

November 25/26, 2000

## *Four Essential Attitudes for a Healthy Christian Community*

### **An Attitude of Forgiveness**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

Pastor Bryan Clark

Of all the things we are called upon to do to be a follower of Jesus, I think perhaps the most difficult thing is to forgive. To forgive those who have offended us is one thing. But to forgive those who have deeply wounded us—that is a very difficult thing. Corrie ten Boom tells her story of trying to forgive:

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him: a balding, heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

That's when I saw him working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and brown hat, the next a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the room, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin.

Betsy and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland. This man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out, "A fine message, Fraulein, how good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea." And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocket rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course. How could he remember one prisoner among the thousands of women? But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying, "I was a guard there." No, he did not remember me. "But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there. But I would like to hear it from your lips as well, Fraulein." Again the hand came out, "Will you forgive me?" And I stood there, I whose sins every day had to be forgiven—but I could not. Betsy had died in that place. Could he erase her slow, terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed like hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do—for I had to do it, I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." I knew it not only as a commandment of God but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war, I had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. But those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and horrible as that.

And still I stood there, with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion. I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin in them. Jesus Christ Himself had died for this man. Was I going to ask for more? "Lord Jesus," I prayed, "forgive me and help me to forgive him." I tried to smile. I struggled to raise my hand, but I could *not*. I felt nothing—not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a prayer. "Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness." As I took his hand –

mechanically, woodenly, a most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand, a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness, any more than on our goodness, that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

- Corrie ten Boom, *Tramp For the Lord*

Corrie ten Boom learned that day that forgiveness can be a very difficult thing. And it is not something that we can just conjure up in our flesh or in our own abilities. It is impossible apart from the love, the compassion, and the forgiveness of God.

I found it interesting in her story that she said those who had been able to forgive their enemies were the ones who had been able to return to life. But those who were unwilling or unable to forgive, basically entombed themselves in a prison of their own bitterness.

It reminds me of a story I read several months ago. Listen to this woman's story:

"I caught my husband making love to another woman. He swore it would never happen again. He begged me to forgive him. But I *could* not. I *would* not. I was so bitter and so incapable of swallowing my pride that I could think of nothing but revenge. I was going to make him pay—and pay dearly. I'd have my pound of flesh. I filed for divorce. Even my children begged me not to. Even after the divorce, my husband tried for two years to win me back. I refused to have anything to do with him. He had struck first; now I was striking back—and all I wanted was for him to pay.

Finally he gave up and married a lovely young widow with a couple of small children. He began rebuilding his life without me. I see them occasionally, and he looks so happy. They all do. And here I am: a lonely, old, miserable woman who allowed her selfish pride and foolish stubbornness to ruin her life."

The subject of forgiveness is a very important subject for us to understand. We've been talking about four essential attitudes for maintaining a healthy Christian community or a healthy Christian family. We've talked about the attitude of *humility*—remembering that we entered the kingdom of God as small, helpless children, and somebody was there to nurture us and to be patient with us and grow us to maturity. Jesus says, remembering that, then we are to have an attitude of humility and receive the new spiritual infants in that same spirit. He tells us to love them, care for them, and be patient with them. We are to accept the responsibility of whatever it takes to grow them to maturity.

Secondly, we talked about an attitude of *holiness*—remembering that what new believers (spiritual children) need most is a pattern to follow. It's hard for them to understand how this theology fleshes itself out into real life. So what they need is a pattern – someone who models for them what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus said we need to examine our own lives and clean out anything in our lives that would cause someone to stumble, and to be a good model of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. That's an attitude of holiness.

Then we talked about an attitude of discipline, or an attitude of *protection*. We talked about the importance in the body of Christ of protecting the spiritual infants and spiritual children from those who would lead them astray. Therefore, we need to deal with sin in our body. The spirit that Jesus intended was that we try to resolve those conflicts as quietly and as privately as we can. But if people are unwilling to deal with those sin issues, it ultimately ends up to be the responsibility of the church to deal with that. It must be dealt with, not only to

help that sinner understand the seriousness of his or her behavior and bring about repentance and reconciliation, but also to protect the family (those in the body) who might be led astray. If someone chooses to dig in their heels and absolutely not deal with their sin, then it becomes necessary to loose them – to turn them loose from the protective umbrella of the body of Christ. They are then set free to experience God’s discipline in order that they might repent and come back, and also to protect the body from the infection of that sin.

