

Proper 19 A
St. Matthew 18:21-35
September 17, 2017
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

A Forgiving Heart

Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

I forgive you! Some of the most welcome words that we will ever hear in our lives. They bring us relief. They bring us hope of a fresh start. They help relieve and lift the heavy burden of our own guilt. They give us permission to not feel bad anymore. These are all very good things. To forgive is to show mercy. To forgive someone is to love them as you have been loved. To forgive someone is to forgive as you have been forgiven. It is the biggest Pay-It-Forward that there is.

I forgive you. Three of the hardest words to say. Three of the hardest words to hear!

We find it hard to say because it is difficult to let go of your anger when you're feeling hurt. We know that from our own experience. I know it. Sometimes I have held onto my anger for years, and not been forgiving as I have been forgiven. How, I wondered, can you genuinely forgive someone, when the hurt is very bad, and when they keep on hurting you? I learned that not forgiving them allows them to continue to hurt you. Forgiving frees you from this burden. We find them difficult to say because we allow our hurt to define us, and we hold onto it because we don't know what life will be like without it.

We find them hard to hear because we cannot believe that something so good could happen after we have done something so wrong. We can't hear it because our guilt is so overwhelming it seems as though forgiveness could not be possible. How could they forgive us? If it were me, and the shoe was on the other foot, I would have a hard time forgiving them! We cannot believe that we have been forgiven. We know we do not deserve to be forgiven, but they have forgiven me. It seems almost too good to be true, and we question their sincerity in our own insincere hearts. Who are we to do so? Simply accept the gift, no matter how unbelievable it is!

We know it is hard to believe because we have heard God forgives us freely, yet we do not understand how God could forgive everything we have done and we find it hard to believe! We cannot hide our sins from God, try as we might to hide them from ourselves and others. We know that God sees everything we have done, the good and the bad, and yet still forgives us. I ask God to forgive my sins and offenses every day. Sometimes I feel as though my sins are too many to forgive, especially when I admit to myself I am a recidivist: Even though I am aware of my proclivity to commit a certain sin, I keep on doing it. It is hard to forgive someone who keeps on sinning after they are made aware of their wrongs and have been forgiven for them. So you start to think, maybe God has a three strikes and you're out rule, and yet there is no evidence for that. Forgiveness comes freely to the repentant sinner who is truly sad in his or her heart about the harm we have caused by our sins and wrongs. And we can ask God for the strength to help us overcome our proclivities to keep committing the same sin.

We also know it is tough to forgive someone else, because we know how hard it is to forgive ourselves. The hardest person to forgive is myself. Again, this may stem from an unhealthy desire to hang onto some sort of negative self-image, and wallow in our own unforgivability. It also comes from a disbelief in the process of forgiveness and how empowering it can be. Do you suppose you can truly forgive others from your heart if you are unable in that same heart to forgive yourself? No one is worthy of forgiveness. No one deserves to be forgiven. It is always a gift freely given, and God has started the process by forgiving us, and God's forgiveness matters the most, more than any other human forgiveness. It empowers the ability to forgive ourselves and others, when we feel forgiven in our hearts as well as intellectually in our minds. This is truly good news!

What is stunning and most hard to grasp for most of us is that God forgives us freely. There is no charge for God's forgiveness. We don't need to sacrifice any object or animal or money to God. Nothing can earn—and I emphasize the word earn—nothing can earn our forgiveness from God that we can do. We will never deserve to be forgiven by God!

Unless you forgive as you have been forgiven, you could be punished for your hardness of heart. Let go of your hurt. Let God into your heart and renew a right spirit within you! Don't you want to feel better? Don't you want the burden of your sin and the hurts from the sins of others against you lifted?

As the Lord's Prayer says, and is hopefully used daily by all Christians, the words remind us: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us." This is a very simple phrase, just a few words, with not so simple and yet profound consequences to change you, your life, and the world. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Seek forgiveness whenever you need it, but do so from your heart. Merely giving voice to empty words is meaningless. It would be better they were not spoken if you do not mean them from your heart.

How many times should we forgive? 70 x 7? If you are not good at math like me, that means it will work out to be 490 times you need to try to forgive someone else. And at least that many times you should try to forgive yourself. You may as well say it means, keep trying and do not stop forgiving. This answer means that we should forgive without limit.

I find I need to be forgiven more than I need to forgive, as I have been blessed being forgiven many times.

I love to see other Christians witness in this peaceful and loving way, like the Rev. Walt Everett, whom I mentioned last week as a hero of forgiveness. If you remember, he forgave the man who murdered his son. And then there are the members of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, S.C. who forgave the young man who brutally murdered their loved ones in cold blood and out of racial hatred, even after being shown the hospitality of the church he offended. Imagine if they had hated and not forgiven how things might have turned out. Instead, there was no violence, but instead, a strong effort of understanding and a community coming together to root out racism and hatred. Consider the power of forgiveness for good in their lives and the community!

But forgiveness must be from the heart! As the Psalmist says in Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart..." Let your sacrifice be of your feelings of hate and anger. Then forgive from your heart. AMEN