

Walking in the Way of Forgiveness

Introduction

The Text

¹ And he said to his disciples, “Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! ² It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. ³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” (Luke 17:1–4)

Inspiring But Not Easy

- A. This is now our second week in this text, though we’ve had a couple of weeks in between.
1. Last time, you may recall we really focused in on vv. 1-3a. Consequently, our discussion centered on these temptations that are sure to come and the necessity, therefore, that we pay attention to ourselves.
 2. At near the end of the sermon I gave some suggestions as to what this paying attention to ourselves might look like and, among other things, it was there that I mentioned the idea of making space in your life for community with other Christians. You see, because of this blinding nature of sin, it is not sufficient for us to merely keep watch on ourselves in and of ourselves, we need others keeping watch with us. And they need us keeping watch with them.
 - a. I drew this out in particular from how Jesus’ thought flows there in v. 3. He moves immediately, without stuttering, from “Pay attention to yourselves!” to “If your brother sins, rebuke him . . .” Yourself. Your brother. In other words, in Jesus’ mind, paying attention to ourselves necessarily involves paying attention to one another—getting in Christian community and getting real.
 - i. So, according to Jesus, we’ve got to be in this discipleship thing together. We need one another if we are going to make it to glory.
- B. Now, the idea of a Christian community like this, while a bit frightening I’m sure for some of us, for others of us, I imagine it sounds a bit inspiring. We long to be a part of something like the early church, when brothers and sisters in Christ were in each other’s lives in deep and meaningful ways—not just passing by one another on Sunday mornings on our way to something else.
1. We want to be in this thing together, growing in Christ together, going out on mission together. The community piece here sounds inspiring, it sounds exciting, it sounds good.
- C. But then as we keep reading in vv. 3-4 another perspective begins to surface on the matter. Suddenly we are forced to face the unfortunate fact that life lived out in such Christian

community—while it is still beautiful and desirable and even essential—it will most certainly be hard.

1. This is hinted at in the way Jesus moves seamlessly from this talk of paying attention to ourselves and one another to talking about forgiveness. With this we get the sense that Christian community engaged at such a level will certainly involve a lot of forgiveness and showing mercy to one another for wrongs done.
- D. Look at vv. 3-4 again: “³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”
1. We are reminded here that sin doesn’t occur in a vacuum. It always surfaces in a context. And it affects not just the individual in the throes of it, but the people all round about it.
 - a. To put it another way: we often notice the sin in others because it has offended and even wounded us! Getting in close relationships with other believers means you are going to see and feel their remaining sin. Their temptations are going to test you.
 2. Did you see it there in our text? At first it sounds like the sin in our brother that we are addressing is floating around out there somewhere, but then in v. 4 Jesus makes it plain: “and if he sins against you . . .” This sin is against you, it is hurting you. It’s not out there somewhere, it is right here in your face, ripping and tearing at your own heart and life.
 - a. Here is where reality breaks in and we realize, again, that to be a part of deep and meaningful Christian community necessarily means you will be sinned against. Some of us know that all too well, don’t we?

Safe But Not Sinless

- A. I know, you thought: “I get sinned against out in the world every day. I thought the church is where I should be able to come in and be safe.”
1. And I say, yes and amen, I sure do hope, at the end of the day, that the church is a safe place. God designed it to be such. But let’s be clear: It is not a sinless place.
 - a. And you should’ve known this, of course, from the start . . . because you are here . . . and I am here. And, though we love Jesus, and want to follow Jesus, and want to look more and more like Jesus . . . we’re still sinners. So if we get close enough to one another we’re going to rub, we’re going to hurt . . . and that’s actually an important part of the process of sanctification.
- B. And yet I say that at the end of the day the church should still be the safest place on the planet. Why? What do I mean by that?
1. I mean that what should make the church a safe place now is not that it’s a sinless place, but that it’s a place where, at the core, at the foundation, there’s this commitment to forgive, this covenant of grace if you will—that binds together and supports the entire community.

