

THE KEY TO TRUE FORGIVENESS

Sermon - Sunday, September 7, 2014

For several months I have talked about the Holy Spirit and that the Scriptures gives us three things not to do concerning the Holy Spirit. We read about this in:

HEBREWS 3:15

“Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.”

We harden our hearts when we “*resist the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 7:51), when we “*quench the Holy Spirit*” (1 Thessalonians 5:19) and when we “*grieve the Holy Spirit*” (Ephesians 4:30).

I have also spoken of seeking after God’s Spirit in fellow believers in order to be strengthened and encouraged. But the uplifting words we are seeking after are not always found and we end up disappointed in those we had so much hope. Of course we have to draw from the well of encouragement, which is the Holy Spirit Himself, if we are to have any encouragement to give to others.

And that is primarily where the issue lies. Staying God centered instead of self-centered; pulling from the life of the Spirit instead of the life of the flesh. All of us fall short but at the same time all of us have the potential to rise above our flesh and dwell in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells within us. We owe this not only to the One who bought us with a price. But also to those who are seeking God through us. Which brings me to today’s topic:

FORGIVENESS

When we disappoint God we seek His forgiveness. And forgiveness is something He is eager to grant because He wants the relationship restored. When people disappoint us or hurt us forgiveness if also a necessary factor is the relationship is to be restored.

The issue of forgiveness really begins and ends with God. In the beginning there was no need of forgiveness because there was no offense. Man and God worked in harmony together - united in purpose, desire and plan. Then Adam and Eve sinned. Suddenly they were at cross purposes with each other. Adam and Eve had betrayed God’s trust. They blew it big time. The consequences they suffered as a result of this betrayal were multiplied troubles and banishment from the Garden of God.

Up to this point they knew nothing of forgiveness for they had need of it. But they were now experiencing something they had not felt before. Gone was the peace, the calm assurance of “everything is right with the world”. These new feelings were shame and embarrassment. Not knowing what else to do, they covered over what they felt was shameful with fig leaves and hid themselves from God when He came by for His usual “cool-of-the-day” visit.

Something had happened between the last time God had visited them and today’s visit that caused a separation between the two parties. They were aware of it instantly and so was God.

Before when He came to visit they were like, “Hey, how ya doin’ God. Create anything new today?” But today they weren’t greeting Him. No hugs. No high five’s. No fist bumps. No smiling faces to greet Him. Adam and Eve were hiding.

This one incident had so drastically changed their relationship that Adam and Eve no longer wanted any part of God. They hid from Him in hopes of He would not see what they had done or what it had done to them. This single incident forever altered how the two parties communicated with each other.

It’s sad how one wrong can cause a separation and turn a lifelong friendship into a strained and precarious relationship. But sin does this. Sin separates. The good news is that God was not surprised by this. He

didn't wake up the next days and say to Himself, "Wow. That snuck up on me. How could I have been so blind not to have seen this coming?" No. Our creator knows what we were made of. And because He knows He made provision for just such an emergency.

Let's take a look at how God restored the relationship and forgave their sin when they confessed it.

TRUE RESTORATION

From the viewpoint of Adam and Eve it was a big loss. One moment in time changed the rest of their lives. Suddenly they were experiencing negative emotions - insecurity, fear and shame. These negative feelings made them want to avoid God, to stay away from His presence.

As far as we are told they were only given one 'no-no', one thing God forbade them to do. Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the middle of the garden. There wasn't a list of Ten Commandments and another several books worth of laws to obey. Just one command – do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

But that's all that Satan needed; one door that he could knock on to see if Adam and Eve would open up and let him in. And they did. Taking advantage of their innocence, the great deceiver distorted the word of God in order to tempt them to disobey a direct order. Unfortunately it worked. And it worked quite well. Suddenly the dominion of the earth transferred hands from those to whom God had originally given it, to the one who deceived them into giving it up.

From God's point of view it was one big disappointment. Adam and Eve had such potential. And now they were experiencing such a loss. But notice what God did with His disappointment. Even though their relationship had been severed, the first thing God did was to draw near to Adam and Eve. He didn't pull away. He drew near. He didn't avoid them or shut them out. He searched for them and had a conversation with them.

Isaiah 1:18 says, “ *‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.’* ”

God wanted the relationship to continue even though He knew it had just taken a sharp turn down a very different and difficult road. The second thing God did was to acknowledge the problem; He didn't ignore it or hope it would go away all by itself without any intervention. No. He immediately dealt with the heart of the matter - their guilt and shame - by providing animal skins for them to wear.

Think about this. God Himself was the first to sacrifice an animal in order to cover over the sins of mankind. Incredible. At the very first sin there was a covering available. And God Himself provided it. He didn't have to do a Google search to see what remedies there were for removing sin. He didn't have to look through His bag of tricks like the Wizard of Oz to find something that would make them feel good and believe in themselves again. No. He knew exactly what to do. And He did it immediately. No waiting. No passing Go. The solution was instantaneous because the contingency plan had already been put in place.