Let’s imagine that somebody deeply offends you, and you first go to them alone, and then you go back to them with witnesses, and finally it comes before the church. At the final moment they decide to repent and confess their sin. What do we do? Well, obviously we receive them back and we forgive them. But suppose two months later they go right back and commit the same sin, and it goes through the same process again, until finally they repent of their sin and they are welcomed back again. About two months later they do it again and it goes through the same process once again. At what point do we conclude that they’re not being sincere? When do we decide that they really don’t mean their confession, but they are just trying to keep the church off their back? At what point do we say we will not play this game any more and we continue on with the process of discipline? In my own thinking, it seems to me that forgiving three or four times probably would be adequate. At that point, if they have not truly changed their behavior, then probably we should continue forward with the discipline process. We should apply tough love for their sake, as well as for the sake of the body.

Now there’s somebody in Matthew 18 who agrees with me on that. The problem is the one who agrees with me is *not* Jesus. According to Matthew 18, what seems logical and reasonable to us, in the words of Jesus, is not right. Peter is processing this just the way we’ve been talking about it. Peter has listened to Jesus teach this – about how to go through the process of discipline. So it raises the question of how many times do we do this? What if somebody offends me and I forgive them; they offend me again and I forgive them; they offend me again and I forgive them—how many times do we have to do this?

Verse 21: “Then Peter came and said to Him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ ” Peter is asking an insightful question—he wants to know how many times do we forgive? How many times do we allow this person to continue to offend us and be forgiven?

The rabbis in the first century taught that three times was the limit. If somebody offended me three times, I was to forgive them. But the fourth time they no longer deserved my forgiveness—because the conclusion would be they are not sincere. Their heart is not in it; they are not truly repentant. So, if after three times the behavior doesn’t change, then I no longer would be required to forgive that person.

Now, just in my own human thinking, that makes sense. At some point you have to draw the line and say, “I won’t play that game anymore.” At some point you stand up for yourself and you say, “That’s enough.” When we think about what the rabbis had to say, let’s admit the fact that we’re not much different. If somebody offends you, you may forgive them. They offend you again and you forgive them again. They offend you again and you forgive them again. But at some point we usually draw a line and say, “That’s enough. I won’t put up with that anymore.”

Peter, who sort of had the gift of going overboard, exercised his gift at this point, because he knew what the rabbis taught {they taught *three* times}. So Peter said, “Lord, how

about up to *seven* times?” In his mind, he’s thinking this is way above and beyond – this is way over the top. He probably expected Jesus to say, “Peter, you are such a grace-filled individual ... you’re so merciful ... you’re so kind. Peter, you really go the extra mile.”

But that’s not what Jesus said. Look at what He says in verse 22: “Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’ ” I would imagine there were a few raised eyebrows in the group that day, because what Jesus said was completely unheard of. Jesus was saying that they deserve unlimited forgiveness – unlimited grace in the family of God. Jesus was not saying to count it up. He was not saying that when they have offended you 491 times you don’t have to forgive them anymore. Nobody could even keep track of that many offenses. The point was that it is an unlimited forgiveness.

Jesus was also *not* saying that there are no consequences to sin. If I’m unfaithful to my wife, she may forgive me. But if I continue to do that, it will disintegrate my marriage. If you have an employee who is stealing from you, you may forgive them, but you’re not going to allow them to continue to do that. If I, as a leader, compromise my integrity, I may be forgiven but I may no longer be qualified to lead. So Jesus isn’t saying that we just turn our head and imagine that this behavior isn’t happening. But when that person repents, confesses that sin and asks for forgiveness, we are to forgive them as often as they seek that forgiveness.

Jesus is saying that someone can fail not once, not twice, not three times, not 490 times—but an unlimited amount – and still be forgiven and welcomed back into the family of God, because this is a family of grace. He is saying that you cannot judge the heart. You cannot judge the motive – only God can do that. You don’t know if they’re sincere or not. Your responsibility is just to continually forgive them when they come, those chronic sinners, over and over and over again.

What Jesus taught was *so* unheard of that He goes on to tell a story to try and explain why. Verse 23: “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. And when he had begun to settle them, there was brought to him one who owed him ten thousand talents.” The slave was probably what they called a tax farmer—somebody who went out for the master to collect taxes and collected an excessive amount. He would eventually settle up, give that money to the master, and keep a percentage for himself. This is the time when the master is settling up, and he finds out that this one tax farmer (slave) owes him 10,000 talents.

