

Yes – And
Week 5: An Ethic of Forgiveness

I. We have been in a sermon series called “Yes And” over the past 4 weeks where we have been unpacking some of the main ethics of the Christian faith. The series title “Yes And” is the idea of “YES” we are informed by the law of the OT “AND” in light of the NT we are actually called to more, an even higher standard. Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it and, in the Gospels, Jesus ups the ante on many of the OT laws. We do not do the bare minimum, but as Christ followers, go above and beyond. Not out of obligation or earning favor with God but out of response (a love response) to what God has already done for us through Christ on the cross. We are set apart (holy) and not “of the world” as John 17:14 says. A sad fact for the modern church is that often we do not look or act that much differently than the secular world. We blend in and “bend in” to the world’s values instead of “bending to the book.” That’s a problem! That’s a serious problem folks! We are not “of the world” as the passage says so shouldn’t the way we approach and respond to topics like gender, work, money, and forgiveness be different than the world?

II. Today, we are looking at the Ethic of Forgiveness. Some initial questions may jump to mind. What does it really mean to forgive? Should our forgiveness be different from the secular world? Is there a higher standard we are being called to? The answer to the last one is a resounding, Yes!! Let’s pray and then dive into today’s topic!

A. In his book “Unpacking Forgiveness”, Chris Brauns shares a powerful story that illustrates the work we must go through to both receive and extend forgiveness and he makes the point that Forgiveness is part of a much bigger picture. One night in 1984 a man broke into Jennifer Thompson’s apartment, held a knife to her throat and brutally raped her. This experience might have finished her, but she was a determined young lady. Even in the midst of her ordeal, she studied the face of her attacker looking for anything that could later identify him. She determined in that moment that she was going to make sure that she put her assailant in prison to rot. Within a few days, she identified her rapist from a series of police photos. She also picked out the same man from a police lineup. Courageously she later testified in open court and based on her testimony Ronald Cotton was sentenced to life in prison. Jennifer Thompson celebrated her victory. Now she was finally rid of her “luggage” and pain and ready to move on with her life. Right? Well, actually no, not at all. Jennifer could not have anticipated the weight of the baggage she would carry through many more years of her life because of what happened that terrible night in 1984. Solely getting “justice” was not enough! She would later realize that just identifying and punishing her assailant could not release her from the deep wounds and bitterness she harbored. She realized this wasn’t strictly an outward/physical journey of justice but an inward process of healing and letting go of anger that she could never do on her own. It was a journey of forgiveness.

1. So, how about you? Are you carrying baggage through life? Are questions, offenses, and wounds weighing you down today? Maybe your baggage contains abuse, divorce, betrayal, unfaithfulness, judgment, or perhaps even mistakes you’ve made. If so, are you learning how to unpack that baggage so that it doesn’t weigh you down and hold you back? Many of us are carrying so much baggage we can barely move or function. The reality is that forgiveness is the key to beginning the process of dealing with our baggage and wounds in life. I say forgiveness is “the beginning of the process” very intentionally. Did you know that there is an even bigger plan that God has for your life and it doesn’t stop with forgiveness? Forgiveness is actually a “means to an end.” Yes, God definitely wants to forgive you and for you to forgive others but God’s ultimate desire for you and me is RECONCILIATION! Forgiveness is the means by which we are reconciled to God and others. Without forgiveness there is no reconciliation. A simple definition of reconciliation is restoration of relationship. Reconciliation is at the very center of God’s heart and the Gospel story. That is why calling Forgiveness an ethic is a bit simplistic. Sure, it is an ethic and something we “DO” but it is so much more than that! It is something we must first receive and it is the very theological foundation for our Christian faith. Without God’s forgiveness, there is no real hope for us to truly forgive and be reconciled to others.

B. As we begin, it is important to understand that forgiveness is primarily a biblical or Christian construct, not really a worldly one. Because humanity is made in the image of God, a need for reconciliation and forgiveness is hard wired into us. We see a concept for forgiveness in most religions and societies around the world. Forgiveness is in our moral compass as humans but apart from the bible and God it is out of whack!

