

Forgiveness and Repentance

Part 3

Do we always forgive – even if there is no repentance on the part of the offender?

Luke 17:3-5

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
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Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him." ⁵ And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith (Luke 17:3-5).

Preface

Shortly after the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado, 15 crosses were placed near the school; one cross for every person who had died. Twelve students and one teacher were shot by the two assailants – of course that's thirteen. The two extra crosses which were erected, and placed among the victim's, commemorated the two students who had done all the killing. As odd as that may seem, that is not my concern as it relates to this morning's message. There was a related action that I think does touch on our topic.

What I would like us to consider, as we continue our study on forgiveness and repentance has to do with the hand-lettered sign posted somewhere near the campus (apparently from a Christian club) that read, "We forgive you Eric and Dylan." Setting aside for now that the sign was not posted by the family members of the victims, but fellow students (who may not have had any business either forgiving or not forgiving the two shooters), is that an appropriate response to two people who drew their last breaths in rebellion against God, killing others then themselves?

There are generally two responses to this: "Wow, what forgiveness!" or, "Wow what misguided moral confusion!" Which is it? The way we respond to this might tell us something about our understanding of forgiveness.

Review

In our series on forgiveness and repentance, we have discussed how forgiveness is a decision on the part of the offended person to “send away” the debt of the offending person – to acquit or pardon others the way we, as Christians, have been acquitted by God. Whatever ailments may accompany the issue of forgiveness by the offended party or the offending party, the unwillingness to make a commitment to forgive stalls and corrupts everything; in addition, and more importantly, it is dishonoring to God.

We then pursued understanding why it is so difficult to forgive others. The bottom line of this difficulty is an unawareness or ignorance of the incalculable abyss of our own sin before God – the immense unpayable debt we all owe – as we discussed in the parable of the unmerciful servant, “ALL THAT DEBT!”

Those were the first two issues in the series. The remaining four topics are:

3. Do we always forgive – even if there is no repentance on the part of the offender? I had originally attached the following to this topic: ‘**And if there is no repentance (and even if there is), how do we spiritually, emotionally, psychologically or functionally deal with the wound?**’ but have since decided that should be dealt with independently.

4. Is there a difference between forgiving and forgetting? Does forgiveness mean ignoring what happened?

5. What is repentance? What does it look like?

6. How do we reconcile forgiveness as a necessary virtue to salvation?

Do we always forgive – even if there is no repentance on the part of the offender?

Imitating God’s Forgiveness

Back to our question: Was it appropriate for the Christian students to proclaim their forgiveness of the two killers? Was that a fitting act of forgiveness or misguided moral confusion? I would say their motives

seemed good. They want people to know that there is forgiveness for even the most heinous acts imaginable. The Scriptures record the unsearchable forgiveness of God extended to those who have done hideous things.

Yet, at the same time, the Scriptures always seem to attach repentance to forgiveness. This morning's passage says it clearly:

Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him (Luke 17:3).

We'll get into detailed definition of repentance with question five. But for the sake of this morning's message, let us understand that repentance is a turning from the sin and turning to righteousness or to God – the offending brother stops doing the wrong thing and starts doing the right thing.

If our forgiveness is to resemble God's forgiveness, there must be repentance. If we're seeking to display the attributes of God in our relationships with each other then our love should resemble His love, our holiness should resemble His holiness, our patience should resemble His patience and our forgiveness should resemble His forgiveness.

Certainly we recognize limitations in our ability to do this – God knows the hearts of men in such a way as to know exactly when patience should turn into judgment. But to the extent that we can, we should seek to allow God's word to determine human interaction – and forgiveness requires repentance. To declare forgiveness without repentance is simply a misrepresentation of the proper components of forgiveness.

If I desire that others see the love of God in my life, I must love others as I have been loved. If I desire others see the forgiveness of God in my life then I must forgive others as I have been forgiven. The forgiveness I received from God followed repentance.

Restoring the Brother

Not that I think the worst of humanity, but right about now I need to address what might be creeping into our own sinful little hearts – that is the danger of viewing the holding back of forgiveness as a validation for resentment, hatred or some other slithering little vice we tend to entertain. You might be thinking to yourself, "Whew, I sure am glad I don't have to forgive that guy. This church is great! What other sinful stuff am I allowed to do?"

Well here is where this entire series on forgiveness and repentance takes a huge turn. What tends to nag at our hearts in this issue is “Lord, how do I cope with my pain?” Again, I don’t intend to utterly ignore that. But the answer, which is in both testaments (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31), and, I believe to be a soul-transforming endeavor of everyone involved, is **“love your neighbor as yourself”**.

If we have been offended by a legitimate transgression (and by legitimate we’re talking about an objective sinful action – something someone else could testify to if they witnessed it), we now have a responsibility to minister, in love, to the offending brother. We are to follow the admonition given by Paul in Galatians 6

Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted (Galatians 6:1).

For one second we thought, “I don’t have to forgive, I’m off the hook!” By the time we’re through here we might prefer the ease of forgiving, forgetting and getting lost, rather than pursuing what God actually calls the offended person to do. Friends, there is a call in the life of the offended party – it is a call to love and minister to the very person who offended you. Jesus taught:

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more *than others*? Do not even the tax collectors do so (Matthew 5:44-47)?

Keeping in mind that Jesus will later teach that “a man’s enemies will be those of his own household” (Matthew 10:36), these are very intimate betrayals of which Jesus speaks.

