

**"Accountability and Forgiveness in a World of Avoidance"**

**Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom***

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**(Mt. 18:15-22)**

**Introduction.**

I once saw a Family Circus cartoon which had one of the children misquoting the Lord's Prayer as he said his nightly prayers before going to bed. The little boy prayed, "Give us our trespasses, as we give it to those who trespass against us." Forgiveness doesn't come naturally to us, does it? And it isn't always an easy thing to do. More often than not, when someone hurts us, our natural reaction is to want to strike back and hurt the other person, not forgive them.

The English poet Elizabeth Barrett had an accident when she was a child which caused her to be somewhat of an invalid before she married Robert Browning in 1846. Growing up, Elizabeth had been raised by an overly-protective and domineering father. He might have been the original helicopter parent. So when she got married, Elizabeth and Robert did so in secret because her father disapproved of the marriage. And after the wedding they sailed for Italy where they lived the rest of their lives.

Even though her parents disowned her, Elizabeth never gave up on her relationship with them. And almost weekly she wrote a letter to her parents. However, not once did they ever write back a reply to her. After ten years one day she received a large box in the mail, an inside it Elizabeth found all of her letters returned. Not one of them had been opened.

If you were Elizabeth, what would you do? How would you react? What would your thoughts and your actions be toward your parents? Would it be hard to forgive them for the pain and the hurt they caused you?

All of us have people in our lives we struggle to forgive. And yet it's the clear teaching of Scripture that forgiveness is the calling for every person who wants to follow Jesus. This morning we're going to study a passage that talks about forgiveness, but it also talks about accountability. It's found in Matthew 18, and there are two matters I want you to consider as it relates to this text: caring enough to confront; and caring enough to forgive.

## **I. Caring Enough to Confront.**

*"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (18:15-17).*

Most of us have a natural pattern of avoidance whenever we encounter a problem with another person. We hope it will go away; we hope that somehow things will just work out by themselves. But more often than not, if we simply ignore or avoid the problem it only becomes worse, and before long we're faced with a crisis. In this passage Jesus offers some very practical advice on how to deal with these situations.

In Matthew 18 the Lord lays out a healthy process for sensitive confrontation. First, we're told that if someone sins against us, we're supposed to go to them in private and confront them with the problem. If the person repents, we have won them over. However, if they don't listen, we're supposed to take two or three other people with us and confront the individual. If they refuse to listen at this point, then we're to take the matter to the leaders of the church. Here we see a process in which there is a progression of accountability, and gradually more and more people, and eventually the leaders of the church, are brought into the matter, all with the goal of pursuing the peace, unity, and purity of the church.

The purpose of the process Jesus recommended was not punishment. Rather, it was supposed to try and bring healing, reconciliation and restoration. Confronting a problem isn't intended to start an argument or to embarrass someone. Rather it's meant to be a means of grace and an expression of tough love to help a person come to see the way in which they are hurting themselves, other people, and ultimately the cause of Christ. It's to help people, not to hurt them. It's to heal relationships, not break them further apart. This isn't always possible to achieve, but that's always the goal, or at least it should be.

Confrontation is never easy, is it? Your stomach gets tied up in knots, your blood pressure rises as your heart pounds in your chest, and it's hard not to take things personally whenever the conversation goes badly. And yet loving confrontation and speaking the truth in love is the way of Jesus. If we really care about someone, we should be willing to confront them in humility and with gentleness, for that is the ultimate demonstration of just how much we really care. We care enough to confront.

I saw story on television about the Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps. It said that after the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, Phelps struggled in life after winning eight gold medals, and he fell into a depression. He made headlines for smoking marijuana, and by his own admission he didn't do much of anything for

six months. Then a close friend talked to Michael, and he confronted the swimmer about what he was doing with his life. It was straight talk and tough love from a friend who cared enough to confront, and that got him back on course. Michael said, "Having somebody be honest and straightforward was what I really needed."<sup>1</sup>

Is there someone you need to confront today? Is there someone God is laying on your heart with whom you need to speak and say, "I care too much to let you do this"? Has someone confronted you recently about something in your own life, and do you need to take a closer look at what they're saying? Whenever I'm criticized, it usually hurts. However, I've learned to try and step back and get past my emotions and ask myself, "What do I need to hear in these hard words? What is kernel of truth God is trying to say to me?"