Now it’s important to understand what that amount means. It’s roughly equivalent to 10 million dollars. If you took all of the currency that was circulating in the Roman Empire in the first century, it would not have equaled 10,000 talents. So if the slave could somehow gather all of the currency (all of the money in circulation) it still would not pay off his debt. If he tried to work to pay off his debt, earning the average wage, it would have taken him 210 thousand years to pay it off. So Jesus is using an example that is way over the top. This is every bit as much hyperbole as verses 8 and 9 were. Jesus is saying this is a debt that is so huge that it is not even conceivable that it could be paid back.

Verse 25: “But since he did not have the means to repay, *{that’s a major understatement}* his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made.” It’s helpful to understand that the finest of slaves, bringing the absolute top dollar, would get about one talent if they were to sell themselves into slavery. So selling himself and his family wouldn’t even make a dent in the debt he owed.

Verse 26: “The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.’” There’s a significant amount of arrogance in verse 26. This debt is *so* large that it is absolutely impossible. There is no way he could ever pay it off. Yet there’s something in his own pride that caused him to tell the master that – somehow, someway – he’ll get the debt paid.

The master, of course, knows that is absolutely impossible. So he responds in verse 27: “And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt.” The master knew that there was no possible way that this slave could ever pay back the debt. Therefore, in an act of compassion and grace, he simply released the slave from his debt. He was forgiven.

It’s important to understand that in this part of the story, we are that slave. We are that tax farmer. We are the one who owes the Master this unbelievable debt because of our sin. Religion causes us to think that maybe we can repay the debt—and that’s the danger of religion. Somehow, by doing things religiously, we think we will ultimately square things with God. Jesus is saying that simply is not possible – the debt is just too big. Therefore, in an act of grace and mercy, God sent His own Son to this world to die on the cross to pay for our debt—that we might be released, that we might be set free, that the debt would be paid, and that we might be forgiven. We are that slave with that unimaginable debt of sin, and we have been forgiven!

I don’t know how many of you have ever seen the Broadway musical *Cats*. It ran for what seemed like 500 years in New York, and finally came to an end this past year. When it was here in Lincoln at the Lied Center, Patti and I went to that event. I didn’t really know what to expect; I didn’t even know what the story line was. So through the first half of it, I was trying to figure out the story line, wondering what the point of it was. During the intermission I ran into Merlyn Vogt from this church, and he said, “Is it just me, or does this not make any sense?” I said, “I don’t know, but there’s at least two of us, because I don’t get it either.” So we sat through the whole thing, and it absolutely made no sense to me. You had all these cats dancing and strutting their stuff in front of one main cat. It just made no sense.

Probably I would have just brushed it off, but I knew that the Broadway musical *Cats* was taken from a poem written by T. S. Eliot on cats. And I just knew that T. S. Eliot would not write some frivolous poem about cats – he had to have some point. Eliot was a very spiritual man, and I figured there had to be some sort of spiritual point to what he was saying. So that sent me on this pursuit of trying to figure out what was the point, or at least what did T. S. Eliot have in mind when he wrote that poem?

Through the process of talking to people and reading and investigating, I discovered what the poem “Cats” is about, and it’s what the musical beautifully illustrates, while I doubt those producers even understand that. There is a main cat, and his name is Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy means “the law,” or “the second law,” to be technical. Deuteronomy is *the* cat, and all of these other cats come out and strut their stuff, dancing and singing. They do their thing in front of Deuteronomy because it’s his job to choose one cat, and that one cat goes on to a better life. So all of these cats are giving it their best shot to convince Deuteronomy that they should be the one chosen for this new life.

Then there is one scrawny alley cat that has nothing to offer. It has no stuff to strut, but just kind of shuffles along and finally ends up in front of the law, “Deuteronomy.” This cat can do nothing but simply ask for mercy, because he realizes he has nothing to offer. When it comes time to choose, Deuteronomy reaches out and chooses the scrawny alley cat in an act of grace and mercy. He is the cat chosen to receive new life. T. S. Eliot intended for that to be a picture of grace – it was to be a picture of God’s grace. While all the other cats are strutting their stuff, it’s the one that was willing to admit he had nothing to offer, but simply asked for grace and mercy, that received new life.

It portrays a beautiful picture of what God has given to those who come to Him and ask for His grace and mercy. That’s the story Jesus is telling. But the story goes on:

Verse 28: “But that slave went out and found one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii.” *{One denarius was equal to about one day’s wage; so a hundred denarii would equal about a hundred days of work—not an insignificant amount, but certainly no comparison to the debt he had owed.}* “... and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ So his fellow-slave fell down and began to entreat him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ *{In other words, he asks for the same thing that the first slave had asked for.}* He was unwilling however, but 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 entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow-slave, even as 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. So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

The one who had been forgiven so much was unwilling to forgive someone who owed him so little in comparison. So the master threw him in prison. In the Roman Empire, it wasn’t uncommon for a debtor to be thrown into prison, to be tortured until people (loved ones or somebody) rallied to somehow pay off the debt. Jesus was using a common illustration to say for those who are unwilling to forgive others as you have been forgiven, you will, in a sense, experience the torture of your own unforgiveness – the torture of your own bitterness. You will entomb your own life with your own unforgiveness.

