

Forgiving One Another

Matthew 18:21-35

Living Hope Church has three core values, that are non-negotiable because they are forged by three fundamental commands from God. Here they are: As followers of Christ, we must be committed to loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength – because that is the greatest of all the commandments. Embracing that command then launches us into loving our neighbor as ourselves – because our neighbor is made in God’s image. And when we think about the most loving thing we can do for our neighbors, we realize that pointing them to Christ and the good news of the gospel can change their lives and their eternities. And in our moments of clarity, we know that genuinely loving God and our neighbor is the best way to make the gospel attractive.

But this brings us to the question: What does loving God and our neighbor look like in the shoe leather of everyday life? Thankfully, we do not have to guess. The Apostle Paul teaches us in Romans 13:10, “. . . love is the fulfillment of the law.” Love would never dream of setting God’s Law aside because God Law defines what love looks like. Jesus said it this way in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will obey what I command.” And just in case that truth sped past us, Jesus gives us the polar opposite of love in John 14:24, “He who does not love me will not obey my teaching.”

Sometimes the best way to describe love, is to speak about what love does not do. A person who loves God, does not give his heart to idols [that’s the point of the 1st and 2nd Commandments]. Nor will a person who loves God, pretend to speak for God when he knows he doesn’t – which is the essence of taking God’s name in vain [the 3rd Commandment]. And please don’t tell me that you love your neighbor when you steal from him [which violates the 8th Commandment]. Nor do you love your neighbor if you lie to him or lie about him [a violation of the 9th Commandment].

But if you are like me, sometimes you just want to know what love does. And if you feel the same, then I have some good news for you. The New Testament is filled with one another commands that tell us what love does – such as, “Be at peace with one another,” “be devoted to one another,” “bear with one another,” “have equal concern for one another,” “be kind and compassionate to one another,” and on and on.

This morning I am going to preach on the command to forgive one another. Let me read it as it is stated in Colossians 3:13, “Bear with one another [which requires], and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” I am preaching on this issue because my own personal journey with Christ is proving to me, just how important forgiveness is. And I am preaching on this command because we all need to hear at least two or three sermons a year on forgiveness.

I am going to follow the format of a Biblical counseling manual entitled, Self-Confrontation. That is a good title because in order to grow up in Christ we must have the ability to be honest about ourselves. Are you ready for some self-confrontation? I will first state a Biblical principle involved in forgiveness [there will be 9 in all] – and then give the Scriptural foundation for that principle. Principle #1: If you do not love others, you do not love God. There is no sugar

coating on that statement, but it is actually more gentle than the passage of Scripture used to support it – which is I John 4:20-21,

“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

Friends, not to forgive someone, is to choose not to love that person. “But pastor Mark, I cannot forgive this certain person. I have tried and failed.” This leads us to the next Biblical principle: #2. God has enabled you to forgive others, or He would not have commanded you to do so. Ephesians 4:32 gives us the following commands, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ – God forgave you.” There is no wiggle room in that verse.

The third principle is a cousin of forgiving others: #3. When you knowingly wrong others, God commands you to seek their forgiveness and be reconciled – if possible.

Matthew 5:23-24, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar [Christ was speaking to Jewish people who were trusting in God’s temporary provision for their sins – which were animal sacrifices offered at the temple altar] and there [at the altar] remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother [ask for his forgiveness]; then come and offer your gift.”

The idea is that if you do not seek your brother’s forgiveness, do not bother asking God for His. This brings us to principle # 4, If you as a child of God do not forgive others, then God the Father’s forgiveness of your current sins will be withheld. That is a sobering statement. Listen to the Scriptural support for it,

Matthew 6:14-15, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

Let’s talk about this truth some more. The earthly discipline a Christian experiences – does not cancel our union with Christ. Through faith in Christ, we become adopted into God’s eternal family. It is an eternal family because we never cease being a part of it. A genuine believer is secure in Christ.

But that does not mean we cannot experience God’s earthly discipline. As a matter of fact, the Bible says we can count on it. Hebrews 12:7 asks the question, “For what son is not disciplined by his father?” When we get ourselves into a state of mind, where we refuse to forgive others, then there is a rule of discipline God follows. It is most clearly stated in Obadiah 1:15, “As you have done, it will be done to you.”

Let me illustrate it this way: If we have children who are defiantly misbehaving and will not respond to our words of correction, then as parents, we may have to temporarily suspend

fellowship with our disobedient children by sending them to their room. They do not cease being our children, but fellowship is temporarily cut off – until they repent and ask forgiveness for being rebellious towards us and God. While they are undergoing separation from us, they are not receiving forgiveness.

