

From Forgiven to Forgiving - Part 2

Kingham & Churchill 6/9/2009

Readings: Ephesians 4:17-32; Luke 17:1-10 and Matthew 18:15-20.

Introduction

Have you noticed how the 'law of sod' works with TV?

When you eventually get a chance to sit down and crash in front of the 'box, there's never anything worth watching!

But worse still, in our house, is when I read out to Lynn the bump on what looks like a really good programme.

Ending with the words: 'Concluding part of 2 part drama'!

Well, for some of you here today, welcome to the law of sod!

Today's sermon is the concluding part of a 2 part sermon!

And many of you missed the first part three Sundays ago!

If you want to catch up, and by the end of the talk you'll know if you need to or not, you can read it on our web site.

Of there are printed copies on the table at the back.

But for now, let me very briefly summarise part 1.

Resumé - the meaning of forgiveness

In the Bible forgiveness isn't just when someone wrongs me, comes and says sorry, and I say 'That's OK. Forget it.'

The words 'sorry' and 'apologise' virtually aren't in the Bible!

The Bible says "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Eph 4:32

As Christians we should forgive one another just as in Christ God forgave us.

So how does God forgive us?

He says things like Isaiah 43:25 'I am he who blots out your transgressions... and remembers your sins no more.'

So when God forgives you, what does he do?

He makes you a promise to remember your sins no more.

A promise that he'll never again raise the matter with you, anyone else or even himself, and so he won't use your sin against you. Ever!

Resumé - What about when you sin against me, you hurt me?

We then looked at what happens when you sin against me.

Luke 17:3 and Jesus says to me, the one hurt: 'If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent', forgive him.'

Matthew 5:23f and Jesus says, now speaking to the one in the wrong: 'if you're offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you [because you've done something against him], leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.'

So there's Jesus' model for relationships between Christians.

One - a Christian sins against another.

Two - they must meet in order to confront the matter.

Three - the offender says that he was wrong and will change and not do it again and asks forgiveness.

Four - the other one must forgive, which means he promises never to raise the matter again.

Five - they are reconciled.

That's the three minute summary: read the whole thing if you're unclear or have got questions.

But I realise that part 1 touched quite a few raw nerves.

It had to; it did in me.

One person had to face up to something from way back which they hadn't forgiven and dealt with.

Another person had to go to someone who had wronged them, and has now been reconciled.

This is very real life, practical, and often painful stuff I'm touching on from Jesus.

You may well need to talk some things through from part 1 and particularly now, in part 2.

Is forgiveness conditional

OK, we're now live!

One of the first questions Christians then ask is this:

What if the other person won't admit they're in the wrong and ask my forgiveness?

Must I still forgive them?

Indeed, can I forgive them?

I expect that most of us here have people in our lives who have hurt us but have never indicated any repentance.

And it's a running sore in your head and heart.

You've gone to them and told them what they have done, and they have laughed you out of the room.

Or ignored you altogether.

And you can't get closure!

To illustrate the problem, remember Gordon Wilson, that Christian whose daughter was killed in the dreadful Enniskillen bombing in 1987.

He was quick to say to gathered journalists 'I forgive the perpetrators of this dreadful crime.'

At the time I, like many, thought 'How does he do that?'

His daughter had just died in his arms saying 'Daddy I love you'.

But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered what he actually meant.

In 1993 he came face to face with the bombers, but he reported sadly: "They listened, but they made no change in their position... I went in innocence to search for what my heart told me might be a way forward. I got nothing."

So here's the question: should forgiveness be automatic or is it conditional on something?

In other words, do I have to forgive someone who refuses to acknowledge they've done wrong?

I'm convinced that the key Bible verse is Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

So ask yourself, how, in Christ, did God forgive me?

Now let me just pause and say that hardly a week goes by when there aren't in church some people who aren't yet committed Christians.

You might know you're not yet a Christian.

Or perhaps you're not sure.

You can tell by asking yourself this question:

Am I sure God will accept me if I die tonight?

If you're not sure that God has forgiven you, that he has promised you that he will remember your sins no more, please do something about it urgently.

There's nothing more important than knowing your future.

We're talking about the difference between eternal life and eternal death; what Jesus called Heaven and Hell.

So speak to someone and get it dealt with and get certain.

Back to the question: should my forgiveness of you be automatic or is it conditional on something?

Well, if we're to forgive in the same way that God forgave us in Christ, apply it to Christ's death on the cross.

Forgiveness is possible for you and me because he died for us on the cross, in our place.

But is my forgiveness conditional or automatic?

The clear answer from the Bible is that it is conditional on my repentance and my faith, my trusting, in him.

Luke 24:47: "repentance and forgiveness of sins [see the link] will be preached in [Jesus'] name to all nations..."