It would appear Jesus is instructing us to love people who, by the very nature of the case, would cause our skin to crawl; make us angry, sad,

bitter (you name the reaction). They are our enemies who seek to curse, hate, spitefully use and persecute us. According to Jesus, there is very little virtue in loving someone who is easy to love – evil people do that! The sun rising and the raining falling on the evil and good, just and unjust illustrates God’s indiscriminate provision for all. That is what our love is to look like; it’s indiscriminate!

Years ago, as young Christians, my friends and I loved passages like these. We loved how Jesus was criticized for keeping company with sinners; we loved how Jesus taught us to love sinners. As time went on and we all became parents and began to see the mess made by those who practice sin and deceit, I began to observe how we don’t mind sinners in the church, provided their sin isn’t too bad and they don’t get too close – the token sinners is nice for the poster but not for the parlor.

Loving sinners was such a noble thought before we realized how painful those sinners can make our lives – that there was a cost (maybe emotionally, maybe psychologically, maybe financially) to loving sinners. All of the sudden God is pushing our boundaries and these hypothetical concepts having taken residence and God is calling us to love and minister.

God does not forgive a person who has not repented; Jesus taught that we forgive a brother who sins against us **“if he repents.”** It is not an imitation of God’s forgiveness to forgive a person who has not repented.

But that does not mean that God was inactive in our lives prior to our repentance.

Prevenient Grace

There was the prevenient grace of God (prevenient grace is grace which comes first, preceding all human decision and endeavor) at work in our hearts which led us to repentance.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins...¹⁹ We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:10, 19).

If God were inactive, waiting for us to repent, we never would have repented! It is God who actually grants repentance.

And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient,²⁵ in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth,²⁶ and *that* they may come to their senses *and escape* the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to *do* his will (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

And notice that Christians have a role in the process. We are to be gentle, patient, willing to humbly correct.

If we're seeking to imitate God, then we, if I can use this term, are to exercise a prevenient love and grace toward our offender. We are actively seeking to restore our erring brother, with a heart that is ready to forgive...and more importantly, recognizing their offense is primarily against God and not us.

Bearing Sin

When I see my children respond inappropriately to me, my primary concern is not that I have been offended. My concern is what is happening in their hearts (or mine) that would allow them to think it is acceptable to dishonor their father. My bigger concern is not that I have been offended, but God has been offended! And I need to assume, at whatever level I can, the responsibility of addressing that bigger issue lest I bear the sin of their rebellion.

In this morning's passage we read that we are to "rebuke" the sinning brother. A rebuke is a reprimand, an expression of strong disapproval. It is a loving thing to do and should not be thought of as venting on the part of the one delivering the rebuke. In a parallel passage we see a warning which comes along with the call to rebuke.

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him.¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I *am* the LORD (Leviticus 19:17, 18).

Notice how the rebuke is included in our love of our neighbor. But God is warning us that if we fail to rebuke, we are in danger of bearing sin. It is possible for us to walk away, as the offended party, wearing sin on our back for not appropriately responding to the sin of others. It is simply not okay to ignore the sin of others.

When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked *man* shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand.¹⁹ Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul (Ezekiel 3:18, 19).

Rejoicing in Repentance

We run around like we're the offended party, when it is God who is the offended party. A lack of someone's repentance should concern us in terms of their standing with God. We are called to minister to those who have offended us. And we are to rejoice in their repentance as the angels in heaven.

Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10).

Yet we might find that after rebuking the offending brother and they do repent, we become Jonah, when God saw the works of Nineveh and **"relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry"** (Jonah 3:10, 4:1). "Lord" we might say, "I was rooting for judgment and you brought mercy!"

Living Out Forgiveness

There is no forgiveness without repentance. But there should always be love and a ministerial passion, and a heart ready and willing to forgive. And when the repentance comes, we are not to be Jonahs. It was precisely a church's lack of willingness to live out the forgiveness of an offending brother that caused Paul to write,

But if anyone has caused grief, he has not grieved me, but all of you to some extent – not to be too severe. ⁶ This punishment which *was inflicted* by the majority *is* sufficient for such a man, ⁷ so that, on the contrary, you *ought* rather to forgive and comfort *him*, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. ⁸ Therefore I urge you to reaffirm *your* love to him. ⁹ For to this end I also wrote, that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. ¹⁰ Now whom you forgive anything, I also *forgive*. For if indeed I have forgiven anything, I have forgiven that one for your sakes in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices (2 Corinthians 2:5-11).

This was written to a church. But it doesn't work unless the individuals in the church adopt a disposition to take responsibility to **"forgive, comfort and reaffirm love."** Paul is concerned – God is concerned – that the offending person be **"swallowed up in too much sorrow."** And the mentioning of Satan, which Paul does sparingly, must be a warning to all regarding how dark it can become when we fail to pursue these admonitions with a whole heart.

Questions for Study

1. Do you think a general proclamation of forgiveness to people who have performed sinful acts is appropriate without repentance (pages 2-4)?
2. If we don't forgive the unrepentant sinner, what do we do (pages 5, 6)?
3. How does prevenient grace affect the way we interact with those who have sinned against us (pages 6, 7)?
4. How is it possible that we might bear the sin of those who sin against us (pages 7, 8)?
5. How should we respond to someone's repentance and why (pages 8, 9)?
6. How does one live out forgiveness (page 9)?