

Life Together in a World of Retaliation

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Christian Living: Life Together Series

Ephesians 4:32

If someone was to ask, “What is the central emphasis of Christianity? I mean, boil it down and make it simple for us. Is there one thing that is at the heart of all that Jesus taught and modeled and accomplished?” How would you answer that question? Or let me put it a slightly different way. If someone came up to you and said, “What is the single greatest contribution of the Christian faith to the well-being of the world?”

Certainly any unbiased evaluation of the Christian contribution to the world would acknowledge that Christians have been at the forefront of spreading health care. Christians started the world’s first hospitals, relief agencies, and clinics. Christian missionaries have long been known as carrying a Bible in one hand and a bag of medicine in the other.

Certainly, we might talk about the Christian contribution to education and literacy. Or perhaps we might mention the Christian founding of many of the world’s greatest universities such as Harvard, Yale, Oxford, or Cambridge. We could talk about the Christian contribution to the arts, to music, to literature, to the birth of modern science. We could talk about the Christian foundation of modern democracy and especially the Christian foundation of the modern civil rights movement.

But, if I were to ask you to point to the one thing that is the single greatest achievement, the most fundamental thing that Christianity has brought to this world, I believe you ought to answer, forgiveness.

As Brian Zahnd put it in his book titled *Unconditional? The call to radical forgiveness*

If Christianity is about anything, it is about forgiveness.

Not forgiveness as a way of escaping punishment, but forgiveness as reconciliation and total restoration; forgiveness which restores the broken relationship between God and people, and forgiveness which has the capacity to achieve peace and reconciliation among all human relationships - whether personal or global.

Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer to say,

Forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors.

When Jesus hung on the cross he said:

Father, forgive them.

In his first resurrection appearance, Jesus said:

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.

We read verses like this in the New Testament:

Colossians 3:13

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

And in the text we are going to look at today, we read this:

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

We are repeatedly told in the Bible to forgive people. But when you are hurt, really hurt by someone, when you've been stabbed in the back by a family member or a friend, when you've had your share of your parent's inheritance stolen by your sibling, when your spouse has committed adultery, or punched you in the face, when you discover that your child has been molested, or that your partner who you trusted who is among your closest friends has been embezzling from your business, it is pretty hard to forgive. To paraphrase my favorite Christian author, CS Lewis, it is easy to talk about forgiveness until you have something to forgive.

About a week and a half ago a member of our church, David Bompert, was fatally shot down in Haiti.

David traveled down to Haiti along with our Missions Pastor Mark Batcheck and a medical team in the immediate aftermath of the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti a few years ago. Our church gave over a quarter of a million dollars to bring relief and assistance. Because of David's skills he ended up helping to organize a field hospital in Port-au-Prince. He and his wife, Nicole's, hearts were so drawn to the plight of the Haitian people and especially the orphans there that they set up a non-profit called Eyes Wide Open International to help in Haiti because so many children were left without parents. Vineyard Columbus has been engaged in the building of an orphanage in Haiti and David was down there assisting in the building of that orphanage.

In any case, a week ago Wednesday David was coming out of the bank. Several men on cycles rode by and shot at him in an apparent robbery attempt. A bullet entered David on the left side of his chest traveling in a downward trajectory through his spleen, through his diaphragm and lodging somewhere in his intestines. David ran bleeding 2 ½ blocks to the hospital that he help to set up.

Sean Penn, the actor, knew David and Sean Penn's foundation has been working in Haiti. Sean Penn immediately dispatched some of his people to get blood for David since it is so difficult to get blood in Haiti. I was told that they put about 15 units of blood in David. He was then life-flighted to Miami to a Miami hospital. Doctors were not able to remove the bullet because of David's critical condition and he died this past Thursday, February 2nd at about 2:00 p.m.

What would it mean for David's wife, Nicolle, or his daughter or son, or his parents, or his friends to forgive David's killers? Forgiveness is easy, CS Lewis said, until you have something to forgive. If forgiveness is at the heart of what Christianity is about, what does it mean to forgive and how do we do it?

I've been doing a series on the church that I've titled *Life Together*. Today's message is called *Life Together in a World of Retaliation*. Let's pray.