- C. You see Jesus is saying here that part of paying attention to ourselves and one another means entering into relationships with each other at such a level that our sin is going to come out and affect each other—it's going to surface.
 - 1. And yet it doesn't have to scare us or push us away. We don't have to bear grudges or burn bridges. Instead we can patiently, graciously, lovingly chat about it . . . and we continue to walk with one another towards the Savior who alone can help and bring change.
- D. So this morning, as we dial in on [vv. 3-4](#), we're going to talk about forgiveness. And there are three things in particular that I want to bring out concerning this: (1) The Rebuke of Forgiveness; (2) The Extent of Forgiveness; and (3) The Way of Forgiveness.

(1) The Rebuke of Forgiveness

- A. Here we are reminded that forgiveness can't really even begin until we first start to talk about the offense. We've got to bring it up. We've got to tell the person why it hurt, why it seems wrong. Hence, Jesus says there in [v. 3](#): "If your brother sins, rebuke him . . ."
- B. Now, there are a couple things we should say on this idea of "rebuke." I realize we are prone to misunderstand this. We need to be clear on both what it is not and what it is.

What It Is Not

- A. This rebuke Jesus speaks of is not a shoot from the hip, I'm frustrated, you need to be put in your place sort of thing. It is not something we engage in to the neglect of other biblical principles regarding confrontation and conflict.
 - 1. It is still, as the author of Proverbs says, a "glory to overlook an offense" ([Prov 19:11](#)). In other words, there is a slowness, a patience to it all.
 - a. It is not our job to point out every failure and sin. Such people are nauseating to be around and often insufferably self-righteous. They could never handle being measured by that same ruler with which they measure others.
 - 2. It is also still the way of wisdom to remove the log from our own eye before we ever attempt to point out a speck in another's. In other words, there is a humility and a self-reflection to it. We are not thinking we are any better than the person we are speaking with.

What It Is

- A. Nonetheless, with patience and humility, we are still called to rebuke. I mentioned last time that the word "rebuke" here often grates on our modern sensibilities. We hear "rebuke" and think immediately of a Pharisee wearing his long robes and looking down his nose. It sounds smug, self-righteous, and demeaning. We've all met this kind of Christian and I think that's why we're a bit turned off by the idea.

1. Better, I said, to capture the heart of what Jesus is after here, is the equally valid translation: “Warn.” That brings out nuances of care and concern, love and compassion. The rebuke here is not communicating I’m somehow better than you. It’s communicating I love you.
 - a. When we rebuke or warn a brother or sister the way Jesus is calling us to here we are moving towards the person, not pushing them away. We are coming in to give them a warm embrace not a swift and cold slap to the face.
- B. So where are you with this? I recognize that there are some among us with very different temperaments when it comes to conflict and these sorts of hard discussions that Jesus is calling us to here.
1. Some, as we said up front, will want to avoid this at all costs. They’ll brush matters under the rug and call it “forgiveness,” call it “love,” but it is not. Often times our reluctance to address another person’s sin is not due to a concern for them or our relationship with them, but for ourselves.
 2. On the other hand, some will all too happily enter in. They take a sick sort of pleasure in pointing out the wrongs in others.
 - a. Neither one of these is what Jesus means here by rebuke. So again, where are you with this? Is there a person or two you need to, in love, call out something? Are there people you’ve been too hard on and you’re the one who needs to repent? May the Lord be our guide.

(2) The Extent of Forgiveness

Looking for Loopholes

- A. When it comes to being sinned against and responding not in turn but with forgiveness, we must admit that such a thing is often very challenging and very costly for us. As we’ve been saying, it is most certainly not easy—not for anyone.
1. And, therefore, what we will find, if we are willing to tune into the inner workings of our own hearts, is that, when it comes to forgiveness, we are constantly looking for loopholes—ways of getting out of this call from Jesus. We’re always looking for the fine print. “I don’t want to forgive. After they did that to me, are you kidding me? That can’t be what Jesus would be calling me to do.”
- B. Now, there are two potential loopholes that surface right here in our text. And people may try to grab hold of them. But that would be to abandon the will and way of Jesus. He doesn’t want that for you. I don’t want that for you. So I want to push back on these and, in so doing, help you see clearly the extent to which we are called to go in our forgiving of others.

