

"TO FORGIVE IS DIVINE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 12, 1994

"TO FORGIVE IS DIVINE"

INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult tasks that we're ever faced with in life is to forgive someone who has hurt us. In his book, Loving Each Other, Leo Buscalgia tells about a student of his who was jilted by her boyfriend. Feeling hurt and rejected, she felt at the time that she would never get over it. In her confusion, she didn't understand her intense feelings to want to get back at him and to do him harm in some way. She had never known such hurt and slowly she came to the realization that she had to work...and work very hard...on forgiveness. She said to Buscalgia,

"I'm the one in pain, so I'm the one who's got to do something about it!"

She would have to forgive the young man for her own sake. Her pain was so intense that she was unable to study, to concentrate. She contemplated dropping all of her classes. She tried to build some new relationships, but that didn't seem to ease her pain. Finally, she came to the realization that if she wanted to "get on" with her life, she would have to forgive and forget. And she did forgive. No longer is she a slave to her anger, her spite, her hate, her hurt.

It's so hard to forgive someone who has hurt us. We stay awake nights thinking of different ways to get even. Sometimes we just want to write the person off and ignore them as if they no longer exist. I'm sure that every one here this morning has, at one time or another, been hurt by someone else. It may have been intentionally or even accidentally, but let's face it - we've all been there!

DEVELOPMENT

Even Simon Peter. And maybe that's why he had a question that day long ago for Jesus to answer.

"Lord, if another member (of the church) sins against me....how often should I forgive?"

It seemed like a reasonable, logical and well-thought out question that Peter was asking. Who knows? Maybe someone had done something to hurt Peter. For whatever reason, Peter wanted to know how many times he should forgive, and before Jesus had a chance to answer, Peter was even suggesting, "As many as seven times?"

Seven seemed like a good number. Seven is a Biblical number, often regarded as the "perfect" number. The world was created in seven days. Peter probably thought he had come up with an exceptional answer. The rabbis of his day instructed people to forgive someone only three times, and if there was a fourth offense....well God would take care of that person. Peter was more generous. He even doubled the amount and then added one more for good measure. "As many as seven times?" Peter might have thought he had hit on the right answer.

After all, to forgive someone who has wronged you or has hurt you seven times is a lot. Why, the average person finds it difficult to forgive even once. To forgive someone even seven times was more than twice the amount required by Jewish law. Jesus answered Peter, saying....

"Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven".

The old standard of forgiveness was inadequate...that's what Jesus was saying. He offers us a new teaching on forgiveness. Three things to consider in connection with this sermon on forgiveness.

FORGIVENESS: AN ATTITUDE

First-off, I think that Jesus would want us to understand that forgiveness is an attitude. In answering the question that Peter was raising, Jesus taught us that there really is no limit on forgiveness. In other words, we don't keep a score card. We don't reach a certain number, be it three, or seven or seventy-seven and say, "OK....I've done my part. That's it....I can't possibly forgive you anymore. I've reached my limit".

For the serious follower of Jesus, forgiveness is a way of life. Jesus went on to tell a story. Remember it. A certain king wanted to settle accounts with all of his servants and so he called them in "one by one". Now there was a servant who owed the king something like ten thousand talents - a big sum of money. Why it would be impossible for that servant to ever pay off that tremendous debt. He would have to work 150,000 years to earn ten thousand talents. The average person couldn't comprehend such a gigantic debt. It would be comparable to our national debt, I suppose. Jesus, of course, was exaggerating things here deliberately. He wants us to see that this servant could never pay the debt off no matter how hard he worked, no matter how much overtime he put in. It was just downright impossible.

The king was ready to throw the servant and his family into prison because he couldn't pay the debt. The servant fell on his knees and pleaded with the king. "Have patience with me....and I will pay you everything!"

Out of pity, Jesus said, the king forgave the entire amount of the debt. The servant was free! Just think of it. The only thing he owed the king was one big thank you. What a relief. He would not be sent to prison. His family would not be sold off as slaves. He was free. Thanks to the goodness of the king, he didn't owe a cent. Let's face it....we don't often run into such a generous attitude, do we? And when we do, it really makes our day!

Remember the story of the grandmother who was celebrating her Golden Wedding Anniversary. She shared the secret of her long and happy marriage with her friends and her grandchildren. She said,

"On my wedding day, I decided to make a list of ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of the marriage, I would overlook...."

A friend asked the woman what some of the faults she had chosen to overlook were, and the grandmother replied,

"To tell the truth....I never did get around to making that list....but whenever my husband did something that made me angry and upset, I would say to myself, 'Lucky for him that's one of the ten!'"

Now, that's the kind of attitude that would have made Jesus smile. That would have pleased Him for the Christian life is not comprised of arithmetic or just some good intentions, but filled with practical, everyday acts of compassion. There is just no limit to the amount of forgiveness we are to offer another.