I want to look at one verse for today's message, Ephesians 4:32:

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Forgiveness is incredibly difficult when you have something to forgive. Every one of us can come up with a hundred reasons why we can't forgive and a thousand easier more appealing alternatives. Almost all of us have run down the paths of some alternative to forgiving a person who has wounded or offended us. Many alternatives to forgiveness may work for some of us for a while, or work to a limited degree. I mean, some of the alternatives to forgiving will enable us to forget the pain of past wounding, at least for a little while. We can dull the pain of childhood abuse, or neglect, or the loss of a loved one through medicating it away with alcohol or prescription drugs, or by being too busy by working all of the time. We can choose the alternative to forgiving of insight, trying to understand our feelings through self-help books, or through some kind of therapy.

Or instead of forgiving we could simply displace all that hurt and anger and project it on to someone else. We could make our spouse, or our girlfriend or boyfriend, or kids, or fellow church member, or pastor pay the bill that is owed to us from someone else.

But the reality is that no alternative to forgiveness will heal us or open the possibility to restored relationship. Nothing else that you can think of as an

alternative will provide you with all the benefits that forgiveness does. Forgiveness is essential to being able to have a happy marriage. Without forgiveness, real intimacy becomes impossible in marriage. There are just too much accumulated hurts and too many walls. If there is no forgiveness, parent-child relationships break down. Without forgiveness there is no possibility of healthy church life.

But before I talk about the dynamics of forgiveness – that is how we go about the excruciatingly difficult process of forgiving someone else – I need to deal with some of the misconceptions regarding forgiveness. I need to clear some of the ground. So, let me start talking about:

What forgiveness is and isn't

Much of our difficulty in forgiving is that we really don't know what it means to forgive.

Forgiveness is not forgetting

What should we do with particularly painful memories? Maybe you've heard the expression, "You need to forgive and forget," but how can you forget the trauma of walking into your own bedroom and discovering that your wife or husband is in bed with someone else? How do you forget the trauma of reading an email or a phone text that you won't supposed to read in which your spouse is professing love or being sexually explicit with another woman or another man?

As followers of Christ we are commanded to forgive. But what do you do with the painful memories of physical abuse, or sexual abuse from your childhood? Or maybe you still have in your mind a vivid scene of being humiliated as a child. For example:

- You wet your pants in elementary school and the other kids laughed at you
- The teacher stood you up in class and in front of everyone made fun of you
- You were publicly ridiculed by a boy who told all of his friends about the explicit details of your sexual encounter with him at a party
- You were always the last person to be picked in sports
- You were beaten up by a bully and had to endure the shame of crying in front of your friends, or the bully's friends
- You experienced a particularly humiliating form of racism and you were powerless to do anything about it

What do we do with painful memories, especially those memories that are so traumatic that we want to lock them up in the basement of our souls and never allow them to see the light of day again?

Forgiveness is not the same thing as forgetting. If a hurt can be easily forgotten, no forgiveness is necessary. The hurt that we're talking about is just an annoyance, a triviality. It is here today and gone tomorrow. It just washes off. We don't even remember it. We don't have to forgive that sort of thing.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. Lots of times what we call forgetting is avoidance. We've repressed the painful memory and that's kept us from having to do the hard work of real forgiveness. We've just pushed it down and have refused to look at it.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. And you can't make yourself forgive on demand anyway. The more you spend time trying to forget something that's painful, the more it locks into your mind. Like, "don't think about pink elephants; especially, don't think about pink elephants dancing wearing hula skirts."

You say, "How do I forget the fact that I was abused or humiliated or betrayed? How can I ever forget what happened to a loved one? I can't erase the hard-drive of my brain."

You don't need to play games with yourself. There is no rewind button on your memory. There is no delete key. So, what does it mean to forgive?

Let me change that word "forget" for you for just a moment. Instead of talking about forgetting, let's talk about practicing non-remembrance.

Forgiveness is practicing non-remembrance

The memory is still there in the hard-drive and will be there until you and I enter into God's eternal kingdom. To practice non-remembrance means that you and I make a deliberate choice to not visit the file over and over again. The file is there, I know it's there, but I choose not to visit it and read over it. I have forgiven. I've given this matter over to God. I've given the person to God. I've given the hurt to God. I will talk about the process of forgiveness in a moment. But part of the key to forgiveness is practicing non-remembrance. After I have forgiven, I make a choice to not dig up that painful memory again. I say, "I'm not going to go there."

Forgiveness is not forgetting; it is practicing non-remembrance.