Potential Loophole #1: Limited Forgiveness

- A. This first potential loophole shows up there in v. 4: “[A]nd if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”
1. At first read, we might find ourselves a bit relieved here, as we see Jesus identify what at least on the surface of it seems to be a limit on the extent to which our forgiveness must go. “Seven times.” We say: “Okay, but if ever they reach the eighth, I’m cutting them off!”
- B. Now let me quickly give you a few reasons as to why this is most certainly not what Jesus is meaning here:
1. For one thing note that this is not seven times over the course of a relationship but seven times in a single day. That already is indicating quite a significant extent. I’d be done with the brother after the second time in a day. And Jesus is saying: “Let’s go seven.”
 2. But then there is the fact that the number seven in Israel carries with it religious symbolism and stands often for completeness. So even in the number, it is pointing beyond itself to a way of life characterized on the whole by forgiveness.
 3. And finally, we see this amplified even further when Peter approaches Jesus on a similar matter in Matt 18:21-22: “²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”
 - a. We’ll come back later to this text later, but for now you see quite plainly, Jesus is not here trying to give Peter some math problem to figure out so he can calculate the extent to which he must forgive. He’s not trying to identify the limits to our forgiveness. Quite the opposite, really. He’s trying to show that our forgiveness should, in fact, be limitless!
 - i. Just as we cannot out-sin God’s grace so another person should not be able to out-sin our forgiveness!

Potential Loophole #2: Conditional Forgiveness

- A. The second potential loophole shows up in both vv. 3 and 4. You see, even if you’ll grant me that our forgiveness should be unlimited, as we’ve just discussed, certainly we are not to assume that it is to be unconditional. For it seems right on the face of it that Jesus lays down certain conditions. I must forgive, if and only if, they do something on their part.
1. Do you see it? “[I]f he repents, forgive him” (v. 3). “[I]f he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him” (v. 4).
- B. The mistaken thought here then is that: “Okay this person has sinned against me. I suppose, if they come back groveling, down on their knees, in sackcloth and ashes, apologizing for it all, well maybe then I’ll forgive them. But if they don’t . . . then I won’t. And Jesus is here saying I don’t have to! ‘If he repents . . . I must forgive.’ You didn’t repent . . . I don’t have to forgive!”
1. We grab ahold of this apparent condition and use it as a way of justifying ourselves as we continue nurse our bitterness and harden our hearts and forsake the way of Christ.

- C. I don't have the time necessary to deal with this as fully as I might like, but let me at least say this.
1. In one sense, it is true that for forgiveness to reach its fullest expression, it requires repentance on the part of the offender. Because the goal of forgiveness is reconciliation and restoration. And, obviously, if a person is unwilling to move towards with humility and love and own up to their mess than that just can't happen.
 2. But, and here is what we must be clear on, this does not justify in us an unforgiving spirit.
 - a. This, for example, is what Paul means when he says: “¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . . ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil . . . If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:14, 17a, 18). Did you hear that? “So far as it depends on you!” You can't make them want to be at peace with you, but you must be ready and willing and working on your part to be at peace with them!
 - b. This is Stephen, while his Jewish brothers are bashing his head in with rocks, crying out: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).
 - c. And, of course, he was simply following in the way of His Savior, who, as He was hanging lifeless on the cross in utter agony, cried out: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34).
 - i. Again, Christ cannot force a man to receive His forgiveness, but, have no doubt, He has made a way for it and is ready and wanting to freely give it!
- D. So let it be plain: No the full expression and final embrace of forgiveness cannot be realized without repentance on the side of the offender. But this does not justify an unforgiving spirit in us along the way.
1. As far as we are concerned, the person is released from our prison, we hold no grudge, we are ready to receive them, we are even pursuing them in love. But whether the fullness of forgiveness is realized is on them. Whether they choose to walk freely from our prison and into our family room is for them to decide. But the door is open . . . our hearts are open!*

(3) The Way of Forgiveness

- A. Now, I know that such things sound practically impossible to many of us. The wounds go so deep. The hurt . . . maybe it's something from years ago . . . but it's still just right there. You're still bleeding. And you hear “forgive”?! “I don't want to forgive.”
- B. But suppose you did. How do you make a start at it? If this is what Jesus is calling us to, how do we even begin to move towards that? I've got three things for us to consider. These are three truths that help me when I'm struggling to forgive.