Jesus was saying that we never fully understand what it means for God to forgive us until we are asked to forgive someone who has deeply wounded us. It’s in that moment that we begin to realize how difficult, how painful, how necessary it is for grace to cause us to forgive. In that moment we get just a glimpse of what we have been forgiven. Until we understand that, we will never really walk in the freedom of God’s forgiveness; we will never really experience what it means to be forgiven. Max Lucado tells the following story:

Daniel was living in the southern city of Porto Alegre. He worked at a gym and dreamed of owning his own. The bank agreed to finance the purchase if he could find someone to cosign the note. His brother agreed. They filled out all the applications and awaited the approval. Everything went smoothly, and Daniel soon received a call from the bank telling him he could come and pick up the check. As soon as he got off work, he went to the bank. When the loan officer saw Daniel, he looked surprised and asked Daniel why he had come. “To pick up the check,” Daniel explained. “That’s funny,” responded the banker. “Your brother was in here earlier. He picked up the money and used it to retire the mortgage on his house.”

Daniel was incensed. He never dreamed his own brother would trick him like that. He stormed over to his brother’s house and pounded on the door. The brother answered the door with his daughter in his arms. He knew Daniel wouldn’t hit him if he was holding a child. He

was right. Daniel didn't hit him. But he promised his brother that if he ever saw him again he would break his neck. Daniel went home, his big heart bruised and ravaged by the trickery of his brother. He had no other choice but to go back to the gym and work to pay off the debt.

A few months later, Daniel met a young American missionary named Allen Dutton. Allen befriended Daniel and taught him about Jesus Christ. Daniel and his wife soon became Christians and devoted disciples.

But, though Daniel had been forgiven so much, he still found it impossible to forgive his brother. The wound was deep. The pot of revenge still simmered. He didn't see his brother for two years. Daniel couldn't bring himself to look into the face of the one who had betrayed him. And his brother liked his own face too much to let Daniel see it.

But an encounter was inevitable. Both knew they would eventually run into each other. And neither knew what would happen then. The encounter occurred one day on a busy avenue. Let Daniel tell you in his own words what happened:

"I saw him, but he didn't see me. I felt my fists clench and my face get hot. My initial impulse was to grab him around the throat and choke the life out of him. But as I looked into his face, my anger began to melt. For as I saw him, I saw the image of my father. I saw my father's eyes. I saw my father's look. I saw my father's expression. And as I saw my father in his face, my enemy once again became my brother."

Daniel walked toward him. The brother stopped, turned, and started to run, but he was too slow. Daniel reached out and grabbed his shoulder. The brother winced, expecting the worst. But rather than have his throat squeezed by Daniel's hands, he found himself hugged by Daniel's big arms. And the two brothers stood in the middle of the river of people and wept. Daniel's words are worth repeating: "When I saw the image of my father in his face, my enemy became my brother."

Seeing the father's image in the face of the enemy. Try that. The next time you see or think of the one who broke your heart, look twice. As you look at his face, look also for His face – the face of the One who forgave you. Look into the eyes of the King who wept when you pleaded for mercy. Look into the face of the Father who gave you grace when no one else gave you a chance. Find the face of the God who forgives in the face of your enemy. And then, because God has forgiven you more than you'll ever be called on to forgive in another, set your enemy – and yourself – free. And allow the hole in your heart to heal.

– Max Lucado, *The Applause of Heaven*

Is there anybody you need to forgive? Is there anybody who has deeply wounded you, and you forgave them; they wounded you again and you forgave them; they wounded you again and you forgave them; and at some point you drew a line in the sand and you said, "That's it. I won't take it anymore"?

What Jesus is asking from you is to erase that line – because God is saying, "I give you an unlimited grace, and I'm asking you to give others the same." If the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul, then the greatest sin would be to fail to do that. And that is a sin we commit every day. Every day of our lives we fail to love God as we should, and God mercifully forgives us.

You and I are that chronic sinner. We are that chronic offender, because over and over and over again we offend God and He forgives us. God is asking, "If I extend that grace to you, I'm asking you to extend that same unlimited grace to those who have offended you."

Will you forgive?