Acts 17:30: "In the past God overlooked... ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent."

Acts 2:38: Peter, on the day of Pentecost, told the crowd that they had just crucified God the son; they'd made a seriously wrong call, and God had proved it beyond all doubt by raising Jesus back to life.

The people are shocked rigid when they realise what they've done and ask Peter 'What can we do?'

He answers: "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

The New Testament is very clear that forgiveness and eternal life are only possible through repentance and faith in Jesus' death on my behalf.

So if you and I are to forgive one another just as in Christ God forgave us, then repentance, a change of heart, an acknowledgement that I've done wrong, is called for.

As is a heartfelt and genuine request for forgiveness.

If you're still not convinced, then listen to Jesus from Matthew 18 :15-20, and ask yourself why does he give us a structure for dealing with someone who doesn't repent in repentance isn't a condition?

'If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan...'

If there is no repentance, must I forgive them and promise never to raise it again with them, anyone else or myself?

No, if there is no repentance, Jesus actually demands that I keep bringing it up through this process in Matthew 18.

Now if that all seems like overkill, let me suggest two things.

Firstly, God's goal isn't forgiveness, but reconciliation.

"By this all men will know that you're my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:35

Do you see what a high priority Jesus places on you and me staying in good relationship?

That's why he says deal with things that come between us.

Secondly, Jesus isn't talking about every little cross word.

1 Peter 4:8 "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

Only those sins that lead to unreconciled relationship need the Luke 17 and Matthew 18 process.

For most things, I must overlook them as minor offences and hope that others will do the same with me.

But do beware of fooling yourself!

It's so easy to say 'love has covered that offence', but then never speak to them ever again!!

No, if you're thinking that, Jesus says you must go to them and deal with it.

Living with it

I want to finish with a couple of comments about the problems of living with this stuff in the real world.

There are three major issues you may be facing with all this.

The first is if the person has asked your forgiveness and you're finding it hard never to raise it again.

Vengeful thoughts and cutting comments can feel so good!

But they are always sinful! You must forgive!

If that is your issue today, here's a few pointers.

Put it down on a prayer list and every day ask God to give you the sheer, gutsy grace to remember the sin no more.

But also tell a good and trusted Christian friend.

Not who the person is or what they've done.

Just that you're struggling to keep your promise to forgive someone, and need them to pray with and for you in it.

And learn by heart Philippians 4:8, to think on and distract yourself when you struggle.

“whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things.”

Write down all the things about them that are positive, and whenever you're tempted to think on what they did, pray through your list of positive things about them.

And make a second list of good and positive things in your life to think about when you're tempted to get bitter.

Planning the garden; cooking a favourite recipe; whatever would be great fun for you.

Distract your sinful mind!

The second situation is when the person who has wronged you refuses to be reconciled.

In that case, if you've done all that Jesus demands of you in Matthew 18, you've reached the end of the road.

Keep praying for God to bring them to repentance.

But you need to watch yourself that you don't become bitter and twisted and vengeful.

Romans 12:17 says “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.”

Hebrews 12:15 “See to it that no-one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”

Again, if you're struggling not to become bitter with someone who won't ask your forgiveness, get a friend's help to pray with and for you.

Use the Philippians verse to think on positive things when you're going down an unhelpful road in your head.

And keep telling yourself, and God, that if and when the person comes round, you will forgive them - indeed, that you long to do that and put it all behind you.

Finally, be aware that even if something has been repented, forgiven and reconciled, there may be continuing consequences.

If it was adultery or rape, there may be a pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease.

If it was theft, there may be ongoing financial difficulties.

If it was slander, many may have believed the lies about you.

There may be a legal punishment that has to be faced.

All of those and many other consequences may follow you, even if you have sought and received, or offered and given, Biblical forgiveness as Jesus sets it out.

Peoples lives are blighted by the continuing consequences of sin, even when they've been dealt with and reconciled.

That's just a part of living in a fallen world.

The best way is to avoid all sin!

The second best is Jesus' way of confrontation, repentance and forgiveness.

Conclusion

“The story is told of a certain physician who treated many poor people. At his death it was discovered that in his record book there was a large number of names of these poor people with a line drawn through their accounts and the word ‘forgiven’ written next to their debts. His widow, nevertheless, attempted to collect these debts. Because these poor persons could not pay, she failed to do so, and at length she took the matter to court. When the judge examined the book he asked her, ‘Is this your husband's handwriting?’ She agreed that it was. ‘Well, then,’ he said, ‘there isn't a judge in England that could change the fact: what your husband has forgiven is forgiven.’

There is power in forgiveness!

Forgiveness is a promise every Christian must make if asked, and one that no Christian may ever withdraw.

Let's pray together.

Prayer (do business)