There is another aspect of this passage on confrontation we also need to consider. Note that Jesus urged His followers to engage in direct communication whenever they had a problem with another individual. The passage tells us to go directly to the person and share our concern with them in private. We are to talk *to* people, not *about* them.

I've discovered that in most churches, including this one, people don't do a very good job of this. Rather than talking directly with a person when they have a problem, they tend to complain and share their concerns with a third party. It's called *triangulation*, and I've seen it happen over and over again in just about every church I've served, including ours. Matthew 18 calls us to care enough to confront, but it tells us to do so directly, not by triangulating others into the problem. So, let's not talk *about* people, and instead let's talk *to* them. God calls us to a better way.

Matthew 18 makes it clear that the followers of Jesus Christ are supposed to be people who care enough to confront. But they should also be people who care enough to forgive.

## **II. Caring Enough to Forgive.**

*"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times' (18:21-22).* The apostle Peter asked a good question. How often do I need to forgive someone when they sin against me? I suspect Peter thought he was being very generous in what he suggested, because when he asked Jesus how often he should forgive his brother he answered his own question by suggesting that he should forgive seven times. Pretty magnanimous, don't you think, Jesus?

Peter's suggestion was not without merit, because it built on rabbinic teaching at the time of Christ which said that a person should forgive someone three times. The rabbis pointed to the book of Amos where in the opening chapters of that OT

book there is a series of condemnations on various countries and it says for "*three transgressions and for four...*" (*Amos 1 and 2*).

From this passage the rabbis concluded that God's forgiveness extends to three offenses, but that He visits the sinner with punishment for the fourth. The rabbis thought that since a person couldn't be more gracious than God, then forgiveness was limited to three times. Here Peter thought that he was being very generous by suggesting that he forgive up to seven times, and the apostle probably expected to be congratulated by Jesus for his magnanimous suggestion.

However, Jesus answered that His followers must forgive not just seven times, but seventy-seven times. And some translations even render the Greek words "seventy times seven", or 490 times! In other words, Jesus was saying there should be no limit to forgiveness, and then the Lord went on to tell a parable about an unforgiving servant. The point of the parable is that it's hypocritical to ask the forgiveness of God but fail to extend forgiveness to another person.

Philip Yancey has written that forgiveness is really an unnatural act, in that it requires us to go against our natural instincts of wanting justice, if not revenge. But forgiveness is the only way to break the cycle of blame and pain in our relationships. It doesn't settle the questions of blame; it doesn't settle who's right and who's wrong. Rather, it often evades these questions. But it does allow relationships to start over again. It loosens the stranglehold of guilt, and it puts the forgiver on the same side as the one who did the wrong.<sup>2</sup>

In the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another person, I'm simply trusting that God is better at justice than I am, and I leave the issues of fairness to the Lord for Him to work out. Wrong doesn't disappear when I forgive, but it does lose its grip on me, and God is able to take and redeem the brokenness of life. Isn't this the way of Jesus? Isn't this what He did when He died on the cross? As He hung between heaven and earth, Jesus prayed, "*Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing*" (*Lk. 23:34*).

As a pastor, I meet a lot of people who have experienced hurt in their life. I have no way of knowing what each of you has brought to this service in the way of personal pain, but I do know that most of us are probably hurting over a broken relationship. Maybe it happened as recently as this morning, or maybe, like Elisabeth Barrett Browning, the hurt is from a long time ago. But it's still with you, isn't it?