(1) God Has Forgiven Me

- A. I mentioned that I was going to return to that scene in Matthew’s gospel where Peter is asking Jesus: “How many times do I need to forgive?” We read Jesus’ immediate answer—“**Seventy times seven**”—but we didn’t see His rationale—His reason for why or how we ought to do such a thing.
- B. It’s this that He gives Peter in the parable He goes on to tell at that point: “²³ Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt 18:21–35).
- C. The key to the whole parable, I think, lies in the difference between the amounts owed.
1. This servant owed his master “**ten thousand talents.**” At the time, one talent was roughly equal to about 20 years’ wages for a laborer. Hence, in modern terms, ten thousand talents would equal about six billion dollars.
 2. And the master cleared that debt. Now this servant had a friend who owed him “**a hundred denarii.**” This was still a significant sum, equivalent in our day to about \$12,000.
 - a. But the point is clear, is it not? In our sin, we owed God an incalculable debt. We would never be able to repay, and yet He has cleared it in Christ. Shouldn’t such a thing utterly transform the way we relate to those who have sinned against us?!
- D. I have said before that, when it comes to our relationships with other people, we tend to operate with these scales—and when I get a sense that you owe me, that the relationship has been imbalanced in some way, that you have sinned against me, that things just aren’t fair—well, I start to come at you in frustration, I come demanding payment, or I just kind of ghost you and go cold and withhold good from you. There’s a vindictiveness to my approach, a sense of entitlement, and I feel justified while doing so . . . because you owe me.
1. But you see this logic only works so long as we are considering things horizontally. The moment we go vertical and start to consider our relationship with God everything changes . . . at least it should. You see, we are prone to forget that, when it comes to our relationship with God, in our sin, the scales were tipped irreparably against us. The debt was beyond repayment. And yet God comes to us not vindictive, not demanding payment, but offering his Son.

- a. And when you get that it just breaks the scales in every direction. When you see the grace given to you freely in Jesus, no longer do you come demanding from others, you come with something to give. You can show the grace you've been shown.
 - i. As Paul exhorts us to in [Eph 4:32](#): "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." The way of forgiveness begins with a deep awareness of all that God has forgiven us in Christ.

(2) God Is Working for Good

- A. I just recently finished reading through Genesis, and the book ends, you remember perhaps, with the story of Joseph. Now there are many remarkable aspects to this story but perhaps the most remarkable of all is the forgiveness and reconciliation we witness between Joseph and his brothers.
 - 1. You remember that his brothers were all bent up about Joseph's dream that they would one day bow to him, and what brother wouldn't be, right? But these guys take it a little further than giving him a noogie or a swirlie or whatever you used to do with your siblings when they got on your nerves. These guys decide they want him gone for good. They throw him in a pit in the middle of the wilderness and leave him for dead. Eventually, they decide, okay that sounds a little too drastic, let's just sell him into slavery. So they do. And we watch as the story unfolds.
 - 2. These guys who bought him bring him into Egypt and through a course of events he ends up in Pharaoh's favor and when a great famine hits the land all around, because of Joseph's wise stewardship and things, Egypt still has food, and so nations all around are coming to Egypt for rations.
 - 3. And, wouldn't you know it, Joseph's brothers come to. Now, remember many years have passed (~20), they thought their brother was long gone, they would not be expecting to ever see him again, and they certainly would not expect that he would be sitting at Pharaoh's right hand. So they come in asking for food. They don't recognize Joseph, but he recognizes them. And he just loses it.
 - 4. Long story short: he embraces them, he forgives them.
- B. And we think, how? Well he tells us how. You see his brothers when they realize this is Joseph they are terrified, they think it's over for them. Because that's how the world works. Eye for an eye. You try to kill me, I try to kill you.
 - 1. But here's what Joseph says in [Gen 50:19-21](#): " ¹⁹Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them."
 - a. You see, he knew, deep in his bones, that even in the midst of such heart-wrenching abuse and abandonment, God was working for good. And it kept him from entering into the insanity of vengeance and things. There's this remarkable calm and kindness about him even in the face the very ones who hurt him so deeply.
- C. I read this and I think, wow! Lord make me like that! So when people hurt us we let it disfigure us. The monstrosities done to us often make monsters out of us. Because we just get so angry, so

