

Forgiveness

Mark 11:12-14, 20-26; Mathew 5:21-24

Sermon by Peter Shetler

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Mark 11: 12-14, 20-26

*12*On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry. *13*Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. *14*He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening.

20 As they were passing by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots up. *21*Being reminded, Peter said to Him, "Rabbi, look, the fig tree which You cursed has withered." *22*And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. *23*"Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it will be granted him. *24*"Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they will be granted you. *25*"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. *26*["But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions."]

Matthew 5:21-24

21"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' *22*"But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. *23*"Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, *24*leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

Almost anytime I call Jan during the day, or send her an email (unless someone is listening in or others are copied), or just see her at the end of the day -- I will almost always start out with, "So. Do you still love me?" Now Jan says that this is just because I am pathetic and need lots of reassurance -- and she is right. But I always find it something of a miracle that people DO love me. Jan. My kids. Family. Friends. Brothers and sisters here in this church! Colleagues at work!

If these little children here could talk and you were to ask them “Are you loved?” They would respond “well DUH! Look how adorable I am. Who wouldn’t love this?” Little ones rightly feel that they deserve to be loved. Young children can sing “Jesus Loves Me” with abandon because OF COURSE Jesus would love them!

But as we get a little older -- not even very much older -- we start realizing that some of the things that we do and say and think are not very “loveable”. And maybe some people do not-very-loveable things TO us. And we are damaged. We are no longer at all sure that we deserve to be loved or that we CAN be loved.

By the time you are an old codger like me you have managed to offend in some way just about everyone you have ever been in contact with. So it is something of a miracle that many of them -- many of YOU -- have forgiven (or at least forgotten) those offenses and still love me.

But God. Now there is another thing altogether. The people around me -- even my wife of 37 years -- only know some of the things that go through my head. Some of the unworthy thoughts or things I say under my breath. Some of the things I have done and said to others. Some of the things done and said to me. But God. God knows ALL of those things. God also knows my doubts and un-faith and unfaithfulness to Him. It is easy to get into a place where I am thinking, “well, I am unworthy of God’s love, and God surely can’t love me now. But if I could just stop doing or thinking these things, or could start doing and thinking these things, THEN God could love me again. In other words, I start thinking in terms of earning God’s love. So maybe somewhere down the road I can sing “Jesus Loves Me” again.

It is just really, really hard for me, for many of us -- including many in this room I suspect -- to KNOW this most fundamental Gospel message -- that we are beloved of God.

As we daily fall short of being the people that God wants us to be, we cry out to God for his mercy and his forgiveness that we might again be reconciled to him and to live in God's embrace and God's love -- in a state of grace. And, indeed, God has promised that he always loves us, that he will hear us, forgive us and heal us.

HOWEVER, in our rush to make SURE that we are communicating no hint that we can somehow earn God's love for us, we sometimes gloss over [or just forget to mention] to our children or to others -- and to [remind] ourselves -- that while God's love for us is unconditional, the quality of our spiritual lives is very much conditional and that our relationship with God is a covenant relationship. God loves us when we are sinners and openly defying Him. God loves us when we are in a relationship with him and we still can't seem to keep from sinning. But sin always creates distance between God and each of us individually, and sin creates distance between us in this community. There ARE things we need to DO if we want to experience fullness of life and closeness with God.

So there are a lot of disagreements among people of faith (and of different faiths) over what we must DO. There are LOTS of words and commands in scripture, and we Christians sometimes get caught in the traps of getting mired in the minutia and start putting following the law above following Jesus; or we give up and want to throw out the whole lot. But there are times when I think God recognizes our frustration and boils things down for us and it behooves us to pay particular attention to these. For example:

- Micah (tearing out his hair here) 6:7 Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?

