

Sermon for Sunday, September 3, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"HOW TO BE FORGIVING AND FORGIVEN"
St. Luke 7:36-50

Text: "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." St. Luke 7:47

One of the most prominent psychologists of our day is Dr. Hobart Mowrer, who is professor of clinical psychology at the University of Illinois. The traditional psychoanalytic theory of emotional illness has operated on the assumption that psychosis develops out of a basic conflict between the conscious and the unconscious in a person. But Dr. Mowrer rejects this theory and insists that emotional illness results from a basic barrier between the conscious self and other people. In other words, much of our contemporary illness arises out of our inability to love and be loved, to be a friend and to have a friend.

Jesus may not have been a trained psychologist with a degree behind his name, but he certainly understood people. He once told us that the greatest commandment was to love God totally, but then he went on to add, "And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

And isn't it right here that most of us run into the most serious difficulties? What is the one thing in the lives of all of us that causes us the most unhappiness, the most tensions, the most tears, the most anger? Isn't it a break-down in relationship to someone else. As Charlie Brown says, "It would be a pretty nice world if it weren't for the people!"

Yet the fact is the Bible tells us something about ourselves that has some serious implications. The Bible tells us that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." And the truth is, when we sin we are going to hurt others. As a matter of fact almost everything we do involves others in one way or another. Many young people today complain that they want to be free to do "their thing." Yet, no man is an island and what one does implicates and involves others whether he intends it that way or not.

So, Dr. Mowrer is right when he says that most emotional illness results from a barrier between the conscious self and others. Actually, the problem is even more serious than that. It is more serious because the Bible tells us that the break down in our relationships with others leads to a breakdown in our relationship to God as well. See how it works! The Bible says, "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar." The Bible says, "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen."

So, on the one hand your emotional health depends on your relationships to others, and on the other hand your spiritual health also depends on your relationship to others. Well, that leaves quite a dilemma. All of us are sinners and as a consequence our interpersonal relationships will suffer. This in turn damages our relationship to God. And the question is, how do we solve this dilemma? How do we overcome this desperate problem? St. Paul gives us the answer in Ephesians 4:31 and 32. There he writes, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

The key to adequate, healthy relationships to others is to practice forgiveness. Because we do hurt one another, the only way to restore the brokenness is through forgiveness.

Now, unfortunately, to forgive may be the most difficult thing a person can do. When you've been hurt or treated unfairly or abused in some way, to forgive may be almost impossible. Because forgiveness isn't easy, let me suggest to you some Biblical principles to help you practice the art of forgiving.

The first principle I would like to suggest is the principle of forgetting. Over in the book of Jeremiah God tells of the time when he will write his law on the hearts of his people and he says, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." In my first pastorate as a young man I once did something that displeased one of my elders. I went to him to ask his forgiveness and he said to me, "Well, I forgive it but I will never forget it." Do you think he really forgave me? I remember reading a remark once made by a great lady. She was being particularly nice to another person and someone asked her why she was being so nice. The person asked, "Don't you remember what that person said about you once?" "No," replied the great lady, "I distinctly remember forgetting it."

One of the biggest problems I have in counseling with people who are having marriage problems is this thing of forgetting. Each of the marriage partners feels hurt and wounded and I spend hours listening to them drag out offenses and hurts that go back for years. They have not learned the art of forgetting. If someone has offended you and you have forgiven them, you must also forget it. Don't talk about it. Don't think about it or permit your mind to dwell on it. Don't drag it out and rehash it on every little provocation. Deliberately put it out of your mind by an act of the will. To really forgive you must also forget.

Isn't this the way you want it to work with you and God. Everyone of us in the past few days have done things that we want God to forgive us for. Is it an appealing prospect to imagine God spending all eternity reminding you, throwing it up to you, of what you have done even though he has forgiven you? No, God doesn't work that way for he says, "I will remember their sin no more."

So, the first guideline to forgiveness is the principle of forgetting. The second principle is the principle of absorption or of non-retaliation. See how it works! Picture Stephen, the first Christian to give his life for Jesus, as he is being stoned by an enraged mob. There in the midst of agony, pain and hurt--as the stones rain down on him--the Bible says he cried out, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge."

You see, one of the problems when personal relationships between two people break down is what I call the ping pong syndrome. You do something to me, I do something back; then you retaliate for that, and I do something to get even again. And on and on it goes, like a ping pong ball bouncing back and forth.

Have you ever caught yourself in the ping pong syndrome? I know I have. But look at Jesus on the cross. He was spat upon, beaten, ridiculed, mocked and at last cruelly nailed to that agonizing cross. Yet, with pain like a searing blindness in the brain, with agony twisting his tormented features, with a sword wound gaping in his side, with his hands and feet pierced with cruel spikes, this same Jesus--through parched and bleeding lips--whispered, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Yes, the principle of absorption. The spear of hurt has to be stopped somewhere. Somewhere we have to let it remain buried, even if it is in our own hearts. We can never get along with one another as long as sin is ricocheting back and forth between us. If we are to be able to forgive one another, somewhere the thrust of sin must be absorbed. The ping pong ball of retaliation must stop bouncing. And

surely that is what Christ had in mind when he told us to turn the other cheek.

A third principle of forgiveness is the principle of parity. Parity, of course, means "equality" and it is the principle that puts us all in the same boat. Let me illustrate. Remember the incident in the life of Jesus when the Jews brought to him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery? Because of her sin the Jews were ready to stone her. Yet, it was precisely at this point that Jesus reminded them of the principle of parity that put them all in the same boat. He said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

And doesn't this hit right at the heart of this business of forgiveness? Sure, someone hurts me, treats me unfairly, deals dishonestly with me--but what about me? Am I perfect? Do I always act fairly? Do I always do the loving thing? And, of course, I don't--and neither do you. It helps in forgiving others to remember that we are in the same boat because we are in need of forgiveness, too. It is a little bit harder for me to throw rocks at you when in my heart I know I deserve some stoning myself.

The title of our meditation this morning is, "How To Be Forgiving And Forgiven." Up until this point I have been talking about some principles of forgiveness. Let me close with a word about how to be forgiven. The first forgiveness has to do with your relationship to others. Being forgiven has to do with your relationship to God. The Bible says, in the words of Jesus, "And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25) And some ancient manuscripts add, "But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your trespasses."

That's hard saying, isn't it? Your forgiveness of others is the measure of God's forgiveness for you. Every Sunday we pray the Lord's prayer. We pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Do we really mean that? Are we truly willing for God's forgiveness of our sins to be determined by our forgiveness of others?

I remember reading a story once about an incident that happened in Kentucky many years ago. A man named Samuel Holmes was sentenced to jail for murder. A friend of his--a man named Young--appealed to Governor Blackburn on Holmes' behalf. Some years before that Holmes had rescued several persons from a wrecked vessel and the Kentucky legislature had even recorded its appreciation for the bravery of Holmes. Remembering this, the governor granted the pardon. Mr. Young went to the prison with the pardon in his pocket. "Sam," he said to Mr. Holmes, "if you were fully pardoned, what would you do?" "I would kill the judge who sentenced me and the man who testified against me," said Holmes who was bitter and unforgiving. Without a word Mr. Young left the prison and outside the gates he took the pardon from his pocket and tore it into fragments. Samuel Holmes lost his pardon simply because when he was forgiven he would not forgive.

The Bible says, "If a man say I love God and hateth his brother, he is a liar." The Bible also says, "Forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." Yes, forgiving and forgiven. The two are inseparably bound together.