

Date: September 17, 2017

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35

Title: WHOLENESS OF OUR HEARTS

Pastor John Ortberg tells a humorous story about an umpire in a softball league in Colorado. One day, during the off season, this unfortunate umpire got stopped by a police officer for speeding. He pleaded for mercy. He explained to the policeman that he was a good driver and told why this particular day he had to be in a hurry.

The officer didn't buy his argument. He said, "Tell it to the judge."

When softball season rolled around, the umpire was umpiring his first game. Guess who was the first batter to the plate? It was the same police officer who ticketed the umpire for speeding. They recognized each other. It was awkward for the officer.

The officer asked as he prepared to swing at the first pitch, "So, how did the thing with the ticket go?"

With a menacing look on his face the umpire replied, "You better swing at everything." The umpire was set to get his revenge.

Sometimes revenge can be deliciously sweet, yet most of us understand that vengeance is not a satisfactory response to being hurt, especially for those who follow Christ. But neither is carrying around a lifetime of hurt feelings. The answer as we all know is forgiveness. But how do we forgive someone who has hurt us? How do we overcome our painful emotions and reconcile with someone who has done us wrong? That's what our lesson for today is about. How do we go about forgiving?

Simon Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Simon Peter's question was a sincere one. He wanted to know exactly what the Master expected out of him. The prominent rabbis of the day were teaching that one should forgive someone who has done us wrong three times. Was that enough Simon Peter wondered? And so he asked Christ this important question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Some of us would like an answer to the same question. Forgiveness is a big problem in our lives. There have been persons who have wronged us and it is so, so difficult to let go of our feelings of anger, resentment and even hatred. How many times shall we forgive?

Jesus' answer was, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." That's a demanding stance. Some of us may feel it's asking too much of mere mortals. And yet Jesus, believe it or not, was looking out for our best interest. Forgiveness, is to our benefit, as much as it is for the person who has injured us.

Our question for today is, how do we forgive? Forgiveness is a redemptive act that's essential to our mental, emotional and spiritual well being. It's not enough to

simply “act civil” toward a person who has wronged us, to let “by-gones be by-gones.” We must move from our hurt, to reconciliation, or else we leave an open wound that’s not allowed to heal. But how? How do we forgive?

Let’s begin by asking, why do we find it so hard to forgive? Obviously, one answer is, that pain is simply too deep to forgive. Pain and traumas we have witnessed or experienced, live on in our memories. Even years later they can cause us fresh pain each time we recall them.

Some experiences of pain and trauma you can relate to, might be with an abusive parent. Or it may have been a teacher or a friend or a sibling or a spouse, who abused us. Somewhere along the way someone has hurt us deeply and we can still feel the pain. For some, the pain is so intense that it’s simply easier to cut that person out of our lives than to forgive. That’s one reason it’s difficult to forgive, the pain is too deep.

Pride can also get in the way of forgiveness, as does a mistaken sense of principle. We think to ourselves, “This will teach him a lesson.” Then there are family members and friends who may encourage our estrangement.

They probably mean well, but they may not understand our own need for healing. Pain, pride, other people, these are usually the reasons why we don’t forgive. And our inability to forgive, can have devastating effects on us, as well as on others. Holding on to resentful feelings can shorten our lives, poison our memories, weaken our relationship with God, and even affect our own feelings of self-worth. This is in addition to the damage to the relationship, with the person we can’t forgive.

Several years ago, a book came out titled *To Forgive is Human--How to Put Your Past in the Past*. It was written by 3 doctors who evaluated the various benefits that come when you move past resentment to forgiveness. Here are three of those benefits:

First, when you let go of past hurts and learn to forgive, there’s a physical benefit to you. Attitudes of bitterness, hostility, and resentment are like poisons and toxins to your body. The doctors claim, chronic anger and hostility can be more toxic to your health, than being a smoker or eating a high fat diet.

Secondly, there’s a psychological benefit to forgiveness. People with angry, bitter thoughts become angry, bitter people, held hostage by their own bitterness.

And finally there’s a relational benefit. Any time you forgive someone you consider an enemy, you open the door to the potential of reconciliation. These doctors say there’s a high price to pay from holding on to resentment and hatred. But how do we let go and forgive? That’s the question. Let me suggest three ways.

First, we let go by recognizing that forgiveness is a gift from God. We have been forgiven, and so we’re able to forgive others.

Jesus followed his answer to Simon Peter with a delightful parable of a man who owed his king ten thousand bags of gold. Gold today sells for about \$1,000 an ounce. Think how much 10,000 bags of gold would be worth today . . . maybe trillions.

