



Forgiveness

SESSION 1

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Introduction

Forgiveness goes to the heart of what we believe as Christians, and nothing is more important to our life together. Yet this topic is neither easy to conceptualize nor easy to practice in our life. Definitions of forgiveness vary, and personal understandings of how we ought to behave, after we are hurt or have hurt others, differ by family, religious beliefs, and cultural perspective. Unhealthy myths about faith, forgiveness, and healing can complicate this painful process, but the power of the Holy Spirit makes the impossible possible.

At the heart of the gospel is God’s gracious reconciliation with our broken world. On the cross Christ not only forgave his enemies; he embodied forgiveness. His saving work makes it possible for us to believe that we are forgiven *and* that we can forgive each other. This is not simply something we do every once in a while, but it is a way of life that reflects Christ. This new state of affairs, in turn, creates a wild and wonderful reality in which living as a human being comes to mean something brand new. It’s not that we have left our humanity behind, but rather that we are set free to recognize ourselves as embraced by God.

In this first session we will consider definitions of forgiveness and its complexity. The second session will be a more practical examination of how we live or don’t live forgiveness in our lives together.

Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection have set us free to be in the world in a joyful new way, and his example has shown us what it looks like to live as a per-

son who is freed from the bounds of pride, shame, and fear. Yet it is often difficult to spot this freedom in the “texts” of our daily lives. We strongly resist saying the words “I’m sorry,” and it takes only an hour of listening to the evening news, or a few



minutes of reflection on our personal lives, to remind us that we do not consistently, or even faithfully, pass on this great gift of forgiveness. Both media reports of war, genocide, and revenge and the less-dramatic stories of our own family relationships portray a human tendency to lash out and to use harmful defenses during times of stress and conflict. These attempts at self-protection lead, at worst, to physical or verbal violence and, at best, to the breakdown of community. Busily looking after our pride, desperately trying to preserve a frail sense of self, we sacrifice the mutuality and respect that are necessary for productive, enjoyable relationships. And sometimes we sacrifice life itself, going to war, as individuals and as nations, for reasons we can neither explain nor justify. We label, we exclude, we push away, we sabotage the safety and dignity of others—especially those we don’t understand. We try all manner of ways to explain these acts, so that—whether we are speaking crudely with obvious malice or using the disguised language of polite discourse—we can rationalize the pain we are causing. Simultaneously, we insist that we are disciples of the Prince of Peace. Only rarely is forgiveness the theme of human history,

including the history of the people of God. Perhaps the greatest mystery of all is that we continue to believe in the possibility of human forgiveness in the face of such overwhelming evidence to the contrary!

It is hard to think of our own brokenness, but truth telling is crucial when we begin to consider forgiveness. Our human defenses “click in” so readily, even when we are committed to being as honest as possible. As C. S. Lewis wrote, forgiving right in and for the moment is not the great challenge—it is to “go on forgiving, to forgive the same offence again every time it recurs to the memory—there’s the real tussle.”¹ Whether we are currently being attacked or on the attack, we’d rather ignore the most painful truth of all—that each one of us is, at one time or another, both perpetrator and victim. Who wants to look at herself and see a person who has hurt others? Who wants to admit he has allowed himself to be victimized? Most of us prefer denial. Recently a client in my pastoral counseling office told me, “I just pack up all my relationship problems in a ‘box’ and put them under the bed each night.” She had decided that anything, even a nightmare, was better than the hard, painful work of forgiving!

What Forgiveness Is

First, none of us begins the work of forgiveness with a “blank sheet.” Memories of being hurt and of hurting others, family and cultural “scripts,” social values around “otherness” and revenge, personal theologies (including the legal, economic, or therapeutic language we use), and our deepest hopes and fears for tomorrow—all of these combine with both our personality traits and the specifics of a broken situation to create a unique context for forgiveness. Some of the attitudes, beliefs, and practices influencing our reactions to relational harm (our scripts) are conscious, but many remain below the surface of our awareness. In addition, misunderstandings and confusion muddy the waters. As any parent knows, often it is not clear who did what to whom or who “started it.” Another challenge is trying to determine the level of harm done. Not surprisingly, research has shown that perpetrator and victim reach very different conclusions here! Clearly, forgiveness is a complex and messy matter. The simple injunction (most often used by perpetrators, of course) “You must forgive because you’re a Christian!” falls short of

being helpful in light of the infinite differences among our stories.