Forgiveness is not a one-time act

You know, it is often the case that offenders move to ask for forgiveness way too quickly. The request for forgiveness can often be used as a way to short-circuit the process of really listening to and understanding the hurt and offense we've committed. I know I've done this and you probably have too. You realize that

your mate is offended with you, or that your friend has been offended by something you've done, so you cut them off at the pass by quickly asking for forgiveness. Part of the reason why you ask for forgiveness is that you really don't want to listen to or be reminded of the hurt that you've caused.

Forgiveness is the *get out of jail free* card that you wave in the other person's face. "OK, I know what I have done, now forgive me." Forgiveness is NOT a *get out of jail free* card.

Sometimes we ask for forgiveness way too quickly. If you really want to be forgiven, we must allow other people the ability to tell us how much our behavior has hurt them. That is a painful process, especially when the person who is telling you is someone you love, someone you care about, someone whose love and respect you want. But often in our desire to just put the history behind us, and bury the past, we ask for forgiveness way too quickly. We are not really looking for full restoration based on truth, based on healing, and based on allowing God's processes to work. We are not looking for full total healing, for restoration. We just want to put the issue behind us and move on.

That is not forgiveness, friends. Forgiveness means healing. Forgiveness means understanding with the heart. Forgiveness means listening and opening yourself up to hearing what you have done and letting it sink in for a while, letting the expression of our offense humble us.

Here's a rule – never ask for forgiveness unless you have really heard and understood what it is that you've done wrong. Lots of folks who ask forgiveness just don't get it – they don't understand the pain they've caused and they don't want to understand the pain. They just want to move on with life on the cheap.

And not only can we ask for forgiveness too quickly, but we can grant pardon and forgiveness too quickly.

You say, "How can that be possible that we would forgive someone too quickly?"

Well, if you really don't recognize the depth of the hurt or the sin, if you are out of touch with your own heart, if you are still in the shock of the discovery of the offense, if you are still reeling from the pain of what has happened, you are probably not yet in a position to forgive. O, you can declare your willingness to forgive. You can say, "Friend, spouse, lover, roommate, girlfriend, boyfriend, criminal – I am follower of Christ and duty bound to forgive, but I need some time for the pieces of my heart to come together so that I really can forgive from a whole heart. I have just been hit by a tidal wave."

This is not an excuse for foot-dragging – "Well, I'm still hurt...I'm still angry..." Forgiveness is the way you deal with hurt and anger. But many people rush to express forgiveness and then, years later, wonder why they are still struggling

with the issues of what was done to them. If forgiveness didn't deal with this, then I don't know what will.

Well, what will is real forgiveness, not the kind of thing we do in the moment of discovering the shocking truth, or the moment of experiencing the pain – but the work out of real stuff that does take time, which leads to the debunking of a second myth. That is that *forgiveness is just a one-time easy thing to do*.

Forgiveness always sounds easier in sermons than it is in real life. Trust me, I am not only a preacher, I am also a human being. Forgiveness is not just a one-time action or a one-time decision. Yes, *it starts with a decision* – a decision to obey God's command that I forgive. It starts with a decision, but that decision only leads to a series of repeated decisions in which I must walk out my decision and forgive every time the offense comes to mind again.

Another way to put it is that forgiveness is a process, not just an event.

Forgiveness is a process

You commit yourself to walk down the road of forgiveness. That's what Jesus is looking for – not just a snap decision, but a commitment to walk down a road. I love what C.S. Lewis, the English writer, said He said, "To forgive for the moment is not that difficult, but to go on forgiving, to forgive the same offense again and again every time it recurs to the memory – there is the real tussle."

Offenders, we must respect the process of forgiving in the life of another and we can do that by making it easy to forgive us. Let me share a little principle here.

I believe it is the job of the offender to make forgiveness as easy as possible in the life of those we have offended. Sometimes offenders make forgiveness really hard by demanding it, by reminding us of our duty to forgive, by refusing to live with limitations for a season, by refusing to listen, by refusing to heal. Make it easy for those you have hurt to get over it. It takes time. There is a process.

That same C.S. Lewis that I quoted before once said that he had an amazing break through one morning. He was in his 50s and he finally felt that he had completely forgiven a horrible schoolmaster who was just a sadist, a cruel, mean, vengeful drunk of a man who ridiculed and bullied and beat not only C.S. Lewis, but lots of other boys. After 40 years he said, I finally feel like it is done. I have really torn up the IOU.