... and 700 years (maybe 40 generations? Later, the Disciples ask Jesus

- Matt 22:36“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” 37And He said to him, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ 38“This is the great and foremost commandment. 39“The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ 40“On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

I think it is especially important to pay attention to what Jesus has to say about what is most important about our covenant with God. Two things stand out. Right off the bat, at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, the very first thing Jesus tells us to do if we even want to approach God -- this God who loves us -- is **Repent** -- to recognize the sin, acknowledge the sin, and turn from sin in our lives.

- Matt:4-16"THE PEOPLE (this would be **US**) WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED." 17From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

And the second thing we must do if we want to approach God is made clear from our scripture in Matt 5:23:

23“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; **first be reconciled to your brother, and then** come and present your offering.

The second thing we must do if we want to even **approach** God is to be reconciled one to another. And the very heart of reconciliation is **forgiveness**.

If we are to talk about repenting of sin or forgiving sin, we should probably pause for a second here and define this thing “sin”. There are many who would define sin as breaking

any of those many laws and commandments -- hundreds of them found throughout scripture. When examining my own life I find it easier to simply see sin as actions or thoughts that hurt me and pull me away from God or that hurt others and push others away from God.

Now these actions or thoughts -- this sin -- can be mine or they can be others' actions or thoughts -- others' sins. Here is the main thing I want to say today: It is right and proper that if we want to remain in covenant with God, we soberly examine our lives for our own sin, to recognize and acknowledge our sins, to repent, and to ask God for forgiveness. I think many of us here do this in our private lives. Often in this church, we read together a confession of some sort. But THEN, we often skate right on over to assuring ourselves and each other of God's promise of forgiveness. **BUT it doesn't work like that!!** God's forgiveness is, indeed, freely available, but it is conditional. It is available ONLY IF we have first forgiven others who have sinned against us.

Sorry, friends, but Jesus could not have been more clear about this. Remember the Lord's Prayer? Forgive me my sins as I forgive the sins of others? And though we often choose other Gospels for this prayer, in Matthew it continues (because we are a little dense, I suppose) with words similar to the Mark scripture we read at the beginning. (6:13-14):
... **13**'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

14"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.**15**"But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

And THAT makes me wonder how many of us here are slowly dying under the weight of unforgiven sin? Not allowing God's healing forgiveness to wash over us by our own refusal to forgive others their sins against us.

Who are these others who we need to forgive? Who comes to your mind? Who do you resent or hate? Might be a person close to you -- a parent, a child, a relative, a coworker, a teacher, a friend, a lover, a spouse, an ex-spouse, roommate, a boss, a stranger. And the list of possible sins is pretty long -- cutting words, lies told about us, treachery, being unfaithful, incompetence, stealing, physical abuse or torture, verbal abuse, sexual abuse or assault or rape ... the whole sorry lot of what we humans do to each other. These things bring with them enormous hurt and it is our RIGHT to hold close the resentment and anger and hatred over the things done to us. To fantasize about revenge and getting even and hurting them back. It is our right. God recognizes that right. And asks us to forgo that right and to forgive instead.

We need to be clear about what forgiveness IS and what it is NOT. Forgiveness is **not** saying that the sin that caused the hurt is in some way diminished or that was somehow “alright” or it was OK. Forgiveness does not deny or diminish the injustice done or the fact that you were so badly hurt. The person who hurt you must still deal with the consequences of their sin and their own relationship with God.

But unforgiveness is a chain that you carry that connects you to those events and those persons. A chain that causes you to dwell on the memories, to relive those experiences, to relish fantasies of revenge. We wrap ourselves in the familiar cloaks of self-pity and victimhood that come to define us. But these chains are a choice.

Forgiveness is choosing to turn over the injustice and the pain to God. Forgiveness is also turning over to God the fantasies of revenge, and the the right to be angry and bitter. Forgiveness breaks the chains that bind us to the sins of others. And forgiving others allows God to forgive US. Forgiveness allows God to work healing in our souls and in our lives. If there is anyone you hate, anyone who has hurt you who you have not forgiven, I beg you to choose to forgive and in so doing, to choose also to be healed.