What is forgiveness? The definition is complicated, since forgiveness is used in three senses—as a response to harm, as a personality disposition, and as a characteristic of what people in social groups tend to do. Because forgiveness is so complex, a variety of definitions is helpful, each getting at some aspect of the truth about this process. One common, everyday definition is letting go of the desire for revenge. This rings true, yet it does not include the experience of all persons, such as abused women, who can have more difficulties with powerlessness than with fantasies of revenge. The Human Development Study Group defined forgiveness as an abandoning of one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior.²

The definition I have created is a somewhat strange one: forgiveness means exchanging one form of suffering for another—namely, the passive suffering of victimhood is exchanged for the more active suffering of forgiving. This definition points to an important benefit of forgiveness—the move from a reactive stance to a more proactive position. It also emphasizes the cost of forgiving—suffering as one forgives occurs when we grieve, when we come to accept an unchangeable past, and as we slowly move on. Since I worship a suffering God who forgave me, a sinner, and since I have accompanied many persons who suffer greatly as they struggle to forgive, I feel it is important to name this aspect of the process in my definition.

What Forgiveness Is Not

I often find it helpful to have conversations with students and clients about what forgiveness is *not*. We typically begin by clarifying the difference between *event* and *process*. Although we may fantasize about a dramatic reconciliation scene, most of the time forgiveness is a long, difficult journey. After situations of serious hurt, it frequently takes months, maybe even years, to forgive. I confess that I have often found myself wishing for a quick, one-time event in which the perfect words (of apology and acceptance) are spoken, the most beautiful gestures (of peace and love) are performed, and everything ends with a nice, warm hug, but there is no nice match of my dreams with the long, slow business of

learning to forgive those who have hurt me nor with the hard, protracted route I sometimes take toward accepting my own responsibility for harm.

Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. Memory can certainly be problematic, especially when memories are used to reinforce anger and/or to justify future acts of violence. There must be some letting go, but this does not mean we can or should completely forget. Rather, forgiveness means giving up the inordinate energy people use to ruminate, keep score, and plan revenge. If forgiveness depended on forgetting, it would seldom occur, nor would we have a safe world. We need to remember our stories in order to grow wiser through our life span and to keep ourselves out of harm's way!

It is also important to distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation. Although forgiveness and reconciliation always occur together in the New Testament, they do not and cannot always occur simultaneously in everyday life. It is important, for example, that victims of physical violence and/or sexual abuse are supported in making choices that include separating forgiveness and reconciliation. A victim *may* choose (but it must be her choice!), over time, to let go of her anger and reach peace with her own story of abuse—but without seeking a restored relationship.

For Christians forgiveness is not dependent on repentance and an apology, although a sincere apology often makes the process a great deal easier. Reparations may or may not be present and are not even always helpful, since agreement over the degree of hurt and the "price" of repairing that hurt is difficult to establish (particularly between victim and perpetrator). On the other hand, reparations can help to heal by *symbolizing* the seriousness of the harm done—one thinks of the powerful image of Willy Brandt kneeling before the Polish Holocaust Memorial. There is really no way to either change the past nor to fully repay the terrible evils of history, no matter what "dues" are paid, but blessed are the peacemakers who try to bring together former enemies.

One especially harmful myth, taught in some families and cultures, is that forgiving your enemy is a sign of personal weakness. Anyone who has struggled for years knows that the opposite is the case—it takes courage and strength to go through this process. As Christians, we have less trouble with this if we have appropriated our theology; we are not surprised that strength is hiding

behind what appears to be weakness, even as the power of God was most clearly revealed after the shame of death on a cross.



