



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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PORTRAIT OF AN APOLOGY – GET OVER IT!

Scriptures: Romans 12:17-21; Romans 8:1

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INTRODUCTION

September 11th forever changed the way we as Americans live. The attacks that leveled the Twin Towers shattered the sense of invulnerability we had lived with for so long. We now live in a guarded, anxious, fear-heightened climate.

It's hard to talk about forgiveness when there's fear, anger, animosity, resentment, long-standing ill-will—whether it is between two people, within a family, or toward a whole culture of people.

Yet the Scriptural mandate to forgive is very clear. In the Bible:

- We are exhorted not to pass judgment on our brothers & sisters (cf. Romans 14:5).
- We are to forgive our brothers & sisters from our hearts (cf. Matt. 18:21).
- We are told by Jesus that if we don't forgive others their sins, our Heavenly Father will not forgive our sins (cf. Matt. 6:15).

So, are we supposed to forgive:

- Terrorists? How about murderers & rapists?
- Those who stand in line for the privilege of destroying us, using religion as a justification to drive planes into buildings. . .or blow up buildings full of people?
- Those who prey on innocent victims who happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time?

Forgiveness is not always simple. It gets mixed in with issues that can't be dismissed or over-looked. It has to fit together with justifiable anger over the way things are in this world.

Forgiveness is not automatic. You don't just say, "*Oh, that's OK. . .No problem, no big deal*" like it doesn't matter what happened.

Forgiveness does not come naturally. What comes naturally is the inclination to want to get even. . .to pay back. . .to exact revenge. . .to go one beyond.

Forgiveness is most difficult when an individual's actions are reprehensible by any existing moral code. I'm thinking about:

- Predators who abuse & mistreat children.
- Alcoholics who refuse to confront the havoc their behavior wreaks in their families.
- Those who engage in sexual misconduct that destroys trust & love.

Forgiving others is not sentimental niceness; it is serious business.

Here's the deal: I have to forgive others if I myself wish to feel forgiven and free. Otherwise, something takes over my life and I cannot be all that God has in mind for me to be.

I'm thinking this morning of a little country church in southern Minnesota: **PEMBERTON**. Two families got into a feud like the Hatfields & the McCoys, and stopped coming to church. So did a bunch of other people who chose sides. They couldn't find a way to forgive. It had taken over their life—and the results were disastrous. A church with an enviable record of 20+ missionaries sent out over the years went into serious decline; it no longer exists as a church.

Were they to hear this message, it would probably have sounded to them as if they were being asked to do something they knew they could not do: come up with a rush of warm, friendly feelings toward those who had hurt them deeply.

But forgiveness does not require that. Forgiveness is not acquittal (i.e.: pretending “the guy didn't do it” . . . that nothing happened). Forgiveness is not sweeping things under the rug. Forgiveness is moving on. Forgiveness is ejecting “the wrong” from its exaggerated place in my mind and emotions. Only God can remove it from the wounded place in my heart.

When my youngest daughter—**KIRSTEN**—was rear-ended by a drunk driver in mid-day right outside our house, did I forgive that so-n-so? ☹ In one sense, NO, because he never formally apologized to me. Because I never met him, I was never aware of any repentance or penance on his part. Eventually, I had to come to terms with it in my head, or else be tormented forever. So, YES, I did forgive him in the sense of moving on. I decided I was no longer going to let the matter dominate my thoughts & feelings.

Forgiveness deals with the PAST; what about the PRESENT + the FUTURE? We get hung up here. Does forgiveness mean the relationship we once had will resume, will continue “as it once was”? There's not a universal answer to that. But I would challenge you NOT to underestimate the power of God to heal & restore relationships. [It's happened in my life – with my oldest daughter, **JENNIFER**.]

It doesn't happen in every case. Not all forgiveness ends in reconciliation. But all reconciliation, if there is to be any, does begin here—with forgiveness.

I've known many divorced people who, years after the breakup, describe it at almost every social gathering with such pain & intensity & anger as if it had happened only a week ago. They rehearse their own innocence and the litany of woes & wrongs inflicted by the other party. You know healing has begun to occur when they refer to each other by their first name (“John” or “Mary”) rather than “my ex-”.

