And so I want us to reflect on that call today.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FORGIVE?

So what does it mean to forgive?

First, I want us to hear a generic definition of forgiveness: *“the process of concluding resentment, indignation or anger as a result of a perceived offense, difference or mistake, or ceasing to demand punishment or restitution.”* The Oxford English Dictionary defines forgiveness as *“to grant free pardon and to give up all claim on account of an offense or debt.”*

As a result of these definitions, sometimes people think they are supposed to let everyone walk all over them and not hold others accountable for wrongs done. We will see in a moment that this is an incorrect understanding.

The Biblical definition of forgiveness goes beyond the above. It is the willingness to forgive another's wrongdoing or slight against your person in a way that reflects the love of Christ and seeks to restore that relationship in a positive way. In other words, it is to do exactly what God does for us. There is a reason why the Apostle Paul wrote in **Eph. 4:32**, ***“Just as the Lord forgave you, so you also must forgive.”***

There is a reason why Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer, ***“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”*** And why He said in **Mt. 6:15**, ***“Don't expect to be forgiven, if you yourself can't forgive others.”***

In fact, the Apostle Paul sums it up in **2 Cor. 5:18-21**: ***“Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.***

20Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” So as ambassadors for Christ, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

Now if we are going to understand how forgiveness works, we first need to look at how our Heavenly Father handles it. God is holy; He is just; He is good; He is perfect. We are the opposite. We fall short. We sin against God; we sin against others; we sin against ourselves. In **Psalm 51**, David rightly says **“I have been a sinner from my mother’s womb”** and **“Against you only, Lord, have I sinned.”** And God holds us accountable. If He didn’t, He could not be a God of holiness and justice and love for that matter. God told Adam and Eve that when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they *surely* would die. If this consequence did not happen, God would then be a liar and unjust. And the fact is, we do pay a penalty, don’t we? We suffer; we physically die; we are separated from God due to our sin. So that is the first thing that we need to remember.

But although God is holy and just, He is also a loving God. He reaches down to us in the Person of His Son Jesus Christ. And then the Lord Jesus Christ, demonstrating God’s love, dies in our place. So both the justice and the love of God are demonstrated in the cross.

Therefore, God is not whitewashing sin. He is paying for it. It is as if the judge steps down and says to a convicted criminal, *“I will take your place. I will pay the penalty for you.”* So forgiveness has been granted.

But what has to happen for this forgiveness to be received? The guilty party has to admit wrongdoing and accept the pardon offered. If the guilty party does not admit responsibility and does not accept the pardon, what happens? They remain condemned.

So the goal of God’s forgiveness is reconciliation of two parties that have been separated because of wrongdoing. But there can be no reconciliation without forgiveness, and you can still offer forgiveness and not be reconciled if the other person does not accept responsibility and accept the forgiveness given.

So how does this relate to our relationships with others?

THREE AREAS OF HURT AND THE BIBLICAL RESPONSE

There are three main areas of hurt that we will experience in life. First, there are the general hurts of interpersonal relationships - things like insensitivity, rudeness, lack of sympathy and so forth. Second, there are more serious offenses - things like unfaithfulness, lies, actual abuse, intentional mistreatment or bullying, and threats to do harm. Third, there is actual criminal behavior – robbery, vandalism, bodily injury, murder, etc.

What does the Bible say concerning these three matters?

Turn with me to **Matthew 18:15-22**. Jesus says, **“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. “But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. “Truly I say to you,**

whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

Depending on what the nature of the offense is, if it is a family member or church member, we are to take the initiative and confront the person and work towards reconciliation. Notice what it then says: ***"Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst."***

So God encourages and accepts such reconciliation. It reflects His very nature.

We find the Apostle Peter challenged by Jesus' words and he then asks a question. He says, ***"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"*** Peter probably thought he was being generous with the requirement, but Jesus totally blows Peter's answer out of the water. He says, ***"I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."*** In other words, there should be no end to our willingness to forgive. Why? True ongoing forgiveness can only be the reflection of eternal, unconditional love. And this eternal, unconditional love can only come from God.

So to sum up the above passage: if you don't take the initiative, you can't expect to see any change in the matter or hope for reconciliation. Now if they refuse, what does Jesus say, ***"Let them be considered as a gentile or tax collector."*** In other words, it's on them. But either way, you are to seek the spirit of forgiveness. And that means to seek the Lord's grace and strength so that you can forgive from your heart. That's the hard part. And that is where faith comes in. How do we forgive? By faith, not by feelings! How do we have the faith? Again, it must come from a total reliance on the Lord's power and help. Of course, when it comes to being able to forgive, we may have good days and bad days. It's why we need to learn to practice the art of forgiveness and learn to give our hurt and anger to the Lord.

Now I want us to look at another passage. **Lk.17:3-4:** Jesus said, ***"Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. "And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him."***

Again, we are to confront people when they sin against us. While we should be willing to forgive, at the same time *they* must be willing to work on the problem with us if there is going to be reconciliation. Now we also know that Jesus said in Matthew, ***"If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."*** In other words, we must be willing to take some knocks on the chin; but at the end of the day there comes a point when the bully has to be told "no" and the addict has to be told that he or she needs help.

So it is a *both, and* response of turning the other cheek while also confronting the hurtful behavior. We are to be willing to take abuse in the short term; but in the long term, we are to work on reconciliation all the while we confront the wrongdoer and make it clear that such behavior will not be tolerated. However, if that does not work, we are to let it go and give it to God, all the while praying for

the other person. **Jesus said in Mt. 5:43-44:** ***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 'But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."***

But now what about criminal behavior? **Romans 13:1-5** gives us the answer. St. Paul writes:

"Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake."

