

Forgive One Another
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
October 31, 2021-AM Service
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Colossians 3:12-14

Today's 'one another' is particularly significant. All the 'one anothers' are important, but forgiveness stands out. It stands out because it's a practice for the most significant breaks in community. While forbearance means putting up with someone else's annoying habits and rough edges; forgiveness addresses the wounds, the trauma suffered when someone sins against us. They don't just annoy us; we are their victims. Forgiveness aims to heal the deepest tears in the community fabric.

Maybe that's why Scripture emphasizes forgiveness so much. While the Bible pushes all the 'one anothers,' it pushes forgiveness harder. Jesus goes out of his way to emphasize it. First, there is his encounter with Peter where he tells the disciples, you don't just forgive someone once, you don't forgive them twice, you forgive them '70 times 7.' Essentially Jesus says, 'never stop forgiving.' And then there's this: In the sermon on the mount, right after he teaches the Lord's prayer Jesus says this to his disciples: "If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. If you don't forgive others their sins, your father will not forgive you." Forgive and God will forgive you. Don't forgive and God will not forgive you. Jesus said it. Matthew 6:14-15. You can look it up.

This is a hard saying. It sounds like Jesus is saying, "Forgive, or else..." However you understand it, Jesus is clearly saying here: "Forgive! Do it! This is really important, people!" He wants his church to practice forgiveness.

What exactly does this practice look like? When Jesus calls us to forgive what exactly is he calling us to do? That's not a simple question, because not everyone agrees about what forgiveness should look like. On December 1 1997, Michael Carneal, a 14-year-old freshman at Heath High School in Paducah, Kentucky brought three guns to his school, disguised as an art project. When he arrived, he pulled out one of the guns and shot eight members of a prayer circle that had gathered in the school's lobby. Three of them died. In a few moments lives were lost and families were thrown into chaos. All the students of Heath High school were traumatized by the event. Two days after the event a group of students made national news when they publically forgave the killer. They made signs that said "We forgive you Michael. And "You are forgiven by Jesus." They put the signs in front of the school.

Some people thought this was wonderful and celebrated the strength of these kids. Others were appalled. One of the appalled wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal called *The Sin of Forgiveness*. He thought this kind of forgiveness was a horror. "I am appalled and frightened by this feel-good doctrine of automatic forgiveness," wrote the author, "This doctrine undermines the moral foundation of American civilization because it advances the amoral notion that no matter how much you hurt other people, millions of your fellow citizens will forgive you." The author worries that this kind of forgiveness is too soft on sin, it's too soft on injustice, that it gives evil a free pass. He thinks we should hold people accountable.

What about that? Is the writer correct? Is the forgiveness offered by these girls amoral and destructive? Rachel DenHollander would probably have some questions about those girls and their signs. When she was a young gymnast, Rachel was a victim of Dr. Larry Nassar, one of dozens of girls he sexually abused. At Larry Nassar's sentencing, Rachel's victim impact statement made national news. DenHollander is a devout Christian, but when she saw Larry Nassar bringing his Bible to the hearings and talking about how he prayed for forgiveness, she had this reaction. "Larry, you spoke of praying for forgiveness. But Larry, if you have read the Bible you carry, you know forgiveness does not come from doing good things, as if good deeds can erase what you have done. It comes from repentance which requires facing and acknowledging the truth about what you have done in all of its utter depravity and horror without mitigation, without excuse." She went on to press for the maximum sentence. Was that unforgiving? What does forgiveness look like? What are we doing when we forgive? What is this practice that Jesus is calling us to in the strongest possible terms?

Part of the confusion comes from the fact that we use the word forgiveness for different things. When those high school students put out their signs saying "We forgive you Michael," *they were trying to communicate something important*. I think it's an overstatement to say that they are undermining the foundations of America. They were trying to say, 'we do not give in to hate. We are inclined towards love. We will love our enemies.' Their signs represented a high school attempt to bend their hurt and anger towards love. That's a good thing. Sometimes we see that merciful inclination and we call it forgiveness. Forgiveness is the name we give to this inclination away from hate and towards mercy. I suppose it's okay that we do that, but it's confusing. Because while this merciful instinct is an essential part for forgiveness, it's not the whole of forgiveness.

When Rachel DenHollander talks about forgiveness, she's not just thinking about this merciful inclination, she's thinking about the whole practice of forgiveness as laid out in Scripture. In the Bible, forgiveness isn't just a good feeling; it's a long process, a slow difficult road towards justice and reconciliation. When Paul talks, he calls us to forgive one another in Ephesians 4, he wants more than an inclination, he wants the whole process.

What are the elements of the longer process? What does full biblical forgiveness look like? Let's take a moment to look at that. I will break full biblical forgiveness into four parts.

First, Christian forgiveness is inclined towards mercy. This is the aspect of forgiveness that shows up in the students' response to Michael Carneal. When someone hurts us deeply, it's easy for our hurt and anger to become the frame through which we look at that person. And when hurt and anger becomes our frame, we are setting yourself up for hatred. We Christians

are people of grace and mercy. Our baseline approach, our frame, is faith hope and love. “Love your enemies! Says Jesus, “Pray for those who persecute you!” “Do not take revenge.” “Overcome evil with good.” That doesn’t mean we forget or ignore sin; they’re just not our primary frame.

