

Date: October 20, 2019

Series: *Final Lessons in Neighboring*

Title: *Forgiving As We Have Been Forgiven*

Preacher: Mark Adams

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-22, Colossians 3:13

As most of you know, CC Day is our deacon chair and it's our custom to meet every Wednesday morning for breakfast. We talk about our families, and deacon ministry issues, and we pray for one another and for the church we are privileged to serve. If you know CC you know time with him---time praying with him---is a great way to start the day!

Since CC is a Federal Magistrate Judge, I often ask him questions about any current legal issue that I've seen either on an episode of *Bull* or *Bluebloods*, or an ACTUAL case that is in the news. CC's a good person to ask legal questions because not only is he a judge, he also teaches law at American University's Washington College of Law! So every Wednesday I get the benefit of a law school education, without paying tuition. Please don't tell the registrar at AU!

For the last couple weeks our breakfast legal discussions have centered around the Amber Guyger case. If you don't follow the news. Guyger is a Dallas Police Officer who shot and killed her neighbor, a young man named Botham Jean. Guyger says that as she came down the stairs to her apartment she accidentally got off at the wrong floor and entered Jean's apartment thinking it was her own; and seeing him as an intruder, shot him. The prosecutor points out that Botham wasn't acting like an intruder at the time. In fact he was watching TV while eating a bowl of ice cream.

Like a lot of people, I had some questions about her sentencing, so as we ate our eggs and bacon, CC gave me the benefit of his wisdom. In our talks we both expressed our amazement at the forgiveness given Guyger by the family of the victim; especially that hug by Botham's brother, his comment to her that he prayed she would put her faith in Jesus. But the thing I hadn't noticed; the thing CC pointed out to me, was the shocking response of the judge in the case. Apparently Judge Tammy Kemp, left her bench---that super-desk judges sit behind---and came down to hug Ms. Guyger as well. But she also gave her a Bible and then she prayed for her right there in the courtroom. CC explained this kind of thing never happens. I mean, this is one reason they have those big, high super-desks, to separate them from the accused and convicted. This is not only for their safety in case someone they pronounce guilty would want to do the judge harm, but also so the judge can remain absolutely impartial.

So, understand that Judge Kemp's compassionate actions toward her convicted "courtroom neighbor" will mean she will almost certainly have nothing more to do with the Guyger case. In fact, since through her actions she has identified herself as a Christian, she will be seen as biased in any future cases in which Christians are on trial for their faith. CC says this will negatively impact her career. She could very well end up judging nothing more than cases that come to traffic court.

Well, I think we could all learn a lot from the forgiveness offered in this case---and that's why I bring it up. For, as you can see in the bulletin, this morning's lesson in neighboring has to do with forgiveness. Take your Bibles and turn to Matthew 18. Follow along as I read verses 21-22. And I would ask that if able you would stand in respect to God's Word as it is read.

**21 – Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”**

**22 – Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.”**

***Colossians 3:13 – Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.***

Let's begin this lesson on neighboring with a definition. WHAT exactly IS "forgiveness?" It's important to begin here because in our culture genuine forgiveness is uncommon. It is MORE common to be unforgiving than forgiving.

In his book *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancey writes that Unforgiveness, "plays like a background static of life for families, nations, and institutions. [Unforgiveness] is sadly our NATURAL human state. We nurse sores, go to elaborate lengths to rationalize our behavior, perpetuate family feuds, punish ourselves, punish others---all to avoid the most UNNATURAL act of forgiving."

In our society, REAL forgiveness---like the Jean family and Judge Kemp expressed---is as rare as hen's teeth. I mean, instead of forgiving our neighbors, most of us hold onto our hurts. We "nurse" our grudges as if they were our precious children! That's counter to how we are supposed to behave as Christians for forgiveness is defined in this way: means to "release or send away" to "let off." Forgiving is a commitment not let feelings of resentment come between us and those who have wronged us.

Well, since forgiveness is NOT the norm, then perhaps the best way to truly understand WHAT it IS -- is to remind ourselves of WHAT it is NOT.

And, one thing forgiveness is not -- is FORGETTING.

That makes sense doesn't it? I mean, when people hurt us deeply, we can't simply forget it and wipe it from our minds--we don't have that ability! So determining to forgive someone means that every time the wrong they did to us comes to mind, which it will, we forgive them again. Colossians 3:13 literally says, "**Keep on forgiving one another.**" So, forgiveness is a lifelong process. Every time Botham's mom and dad and brother look at his picture and remember what Guyger did to him, they will have to forgive her all over again. I think this is what Jesus meant when He told Peter that we are to forgive one another not seven times but seventy times seven. Forgiveness is not forgetting. In fact, it actually has MORE to do with remembering!

Forgiveness is also not RECONCILIATION.

Reconciliation takes two people, but an injured party can forgive an offender without reconciliation. We can forgive someone even if they don't ask or even want to be forgiven. And then, forgiveness is not CONDONING or DISMISSING. It doesn't mean saying, "What you did was bad---but it doesn't really matter." Because, if something doesn't matter, then of course forgiveness isn't needed in the first place. No forgiveness involves taking the offense seriously, not passing it off as inconsequential or insignificant. Forgiveness acknowledges the act as being wrong and forgives it anyway.