Isaiah 44:22 says, “*I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud and your sins like a heavy mist. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you.*”

In the midst of the consequences of their sin God made a promise to both Adam and Eve and to Satan; A future promise for a present situation. One day Someone would come, a direct descendant of Adam and Eve, who would put an end to Satan's reign and take back the dominion of the earth. And this One would wipe every tear from their eyes. He was already preparing a place where there would be no more pain, no more crying or sorrow. And everything that was tainted by sin would be removed and new heavens and a new earth would be created where we, as rescued, redeemed and resurrected sinners, would live eternally.

And Satan himself would come to a flaming end in the Lake of Fire which God was preparing for him and all his followers.

So long before He uttered the words, *“Vengeance is Mine. I will repay”* (Romans 12:19), the Lord put His repayment plan into motion making promises of future restoration.

This is so God-like; so unlike humans. When people sin against us we are more prone to continue the separation rather than seek restoration. And even if we desire restoration we usually wait for the person who offended us to make the first move. And if it is not forthcoming we cut our losses and move on. Yes, a very human response. A very flesh oriented pattern of behavior.

Now I am not saying we are all like this. Nor am I saying that none of us desire our broken relationships to be restored. For the most part we do. But it takes two to make a relationship. One party can work very hard to bring the relationship back to some semblance of normality but they can only do so much if the other person is not willing to budge an inch. Just ask anyone who has tried to make a broken marriage work. If the other spouse is unwilling to put any effort in restoration it rarely works. The same holds true of any relationship. When offenses occur causing a tear in the fabric of love, it must be mended quickly before it grows so large there is more hole than fabric. Yet even then, a good seamstress or tailor can mend that fabric so well that you won't be able to tell that it was even torn. And here's the secret. The thread used to repair the breach is forgiveness. And the sewer is love.

Dave Willis has said, *“Love unlovable people, because we have all been unlovable people. We usually need love most in those moments when we deserve love least.”*

But how can we truly love if we do not forgive those who have offended us? And how are we to forgive? Lip service is fine but God looks at the heart. And heart service is a whole lot harder. Paul speaks of this in his letter to the Ephesians.

EPHESIANS 4:30-32

“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

And this is the point of my sermon – the key to true forgiveness. We are to forgive each other as God has forgiven us. Not as we want to, or to the degree are comfortable with. But as God has forgiven us. And how has God forgiven us? Well let's take a look at some Scriptures and see.

PSALM 103:10-14

“He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.”

MICAH 7:18-19

“Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.”

ISAIAH 31:33-34

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

ISAIAH 38:17

"It is You who has kept my soul from the pit of nothingness, for You have cast all my sins behind Your back."

This is how God forgives. He removes our transgressions from us. He casts them into the depths of the sea where no man can go and bring them up. And He forgets. They are behind him, not in front of Him. They don't hinder His vision because He does not remember them. That is such a far cry from how we forgive.

When was the last time you forgave someone by not even remembering what they had done to you because you had removed the offence off of them and cast it so far away it could not be retrieved? This is not fleshly possible. It is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit working within us. Spirit living is so different from living in the flesh. It really is like moving to a foreign country and trying to learning a foreign language. Flesh and Spirit are like oil and water. You can shake them up together and they appear to be joined together for an instant. But let it sit for a few seconds and the difference between the two becomes quite evident.

So how do we know if we have truly forgiven? Here's a test. Think of someone who has hurt you. Now look around your emotions and see if there is anything negative still lingering in your heart or mind. Do you feel anxious when you are around them? Do you feel there are still unresolved issues that cause you to keep them at a distance? Have you ever thought to yourself, "I have forgiven them more than once but I still can't shake these negative emotions when I am around them? This type of forgiveness isn't working because it is incomplete. There is more work to be done.

Can you image what would happen to us if God said "I forgive you" but still harbored resentment towards us? If He no longer desired to be around us because "once burned is twice shy"? If He brought up the past whenever we came and asked Him to forgive? If He said, "Yeah, sure, you say you're sorry. But I've heard that line before. If you think I'm gonna open up my heart to you again you've got another think coming. I'm done with you. Find someone else to cry your eyes out to. I'm outta here." Wow. Just think how devastating that would be - to have the words of forgiveness freely spoken but the experience of forgiveness never granted.

But thanks be to God! That is not how God forgives. He forgives freely and completely, keeping no record of wrongs.

Sometimes the only clue we have that there are relationship issues is that we feel unsettled when we think about someone who has hurt or offended us. But we may be totally unaware that these feelings are related to unforgiveness because we have verbalized forgiveness. We have said we forgive and thought that took care of it. But these negative emotions are telling us otherwise.