Forgiveness begins with a decision, but then it proceeds to a hundred thousand decisions to really walk out a lifestyle of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a process.

Forgiveness is not the absence of consequences

I have had men who have committed adultery tell me that their marriages are not restored because their wives have not forgiven them. Now, that is certainly possible. It is possible that their wives have not released them from the debt. It is possible that a wife keeps dangling over her husband's head an IOU; that the husband keeps being accused; that the bill of hurt and offense has really not been torn up. It is certainly possible that in a situation of adultery where confession is made, that forgiveness is not extended.

But very often people believe that they are not forgiven because the offended person demands that there be some consequences for the particular sin. Let me say this as plainly as I can. *Forgiveness does not mean that there are no consequences.* Do you know even with God, forgiven sin often involves consequences? Read the story of David's sin of adultery with his neighbor Bathsheba, who was the wife of another man. And if you are taking notes, you might want to jot down 2 Samuel 12, especially verses 13-14 where David says,

2 Samuel 12.13-14

"I have sinned against the Lord"

David, there are consequences. Let's be clear. We are not talking about punishment or penalty. God isn't trying to settle accounts with us when he says there are consequences for our sins. Our accounts were settled at the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross settles accounts. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

So, if a person has an affair and breaches their marital vows, the offended party is commanded by God to forgive. That means the offender does not have to pay them off. He doesn't have to buy them flowers or do the dishes for the next 15 years. Jewelry, a new house – none of that is required. But there are consequences for a breach of your marital vows. And the consequences may be a limitation of freedom. You can forgive someone and still ask questions that you wouldn't have asked before the affair. You may require an accounting for their time; or an accounting for money spent, or an end to the privacy of email or phone texts. You may even insist on a requirement that we go in for counseling. These are consequences, not penalties for sin.

As a consequence of forgiven sin, a mate might say, "You know, I forgive you, but these incidents point out to me the need for us to fundamentally restructure our marriage. I insist on counseling. This incident or pattern is just the tip of the iceberg. There is something deeper, a deeper pattern of selfishness or secretiveness or busyness or a lack of intimacy. We need to fundamentally restructure our marriage and I insist on that."

Friends, that is consistent with forgiveness.

If you have a teenager and your teen has just gotten their license and they go out and get a speeding ticket or you see them driving without their seatbelt or they get a bad grade card and they ask your forgiveness – forgive them, by all means, forgive them. Release them.

But that doesn't mean there are no consequences by way of discipline. It might mean the removal of driving privileges for a season (a season, not just a night). If someone habitually lies to you and asks your forgiveness, forgive! You are a Christian – forgive! But it is appropriate in the future to ask for more proof, more evidence when they promise something. Their lost credibility is a consequence of their sin, not a punishment.

God forgives our sins, and yet, there may be consequences as the result of promiscuity. We might get a sexually transmitted disease. As a result of a lack of self-control in spending, we may find ourselves loaded down with debt and having to pay off creditors for years. Our spouse or friend might insist that we tear up our credit cards.

Forgiven, brought into restored relationship with God – yes; but consequences? Perhaps, also yes. A leader or a pastor may be removed from their job. Churches may be restructured because of forgiven sins, not just sins, but forgiven sins.

Forgiving is breaking the law of action and reaction

Why do we forgive? *We forgive because forgiveness alone breaks the law of action and reaction.* You know the law of action and reaction? Any of you who have been married know the stupid arguments that you can get into, how embarrassed you would be if these things were tape recorded and played back to you in front of people that you respect:

“Did you cash your check today?”

“No, I forgot.”

“You forgot? You forgot to cash the check today? You always seem to forget.”

“Well, it wasn't my check. Why don't you cash it yourself?”

“You can't do one thing for me?”

“I do a lot of things for you.”

“I asked you just last weekend...”

You go back and forth, on and on. How do we stop this stupid cycle? We forgive. Forgiveness is the steel rod in the machine that pumps out reactions for every action. It shuts the whole machine down. Forgiveness operates by a totally different system than America or any other country in the world operates. We in America operate by way of claiming our rights, of demanding what is owed to us, by just wanting everything to be fair and square, just getting what is ours,

getting even, making sure no one gets a leg up on us, making sure no one takes advantage of us, making sure we are totally protected and never vulnerable, never stepped on. We never have to sacrifice what is ours – action and reaction.