How can we ever get free? As I said, forgiveness does not come naturally to us. We are not forgiving by nature. We are vengeful. We tend to hang onto things rather than let go of them.

SCRIPTURE – Turn with me to **Romans 12:17-21 (CEV)**

Don't mistreat someone who has mistreated you. But try to earn the respect of others, and do your best to live at peace with everyone. Dear friends, don't try to get even. Let God take revenge. In the Scriptures the Lord says, "I am the one to take revenge and pay them back." The Scriptures also say (in Deuteronomy 32:35), "If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. This will be the same as piling burning coals on their heads." (quoting Proverbs 25:21-22) Don't let evil defeat you, but defeat evil with good.

This passage has *THREE SETS OF DO'S & DON'T'S*.

I. DON'T mistreat someone who has mistreated you. . . DO attempt to live at peace with everyone.

Retaliation never works. It's always a lose-lose situation. Here's a good description of the folly of "hitting back" from the pen of a preacher by the name of **Ray Stedman**:

"I remember when I was a boy in Montana in cattle country. One frosty morning, I looked out and saw the cattle in the corral. There was one old cow who, in turning around, bumped another cow. That cow kicked at her, so the first cow kicked back, but she missed and hit another cow. Pretty soon they were all kicking one another. The entire corral was full of animals kicking at one another."

"You mean I don't hit back? Someone lies to me. . .takes advantage of me. . .destroys some of my property. . .hurts someone I love—and I do nothing??? What am I, a doormat? Can't I even be angry?" YES! The Bible doesn't condemn that. In fact, there are some things we should be angry at (e.g.: terrorism, racism, crime, corporate scandal. . .along with other injustices in the world). We are only warned not to let our anger lead us to sin.

Remember there are consequences to people's actions—natural and legal—and we need to let them play out. Sometimes we even set some boundaries (e.g.: with an alcoholic or an abuser), and when we do we need to stick by them.

So, we can express some anger. . .we can set some boundaries. But then, we are to do everything within our power to bring a conflict to an end, not keep it going. We won't always be successful. Jesus turned his cheek—many times—and didn't always win a positive response:

- One thief on the cross repented. . .the other one cursed.
- Peter repented after his denials. . .Judas hanged himself after his betrayal.
- The centurion said, "*This was the Son of God*". . .others said "*good riddance*".

II. DON'T try to get even or seek revenge (which goes a step further than getting even) . . . DO let God take care of that.

Here's why: When you try it, you are usurping God's job—without His power & wisdom. Inevitably, you will make things worse.

To see how true this is, you only have to look around at families (e.g.: squabbles over inheritances) and nations (e.g.: squabbles over land, as in the Middle East). Vengeance only perpetuates evil, expands it, flings it out wider—so that it touches more lives and hurts more hearts. It does more damage than good, and resolves nothing.

If we let God handle the "settling of scores", He does it in a way that is (at least potentially) redemptive. You see, God's purpose and our purpose are different. God wants that person who has committed a wrong to be redeemed (or at least have a shot at it); we want them to be hurt, put down, even destroyed. We need to give God room to work. . .to do what only He can do (i.e.: in His way & in His timing)—not take matters into our own hands. He knows how to handle His wrath much better than we do ours!

Let's not be like Jonah when Nineveh repented. Remember how mad he got when God spared it?

Like Jonah, do you ask: "*Where's the justice? Is there only mercy? Only kindness in the face of violence and violations?*" There is vengeance; there is justice! All things will be set right. Either our adversaries along with all their wrongs will be dealt with—OR—they will repent, as have many of us, and trust Christ who paid the debt on the Cross. All wrongs will be punished—one way or the other.

Forgiveness does not mean that some crimes receive no punishment and will be swept under the rug. It means that some crimes are punished in the suffering of a Substitute. "*The Lord has laid on Him (Jesus Christ) the iniquity of us all*" [Isaiah 53:6]. Chances are we will see our worst adversary or some of the worst criminals in heaven, so we'd better get over our hatred, our prejudice, our animosity.