I once had a relative which spoke some hurtful things to my wife. She handled the situation well but I retained the sting of her hurt for many years. Every time I was around this person I had negative feelings

rise up within me. As a result I tried to avoid this person whenever possible.

What I did not realize until perhaps decades later is that I was harboring unforgiveness toward them. I have rarely experienced something that I cannot forgive. Forgiveness is just something I do automatically. I do not let something linger long enough to cause unforgiveness to occur. So I was quite shocked to discover that my uneasiness was directly related to my inability to forgive this person for what they had done to my wife. It was from this incident and God's revelation about it that I learned to look for the root of my disquieted heart. The forgiveness I had granted was only lip service and not rendered from the heart. I was attempting to love from a distance because I kept a record of wrongs when genuine love would never have made the list in the first place (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Peter once asked the question of how many times we must forgive our brother. This was in response to the instructions Jesus gave about confronting a brother once about his sin. If he did not repent then He instructed us to go with another believer, then in front of the church then removing him from the fellowship if he failed to repent. So Peter said,

"Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.

So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.

But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.

So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:21-35)

There we are again. We are to forgive each other from the heart. Not empty words. Not lip service, but true forgiveness. The point of this parable is not to count the number of times we forgive and stop when we reach the number 490. Rather it is saying that we must forgive as we have been forgiven. This is not just a simple story. This is what God expects of each and every one of us.

And how does God forgive? He removes our transgressions from us. He casts them into the depths of the sea where no man can go and bring them up. And He forgets. He does not remember them.

If we are to forgive as God forgives we must lose track of the number of times we have had to forgive someone. And we have to give our hurts and disappointments to the Lord to carry. Isaiah speaks of the Lord in this way:

ISAIAH 53:3-4

“He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried;”

Jesus knows sorrow. He knows betrayal. He knows disappointment. He knows the cost of forgiveness because He paid the price for all of us. And He knows what it is to offer forgiveness to all and have only some accept it. We are to look to Him, the author and finisher of our faith, if we are to have any hope of granting forgiveness as we have been forgiven.

So examine yourself. See if there be any unsettled, unresolved issues in your relationships. Any agitation that rises up when you come near the person. If there is ask the Lord for help. It's His will that you forgive as you have been forgiven – unconditionally, paid-in-full with no strings attached. Not only will this set your offender free, it will set you free as well.

Forgiveness not only applies to others. Sometimes the person who needs forgiveness the most is us. But we stay away like Adam and Eve, ashamed and afraid of God. God offers forgiveness but we do not accept it. If those negative feelings you are having are related to your own sin, seek out the One who said, *“If we confess your sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9). Stop carrying the unrighteousness and let God remove it from you.

You can find no peace without forgiveness. Don't settle for a temporary calm, a lull in the storm. Seek after a safe harbor where the winds of discontentment cannot find you; where the agitations of life cannot whip up the waters of resentment into frenzy. Instead, unfurl the sail and set your boat upon the peaceful waters of forgiveness. Pull up the anchor. Stop looking behind at where you have been and start looking ahead to where God is calling to be.

This is what God has done for us. He has set us upon the peaceful waters of forgiveness. We can do no less for Him. We must forgive as we have been forgiven.

If you find yourself at a crossroad today in the area of forgiveness know that God will come along side you and help you make your way through the maze of disappointments and hurts so that you can come out the other side completely free of any lingering negative emotions. If you need help Wendy and I can also help you as we have helped others hear from the Lord and find the missing pieces to forgiveness. God knows we need the kind of forgiveness He gives. And we know He expects us to give this same forgiveness to others.

One last thing before we close. There is a difference between forgiveness and trust. Forgiveness is something that is freely granted. Trust is something that must be earned. You can completely forgive someone who has stolen from you. But you won't give them the key to your house or car so they can easily steal from you again. You may at some future date trust them with your keys. But that day will only come when the person has shown themselves to be trustworthy.

Forgiveness is freely granted. Trust is something that must be earned. It is not incomplete forgiveness just because you are using discernment and wisdom in your dealings with others. It's when we excuse ourselves by calling resentment discernment and bitterness wisdom; when we say we forgive but speak ill of others and bring up their past sins because we have not been able to let go of the hurt.

That may be earthly wisdom but it is not the wisdom from above because James tells us the wisdom from above is first of all peaceable. And there is no peace in the heart of one who holds on to bitterness and

anger. We are told to put these things away from us. So if you are harboring any of these things today put them all away and stop grieving the Holy Spirit of God. For the Scriptures say,

EPHESIANS 4:30-32

“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

Forgiveness is a matter of determining who will be the ruler of your emotions. Will it be the flesh or the Spirit? Will you submit to God’s authority or will you resist His Spirit? Who will be King over your life? Choose this day whom you will serve.

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