The words are not difficult, but saying and meaning them can be among the hardest things you ever do. I have seen the anguish and the struggle. It is often not possible at all without the help and strength of the Holy Spirit. If the hurt seems overwhelming, and forgiveness an impossible thing to ask you to do, it might help to remember that Jesus has gone before you. Falsely accused, mocked and shamed by his own people. Stripped and beaten. Abandoned by his friends and denied by his own disciples. Made to shoulder his own cross. Nailed to the cross and left to die an agonizing death. Oh yes, he knows about pain and injustice. And his words were “Father, forgive them.”

How is it done? It isn't magic. Having a witness -- a friend, a mentor, a pastor is good. Say “Before you, God, and this witness, I choose to forgive <the person's name> for <whatever it was they did to you> and I ask you, Holy Spirit, to fill all those places in my soul where where unforgiveness has lived with your own presence and the fruits of the spirit.

Sometimes -- esp. when the hurts have been catastrophic -- like the death of a loved one, ongoing abuse -- we need to forgive God. Sometimes it is God we hate. Why did you not protect me?? Where WERE you? WHY did you not answer my prayers?? Name these things to God. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you how God was present in the situation, usually sustaining and weeping with you. “I forgive you, God, for seeming to have abandoned me.”

Sometimes we need to forgive others. Sometimes we may need to forgive God. And lastly (from Brennan Manning's book “The Signature of Jesus”):

Jesus challenges us to forgive everyone we know and even those we don't know and to be very careful not to forget even one against whom we harbor ill will. Right now someone exists who has disappointed and offended us, someone with whom we are continually displeased and with whom we are more impatient, irritated, unforgiving, and spiteful than we would dare be with anyone else. That person is

ourselves. We are so often fed up with ourselves. We're sick of our own mediocrity, revolted by our own inconsistency, bored by our own monotony. We would never judge any other of God's children with the savage self-condemnation with which we crush ourselves. Jesus said we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. We must be patient, gentle, and compassionate with ourselves in the same way we try to love our neighbor.

Forgiving ourselves can sometimes be the hardest of all. Here you must remember that God loves you NOW. Just as you are. Not as you could be. Not as you should be. Not if you were perfect. Right now. Just as you are. Forgive yourself for being so harsh to yourself. You will also find that being gentle with yourself will yield the fruit of finding you being gentler with others around you.

I suppose this is a place to mention one more thing connected with sin and repentance and forgiveness: to be wary of curses; curses you may have made against others, and curses you may have made against yourself. In our churches we are comfortable -- or at least OK -- with the idea of giving and receiving blessings. Maybe we occasionally even remember who we are and that our Lord commands us to bless others, even those who do us harm, even those who curse us. Giving blessings in a way of affirming and participating in God's work. Blessings draw the person who is blessed closer to God. Do we also take seriously the power of a curse? (Did you note the power of Jesus' curse in the opening scripture?) Are we aware of the real damage done with the curses we throw out in moments of anger or hurt during the day? Against strangers? Drivers that cut us off? Coworkers we are frustrated with? Towards our children? Towards our parents? Towards ourselves? "I hate my body...", "I wish I was dead". We have been given both the ability and the authority to repent of --and cancel -- curses we ourselves make. And to ask Jesus to cancel curses made against us and choose to respond to those curses with blessings and with love.

If you turn over to God your right to the pain and anger and bitterness and vengefulness because of things done to you, God is free to pour out on you healing and forgiveness for your sins when you ask him to. Accept that forgiveness and the love and companionship that you have been offered by Christ. Once forgiven, do not dwell again on your sins or on the sins of others! You have given them to God and he has dealt with them. Know that you are loved and forgiven. Extend that love and forgiveness to others. That is what it is to live into a state of grace. What work do you need to do to live in a state of grace?