III. DON'T be overcome by evil; DO overcome evil with good (e.g.: give food and drink to your enemy—the one you are at odds with—and heap coals of fire on his head).

“Oh boy...finally...my chance to get him. If I can't be mean or cold toward him, I'll kill him with kindness! Make him so ashamed of himself that he will finally come around and say that I was right after all.” [Then you can sit back and gloat over making him miserable.]

All that does is put us right back where we started. That's not the way to go! *“Burning coals”* here means “hot coals of love”—not sentimental, gushy love—but acts of kindness & goodness—done NOT from an ulterior motive of trying to shame the person you are having trouble with or bring him/her to self-reproach. That can't be the motive; the good you do must be genuine.

So what does it mean to *“heap burning coals on someone's head”*? What Paul had in mind when he used that figure of speech was how they lit fires in those days. There were no matches back then. So if you wanted to light a fire in your home, you had to go next door or down the street and borrow some coals from a neighbor. Of course, you would take along an earthen jar that would not burn. You would ask your neighbor if you could borrow some coals to light your own fire. And if he was a good neighbor, he would fill the padded jar and you would carry it home on top of your head. The more the better—in order to get your fire lit.

What we have here is a picture of a generous response to a neighbor's need! Don't you think such an action (of piling more coals into your neighbor's earthen jar) would produce a change in his/her attitude? And consequently your relationship with that person?

So let GOD take care of the evil. Don't you be overcome by other people's evil. Don't let someone else's evil lead you into all kinds of evil yourself.

CONCLUSION

Now all this must sound pretty impossible. . .like trying to lift a rock that's way too heavy. Is forgiveness beyond you? Of course it is; it's beyond all of us. But let me ask you this morning: Is the problem *“I can't”* or *“I won't”*?

- If it's *“I won't”*: then you need to ask God to make you willing [Step 8].
- If it's *“I can't”*: then it's a matter of connecting with the power of a loving God.

Forgiveness is not beyond the One who looked down upon His tormentors from the cross and understood & forgave them. And because He lives in us, we can lay hold of this loving power and move beyond terrible things, if we must.

Here's how you begin: You begin by DECIDING to forgive, not by FEELING like forgiving. You make up your mind to put something behind you. Your heart may or may not follow. It doesn't matter. You make the decision to forgive knowing that you lack the power to carry it out. Then ask God to enter into the process of dealing with your feelings and their continuing grip on you. He knows full well the terrific anger & hurt that mark the moment in our history when something terrible happened to us.

The decision to forgive does not need to be certified by “good feelings”. If you have said it to God, then it has already begun to happen. You may still be hoping mad, but you are not alone. You have asked Him into the mix of your feelings, actions and decision-making. Now you have a power much greater than your own at work in you. He will sort things out. Right here & now, the process of easing your burden has begun.

You can't "forgive and forget" any more than you can un-ring a bell. What's happened has happened. Forgiveness does not erase history or give you amnesia. That's not to say God can't, in time, heal your memories and wounds. There may be scars; but that's OK, they are reminders. Forgiveness helps you move on. It takes the sting out of the memories.

And, having the memory isn't all bad either. As a seminary professor of mine used to say: "*Let the past be your teacher, not your master*".

So: GET OVER IT! LET IT GO. PUT IT BEHIND YOU. . .AND MOVE ON!

ADDENDUM

"*There is therefore now no **condemnation** to those who are in Christ Jesus!*" So says Paul in **Romans 8:1**. The word "*condemnation*" is more a legal than a psychological term. Don't let anything from the past reach up into today and steal your joy.

Don't get stuck in *yesterday*. If you stay buried in yesterday—if you tell, re-tell, hash and re-hash the story(-ies)—then you are clutching onto the PAST, rather than embracing the PRESENT & FUTURE (i.e.: what can be). Let it go! You can't undo or change it. Only Jesus can make it look like the accident never happened!

Will you let Him?

Remember, GRACE is *undeserved* favor. We didn't deserve to be forgiven; neither does anyone who has ever offended or hurt us. But by giving an "enemy" a drink, you're not excusing his misdeeds. You are acknowledging him, forgiving him, and loving him in spite of his sins—just as Christ did for you. Will you do it this week.....?