Perhaps your spouse wounded you deeply and said, "I no longer want to be married." Maybe you've been betrayed by someone you loved and trusted. Maybe you're a parent who has poured your life into a child, and they've turned on you. Maybe you're an adult who is just now beginning to understand how emotionally crippled you are because of the sins of your parents. Maybe you're a teenager, and

recently someone has ruined your reputation at school by spreading rumors about you.

Regardless of where you are, I want you to know that the gift of forgiveness is available to each one of us from Christ Himself for everything we've done wrong, and it's a gift we can also give to others, if we're willing. It isn't easy, and there are no short cuts. But in the decision to forgive someone, we share with God in a divine act which has the effect of setting us free from the bondage of pain.

Many years ago, a friend of mine who was a pastor had an affair, and it became public. He had to step down from his ministry, and he submitted himself to a group of men who held him accountable. They cared enough to confront. But what about his marriage? He and his wife had been married for over 20 years, and the affair devastated her. Would she ask for a divorce? Would she kick him out of the house? What would their future be? I want to read you something she wrote which talks about how hard it is to forgive someone.

"Forgiveness is more often a lifestyle of grace than a one-time act. We have fooled ourselves if we think that the resolve to forgive someone who has hurt us can be wrapped up in an overnight decision. That's an unreal expectation and an inhuman pressure to put on ourselves.

...I am convinced that we do not learn to forgive in the hour of crisis; we actually train for it. Is it strange to say that in our best moments we prepare for the potential worst ones? In this case, we study the meanings of forgiveness and how it is portrayed in Scripture. We watch and learn from others who are going through situations needing forgiveness. And we monitor our own spirits to observe our progress in times of small irritation or conflict. Are we instantly vindictive or easily drawn to give grace? Do we hold grudges easily? Is it difficult to let go of hard feelings toward another who has offended us? Are there those with whom it would be difficult to sit down and pray because we harbor hostilities toward them?

Asking such questions is imperative if we are to guard our hearts closely. For... few things are more crippling to the person who wants to go a step farther spiritually than the inability to forgive."

Eventually, she learned to forgive her husband, but it wasn't easy, and it didn't happen overnight. Their marriage was restored, and my friend is now back in ministry, and they are stronger than ever. It's a miracle.

## **Conclusion.**

Regardless of where you are this morning, this message of accountability and forgiveness is for you. People need to be held accountable for their sin, and we shouldn't ignore it or sweep it under the carpet. I encourage you to love someone enough to confront them whenever it's needed. And take someone with you if you

scared to do it by yourself. Follow Matthew 18 and the process it outlines for accountability.

But this message is also about forgiveness, and there is forgiveness for everyone who acknowledges their sin before God. That's what the gospel is all about, and our God is a God of second chances. There is also the gift of forgiveness available to each person to extend to others, if we're willing to do it.

In 2006, a tragic school shooting left the Amish community in Nickel Pines, PA, devastated. But it didn't make them resentful. Charles Roberts wasn't Amish, but the Amish knew him as the man who drove the milk truck. On October 2, 2006, he walked into the one-room Amish schoolhouse and shot 10 young girls. Five of them died. Then he killed himself.

When the tragedy happened, people around the world were amazed and inspired by the way the Amish expressed forgiveness toward the killer and his family. Thirty Amish people, some who had buried their own daughters just the day before, were in attendance at Roberts' funeral, and they hugged his widow and other members of the killer's family. The Amish community even donated money to the young widow for her three young children.

One member of the community said, "Tragedy changes you. You can't stay the same. Where that lands, you don't always know. But what I found out in my own experience was if you bring what little pieces you have left to God, He somehow helps you make good out of it. And I see that happening in this school shooting as well. One thing that the whole world got to see was this simple message of forgiveness."

Jesus' death brought about the forgiveness of our sin, and our forgiveness of others can bring grace and peace to their souls and to ours. This is the way of Jesus, and we are never reflecting God's love for us more than when we echo our Savior and say, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> NBC Nightly News, July 28, 2012.

<sup>2</sup>Philip Yancey in "An Unnatural Act" in *Christianity Today*, April 8, 1991, p. 37