Think of all the movies that are centered on the theme of getting even, exacting retribution, and retaliation. Think about all the revenge movies that are popular in the theatres. There is *Kill Bill* where the bride wakes up after a long coma. The baby that she carried while in the coma is gone. The only thing that is on her mind is to get revenge on the assassination team that betrayed her.

There is *Law-Abiding Citizen* where a frustrated man decides to take justice into his own hands after a plea-bargain sets one of his family's killers free. Essentially, in the movie he targets not only the killer, but the judge, the mayor, the whole city in his revengeful plot.

Mel Gibson was in a movie a few years ago titled *Payback*. Mel Gibson was shot by his wife and his best friend and left to die. But he doesn't die and he pays back several dozen people.

There are so many revenge movies! That's what *The Godfather* was all about – several generations of a family who understood the principle of retaliation, getting even, making sure no one steps on them; paying people back even years later; never forgetting an offense.

That's the theme of so many of our fantasies. Here is what I should have said, when she said that. Here's what I should have done. I see myself pounding the bully - cutting to pieces that sarcastic coworker- setting my ex-fiancée's car on fire.

Isn't this what so many teen movies are about? The nerdy kid, the neglected kid, the kid with problems – gets even with the popular kids. At the end of the movie the popular kids, the cheerleaders, the wealthy kids, the football players, they all get their come-uppance. They fall in the mud. A truckload of manure dumps on their car. And we love it. People getting even – pay back - action and reaction.

The Serbs and the Albanian Muslims have been at it since 1389. 600 years of memories of getting even, of paying back for generations of hurt - actions and reactions.

The Protestants and Catholics in Ireland have been at it for generations, since William of Orange in the 1600's and his massacre of the Irish. And people are still bombing others for what happened 300 years ago - action and reaction.

We see it with the Palestinians and the Israelis. A suicide bombing leads to a helicopter gunship blowing up a policy headquarters, leads to a grenade launcher

attack that kills two boys, leads to the demolition of 20 homes and five children's deaths.

Friends, this is what the world's religions outside of Christianity are based on – this relentless, merciless, exacting of justice and retribution. People say there are many ways to God. Americans today are offended when a Christian stands up and says that you come to God only through faith in Jesus Christ. Americans say, "How intolerant. How bigoted. How narrow-minded. How dare you...there are many roads to God."

I would ask the person who had the many-roads philosophy to God, "What kind of salvation are you looking for? Are you looking for a salvation that offers forgiveness, an end to the law of action and reaction? Or are you looking to get even?" You are not going to find forgiveness in Hinduism. Hinduism teaches karma and what we experience in this life is the result of the accumulation of all of our past deeds and misdeeds. We are on this endless wheel of paying off what our past lives have done. If you are looking for forgiveness in Hinduism, it is not there.

Don't look for forgiveness in Islam, it is not there. The ultimate symbol of Islam is a scale where a perfect and just God weighs your good deeds against your bad deeds and gives you exactly what you deserve - action and reaction; justice without mercy.

To the person who says, "All roads lead to God" I would ask, "What kind of salvation do you want? What kind of God are you looking for? Are you looking for a salvation that is based upon forgiveness? Are you looking for a system that puts a steel rod in the spokes of the wheel of an "eye for an eye?" Gandhi once said, "We will practice an eye for an eye until the whole world goes blind."

But if you are looking for an end to retaliation—in the Mideast; in our inner cities; in your home; if you are looking for someone to just say, "Stop. Let's stop the arguments. Let's stop the fighting. Let's stop hurting each other. Let's stop blaming each other. Let's stop being controlled by the past. Let's open up the possibility of a different future." If you are looking for something like that, that kind of salvation is only found in Jesus Christ. The symbol of Christianity is not balanced scales; it is a cross upon which the Son of God died to achieve forgiveness.

How do we forgive?

I mean, if forgiveness is a process, if forgiveness is the continual choice to practice non-remembrance, if forgiveness breaks this law of action and reaction so that I'm finally set free from my revenge fantasies, how do I forgive? How do you forgive?

Forgiveness begins with honesty

One of the reasons why the book of Psalms is many people's favorite book in the Bible is because the writer of the Psalms, typically the Old Testament King David, is brutally honest as he names the hurt that he has experienced before God. We read verses like this in the Psalms:

Psalm 55:12-14

12 If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were rising against me, I could hide. 13 But it is you, one like myself, my companion, my close friend, 14 with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship at the house of God, as we walked about among the worshipers. 20 My companion attacks his friends; he violates his covenant. 21 His talk is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords.