The same principle of withheld forgiveness and suspended fellowship applies when we refuse to go to others we have wronged – and ask for their forgiveness. Because we live in a fallen world, there may be times when we cannot ask forgiveness from a person we have wronged, without doing further damage to them. But the vast majority of times, we need to ask forgiveness. And we need to believe that when we repent of our sins, God is eager to forgive us. Listen to Ezekiel 18:21-22,

“ . . . if a wicked man turns away from his sins . . . and does what is right . . . none of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him.”

God’s judgment upon unbelievers will ultimately result in their eternal separation from Him. God will not do that to believers, but He does discipline us now – even up to the point of ending our earthly lives, which was happening in the Corinthian Church [I Corinthians 11:30].

Question: Does God know how hard it is to forgive a person who has betrayed us and treated us like an enemy? Yes, God understands it is hard, but God regularly calls upon us to do hard things. It is by doing hard things that we grow. This is confirmed in the next Biblical principle: #5. As a follower of Christ, you are commanded to love even your enemies. Jesus states in Matthew 5:43-47,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy’ [that was false teaching] 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” God asks and enables us to do hard things.

Principle #6. Not to forgive others is to live in disobedience to God.

James 4:17, “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.”

Principle #7. If you refuse to forgive others, in light of how much God has forgiven you, then you are empty of gratitude for God’s mercy.

Luke 6:36, “Be merciful [which requires forgiveness], just as your Father is merciful.”

Let’s probe that point a bit. If a woman is brutally raped – is she to forgive that man? Yes, she will need to start the process of seeking God’s strength to forgive him. However, civil government’s job is to apprehend that man and after a thorough and fair trial, see that he receives a just and appropriate punishment. And if the raped woman is called upon to testify at his trial,

she must tell the truth, which can be useful in protecting other women from that man. Here is the point: We can forgive, but still remember. And the woman who was raped can hate what the man did – but still trust God that He can and will make good come from that evil act. It does no good for us to drink a poisonous cup of hate in hopes that it will kill the person who wronged us.

Principle #8. Refusing to be merciful to others, means your heart has not been changed by God's love and mercy to you.

Matthew 18:21-35, "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' 22 Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times [don't keep a record. However, if a member of a church is continually wronging others without repentance, then the elders of the church are to go to the offender and reason with him to repent. If he refuses, then the church body is to treat him as an unbeliever and excommunicate him]. 23 Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him [that amount of money is equivalent to a national debt]. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. 26 The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' 27 The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. 28 But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. 29 His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' 30 But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32 Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' 34 In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.'"

Principle #9. Refusing to forgive others, which is a sin, means you have not made a Biblical confession of that sin – because to confess sin rightly before the Lord means that you agree with God about the wrongness of your sin with a corresponding commitment to forsake that sin.

James 1:22, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

At this point I want us to take a close look at the Biblical truth that God's forgiveness involves remembering our sins no more. Isaiah 43:25, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgression, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more." For a Christian, this means that God will not hold our sins against us, since He has cleansed us with the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1:7, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."

While God forgives, He doesn't forget – in the sense that He erases His memory of what we have done. I say that because God is omniscient. He knows everything. God cannot know everything and at the same time have forgotten things. This is backed up by the truth that we will all give an account of our sins on Judgment Day.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil”

II Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”

Friends, it is not until Judgment Day that we will fully grasp just how much God has forgiven us. My point again is that Scripture uses the term “not to remember” as meaning “not to hold something against us.” In Psalm 25:7, David prays to God, “Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me”

If David could remember the sins of his youth, certainly God could as well. However, in a legal sense, God can remove our sins from us, as far as the east is from the west, without erasing them from His mind.

Most of the time, when the Holy Spirit draws my attention to sin that I have committed, I confess it to God immediately – I do not wait until the end of the day. I confess by admitting to God that He is right and I was wrong. And I will often say, “O God, thank you for forgiving me of my sins in Christ.” But if I have been fighting God for weeks by refusing to forgive someone who has wronged me – then I have entered into a spiritual state where God has sent me to my room – and is withholding forgiveness of my current sins. When I finally come to my senses, and repent, it is very appropriate for me to ask God's forgiveness. This is why Jesus taught us to pray to our Heavenly Father, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

If a person habitually refuses to forgive others, then it is likely that person has never been born again. Why do I say that? Because how can I truly believe that God has forgiven me a mountain size of sin and then refuse to forgive someone who has committed a thimble size of sin against me. Let's Pray.