Ordinary vs. Extraordinary Forgiveness

It is helpful to separate the need for forgiveness between individuals (interpersonal forgiveness) from the forgiveness we experience within ourselves (intrapersonal forgiveness). An even more important distinction is between the need for individual forgiveness and the need for forgiveness between groups (for example, ethnic factions or nations) after a war or other horrific historical event or in the face of continuing conflict. When I attended a forgiveness conference in Jerusalem several years ago, I found my clinical experiences as a pastoral counselor valuable in some ways, but there were limits to the parallels I could make between sitting with angry individuals and understanding persecuted communities. In large groups, "differentness" becomes a far more extensive and complex matter, and histories of harm become even more difficult to unpack. Often stories of violence and revenge are passed on (and enhanced by gossip, fear, and political rhetoric) from generation to generation, gaining momentum and leading to increased enmity over time. As we consider such events as the Rwandan genocide and the European Holocaust, we find that words fail us. We ask how such unbelievable, systemic malevolence can exist. How could survivors ever forgive their persecutors after such deeds?

Yet our theology does not leave us speechless, even in the face of extreme evil. Against easy resolutions and cheap words, Christians are called, in confronting extreme suffering, to respond with both outrage and purpose. We must protest the injustices that resulted in these evils *and* work responsibly to prevent their reoccurrence. This is costly business—being a healer and peacemaker is dangerous work, not passive acceptance. Here the work of Desmond Tutu and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is particularly inspiring. A confident yet compassionate man, Tutu never stopped living out of the radical freedom that has been given him by God through Christ. Neither is he naive about what

must be achieved if true reconciliation is to be sought and how long it may take!

Forgiveness: Our Christian Treasure

One moment of the Jerusalem conference was particularly important to me: a peacemaker named Rabbi Kelman told our group of theologians, “You Christians have a treasure you must share with the world. Forgiveness is the heart of your theology.” Sometimes a person from another tradition can see more clearly than those standing up close. I had never before visualized forgiveness in quite this way, as a treasure we must intentionally share with the world.

Many passages in the Bible portray God’s mercy and forgiveness, and the Old Testament is no exception. In 2 Samuel, for example, we have a vision both of God’s intolerance of injustice and of God’s outpoured mercy. Nathan’s words to David, “You are the man!” (2 Sam. 12:7) remind us that a straightforward naming of the offense can be a vital part of the forgiveness process. But we read, too, of God’s willingness to forgive David and to continue to use him to play a major role in salvation history—a reminder that it is “as we are” that God loves and accepts us! David’s story also points to the complexity of forgiveness with regard to the consequences of sinful deeds. Even though David’s repentance paved the way for his return to a relationship with God, he could not undo all the costs to himself or his people of what he had done (including murder and adultery). Because all our human deeds participate in the structure of reality itself, the consequences of David’s sin played themselves out in the years to come. We read that tragedy after tragedy unfolded in his kingdom.

The New Testament is filled with forgiveness stories, perhaps none more moving than that of the prodigal son (Luke 15). This story of homecoming is a reminder of God’s parental embrace of us all, of God’s affirmation of our fallen humanity. As Henri Nouwen wrote, God’s forgiveness “comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking.”³ Christians often identify more fully with the “righteous” brother who stayed at home and who passed judgment on his brother, under the grip of anger and jealousy. It is only when we recognize ourselves in both the righteous son and in the prodigal one that we can experience the fullness of the Father’s embrace and accept the free gift of God’s forgiveness.

For Christians, forgiveness is, above all, about choosing a new life. When we resist forgiveness, it is like having an unwrapped Christmas present under the tree that we can neither appreciate nor use. If, on the other hand, we enter a lifestyle of continual repentance and forgiveness, we spring into life itself. In session 2 we will learn more about both the impediments to forgiveness and the freedom and peace that we receive along with this great gift.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964), 30.
2. For information on this and other definitions of forgiveness, see “The Forgiveness Web” at http://www.forgivenessweb.com/RdgRm/definitionpsychological_.htm.
3. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 129–30.