

49. One of the most difficult tasks – Forgiveness

October 2, 2016

A long time ago, there were a couple of brothers who got their sheep by stealing other people's in Indiana. They got caught red handed by local ranchers one day. That was the time when the punishment from neighbors was far more severe than the law. The ranchers made a branding iron for them with the letters, "ST" – stands for "Sheep Thief" and they stamped on the brothers' foreheads, so that anyone who saw them would notice "ST" on their foreheads.

One of the brothers got bitter and left the town and went into a big city and became a true low life. He ended up in a ditch with a knife in his back. But the other brother repented from his crime and decided that he would make up his bad past by serving and helping the people in the town. Many, many years passed by, the good brother got old and became the most respected and loved man in the town and the surrounding areas because of his hard work and kindness to others.

A reporter from a big newspaper company came to the town and met this remarkable, now elderly man. After the interview, the reporter asked the caregiver, "I've noticed the mark of the two letters "ST" on his forehead. What is that for?" The caregiver scratched his head and replied, "I don't know where he got it, but I think it stands for 'Saint'".

Biblically, forgiveness is a determined action that requires a tremendous effort in the offended one's heart. Being our Master and Lord, God just did that for all of us through Jesus. It is one of the most difficult tasks for any one of us to perform. But with the Lord's help, it is possible.

A. CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Matthew 18:15-17 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

Jesus teaches us how to deal with a sinning brother. Many people leave one church for the other, because this was not done in a proper way.

Above all else, we should go to him with the idea of winning our brother or sister, not winning an argument. It is possible to win the argument and lose a friend. We must have a spirit of meekness and gentleness when we seek to restore a brother or sister.

Galatians 6:1 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.

The word "restore" in Galatians 6:1 is a Greek medical word that means "to set a broken bone." Think of the patience and tenderness that requires!

What started as a private problem between two people is now out in the open for the whole church to see. Church discipline is a much neglected ministry these days, because many church leaders do not follow the Word of God. They'd rather have

bigger congregation and budget than simply obeying the Lord and His Word. Yet it is taught here, as well as in the epistles (1 Corinthians 5; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-16; 2 Timothy 2:23-26; Titus 3:10). Just as children in the home need discipline, so God's children in the church need disciplines including excommunication so that they can repent from their sins.

1 Corinthians 5:5 deliver such a one to satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

B. THE TRULY FORGIVEN UNDERSTANDS FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:21-22 Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Peter came to Jesus with the measuring rod of forgiveness and he felt that he was extra pious, because the average rabbi taught them to forgive up to three times.

The answer of Jesus completely blew Peter's mind and his measuring rod of forgiveness out of water. Does it mean that we can smack somebody if that person offends us more than 490 times? No. In Jewish term, it is countless. According to 1 Corinthians 13:5 in NIV, Love, "keeps no record of wrongs." I love that translation.

Jesus explains a great deal about forgiveness. God doesn't leave the one who offended others to die in the gutter. He teaches us how to restore them with the same forgiveness that we have received from Him. What we are learning here is "Not condemnation, but evaluation with the purpose of restoration." Not to destroy, but to build up.

Isn't it interesting that we often pray to God to give justice to others, but we beg Him to have mercy on us even if we committed the same sin as the others?

In this next parable, we find three very interesting stages of the one who does not forgive others:

1) He was a debtor.

Matthew 18:23-27 Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

This man actually thought he could get out of the debt of 10,000 talents which is equivalent to over \$10 million. In the economy of that day, a man would have had to work twenty years to earn one talent. Simple math would tell us that it would take 200,000 years for him to pay back what he owes to the king.

We detect two sins of this man here: pride and a lack of sincere repentance. The man was not ashamed of stealing the money, but he felt bad that he got caught. You may say, "He didn't steal it." Yes, he did. He had no means and intention to pay it back. And he actually thought that he was capable enough to earn the enormous amount of money to repay the king.

