



University Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Austin, Texas

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Forgiving from the Heart

Matt. 18: 21-35

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Matt. 18:21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

We all need forgiveness. Usually that's easy for us to see. But we all also need to forgive. We all suffer in this life at the hands of people who either intentionally, or unintentionally, hurt us, wrong us.

First we feel a steaming veil of anger when it is hot,

Then it becomes a simmering, pool of resentment as it cools some,

And finally, it can become a wall of despising or disgust as it congeals into its solid form that can endure for years.

We have all been angry at someone, and allowed that anger to reach a point of festering. It doesn't matter for our discussion this morning whether the anger is a righteous anger because of some very real injustice done to us; or whether the anger is less justifiable. If we have anyone with whom we bear a grudge, then talk of forgiveness is appropriate.

Medical and social scientists have shown how unhealthy it is to hold a grudge. There are plenty of hard statistics that prove beyond any doubt that those who harbor grudges don't live as long, or as well as those who have learned the art of forgiveness.

Besides this, though, we know... something deep within us knows our

Christian compassion calls is to transcend the wall of separation that holding a grudge creates.

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But HOW? How do we forgive, not just saying the words, but as the scripture says, forgiving from the heart?

First, we need to understand that there is a huge difference between anger and resentment. One whole semester of an undergraduate psychology class studying the biological basis of emotions demonstrated that long before humans evolved, anger was loosed on the world. Did you know that Chimpanzees get angry just like we do. Our facial expressions, our physical tenseness, the adrenaline flowing through our veins is just the same as theirs. Our study that semester made it abundantly clear to me that anger is so deeply hard-wired in this human system of ours that God clearly meant anger for a purpose.

We are meant to get angry! We are meant to respond energetically against that which we feel is wrong! The Bible is clear on this point. Did you know that it is good to be angry? Eph. 4:21 tells us, "be angry, but do not let the sun set on your anger." Anger is a deep human reality. And if we have been wronged, we are to stand up for justice. In a day when innocent people are being abused daily, we must affirm that their righteous anger is a powerful tool for their own liberation and salvation.

And Jesus got angry.

1.) Mk 3:4 Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart"

2.) It took an angry Jesus to drive the money changers out of the Jerusalem

Temple.

So, if Jesus got angry, don't you think that it is OK if we get angry, too?

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In my teenage years I misunderstood what the scriptures say about anger, and it has caused me all sorts of grief over the years. I was taught by a well-meaning, but unenlightened fundamentalist Christians in my college fellowship group, that God didn't want us to be angry. But I got angry. So I tried not to get angry. But I still got angry! It happened almost everyday!

Psychologically confounded by what I felt and what I thought a Christian should feel, I began translate my very real feelings of anger into an inauthentic form of "sadness". Others I know translate their anger into physical pain, or symptoms of sickness. Others still, paper over their anger with kind words to the irritators face, but dish out some vicious back-biting gossip later because they haven't admitted what they really felt in the moment of offense.

Our call to Forgiveness doesn't have to do with anger *per se*. Anger is an emotion, and as such, exists only for a few seconds, or at the most a few minutes. Anger doesn't stretch out into days and weeks. That is something else. Resentment, animosity, something solid that becomes an ongoing spiritual impediment, grows out of ANGER that isn't dealt with appropriately.

Our call to Forgiveness is to try to heal a relationship that is severed or burdened by unresolved resentment, to reestablish a new form of the relationship wherein the resentment is resolved... usually resolved in fresh understanding of the self and the other.

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Let me suggest that there are several important principles about forgiveness

taught in and hinted at in this passage that can help make forgiving a central strength of our own Christian walk. There is a pattern that we can see, that we can use, to help move forward through feelings of resentment.

First, we need to admit our anger when it wells up. We don't need to shout or pound someone, but we need to be aware that it is anger, our anger, when it comes.

Secondly, when we have hostile feelings toward someone and those feelings stretch into days and weeks, we need to admit that we have a problem to deal with. It is not the other person's problem. It is our problem. If there is an injustice involved, or an abusive relationship, so that we have a justice issue to resolve, too, that makes the situation even more complex. But in every case, if we bear a grudge, we have a problem that we had better begin to face.

In the Narthex, on the literature table after the service, there are several copies of a process developed by Dr. Ira Progoff in his monumental book on creating a personal journal. This process describes how we can prepare ourselves to hold an imaginary, internal conversation, a dialogue, with the person against whom we hold a grudge. If you, or someone you know, would benefit by finding a way to forgive another, I highly recommend Dr. Progoff's method. It works.