Jesus calls us to mercy because that’s how God dealt with us. God did not treat us as our sins deserved. In Christ, God shows us mercy and he shows it before we do anything. Romans 5:8-while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:10-while we were still God’s enemies, we were reconciled. Even while we were in rebellion against God, spitting in his face, God inclines towards mercy. Even while God is still angry with our sin-and our sin does make him angry-he is inclined towards mercy. This mercy is central to his being. Remember in Exodus 34 when God showed himself to Moses? Moses couldn’t live and see God’s face so he showed Moses his back-do you remember how Moses put what he saw into words? “The Lord, The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.” This inclination towards mercy and restoration is at the center of God. And if mercy is at the center of God, if his mercy is what saves us, of course God wants that same mercy to live in us, of course God wants us to see others in the same merciful frame.

Forgiveness needs more than just a merciful inclination, it needs judgment. That’s the second component of forgiveness. This is the component that Rachel DenHollander is so concerned about. Forgiveness can’t just absorb sin into a misty haze of goodwill; sin needs to be reckoned. Sin needs to be dealt with. Forgiveness needs clear judgment.

This judgment has two parts. The first is discernment. What sin was committed? What was going on inside the person who sinned? What spiritual corruption caused this? What exactly went wrong and what damage was done? Who was hurt and how were they hurt? And how can we address this hurt?

Jesus’ forgiveness includes this sort of discernment. When you meet Jesus, mercy may be his inclination, mercy may be at the center of his character, but his mercy isn’t just a “hey don’t worry about it, everybody makes mistakes so bring it in and let’s hug it out.” No. When you met Jesus-and you will meet Jesus-you will meet a mercy of piercing judgment. His discernment will see through all your masks. His discernment will see through all your flimsy excuses. His discernment will shine a bright light on all your self-deceptions. Remember what the woman at the well said after meeting Jesus? “Come and meet the man who told me everything I ever did.” Piercing discernment.

The second part of the judgment is confrontation. Once the sins are discerned they need to be named. The sinner must understand what he did. If forgiveness is to be complete and full, the person who sinned against you must know and understand what they did and who they hurt and how much they hurt them. This too is God’s way. God may be the God of compassion and love, but his love confronts us with our sin. Whether it’s the Old Testament prophets confronting Israel and calling them to repentance, or whether it’s Jesus confronting us in his parables of judgment, he confronted our sin. His confrontation is motivated by mercy and it was aimed at our salvation, but it was pointed and specific.

Which brings us to the third component of forgiveness. Full Christian forgiveness requires sincere repentance. So far, the victim has done all the work in the forgiveness process. This third stage is the sinner’s responsibility. At some point the person who gave the hurt has to admit what they’ve done. They need to acknowledge the depth of their sin and the hurt that it caused. They need to show they are truly sorry for their sin. This confession must be sincere, sorrowful and specific. It can’t just be, “Okay, I admit what I did! I’m sorry. Now can we put this behind us and go back to normal because Jesus says you have to forgive.” True repentance doesn’t just make a general apology, true repentance is specific, sincere and sorrowful. True repentance commits itself to behavior change.

This too follows the pattern of scripture. Think of David’s apology in Psalm 51. After committing adultery with Bathsheba, that Psalm expresses his repentance and his is sincere, sorrowful and specific. Jesus preached repentance: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” On Pentecost Sunday Peter preached repentance: “Repent and be baptized every one of you!” If the prodigal son had come home from the far country, and the father had run to him and thrown his arms around him and kissed him, but then the Son had said, “Dad, give me a job and a meal because I’m hungry and tired, and this whole thing is your fault.” Would dad have still killed the fatted calf and thrown a party? Full forgiveness aims at reconciliation. But without penitence and genuine repentance on the part of the sinner, restoration can’t happen.

Which brings us to the fourth and final component of forgiveness. Restitution and reconciliation. Once the person who sinned has shown proper penitence, part of repentance is an effort to make amends. When we hurt each other, some of the damage we do can’t be repaired. Not by us, anyway. A father spends too much time at work and fails to give his young child the attention and love she needed. She tearfully confronts him as an adult. He can’t bring back those lost years. But he can do something. After apologizing he can try to make restitution. He can send her daily texts of encouragement. He can call her every week. He can fly out to see her as often as she’ll allow. He can pay for the therapy. Over time these things may not fix everything that’s broken, but they can allow for a context where love and trust can be restored.

This is what you see in the story of Zacchaeus. Jesus comes to dine with the sinful tax collector. In mercy he inclines to eat with this sinful man. At the end of the dinner, Zacchaeus is cut to the heart and he says that he will pay everybody back 4 times what he stole from them and he will give half his money to the poor. That’s restitution. And Jesus responds, “Today, salvation has come to this house.” In Christ’s forgiveness of us, Jesus himself pays the price of restitution. Jesus restores what has been damaged and he does it at the cost of his life.

Those are the four stages. In this broken world they are rarely practiced all the way through. Most of our forgiveness is done in fits and starts and bits and parts. Sometimes there is repentance, but no merciful inclination. Sometimes there is a

merciful inclination, but no real repentance or attempt at restitution. But when we try to live out full forgiveness, the life of the Spirit takes deeper root in our hearts.

That's the last thing I want to say this morning. Forgiveness isn't some task out there that we have to accomplish by our own strength, forgiveness is the fruit of the Spirit taking deeper root in us. That's how to understand Jesus' words in Matthew 6. When Jesus says, "if you don't forgive, the heavenly Father won't forgive you," he's not saying, "forgive or else." He's saying something more like: "Folks this forgiveness thing, this is the heart of who I am. It's the heart of this community. It's the song we are singing. It's the dance we are dancing. If you want to dance the dance of bitterness, rage, slander, and malice, you won't be on my dancefloor, you won't be singing my song. So, come on! Don't give into fear and anger and resentment! Take my hand. Let my mercy fill you. Let my grace be your food. Let my hope be your horizon. Because when my full forgiveness lives among you, my name is glorified and you will be changed." ©Rev. Peter Jonker