

## Forgiveness (Part One)

### *“If you forgive others”*

Reflection 51 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

We turn now in our series on “A New World in the Morning” to considering the topic of forgiveness, and we take as our text Matthew 6:14-15, these words from Jesus: “For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” And we take this as our text and our topic because a new world in the morning depends on forgiveness. A world awash in conflict and violence depends on forgiveness. For many people there literally is no viable future without forgiveness. But even for us in the relative comfort and safety of our lives here, there is no future, no healing, no recovery of our souls, no real chance of new life without forgiveness.

In spring 2014 we were, I think, all amazed by the response of the people in the Charleston church to the shooter. One said directly to the shooter in the court of a 70-year-old grandmother whom he had killed, “I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people, but I forgive you.” It was in many ways astonishing, almost unbelievable, that people, the victims of a hateful, violent crime, could – so quickly – turn to forgiveness. I still marvel at it. And wonder if the woman who said this had because of her race had so many things in her life to forgive that she'd mastered it.

In any case forgiveness is not easy. It never is. It's something I struggle with. People do things I struggle to forgive. They make decisions I struggle to forgive. They say things I struggle to forgive. And it's a real struggle. And all I can say is, thank God, I have these words to caution me: “For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

But what do you do with the many, many pictures of savage atrocity from the forces of ISIS? On a more personal note: What do you do with a parent who may have always put you down? What do you do with a husband who fundamentally disrespects you? What do you do when people you thought you could count on let you down? What do you do with that brash, aggressive person at work who would ruin you in a minute if he could? First, my apologies to you – at the end of this consideration, we still won't quite know. These matters are not easy, and they do not have simple answers. And sometimes we have to make tough calls often because someone's safety is on the line. But I am still glad I have these words: “For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

With Jesus it was always about forgiveness. It was what the people of his day most needed to hear. And the fact that most of them did not listen led to the great Jewish Revolt in AD 66 and national catastrophe. But with Jesus it was always about forgiveness. Consider one of the first things Jesus did after he was resurrected. We find

this story in John 20:19-23. Evening had fallen on Resurrection Sunday in the ancient city of Jerusalem. Shadows had lengthened and slid past dusk into night. The disciples are together behind locked doors for fear of the authorities. And Jesus comes and stands among them and says, “Shalom aleikhim. Peace be with you! And again, peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you!” It’s then that he does a most remarkable thing. He breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” Scholars have many questions about this, but I doubt that it is nearly as complicated as church history has made it seem. What Jesus is saying is something very simple: “To you, and to your spiritual descendants – my people across the ages, is entrusted the message and the lifestyle of forgiveness. I want you to go out, among the people, and start forgiving them. In my name. That’s it. Forgiveness is the universal human need, and I want you to start doing it.” And imagine, imagine if that had become our one central message, the one we always kept central.

As it is, behind every conflict in our world today is a need for forgiveness. Behind every blood-soaked hot spot in the world, whether it was Israel and Rome in Jesus’ time, or Israel and Hamas in ours, there is always someone who will not forgive and someone who is unforgiven. Behind every life spiraling downward, behind every troubled marriage, wherever there is fear or tension or conflict between friends or within churches or in work places there is always someone who will not forgive and someone who is unforgiven. Always.

And the power to heal and save the world (remember, that is Jesus’ stated intention in John 3:17; that’s why he came – to save the world) is always this one thing: forgiveness. It’s a group of people bonded together on earth, living, teaching, practicing, proclaiming and learning the ways of forgiveness and teaching them to others. It’s a group of people who know that the hope for the future, the hope for any future, is not the next entrepreneurial scheme, the next diet plan, the next summer home, the next all-terrain vehicle, the next shopping spree, the next meditation technique, or even the next true love or the next political hero. It’s a community of people who learn and teach forgiveness.

That’s what Jesus was trying to teach his followers in Matthew 18: how to act in such a community. He says, first (beginning in verse 15), it all starts with what happens when your brother sins against you, because this is going to happen. Your brother or sister is going to sin against you. He will offend you. She will say outlandishly inappropriate things. He will pass on what you’ve said to him in confidence. She will shut you off when you need to be heard. In your darkest hour, he will strand you. And when this happens Jesus says, “Here’s what you do” which brings us to verses 15-17. These verses are almost always treated as a text on church discipline, but in fact there’s nothing in this text about power or official excommunication or official anything or hierarchy or even elders. The situation Jesus is addressing is “If anyone sins against you.” And his counsel is: When this happens, spare no effort to get things right again between you and him or her. It’s all about mending broken relationships within the community of faith. If you feel someone has wronged you, put your complaint into words. Don’t brood about it. Get your feelings out into the open. Face them. State them. And if maybe they don’t seem so solid

when you have to say them, fine! That's good! But go and see the person personally face to face just the two of you. If that doesn't get you back together, take a wise mature person or two with you, not so much to prove the other guy's wrong as to see that reconciliation happens. In front of kindly and gracious people, the universe has a way of looking entirely different. If that fails, take the trouble to the Christian "gathering" (that's the core meaning of ekklesia or "church"). Take it to where prayer and love and trust and wisdom operate. And if that doesn't work, you must realize that it's a very difficult case, like a pagan or tax collector coming to understand the God of Israel. And maybe you could do what your Teacher did which is not to abandon them. He was in fact notorious for being their friend. And maybe you will still win them. Maybe you'll take this "hopeless case" and get a Zacchaeus or a Matthew out of it. Remember a tax collector wrote this passage.

Whatever's being said here, it immediately leads to Jesus telling Peter that you forgive your brother not three times, not seven times, but seventy seven times. Or as the footnote says, seventy times seven. 490? No! No! No! This is not mathematics! Or if it is, it's spiritual mathematics. It's  $7 \times 10 \times 7$ . Unlimited. Forgive again and again and again forever. You see, the untapped force field of the universe is forgiveness. It's not anything nuclear. It's forgiveness that can produce a spontaneous life-giving chain-reaction. The power is always in forgiveness. The world awaits this moral revolution.

– Dale Pauls

*Part Two (of two) next week*