upset. We don't trust: "God, even here, you're at work. They meant this for evil but you mean it for some good."

1. When I get that, I'm free to forgive. Because I know God's with me and I'm not stuck, defined by my wounds, He's moving me forward. He has a purpose in this.

(3) God Will Make the Wrong Right

- A. With this now we look towards the future and the last day, the day of judgment. It's the day when God has committed to make all the wrong in the world right.
- B. As you know, many in our day have distaste for the idea of a God of judgment. And one of the things they say is that this Christian notion of a God who judges and throws people into hell and what not, well it will of course make nasty people out any who would believe it. Certainly we should expect people who follow such backward nonsense to be judgmental and even violent themselves.
 1. Now, to be sure, sadly, as history bears out, some have twisted these doctrines towards violence and other things.
 2. But that it is emphatically not what the Scriptures themselves say this doctrine of God's judgment ought to do with us. No! Understanding that God will make all the wrong right on the last day frees us up rather to love and forgive. We are released from trying to get justice for ourselves, or prove our point, or make our case, or whatever it may be because we know God will do that for us in the end.
 - a. This is what Paul means when he says: "¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'²⁰ To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.'²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:19–21).
- C. Miraslov Volf, in his book *Exclusion and Embrace* writes of this very thing: "One could object that it is not worthy of God to wield the sword. Is God not love, long-suffering and all-powerful love? . . . [But] in a world of violence it would not be worthy of God not to wield the sword; if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make the final end to violence God would not be worthy of our worship. . . . [I]n a world of violence we are faced with an inescapable alternative: either God's violence or human violence. Most people who insist on God's "nonviolence" cannot resist using violence themselves . . . And so violence thrives, secretly nourished by belief in a God who refuses to wield the sword.
My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. . . . [But] it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die."
- D. If what he's saying here seems a bit too complex, let's let Tim Keller make sense of it for us. He comments: "In this fascinating passage Volf reasons that it is the lack of belief in a God of vengeance that 'secretly nourishes violence.' The human impulse to make perpetrators of violence pay for their crimes is almost an overwhelming one. It cannot possibly be overcome with platitudes like

‘Now don’t you see that violence won’t solve anything?’ If you have seen your home burned down and your relatives killed and raped, such talk is laughable—and it shows no real concern for justice.

. . . Can our passion for justice be honored in a way that does not nurture our desire for blood vengeance? Volf says the best resource for this is belief in the concept of God’s divine justice. If I don’t believe that there is a God who will eventually put all things right, I will take up the sword and will be sucked into the endless vortex of retaliation. Only if I am sure that there’s a God who will right all wrongs and settle all accounts perfectly do I have the power to refrain” (The Reason for God, p. 77). . . or we might add . . . the power to forgive!

- E. Listen, God knows what’s been done to you. God knows the injustice, the devastation, the wrong. And, in the end, He will make it right. You’re free to love those who have hurt you so deeply because He’s got your back.

Conclusion

“Increase Our Faith!”

- A. Now, even still, after saying all of this, I know, it still seems so out of reach sometimes. And that’s why I love how the disciples respond to all of this talk of forgiveness seven times in a day and things. And this is where I’ll leave us.
 - 1. Look at what they say coming out in v. 5: “The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’” In other words: “This seems crazy! I don’t think I can do this. God, if I’m going to do this, it’s going to have to be by your strength alone. Help me believe You for this. Help me rely on You for this. Help me be like You in this. Increase my faith.” Let’s come to God in prayer for this now!