You can't forgive what you haven't named. What exactly are you so angry about? Yes, that person said something really awful to you, but it is not just their words that hurt; it is what those words did to you. They humiliated you. They caused you to feel shame. Those words robbed your dignity and made you face in front of your friends or your colleagues.

One simple way to begin the process of forgiveness is to ask yourself: when and where did the knife penetrate you? Was it reading the email? Was it a certain lie? Was it a discovery that you've been played for a fool? When and where did the knife go it? Forgiveness starts by naming the sin and being completely honest before God. "Father, here is what was done to me. Here is what it produced in me. Here's what it felt like. Here's how I was violated."

Forgiveness continues with empathy and humility

Typically, when we've really been violated it is difficult to think about the violator, the offender as being any bigger than their sin. Very often when we're stuck in un-forgiveness, it means that we've reduced the other person to their sin. We look at them and we say that they are nothing but a con artist; they're nothing but an adulterer; they're nothing but a liar or a manipulator or a narcissist. It is virtually impossible for any of us to have empathy for someone who is nothing more than a sin.

But, of course, all human beings are more than our nothing-buts. How do I gain any empathy for a person who I view simply as a cheat or a thief? The only thing that's ever worked for me is to begin to pray for that person. And again, I've got to quote from CS Lewis, who was asked one time, "How do you pray for someone like Hitler or Stalin? How do you pray for someone who was so

obviously evil? How do you fulfill Jesus' command that he gave to all of his followers in Matthew 5:33-45:

Matthew 5:43-45

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Here is what CS Lewis said:

When you pray for Hitler and Stalin, how do you actually teach yourself to make the prayer real? The two things that helped me are (a) continual grasp of the idea that one is only joining one's feeble little voice to the perpetual intercession of Christ who died for these very men (b) a recollection, as firm as I can make it, of all of one's cruelty; which might have blossomed under different conditions into something terrible. You and I are not at bottom so different from these ghastly creatures.

I pray and I remind myself that Jesus Christ himself is praying and has prayed for the murderers of David Bompart. I pray and I remind myself were I put in a whole set of different circumstances with an utterly different family and different opportunities and set of relations and set of temptations, who knows what I would have become? Who knows what you would be given an entirely different set of conditions?

We're honest with God. We continue with empathy and humility as a result of praying for this person.

We conclude by tapping into the heart of Jesus

None of us in our own strength can forgive our friends, much less our enemies. Forgiveness is the result of sharing in Jesus' Spirit, tapping into a heart that is kinder than our own. We have to tap into a heart that is bigger than our hearts, more generous. My shriveled up little heart doesn't have the ability to really let someone go, so let all the hurt go, to pray for an enemy. I can't do that from my shriveled up little heart. And you won't be able to do it with your shriveled up little heart either. You need to tap into a bigger heart, the heart of Jesus.

See, Jesus is not one of those philosophers who taught one thing and did another.

You say, "Rich, everybody has a limit. I give up. I am not God. My patience gives out. My love gives out. I'm at the end of my rope with this other person." I

share your feelings; and, Jesus understands how we feel. And so he tells a story:

Matthew 18:23-27

23 “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. 26 “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ 27 The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

How much did Jesus forgive?

Jesus, of course, is the King in this story. In this story the servant owes not 10,000 bags of gold, but 10,000 talents. A talent was the currency in the ancient Roman world. It is almost impossible to convert 1st century currency into the modern world, but when you discover that the entire tax bill for all of Galilee, everyone living in Galilee at the time, to the Roman government each year was 200 talents. So they are talking about 50 years of taxes for everyone living in that area. And the Roman tax was really high. 10,000 talents was a lot of money! To put it differently, you realize that a talent was about 20 years of wages for the average worker; we’re talking about 200,000 years of work. What Jesus is saying is that there was a servant who owed the King an absurdly large debt that he could never repay. And yet, the King forgave the debt.

When we talk about how much we should forgive, how far does this Christian forgiveness thing go? Jesus says it goes all the way, no limit; he is not one of those philosophers, who taught one thing and did another.

I remember back in the 1970’s Larry Norman, a Christian artist, said,

The Beatles wrote all you need is love, and then they broke up.