Let me put it this way. There is a great deal of grace in the act of forgiving someone. In fact, I want you to note that the word "forgiveness" is built around the root word, "give" and that tells us that it is something that is undeserved — like a gift.

Forgiveness is also not PARDON.

CC would say that a pardon is a legal transaction that releases an offender from the consequences of an action, such as a penalty. But, as Lewis Smedes writes, "You can forgive a person and still insist on a just punishment for the offense."

Another thing FORGIVENESS is not -- is EASY.

It can be extremely difficult for us to forgive those who wrong us or those we love. Elizabeth O'Connor writes, *"Despite a hundred sermons on forgiveness, we do not forgive easily, nor find ourselves easily forgiven. Forgiveness, we discover, is always harder than the sermons make it out to be."*

The movie *Dead Man Walking* tells the true story of how an unsuspecting Catholic nun became the spiritual director of a death row inmate. Throughout the movie, this prisoner, who was convicted of the brutal murder of a young couple, does little to make us identify with him as a human being. He is sickening and repulsive. Yet this nun, Sister Prejean, continues to guide him, hoping somehow to touch his soul. Finally, she succeeds in leading him to an act of contrition and penance and as a result, he declares to the parents of his victims, *"I'm sorry for what I did. I hope that my death gives you some peace."* For the parents of the young girl, there is no peace. They have only their hate. And their reaction is understandable, even natural. But, the father of the young man is not as hardened. He attends the grave side services for the murderer but stands at a distance. Sister Prejean goes to him and he tells her, *"Sister, I wish I had your faith."* She replies, *"It's not faith. It's a lot of WORK."*

And forgiveness **IS** work. It's hard to forgive. It doesn't come easily to us. Well, WHY would God ask us to do something that is so unnatural, so difficult? One reason is because God is so forgiving. When Jesus commanded us to love our enemies---which would of course include forgiving them---He said He wanted us to do this so that we would be seen as sons of our Father in Heaven. Our Lord was reminding us that we are to resemble our forgiving Heavenly Father. We are to bear God's family likeness and forgiving one another is one way we do this.

As A. M. Hunter has said, *"To return evil for good is the devil's way; to return good for good is man's; to return good for evil is God's."* Forgiving our neighbors is one way we ***"let our lights so shine that they see our good WORKS---and glorify your Father Who is in Heaven."*** (Matthew 5:16) Whenever we forgive, we are acting like God, we are following Jesus' example. In fact, whenever we are not sure how to deal with an enemy, whenever we hesitate because we're perplexed over how to proceed, whenever we wonder if we've gone far enough in our effort to reconcile, we should look at the example of Jesus and model ourselves after Him.

Some of you might be thinking of someone who has wronged you. Perhaps as I say all this you are thinking, *"Mark, you just don't know the terrible things that person DID to me."* And you are right, I don't---but I do know what WE did to our Lord, and yet He forgave. I know how much we were forgiven and remembering that ought empower us to forgive as well. In fact, many times the only way we CAN forgive is to ask God to give us the strength to do so.

But, the fact is, we'll never be asked to forgive someone more than God has already forgiven us.

Associate Press reporter Terry Anderson was held hostage in Lebanon for nearly seven years. Remember him? All those years, he was chained to a wall in a filthy, spider-infested cell. He suffered through sickness. He endured mental torture. He longed for his family. Through it all, he was given one book to read, the Bible, and as he devoured it in a search of words of hope, he came across Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount: ***"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy' but I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*** (Matthew 5:43) Can you imagine how outlandish that command must have seemed to Anderson, after spending 2,455 mind-numbing days in cruel captivity? Love whom? Pray for whom? Show kindness toward those who brutalized me? Exhibit compassion toward those who callously extended none to me? Finally, Anderson was released on December 4, 1991 and

journalists peppered him with questions. They wanted to know what his ordeal had been like---what his plans were for the future. But one reporter called out a question that stopped Anderson in his tracks. He asked: *"Can you forgive your captors?"* Anderson paused and before the words of his response could come out of his mouth, the Lord's Prayer coursed through his mind: ***"Forgive us our sins, as we also forgive those who sin against us."*** Then this victim of undeserved suffering replied, *"Yes I can forgive them because, as a Christian, I am required to forgive no matter how hard it may be."* Sometimes the only way we can forgive is to stop and remember our own experience and need of God's forgiveness.

That's one reason we share communion so let's go to the Lord's table and do that. As we partake of the bread and the cup, let's remind ourselves of the forgiveness and grace God has bestowed on us.

## THE ORDINANCE OF COMMUNION

If I were to take CC's class I'm sure there would be a test followed by the dreaded final exam. In the life of the Christ-follower the "test" to see if we understand what God teaches us about forgiveness is the act of forgiveness itself. It's sort of a take-home exam. This morning God may be testing you by reminding you of someone you need to forgive. It could be a spouse or friend. It could be a neighbor at work or across the street or across the aisle. I hope you pass this "test" with flying colors because there are so many benefits to doing so. For others this morning, the test may not be to forgive but instead to be forgiven. If you are here and are not a Christian then your "test" today involves whether or not you will accept the forgiveness for your sin that only Jesus offers. I hope you will say yes to this question and if you do will walk forward as we sing to share this decision with me. In this time of examining ourselves if you have other decisions to make...such as joining this church or rededicating your life to God in some way, I encourage you to leave your seat and walk forward and share it with me as we stand now to sing.