

We are starting off this morning with a tough topic - forgiveness. Most of us have personal stories or know of close friends who have stories of broken relationships. Deep hurts. Un-forgiveness. Is this God's plan for us? Is there a better way?

Part of life is being hurt. It's an ugly, but true fact. In the words of Pastor Adam Hamilton, "We are bound to hurt others and others are bound to hurt us." But this is not how God imagined or wanted life to be for us. Emotional hurts are a direct result of Adam and Eve disobeying God, they are a consequence of free will, and stumbling into sin. God wants us to repent of the harm that we cause others and wants us to seek to forgive others for the pain that they cause us, though this is often easier said than done.

Because the world we live in is filled with brokenness, forgiveness is essential to life. In fact, if we do not forgive, we often perpetuate the cycle of hurting others. But as Christians we believe that Jesus taught us a counter-cultural way to live by both his example and teachings on forgiveness. Jesus ultimately did as he taught, forgiving even the people who called for him to be crucified and those who mocked and beat him as he hung on the cross. He suffered pain and humiliation that is hard for many of us to even fathom, yet he asked God to forgive those gathered around the cross that day. And he forgave his disciples even though they turned their backs on him, only one staying by his side as he died. But Jesus also calls us as his followers to live into his example of forgiving others, even asking the disciples to go to the very ends of the earth announcing the forgiveness of sins. However, we know the actual act of forgiveness can be unspeakably difficult at times.

One of Jesus's first teachings to the disciples about forgiveness came as part of the Lord's prayer, which he repeated throughout his time on earth - "*forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us*". We pray this prayer together each and every Sunday, 52 weeks a year. But have you let those words capture your soul? Do we mean what we pray? We are asking God to forgive us *as we*, or in the same way, that we forgive others. That's powerful. How would God respond to you if you are being judged in the exact manner that you judge others? Would God quickly forgive you? Hold a grudge? Try to let things go, but find that they keep coming up in your mind and spirit?

Thankfully, God does not judge us as we judge others, but I think if we let the Lord's Prayer transform us from the inside out, if we mean what we pray, then we will be more prone to forgive. But I also think that one of the reasons we are slow to forgive is because we don't exactly know what forgiveness means or looks like in our daily lives. Even the best relationships in our lives have conflict. Most of the conflict are small things - irritations and disappointments - but if we don't actively choose to forgive the small things, they often fester and infect our soul. Other conflicts are like boulders, weighing on us. But whether we have to make a decision about forgiving small or large conflicts, it boils down to the same basic question: are we going to choose justice or mercy?

I had a friend in high school who dealt with conflict big or small in the same way - he would ignore you. If you had done something wrong you would know it because you were shown the silent treatment until you accurately figured out what you had done and apologized.

This was his way of seeking out justice. You had hurt him, so he was going to hurt you by ignoring you. Now he may not have explained it that way if you asked him, but that is what he was doing. But before you start criticizing my friend, I think we need to each examine our hearts and see if we do the same thing from time to time. Where are the places in our lives when we demand an eye for an eye, or a hurt for a hurt? How do you respond when someone hurts you - by seeking to hurt them in return, even if it's just by ignoring them? Or by the words you choose to say? Justice seeks to right wrongs through punishment - though we each have a different way of inflicting punishment on others. On the other hand, mercy is forgiving someone. Offering to them what they cannot earn or deserve.

At times justice may seem really appealing, so why would we choose mercy? Because God chooses to show mercy to us - by offering us life through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Through his example, teachings, death and resurrection Jesus modeled for us what it looks like to love someone instead of seeking to punish them.

We also get confused because we don't know what to do if we have a conflict with someone or if we have been wronged. In Paul's letter to the Colossians he writes that we are to forgive whenever we have been wronged. But how is this possible? Especially when righteous anger seems to simmer inside of us? First, and most importantly, we are to pray for those who hurt us, bringing our pain before God. As you pray to God, remember your own shortcomings. Remember ways that you have harmed others in relationships, by doing so you may be more able to offer grace because of the grace you have been freely offered. As you pray, ask God to reveal to you the very best about the person, helping you focus on their positive attributes instead of simply the wrong before you. And then pray for the person by name. Pray that God blesses them, even in the midst of your hurt. Praying this type of prayer often helps us let go of our need, our right, for retribution and opens up our heart to offer mercy.

However, a few words of caution about approaching forgiveness in this way. First, notice that you are talking to God about the complaint, not other people. Often we have a tendency to gather people in our corner when we feel we are wronged, as if we are preparing for battle. Please don't do this. It just makes it easier to perpetuate hurt feelings and hide behind anger. This type of prayer asks us to strip away the layers of the hurt by bringing it before God so we can offer mercy. That's a lot harder if other people are chanting for you to seek justice instead.

Second, through this prayer, God may prompt you to sit down and talk to the person face to face. This is difficult, but is much better than telling everyone else about our problem instead of telling the person directly. But when we choose to show mercy, we shine forth the light and message of Christ, who forgave us.

Lastly, we are confused about what it means to continually forgive. I've heard every message there is about forgiveness from you need to be a doormat who allows people to mistreat you because it's what Jesus would do, to you need to seek vengeance in the form of an eye for an eye, because it's scriptural. But this morning we hear Jesus telling Peter to continually forgive. To forgive more times than you could possibly remember. But this does not mean that we forget, or that there are not consequences to the pains that we face. Forgiveness is not the same as

condoning. Sometimes people have hurt us so deeply that even after we choose to forgive them that we still must seek to rebuild trust.

Forgiveness is difficult. It requires us to examine ourselves, to pray, to choose mercy over justice, and to remember that forgiving is not the same as condoning. But forgiveness also becomes easier the more we practice it and the more we remember that we are forgiven by God. May we leave this place and seek to be people marked by forgiving hearts and follow the path of mercy, in order to proclaim the love of our Lord and Savior. Amen.