Amazingly, the king forgave the man this enormous debt. And here's the second amazing thing: This same man who had been forgiven this enormous debt had an acquaintance who owed him a hundred silver coins, perhaps worth a few hundred dollars. And this very man who had his enormous debt discharged by the king couldn't forgive the tiny debt owed him by this acquaintance. To make matters worse, he had this acquaintance thrown into jail. The contrast couldn't have been starker, a man had been forgiven a trillion dollars and he was unwilling to forgive a debt of a few hundred dollars.

Now, Jesus wasn't simply telling about one man in one particular place. He was talking about you and me. We have been forgiven by God. We're sinners saved by grace. We have been forgiven an enormous debt. If we can see that, it can be a powerful antidote, to our feelings of resentment, over a wrongdoing someone has done to us. We remember just how much God has forgiven us and we're enabled to forgive.

It's like a little boy who had done something very naughty. His mother was quite disturbed by his behavior. In the kitchen there was a chalkboard on the wall where they wrote down phone messages. When no one was around, this troubled little boy wrote on that chalkboard, "Dear mom, if you forgive me, please wipe this message out."

He went to his room, and about an hour later returned, and, to his great joy, discovered that the chalkboard had been completely erased!

That's what God has done for us. Can we not do the same sort of thing for people who have hurt us? We forgive because God has first forgiven us.

We also need to recognize that forgiveness is the most powerful witness we have to the activity of grace in our own lives.

The great Christian scholar and writer C.S. Lewis struggled for many years to forgive a childhood teacher, who made life miserable for him. Lewis was one of the most influential Christian writers of the twentieth century, yet he was a human being. He struggled to forgive this headmaster. But he knew that his witness for Christ would not be completely authentic, until he somehow managed to forgive this one who had caused him so much pain. At the end of his life, he was finally victorious with God's help. His ability to forgive at the end of his life, was a testimony to the power of Christ's amazing grace. There are some wrongs, that can only be righted with Divine help.

For some of us, the nursing of a grudge has become a deep spiritual problem. It weakens our witness to Christ's presence in our lives. Besides the damage it does to us personally, it prevents us from being effective in our ministry to others. We need to recognize, that forgiveness is a gift from God, to be passed on to others. It's the most powerful witness we have, to the reality of God's grace in our lives.

Finally, we need to recognize, that forgiveness is a positive activity, necessary to the healing and wholeness of our own hearts.

Reader's Digest once asked its readers to complete this sentence: "I Never Regret . . ." Think about that for a minute: "I never regret . . ." Here's how some of their readers responded: "I never regret . . . the day I quit smoking." Sandy Biss, Elbow Lake, MN. "I never regret . . . taking naps and leaving large tips." Rhiannon Rae, Hershey, PA. "I never regret . . . serving my country." Sharon Parsons, Oak Hill, OH. "I never regret . . . eating the last cookie." Christina Hicks, Clarksville, TN. And listen to this last response: "I never regret . . . forgiving the person who caused me pain, which gave me relief, I never thought I could have." Erika Jones, New York, NY. Erika Jones is a very smart person, who learned about the power of forgiveness.

The Jewish philosopher, Hannah Arendt, once had these wise words to say, "Forgiveness is the only power which can stop the stream of painful memories."

Now please understand. Forgiveness is not passive resignation to a bad situation. We don't shrug our shoulders and say, "Well, there's nothing else to do. I might as well forgive." There's little healing in that kind of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a positive, joyful activity in which we change from seeing ourselves as victims, to seeing ourselves as victors. Forgiveness allows us to move from weakness to strength, from inadequacy to self-affirmation. Forgiveness allows us to experience within our own lives the power and the presence of the indwelling Christ.

Is there someone you need to forgive? An unfaithful spouse, an overbearing parent, a friend who has stabbed you in the back, an employer who has taken advantage of you? I know there's pain. There may also be pride, principle, and other people to consider. The most powerful witness we have, to the action of the grace of God at work in our own lives, is the ability to forgive others. As we forgive, we heal not only the wounds of a broken relationship, we find healing for wounds inflicted in our own hearts by anger, hurt and resentment.

God has forgiven each of us for every soiled thought, act, and deed of which we are capable. Can we not forgive one another? Three times? Seven times? Yes, even seventy-seven times? Forgive and find the emotional, mental and spiritual freedom that only Christ can give by Trusting, Believing, and having an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.