Jesus was not like the governor who recorded an abstinence video while carrying on a secret affair. Jesus is not like that. He didn’t say, “You just need to forgive and forget, but I’m going to do something else. When it is crunch time, when I’m offended, I’m going to get back at people.” The amazing thing about Jesus, our Lord, is that he actually put into practice what he taught us. He was so radical that he actually lived this forgiveness thing. When Jesus hung on a cross, what did he pray? Did he pray, “Father, get them? Consume them?” Did he pray like the Old Testament psalmists, “Smash their babies on a rock. Repay them, God, for everything they’re doing to me?”

What did Jesus say to Peter when Peter pulled out his sword on the night Jesus was arrested? Did he say, “good job, Peter, you’re living in the real world, buddy. In the real world, it’s violence in return for violence.” No. He said: Peter, you don’t get it. You are living in the way of Lamech. You are still living in the world of payback. I’ve come to introduce you to a different world. And then he modeled it as he hung bleeding on the cross where he prayed: Father, forgive them...forgive them.

Forgive who? Forgive the Roman soldiers, who weren’t just good guys, who were just doing their job, their duty. The Roman soldiers were people who enjoyed kicking Jesus in the face and spitting on him. They were a bunch of thugs.

Forgive them? Forgive who? Forgive the Sanhedrin, Father, and the religious authorities who deliberately lied and manipulated a trial, perjured themselves, broke their own laws.

Forgive them? Forgive who? Pontius Pilate, the ultimate conscience-less-nests political animal. Which way is the wind blowing? That’s where I’m going.

Forgive them? Forgive who? Forgive the soldiers, forgive the Sanhedrin, and forgive Pontius Pilate; forgive you and me. What does Jesus forgive us for? We often read the Anglican Prayer of General Confession during communion. During that prayer we say:

We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We’ve offended against thy holy laws. We’ve left undone those things we ought to have done and we’ve done those things which we ought not to have done and there is no health in us.

You say, “I have reached my limit with this other person.” Jesus says, “I understand that; so, I want to help you to go beyond your limits. Ask me to fill you with my Spirit. Ask me to give you my heart.”

What happens if we don’t forgive?

When we don’t forgive Jesus tells us that we are chained to the injustice we suffered in the past. If you don’t forgive, Jesus says, you are going to be imprisoned forever by what was done to you, or what has been done to your family member. You are always going to drag that hurt around. If you don’t forgive, you live in a permanent bent and twisted response to your past. You are always in reaction. You are always an echo. The evil that was done to you or to your family member wins because it forever shapes you.

Do you want to be distorted? Bent? Do you want to just be an echo of what was done to you?

Let me close with this story. Years ago I read the story of a little girl who got her hand stuck in a very expensive Chinese vase at her uncle's house. She was about 3 years old and she stuck her hand into the vase, but she couldn't get it out. Her uncle couldn't get it out. They tried to pour oil on her hand and soap it up. She was screaming and really traumatized because she couldn't pull her hand out of the vase.

Finally, there was nothing to do but break that expensive Chinese vase. When they broke the vase, they found out the reason why they couldn't get her hand out of it. It was because her hand was clutched in a little fist. When they opened up her hand they discovered that this little girl was holding onto a penny. And because she wouldn't let go of the penny, they had to break the expensive vase.

So, here's the question I want to leave you with today: What is the penny that's in your hand that you are not willing to let go of? What's the hurt, the pain, the grievance, the offense, the thing that you're clinging to with a death grip? And what valuable thing in your life are you allowing to be destroyed so that you can hold onto your penny? What grace of God are you forfeiting because you've got a death grip on something else?

Forgiveness opens our hands. By our forgiveness, we're able to let go. Let's pray.

Life Together in a World of Retaliation

Rich Nathan
February 5, 2012
Christian Living: Life Together Series
Ephesians 4:32

I. What is forgiveness?

A. Forgiveness is not forgetting

Forgiveness is practicing non-remembrance

B. Forgiveness is not a 1-time act

Forgiveness is a process

C. Forgiveness is not the absence of consequences

Forgiveness is breaking the law of action and reaction

II. How do we forgive?

A. Forgiveness begins with honesty

B. Forgiveness continues with empathy and humility

C. Forgiveness concludes by tapping into the heart of Jesus

III. What happens if we don't forgive?