**Forgiveness**

**Handout Message 11**

**Memory Verse:**

Ephesians 4:31 “*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another*, *forgiving one another, just as Christ forgave you.”*

*Last night, I talked with a new friend of mine who shared that he’s always seemingly been angry. “I spend half of my life with anger”, he said. “I’ve always lost a tremendous amount of sleep because of it.” As I sat at his kitchen table, with his two adorable toddler daughters running around us, he told me that because he’s now in recovery from drug addiction, he’s had to make amends with people with whom he’s been angry. So he called a guy who once beat him up and told him he was forgiving him. The guy was amazed, but it really wasn’t for him. It was for me, he said.*

*“And did you sleep soundly that night?”*

*He laughed. “Yes! Finally! It’s amazing how that happens. And you know what? I’ve found that when I'm not angry I can finally be in the moment with my wife and kids. Finally. I can just be here. I’m not thinking about what other people did to me.”*

*Hansen*

**Review of Anger**

Since forgiveness directly deals with anger, it is important to review the highlights of that topic discussed in our Prodigal curriculum. Remember that anger, in and of itself is not sin, but rather a helpful emotion that is God-given. Anger can warn us of trouble, conflict, and/or dysfunction of any kind. It is important to distinguish righteous anger from sinful anger but any anger that we hold onto “resides in the lap of fools”. Eccl. 7:9

Anger, if left unchecked, can worsen, leading to bitterness, rage, brawling, and slander. If anger is denied or not addressed, it can even manifest itself in depression. It is often said, “*Worry is thinking God might get it wrong, while bitterness is thinking that He did get it wrong.”* Scripture tells us that neither of these assumptions could be further from the truth (Romans 8:38). Logically, if you believe God can’t be trusted then you have to assume that role, which is impossible, incredibly tiring, and harmful.

**Forgiveness, the Antidote to Anger**

People often think that the opposite of anger is joy, or happiiness, but the opposite of anger is forgiveness. Anger often seeks revenge, while forgiveness lets it go. If you truly forgive in Biblical fashion, then you cure your anger and rid yourself of the sin associated with it.

* Ephesians 4:31 “*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as Christ forgave you.”* [emphasis mine]

Once again, in God’s merciful plan, when faced with such a difficult concept like forgiveness, we look to Jesus as our perfect teacher and example.

**Why is Forgiving so Hard?**

On one hand we have emphasized in this ministry that in order to parent well and love anyone well, we should allow people to reap what they sow. Forgiving can be especially hard when mistakenly viewed as “letting them off the hook” rather than in its proper biblical context.

So, if we forgive our prodigals, are we not enabling? We often worry that if we forgive them, they will never learn. A key concept to keep in mind is this. Forgiving does not mean foregoing consequences. *Loving* people and *trusting* people are two different things. We will see in a future lesson on unconditional love that often the most loving thing a person or parent can do is to allow people to reap the consequences of their actions. Such consequences might result in terrible pain, destruction, and heartache, but might just be the pain that brings our prodigals “home”. God’s love and forgiveness does not negate the necessity of consequences (Exodus 34:6,7; Prov. 19:18,19; Prov. 29:15,17,19,21).

Pride is a huge obstacle to forgiveness. Pride becomes an issue as we once again place ourselves on the throne instead of God. We feel we have been injured or offended and we feel we deserve to be compensated. We often focus on revenge and returning the pain as it feels so justified. If you hold yourself in high esteem as better than other people (e.g. better character, less sin, more moral, etc.), then it is much easier to judge others and feel the need for them to be punished. However Christ’s ministry pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) that we are to forgive in humility, realizing that we are all guilty sinners in the eyes of God and we must forgive rather than seek justice (Matt 5:38-48; Matt. 7:1-5).

In our pride, we seek to enact justice and often get frustrated when justice is delayed . Several scriptures give the proper perspective regarding justice:

* Romans 12:18 18 if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.
* 2 Thess. 1:6,7 God is just. He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels
* 2 Peter 3:9, “*The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”*

As the world is getting crazier and evil is appearing not to be judged, it seems to be winning the battle. We often say, “Jesus come quickly!” However, let’s consider that possibility in real terms. What if Jesus came right now as you were reading this? What if he had come last Friday night, or during your most recent vacation? Are we ready? I trust and pray most of us are. However 1 Peter 1:17 says that God judges each man’s work impartially, so we are encouraged to live our lives as strangers here in reverent fear. Revelation 18 is worth the time to review as it paints a horrifically scary picture of what it looks like at the end of the world when there are no more second chances. The highlights of these times describe a world in which all wealth is brought to ruin and there is no commerce, no work, no song, no light, and the “voice of the bride and bridegroom will never be heard”. This fate is something you would not wish on your worst enemy.