His case was hopeless. But the king was a man of compassion. The servant did not deserve this forgiveness. It was purely an act of love and mercy on the part of his

master. We do not deserve God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. But He chose to extend them to us if we only accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

Researchers at the University of Toronto reported in 2006 that people who are suffering from a guilty conscience experience "a powerful urge to wash themselves." To study this effect, the researchers asked volunteers to recall past sins. They were then given an opportunity to wash their hands as a symbol of cleansing their conscience. Those who had recalled their sins washed their hands at "twice the rate of study subjects who had not imagined past transgressions." We all want to be forgiven for our sins.

2) He was a creditor.

Matthew 18:28-30 But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

Instead of sharing the joy of his own pardon with his friend, the servant mistreated his friend and demanded that he would pay the debt. The poor debtor used the exact same plea as this servant did. But the unjust servant was unwilling to grant to others what was granted to him. He may have the legal right to throw the man in prison, but he did not have the moral right.

3) He became a prisoner.

Matthew 18:31-35 So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

Some of you may wonder why I used an image of a prison cell in the title of this teaching. Let me explain it. The world's worst prison is the prison of an unforgiving heart. If we refuse to forgive others, then we are only imprisoning ourselves and causing our own torment. Some of the most miserable people I have met have been people who would not forgive others. They lived only to imagine ways to punish these people who had wronged them. But they were, in reality, only punishing themselves.

We who refuse to forgive – we who live in the gall of bitterness – will become victims of torture. If we nurture feelings of bitterness, we are no better than inmates of an internal concentration camp. For your sake, let me urge you to put away all bitterness now. The escape route is clearly marked. It leads to the cross where the only One who had a right to be bitter wasn't.

You may say, "Pastor, it is not easy to forgive that person. He hurt me bad. Each time I see him, I have this anger." I know, brothers and sisters, I know. In my 60 years, I've been hurt by someone and I am sure that I've hurt others many times.

As C.S. Lewis pointed out, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive." Grant that forgiveness is not a snap-of-the-fingers mira-

cle. It's a journey involves work, commitment, faith, and time to heal. But the God of forgiveness will be with you every step of the way, strengthening you on your journey to becoming more like the Ultimate Forgiver, His Son Jesus.

Jeremiah 31:34b For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.

The moment we stop forgiving others, it is the moment our Christian walk is stopped. The longer we don't forgive, the further backward we go in our walk with the Lord.

There are three misunderstandings regarding forgiveness:

1) We don't have to say, "I understand why you have done that."

If someone offends you in the wrong way, they are responsible for their own actions. You don't have to understand their excuses for their wrong doings.

2) We don't have to say, "What you have done didn't hurt me."

The hurt is there; the pain is there. We don't have to pretend that it didn't hurt. But at the same time we don't have to exaggerate our pain as a leverage to get back at them.

3) Forgiveness does not require restoration in every case.

There is a time when you have to say, "Enough is enough." Forgiveness is mandatory as a Christian to the Lord and to the person who offended you. But restoration is not always required. Sometimes it is wise to cut off that bridge before a future recurrence.

C. APPLICATIONS

1) Forgiving someone who hurt us deeply is not an option, but a MUST.

God is not giving us a whole lot of choices when it comes to forgiveness. You and I may come up with many feeble excuses why we cannot forgive. Before we do that, let's think if we would like for God to come up with the same excuses why He couldn't forgive our sins against Him.

Colossians 3:12-13 Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.

2) Remembering forgiveness of God requires our own forgiveness for ourselves, too.

Many people say that they cannot forgive themselves for the things they've done. If that's you, please listen to me carefully. If you think that God cannot forgive your sins, because they are so bad, you are calling God a liar. And He ain't a liar. As God forgave you for your sins when you accepted Jesus as your Savior and Lord, you must get over that ugly past and move on.

Isaiah 59:1 Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, That it cannot save; Nor His ear heavy, That it cannot hear.

3) Forgive others only as much as you want to be forgiven by the Lord. To refuse to forgive is hypocritical of our part.

I want all of my sins to be forgiven by Him, not just a few. It means that I need to forgive all who offend me.