

Rev. Walter H. Everett answered the phone one day unprepared for the words he was about to hear: “Your son Scott was murdered last night.” Scott was 24 years old and had been shot by Mike Carlucci, a tattooed biker and lifelong bully and drug addict. Though Carlucci was arrested within minutes of the murder, still covered with the dead boy's blood, he somehow struck a sweetheart deal and would have to serve only five years. Walter’s anger toward his son’s killer raged through him like a violent riptide, growing even worse with the plea bargain that resulted in the reduced sentence.

“My rage was affecting my entire life.” He wrote, “My life was in shambles. I was going through the motions in my ministry. How am I going to let go of this anger?” I wondered. The answer came the first time I saw Mike, almost a year after Scott’s death. Mike stood in court prior to his sentencing and said he was truly sorry for what he had done. Three-and-a-half weeks later, on the first anniversary of Scott’s death, I wrote to Mike. I told him about my anger, how it impacted my life, and asked some pointed questions. Then I wrote, “Having said all that, I want to thank you for what you said in court, and as hard as these words are for me to write, I forgive you.” I wrote of God’s love in Christ and invited Mike to write to me if he wished.

Now let me ask you, if that had happened to you, would you be able to forgive? I have three daughter’s and I honestly don’t know how I would respond if someone was to harm one of them. I would like to think I would be strong enough to forgive like Rev. Everett did, but honestly I just don’t know. C. S. Lewis wrote that “everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, that is until they have something to forgive.”

Maybe you have experienced that trial of forgiving someone who has hurt you. Maybe you’ve been through a bitter divorce and someone you loved and trusted has let you down, or you’ve experienced a family squabble that has torn you and your loved ones apart, or perhaps it’s an employer who let you go and even though you had years of dedicated service you were treated like an expendable resource. Forgiveness is easy when it involves an accidental bump or mistakes, but when the wounds run deep, forgiveness tends to go against our every inclination for justice and revenge. Lewis Smeeds expresses the feelings of many when he writes, “There is a lot to be said about not forgiving people. Why should people cut there way through our lives leaving us bleeding in their wake and then expect us to forgive them and act as if nothing was wrong. Forgiveness he says, seems to be an outrage against dues paying morality.”

This morning we come to the last of our sermons in this series and perhaps the most important message for you. Forgiveness. Many of you have been jaded at some point in your past, and you are holding on to that pain, to that anger, and to that hurt. If you harbor a grudge, you are destroying your health, your joy, and even your spiritual relationship with God.

As we approach this topic and this passage this morning, I want us all to examine our own hearts to see the underlying hate that lies there and to bring those to the surface to allow God to heal you this morning.

Now the first thing I want us to see is the reality that we will get hurt in this world. This passage that we just read flows out of the previous section of what to do when your brother sins against you. I wished we lived in a world where everybody always said and did the right things, a world where no one ever said anything to cut you down, or do anything to cause you pain, but the reality is that there will be those who will hurt you.

There will be those in this world who will hurt you and will be indebted to you. A person tells a lie about you and your reputation is ruined. A spouse runs around on you and breaks their marriage vow. A family member did something that didn't sit well with you...the preacher preached longer than he was supposed to and you didn't get to Barnhill's before the Baptist. People will upset you and they will hurt you.

And Peter came to Jesus and asked Jesus in a nutshell, what's my limit. Peter asks, shall I forgive him 7 times? Now Peter thought he was being very generous. The rabbi's of that day taught that you were only required to forgive up to three times. So Peter was going above and beyond what was being taught, but Jesus said not 7, but 77. Now the point was that there were to be no limits to your forgiveness.

Now that 's hard for us because common sense would seem to say that forgiveness needs to have a limit. Burn me once shame on you, burn me twice shame on me, right. In most minds, the prodigal son can come home only once, and perhaps twice. In our minds we think that yes, there needs to be a limit! I can't forgive forever, can I?

Well, I think this dilemma arises in that we misunderstand what it means to forgive someone. When we say we forgive someone, we are not by any means endorsing that behavior. We are not saying that what that person did was in any way all right, but instead we are saying, what you did was wrong...but I will not retaliate back. We don't attempt to make the person suffer for what they did.

Also, when we forgive someone we are not exempting that person from the consequences of their action. When Jesus forgave the thief on the

cross, the thief still had to pay the debt of his crimes to society. Forgiveness does not mean that a person does not make restitution or face justice. It means that you release resentment. When I was a teenager in high school, I broke a major rule in our house, and I got caught doing it and because I got caught I got mad at my mother and said a lot of hurtful things that I shouldn't have said. I was punished and was grounded for a long period of time. Which meant that I was going to miss a big date I had planned for the school dance. I fussed for a bout a day, but then I realized what I had done, what I had said...and I went and apologized to my mom. My mother opened her arms and hugged and kissed me, and she forgave me...but I was still grounded for two weeks. Just because I was forgiven didn't mean that I didn't have to serve my time at home, but the hostility was removed.

Also, when we forgive, we are also not saying that there is an immediate restoration of trust. I've heard many sermons illustrations where the pastor told about how we need to forgive and forget...but that is not how forgiveness works. Forgiveness can be instantaneous, but trust takes to earn and to build. If there is a young girl who is engaged to get married, and about two months before her wedding she finds her fiancé is addicted to drugs and has been cheating on he...she should forgive him if he repents but she should not marry him, at least not right away. That trust was broken and needs time to be restored. When I got in trouble with my mom, I was grounded for two weeks, and I was forgiven, but for the next year or two I was on a much shorter leash on where I could go and what I could do. Trust takes time.