And its basis is so Biblical. To truly forgive, we may well need to come to understand why the other person offended us. Not just intellectually understand, but on a deep feeling level, we need to feel our way into just why they acted as they did. When we have arrived at that beginning point, then we may be ready to speak with the other-- even if it is only in our imagination -- and friends, you will be amazed at what comes out of those talks. The forgiveness business often seems just absolutely crazy. But this method works.

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Each week we pray together, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." What an astounding statement. In chapter 6 of Matthew's Gospel it reads, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

In one of my favorite movies of all time, Gandhi, there is a scene in which a Hindu father whose child has been killed by a Muslim comes to Gandhi in great grief and remorse. Out of a sense of retribution he has killed a Muslim child. He now kneels before Gandhi asking how he can get over his guilt and regret. Gandhi, who is gravely ill, tells the man that he must go and adopt a boy and raise him as his very own son. That request seems reasonable but then comes a requirement: In order to find inner peace, the Hindu man must raise the boy to be a Muslim. Overwhelmed at the inconceivable thought of raising a son as a Muslim, the man leaves Gandhi's presence in total disarray. Some time later, however, he returns and again kneels beside Gandhi's bed. He now understands. He must take the hostility from his heart and replace it with love.

We forgive others, then, not only to reestablish communion with the other, but because our own forgiveness from God, our own spiritual health, indeed, our own salvation, hangs in the balance. It is a spiritual law that simply cannot be broken. We are freed by God's forgiveness, exactly insofar as we are able to forgive. No more, no less.

Andrew Greely once said that if one person forgave another person the way Jesus forgives us all, we would say that the forgiver was mad. We would want to exact our pound of flesh if we were Christ. But not Jesus.

As he hung on the cross, Jesus represented the best that had ever lived, the crown of creation. There, His own blood flowing, his own life ebbing, his pain unimaginable. He only had time for the essentials. So he whispered his prayer to God, in face all the evil done to him, he whispered, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

My friends, do we know what we are doing?

With these precious days of earthly life, our treasure to steward, our responsibility to spend in service and in thankfulness for all the goodness that has come our way. Do not waste the treasure in days of hunger for vengeance that blocks your growth in spirit. Resolve this day to forgive all who have wronged you. Read Dr. Progoff's method, or actively seek out your own way, a way that will work for you.

But do not delay. Life is too good. Life is too short to be squandered. And the good news of Jesus, through his teaching and his example, is that forgiveness is possible for the other, and for us!

And by the way... this week as a nation we have remembered the 7th anniversary of the horrors Sept. 11, 2001, that day that brought forth raging anger and desire for vengeance from so many Americans....

So, how is your forgiving going?

Dialogue With Persons
Abstracted from Dr. Ira Progoff's book *At a Journal Workshop*ⁱ

In a quiet setting with paper and pencil handy, record the date at the top of your page. Prepare yourself in moments of silence by centering your mind and calming the busyness within.

- a) After moments of silence, allow your mind to focus on a person (living or dead, makes no difference) that you currently have need of forgiving. It makes no difference for this exercise whether you'd judge this resentment justifiable or not, only that there is this ongoing separation.
- b) While maintain your quiet, centered state, recall the outlines of your relationship briefly, directly, including some feeling statements. Record on paper...
- c) How does that make you feel now, today? Record...
- d) Get inside the other person...
 - i) Maintaining your quiet centered:::List the other persons steppingstones (the key dozen or so developments in his/her life), as best you can, allowing your imagination to fill in any lacks of knowledge. Record them.
 - ii) Imagine the other person present with you now... words, memories, feelings, emotions, intuitions.... Letting the images take their own form... Feel the presence of that person, the movement of that life . Record your perceptions, intuitions.
 - iii) Let a dialogue begin.... Record it... a dialogue script can form itself, you speaking and then other, a dialogue unfolding.... Let it go on under its own steam until the dialogue ceases of its own....
 - iv) When concluded.... Allow yourself to sit in stillness for a time...
- e) Describe (record) as objectively your feelings at this moment
- f) Read the script back to yourself....
- g) Describe (record) your feelings again...

ⁱ Progoff, Ira (1975). *At a Journal Workshop: The Basic Text and Guide for Using the Intensive Journal Process*. (in English). [New York](#), Dialogue House. [ISBN 0879410035](#).