So you see, the government has been given authority by God to execute His vengeance. We are not to take the law into our own hands but let the civil authorities take care of punishing the wrongdoer. But when the penalty has been paid, and if the criminal repents of his or her crime, we are then commanded to forgive!

WHEN DO WE FORGIVE?

Therefore, again we must always be ready to forgive; and if someone repents of his wrong, always forgive. The truth is, unless we are cultivating the spirit of forgiveness in our hearts, we will never be able to sincerely pray for another person. Moreover, if we are not willing to forgive, then our unforgiveness is really controlling us. We have become its slave. God says take it and give it to me. If we don't, we are only hurting ourselves. Unforgiveness unchecked always turns into bitterness. And bitterness is like taking the poison you meant to give to your "enemy" but instead, giving it to yourself!

At the end of the Civil War, General Robert E. Lee came to the home of a wealthy southern lady. While there, she showed him the scarred remains of what had been one of her favorite trees. All the limbs had been shot off by Union artillery. She complained to the General thinking he would share her sense of outrage. She waited expectantly for him to comment. Finally, the old general spoke. He said, *"Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it."*

If there is nothing more you can do about some wrong that has been done to you in the past, cut it down and forget about it! But what about when you can do something about it? Let me give you a tough example that just happened this past week.

A MAN ON DEATH ROW

The state of Arkansas has been in the news lately, seeking to put to death eight convicted murderers on death row before the drugs used expire. The fourth was executed a few days ago. His name? Kenneth Williams. Williams was serving a life sentence for murdering a college cheerleader in 1998 and assaulting her boyfriend. But He escaped in 1999 just a month after being incarcerated. During his escape he murdered Cecil Boran, the former warden of the facility, stole his car and while being chased by the police he was involved in a traffic wreck which killed another man named Michael Greenwood.

Michael Greenwood's daughter, Kayla Greenwood, learned a few days ago that Williams had a twenty-one-year-old daughter he had not seen for seventeen years and a three-year-old granddaughter he had never met. Kayla's mother then bought plane tickets so Williams' daughter and granddaughter could fly from Washington state to Arkansas to see him a day before his execution. Kayla Greenwood sent a message to Williams through his attorney: "I told him we forgive him and where I stood on it." When Williams found out what they were doing, "he was crying to the attorney." If you were like me, you probably are wondering how could this woman do such a thing? Well here is the rest of the story: Williams, a former gang member and only 20 when he committed this horrendous crimes, told an interviewer that he has been *"stabilized and sustained by the inner peace and forgiveness I've received through a relationship with Jesus Christ."* He chose to appear before a prison review board, not because he expected to receive clemency but "so I could show them I was no longer the person I once was. God has transformed me, and even the worst of us can be reformed and renewed. Revealing these truths meant more to me than being granted clemency. I'm still going to eventually die someday, but to stand up for God in front of man, that's my victory."

In his final words before his execution, he wrote, *"I humbly extend my sincerest apologies to the families I senselessly wronged and deprived of their loved ones." The families of Dominique Hurd, Jerrell Jenkins. To Kayla Greenwood and the whole Greenwood family. The acts of grace, forgiveness and mercy you demonstrated toward the person who had taken so much from you by bringing to me in prison my own baby and grandchild, right before my scheduled execution. No rapist, murderer, terrorist, butcher, barbarian; not even old Beelzebub himself; could withstand such a blast of glorious Light and continue to walk in darkness."*

"I was more than wrong. The crimes I perpetrated against you all were senseless, extremely hurtful and inexcusable. I humbly beg your forgiveness and pray you find the peace, healing and closure you all deserve,"

During his clemency hearing Williams testified, *"I accept full responsibility and accountability for my crimes," "That would be Christ in me, enabling me to embrace justice — not fear it."* In addition to his last meal, before his execution, Williams received the sacrament of Holy Communion. He was ready to meet His Lord.

No one is beyond the reach of God's forgiveness: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9).* Do you see any loopholes or ambiguity here? If *"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15),* are any sinners exempt from his grace?

Williams repented of his sin, and the Greenwoods were ready to forgive him. Dominique Hurd's (the cheerleader) mom also said she forgave Williams. The truth is that it is the body of Christ that is often the means by which we experience the grace of Christ. We are called to pardon those who sin against us because we have been pardoned and to demonstrate such grace to the world. Otherwise, how can we expect Christ to forgive us if we don't forgive others? How can we expect the world to believe that the Father loves them if we don't love one another? In a graceless culture that measures us by what we do and how we look, agape love is a powerful and lasting witness. Our love and unity point others to the One we love and serve (**John 13:35**).

The Apostle Paul wrote in **Romans 12:18**: "***As far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.***" The fact is in this life we can't always be at peace with everyone; and sometimes we need to move on and let bygones be bygones. Reconciliation might not be possible; and that means we have to move on when nothing more can be done, entrusting our feelings and judgment itself to God. But at the same time we should always retain a hopeful spirit of forgiveness in preparation for the time our brother or sister or "the enemy" who has wronged us is willing to accept responsibility and repent. And we must also be willing to accept responsibility for anything we may have done to contribute to the disagreement.

Otherwise, how else can we be God's ministering agents of reconciliation? It is why Christ came to do what He did! It is why we have been forgiven by our Heavenly Father. It is what the Gospel is all about. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!