FORGIVENESS PROMOTES HEALING

"Not seven times, but seventy times seven" is the word of Jesus. Secondly, when we are able to bring ourselves to forgive another person, I believe that healing takes place within us.

Back to the parable Jesus told. The king forgave the servant a colossal debt. You would think that this act of forgiveness would change his entire outlook on life, but NOT SO! Soon afterwards, this forgiven servant ran into a fellow-servant who owed him one hundred denarii. Note the contrast. It would have taken an entire army to transport ten thousand talents, but one hundred denarii could easily be carried in one's pocket. The average worker could earn one hundred denarii in only a couple of months. In contrast to the substantial amount the servant owed his king, the denarii was nothing...nothing.

Yet the servant whose debt had been forgiven by the king was enraged. He grabbed his fellow servant by the throat and started choking him. "Pay me what you owe me". Notice that the fellow servant said the exact same words the servant had used when he pleaded with the king. "Have patience with me, and I will pay you". But the servant was unmoved by his words. He even had the fellow thrown into prison. What a person he turned out to be. And even more important, what an opportunity he missed, passed up. He could have known the joy of forgiving.

The Upper Room had a story that's worth sharing. You may remember it...those of you who read it every day. When Hubert French was ten years old his father was shot and killed by an unknown assailant. Hubert took on an attitude of vengeance against his father's assailant. Many years later, in mid-life, Hubert was diagnosed with a neurological disorder. He was hospitalized and eventually placed on heavy medication. He was told it was his only hope and the doctors informed him that he would be on this medication for the rest of his life. But his condition continued to deteriorate. After several years on medication he was totally disabled.

It was when he was at his lowest point that he began to examine some of those buried feelings he had at the time of his father's death. Why he even began attending church and soon started to read his Bible. The process was slow, and it was often painful, but he worked on forgiving the assailant, the man who had killed his father. And you know what happened? There came that day when the doctors were able to take him off his medication completely. And soon after that his neurological disturbances disappeared. Twelve years have since gone by and the problem has never returned.

When we harbor negative feelings, when we are unable to forgive another person for what they have done to us, we are apt to be the ones who suffer the most. It takes a toll on us emotionally, physically and spiritually. Healing takes place when we come to that point where we can truly forgive and forget, hopefully forever!

The servant in this parable of Jesus refused to forgive his fellow servant. And when the other servants heard what had happened, they were shocked! It didn't take long for the king to hear about it. And when he did hear, he was enraged and called once again for the servant. The king berated him and this time said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"

WE FORGIVE OTHERS BECAUSE GOD HAS FORGIVEN US

The point, of course, is quite obvious. We forgive others BECAUSE God has forgiven us. That, dear friend, is what empowers us to forgive. We have been forgiven. If you do not know yourself to have been forgiven, you have nothing to pass on to another.

In the Parable, because the servant who had been forgiven was unwilling to forgive his fellow servant, he was thrown into prison where he would spend the remaining years of his life in hard labor.

Remember the great novelist, A. J. Cronin. He started out as a doctor. And his first assignment, he once wrote, was in a small Welsh town where he performed his first surgery on a little girl. She was suffering from a severe case of diphtheria. Cronin performed a tracheotomy and her condition improved. However, she was still in critical condition and after surgery, Cronin told the nineteen year old nurse on duty,

"I'm going to get some sleep....when this tube clogs up, take it out immediately and clean it....then come and get me...."

Within a few hours, the tube did clog up. Instead of taking it out and cleaning it, the nurse panicked and ran for the doctor. By the time Cronin got to the girl's bed, she was gone. And he was furious. The very next day he wrote a letter recommending that this young nurse's license be revoked. He called her in and read it to her.

The young nurse, close to tears, pleaded with him for a second chance. But Cronin was unrelenting. However, his sleep that night was haunted by her words. Upon awakening in the morning, he suddenly remembered that once he had offered up to Christ the same exact plea, "Give me a second chance". The nurse was given a second chance and she went on to become the Superintendent of the largest Children's Hospital in all of Britain.

CLOSING Have you ever been given "a second chance?" If you have, then be careful if you say you cannot forgive someone else. And remember this that there is healing in forgiveness - the healing of relationships and healing within for the person who forgives. Don't try to go against the grain of life. Go with it. It's part of God's universe...to forgive. Jesus told a story about a servant who was forgiven an enormous debt, but he was too "tight-fisted" to forgive another who owed him. How sad. How utterly sad.

We often wonder: how many times are we to forgive another person. There is no limit, according to the "word" of Jesus. Forgiveness...a way of life. It's an acknowledgement that we have been forgiven. And therefore, we are able to forgive. Think about some person you might approach with a forgiving word this week. See what happens. You'll feel better for it, I'm sure.

PRAYER Wrestle with each of us, O Lord, as we struggle with forgiveness in our lives. Help us to remember that "to forgive is divine" and that as followers of Christ, that is the way we should walk. In His name we pray. Amen.