So when we forgive someone, what we are doing is we are releasing the resentment and the hatred we have of that person. We are choosing to love instead of hate. Now that is not always easy, and it's important that we understand that forgiveness is a process that takes time and energy. Now some folks will flippantly say, "I forgive you" and it's coming from their mouths but you know that hatred is still in their heart. A woman testified one day on how she forgave her uncle, she said, "I'm so glad I got religion. I have an uncle I used to hate so much I vowed I'd never go to his funeral. But now, why, I'd be happy to go to it any time, and the sooner the better." Now some folks and let go of the anger and pain and forgive right away, but for most of us it takes time.

Lewis Smeeds in his book "Forgive and Forget" says that we typically forgive in four stages. The first stage is Hurt. Somebody has caused you pain so deep and so unfair you can't forget it. You might say, "Well, if I were a real Christian I would just let it slide." No. Even as a Christian you

still hurt. You weep. You pound your fist into the wall. You gripe to friends. You can't sleep.

The second stage is Anger. You Now this is not godly, I'm not saying it is but its true. You lay awake at night thinking about it, and you wish somehow the harm that was done to you could be done to that person. You think of ways that you can get even. You pout, you say, "I'm not talking to him" you want to tell everybody what a bum he is. You look for away to get even. I read about an ad in the classifieds that said, "Wedding Dress for sale, never been worn. Will trade for a .38 caliber." We look for someway to inflict upon that person they pain we feel.

The third stage is the healing stage. The length of this stage varies. If you got superficial cut on your arm, it would heal in days, but the deeper the cut, the longer it will take to heal. And as time goes by you are forgiving that person, but if that old wound is somehow touched the pain returns, but eventually with time, the pain does go away.

The fourth stage is reconciliation. This is when you can restore the relationship to what it was before. Now this stage is as much dependent upon the other person as you. It involves an apology, and a coming together from both sides. You can still forgive the person even if that person won't be reconciled to you. But the point I'm trying to make is that forgiveness takes time. One pastor compared forgiveness to ringing a church bell. When you forgive you let go of the rope, but it still takes time for the bell to stop ringing. And when you forgive, you let go of the bitterness, but it takes time for the pain to go away.

And Forgiveness is a choice we must make. Forgiveness is a process that takes time. But we must be determined in our minds to go through that process rather than get revenge. That is why we need to pray every day, "Father, forgive me my debts as I forgive my debtors." Some people may say, "I don't feel like forgiving. I don't want to hear about forgiving because I can't forgive." Well, it's a choice we make, but it something we have to do. And it's not a matter of feeling. It's a matter of obedience to the Lord's command. And to show this Jesus told this parable which goes directly with our lives.

In this parable a man owes his king a large sum of money. A denarius was one day's wage for a laborer, and a talent was worth about six thousand denarii. Ten thousand talents would be sixty million day's wages, this man would have to work 60 million days just to pay back what he owed. His situation was helpless. But he humbled himself and pleaded for mercy. And this king had compassion. He wasn't a hard mean king, but he was just and

merciful and he took pity on the man and at a great cost to himself he forgave the man his debt.

Now all of us, when it comes to our heavenly King, we owe a large debt. We have all sinned and accumulated this large debt that we owe God, but He has taken pity on us and has taken that large debt we owed and placed that burden on Christ and there it was paid in full. **II Corinthians. 5:21** says, “**God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.**” When Jesus died on the cross the Bible says that God laid on Him the iniquity of us all. That is why the earth became black. That is why God turned His back. That is why Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Jesus became guilty of the debt of all our sin. On the day He died one of the final things He said was, “It is finished.” The word He used for finished was “paid in full.” The debt was paid.

Now the man in this parable was forgiven this large amount of debt, he had just experienced Grace, but he turned around and saw a man who owed him a few dollars and he demanded justice. He was unwilling to forgive the man the way he had been forgiven. And the point Jesus is making is if God has forgiven you...then you should forgive each other. Remember our story about Reverend Edmund, when he wrote that letter to his son's murderer he told the man of God's love in Christ and then he invited Mike to write him back if he wished. *He says, “Three weeks later his letter arrived. He said that when he had read my letter, he couldn't believe it. No one had ever said to him, “I forgive you.” That night he had knelt beside his bunk and prayed for, and received, the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Additional correspondence led to regular visits during which we spoke often of Mike's (and my) growing relationship with Christ. Later I spoke on Mike's behalf before a parole board, and he was given an early release. In November 1994, I was the officiating minister at his wedding. When asked about his early release, Mike says, “It felt good, but I was already out of prison. God had set me free when I asked for his forgiveness.”*

Years later, the two men still speak and go and speak to schools and churches about the power of forgiveness. Mike, the man who murdered Rev. Edmund's son was asked by a reporter, “If someone came along and killed your daughter, do you think you'd be able to forgive him?” And Mike responded by saying, “I'd like to think I'd have the courage to subside that anger, but to be honest with you, I don't know. I don't understand how Walt was able to, and I was suspicious in the beginning. But he kept showing up as a genuine person, and he's been there every minute, steady and constant.

And, meanwhile, I killed his son, but yet he saved my life -- how many people would do that?"

Now let me ask you, if that preacher can forgive the man who murdered his son, and if Joseph could forgive his brothers for throwing him in a well and then selling him into slavery, if Corrie ten Boom could forgive a Nazi prison guard who tortured her and murdered her family, and if Jesus Christ could forgive you and me for everything that we have done against him, then you, with his power, have the capacity to forgive those who have offended you. Do you need to find that place of forgiveness this morning? Maybe for yourself, maybe for someone else. If so, I want to invite you to pray with me this morning.