We must be careful, as it is not only sin to not forgive, it is clearly sin to wish evil on our brothers. Ezekiel 18: 23 states, *“Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”*

So it is helpful to realize that God wants everyone to come to repentance and that with God, all things are possible (Matt 19:26; Mark 10:27). So at such a time when Revelation 18 is played out, it helps me to picture the person I am so angry at that I refuse to forgive being separated from God for eternity. That is an eternal pain that is almost impossible to comprehend; however, it is important to do so. On the contrary, I then picture that same person forgiven by me and possibly that my very act of forgiveness allowed them to see Christ’s love. I see a sinner just like me in need of a Savior. Instead of seeing an enemy whom I want to see punished, I see a humble brother or sister in Christ who is standing side by side reconciled to each other and to Christ, living to glorify God and further the Kingdom. That goal is consistent with God’s Word and a significantly more appealing outcome.

**Why Do We Forgive?**

**Not to Forgive is Sin**

Lack of forgiveness is sin as we have seen we are clearly called to forgive. It is also important to point out that we forgive because if we do not, it hampers our worship. Matthew 5:23-26 highlights that if we are worshipping at the altar and we remember an issue with another brother, we are to stop our worship and go and deal with it directly. We must put aside anger and forgive, and deal with the conflict in an attempt to reconcile before we are return to worship. Lack of forgiveness harms our relationship with God, pure and simple.

**Love and Forgiveness brings God glory**

Also keep in mind that a lack of forgiveness in our hearts does not glorify God. Unforgiveness hampers our witness for Jesus Christ. We are called to love one another in the following verses.

* **I John 4:20** If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.
* **John 13:34,35** A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

In Jesus final prayer for us in the upper room discourse of John 17, he says in verse 23 he prays ”may they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

**It allows us to be forgiven**

We have a guidebook we follow, so once again, let’s turn to the truth of Scripture on this topic.

* “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (**Matt. 6:14,15)**
* “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” (**Mark 11:25)**

Taken in isolation, these verses could imply that forgiveness of others is a requirement for salvation and therefore an unpardonable sin. However, such a position is not consistent with Scripture as a whole. John 3:16, John 6:40 and Romans 10:9 all state that salvation is based on true, heartfelt belief in Jesus’s death and resurrection alone. John 10:28 states those who believe in Jesus cannot be snatched out of his hand. So what is Matthew saying here? I believe he is saying that we must not be prideful thinking that we are perfect and not in need of forgiveness ourselves. Jesus forgave us and out of gratitude, Jesus calls on us to follow that example of mercy, understanding and compassion. We must forgive others just as we have been forgiven and we must realize that the person we need to forgive has something in common with us: we are both sinners in need of forgiveness and salvation.

Ephesians 2:8 states that it is by grace alone that we are saved, a free gift of God, so that no one can boast. However, we must also consider James 2:26 which points out that faith without works is dead. Therefore if someone struggles continuously and consistently with an inability to forgive others, it could certainly bring into question whether that person actually understands the grace and forgiveness offered to them and if, in fact, they are indeed saved. This is a question we should all ask ourselves honestly. Please note that we all sin, but a continual and consistent lack of forgiveness is a troublesome character issue and does not bring God glory nor is it in His will.

**How Do We Forgive? Follow Truth**

*“Few ever present the radical implications of what it means to die to ourselves and what it means to practice a lifestyle of forgiveness. Stepping out of anger means you are surrendering your will to God. It means you have accepted that you don’t have to have your way.”*

Dallas Willard

Forgiving is difficult and oftentimes seems impossible. So how can we do it? We forgive only with God’s help, just like every other difficult action God calls us to do. He tells us why we should forgive and Jesus gives us practical examples to follow.

**Overcoming Pride**

If you are unable and or unwilling to forgive, then that is sin. The usual obstacle is pride. Pride blinds us to our own sin and need for repentance. Interestingly, pride is also the root of the opposite problem of believing that you are too sinful to be forgiven. This implies that you must earn your way to heaven and that Christ’s sacrifice wasn't enough. Finally, pride is also the source of unbelief as we believe we are God or are smarter than God and have it all figured out. Pride therefore must be addressed head on in order to humbly forgive others.

This concept is further driven home in the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant detailed in Matthew 18:21-35. This parable is one of God’s greatest examples to us of how we should forgive our brothers in their sin against us, just as Jesus has forgiven us for just as great a sin.

***How much do we forgive?***

* “So watch yourselves. ‘If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and comes back to you and says, ‘I repent’, forgive him.’” **Luke 17:3,4**

This too is a passage that is challenging from a human perspective, as it is natural to believe that there should be a limit to our forgiveness. However, Jesus says in this passage clearly that we must continue to forgive. Thank God that this is Jesus’s example implying that as long as we repent and ask forgiveness, there is no limit to His forgiveness to us.

Paul never instructs us on how to quit sinning because it is morally right. Some people refer to such transformation as a “changed heart.” However, Paul instructs us in Ephesians 4:23 to be made new in the attitude of our minds. Romans 12:2 calls on us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. When we realize the depravity of our own sin and our destiny if we are unforgiven, we must forgive out of desperate need of our own forgiveness.

* Jeremiah 17:9,10 *“The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick, who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.”*

The Lord knows our minds and our hearts, which is why we so desperately need forgiveness. Consider these simple yet sobering truths:

* Matthew 5:48 commands us to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.
* Romans 3:23 indicates we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.
* Romans 6:23 states that the wages of sin is death.

Therefore our righteousness, eternal salvation, and only hope comes through the forgiveness of our sins by Jesus Christ when we simply believe in Him and His work on the cross and resurrection.

**Only by understanding fully God’s gracious gift to us through His forgiveness, which leads to eternal life, can we draw the strength and wisdom to forgive others.**

Two passages below are beautiful scriptural pictures that serve as great motivators for the forgiveness we need to give freely to others:

* ***Titus 3:3-6*** *“For we were also once foolish ourselve****s****, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our lives in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another, but when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us not on the basis of works done in righteousness but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.”*
* ***Colossians 2:13,14*** *“ When we were dead in our transgressions He made us alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which were hostile toward us, He has taken them out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”*

**Key Distinction: Forgiveness vs. Reconciliation**

Forgiveness is unilateral, but reconciliation requires both parties. We can only control forgiveness and as we have outlined in this message, we are clearly and consistently called to forgive our brothers who sin against us. This would include our prodigals. God’s desire is for reconciliation to Him first as this empowers us to be reconciled with our brothers. Lack of forgiveness destroys us as was pointed out so vividly by the quote from Frederick Buechner. Furthermore, we have learned from this lesson that such forgiveness is a clear command from Jesus himself.

An analogy that may help here is to consider forgiveness is a gift, wrapped up and placed on the porch. For reconciliation to occur, the package must first be picked up and accepted. Thereafter, the issues are addressed before reconciliation is possible. You alone cannot control reconciliation, but you can control forgiveness, which leads to healing.

We are commanded to forgive because it both benefits us and glorifies the Father. It may restore relationship with those we forgive, but we cannot totally control that. However, as a minimum, forgiveness allows us to avoid sin in this instance, and restores relationship with the Father, allowing us to worship Him fully (Matt.5:23-26). As always, Jesus not only commands us but also gives us such an amazing example to follow on the cross. In Luke 23:34 Jesus says, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” How powerful! Could you forgive those who were inflicting such great pain? Could you forgive those who were actually murdering you so unjustly? What an example to us. If Jesus could forgive the people who nailed him to a tree, He can forgive us in our sins.

What an example for us in our prodigal situation. Aren’t our prodigals torturing us unjustly as well? We just want the best for them, don’t we? They don’t know what they do. Let us release the anger that grips us and forgive them so that we can be free of this weight and be obedient to our Lord and Savior who is the ultimate forgiver. We don’t need to forgo the consequences of sin, for we will state over and over again in this ministry that such action is often the most loving thing we can do. We can still enforce consequences while letting go and forgiving, but this requires the renewing of our minds with truth.

*God knows how we’re wired. He tells us to forgive and to get rid of anger. People made in his image would do well to listen. It means everything, not just for us, but for those around us, like two sweet little girls who can now have their daddy in full.*

*Life is better this way. It’s better when we admit what we don’t know, realize our own moral status before God, and give up our made-up Right to be Offended.*

*We think we want a right to “righteous anger”. It takes a tremendous amount of humility and extraordinary” dying to self” to hand over this desire, this job, this obsession to God. But He made us and he knows how we operate best. He says to hand it over.*

*And he’s promising something of value that no one else- and literally, no other religion promises. He’s promising a release from the constant evaluation, never ending striving and relentless assessment of where we, and everyone else, stand.*

*He’s promising a better way of life. He’s holding it out to us saying, “hand over the garbage” and He means it, because He loves us and He has something better to offer.*

*He’s offering* ***Peace****.*