We see 3 main (but distorted) models for forgiveness in the secular world:

1. Cheap Grace Model - this is a nonconditional-forgiveness model in which all of the emphasis is on the victim being liberated from anger. Confrontation with the perpetrator may be involved, but only to the degree that it helps the victim's inner healing.
2. Little Grace Model - this is a transactional-forgiveness model in which all of the emphasis is on the perpetrator meriting or earning their forgiveness. The victim gives up anger and "forgives" only if the wrongdoer earns it through acts of penance and reparation.
3. No Grace Model - this is a no-forgiveness model in which forgiveness is abandoned completely in favor of the pursuit of justice for the victim.

All 3 of these models are prevalent in our culture today where the focus is on the individual and personal aspirations and not the unity or the good of the greater community. All three of these lack any vertical dimension or pursuit of a truth higher than oneself. In the secular world, truth is derived from within oneself and so could be different for every person. There are no absolutes. It is important that we safeguard ourselves against these sometimes attractive but inaccurate and false models for forgiveness.

4. In stark contrast to the previous three, Biblical forgiveness is a "Costly Grace" Model. In the book "Cost of Discipleship" Dietrich Bonhoeffer says "Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us!! Above all, it is costly grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God for the purpose of Reconciliation by the forgiveness of our sin." As Bonhoeffer suggests, biblical forgiveness should cost us something. It certainly cost God something!

C. Let's quickly look at the human need for forgiveness and how we got to where we are today.

To do that, we must go all the way back to Genesis chapters 1-3. Genesis 2:25 - Before sin entered creation, "Adam and Eve were naked and had no shame." They are in perfect union with God and, as a result, are in perfect union with one another. This is actually the first picture of "Covenant" in scripture. Covenant is all about relationship and "oneness." It is based on trust. There is no hiding and no shame because there is no sin! Then in Genesis 2:16-17 choice and free will enter the picture. There is still no sin but the opportunity for sin because of "free will." Verse 17 says that "if you eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you will certainly die." We know what happens next. In Genesis 3:1-7, Adam and Eve use that free will to disobey God and sin enters God's creation. A simple definition of sin is disobeying God or turning our backs on God's Word and Truth. The central issue in "the Fall" is that they bought the lie of Satan. They did not trust God, so they broke their Covenant relationship with Him. They did not trust that God had their best interest at heart. This immediately created a debt between God and mankind and that debt created a great divide.

1. But there is amazing news! We see God's grace and plan for reconciliation from the onset. Genesis 2:17 said they would "certainly die." Did they die? Well, yes and no. There is no immediate physical death so that is evidence of God's mercy and grace. God gives mankind time. Scripture says that the wages of sin is death so God could have rightfully killed Adam and Eve and ended humanity right then and there to pay the debt that was created. Instead, God gave us grace (unmerited favor). However, there was immediate spiritual death. There is now separation from God and shame immediately enters the picture as a result. Adam and Eve are exiled from the garden which is a picture of a broken relationship with God (death of relationship). There is now a need for reconciliation. We are still image bearers of God, but sin stained all of creation, so the image is distorted. It's a broken reflection and because man's relationship with God is broken and distorted so is the relationship from man to fellow man. Furthermore, in Genesis 3:21, God shows further compassion and love. God cares for Adam and Eve. He immediately addresses their nakedness (which represents their sin and shame) by making them garments to cover up. The garments are a temporary covering but eventually God would provide a permanent covering through the sacrifice of His only begotten son, Jesus Christ. The rest of the Old Testament is the story of God relentlessly pursuing

humanity and preparing the way for the ultimate and permanent RECONCILIATION of mankind to Himself through Jesus.

2. Let's look at one more OT passage.

Exodus 34:6-7 - 6 And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.

These verses are a perfect example of "Yes and." Yes He forgives AND He punishes. YES AND! Exodus chapter 34 says God is compassionate and forgiving but also does not let the wicked go unpunished. Both are true of a loving and Holy God but aren't those in conflict with one another? Doesn't forgiving people mean they go unpunished? How could God punish every sin and yet forgive us? The animal sacrifices that we see required in OT law point to some solution but that was partial and temporary. Such sacrifices were costly and offered some atonement, but they had to be offered over and over and over again. God's provision for our forgiveness and punishment of the wicked comes through the singular event of Jesus on the cross. As Tim Keller says, "in short, on the cross, Jesus satisfied both the justice and love of God in the most wise, wonderful and glorious way." God loves us so much that he takes on the penalty for our sin. In other words, He absorbs our debt! We will see this dynamic clearly demonstrated in one of the parables of Jesus that we will look at in just a moment.

D. Let's start formulating a definition of forgiveness by looking at how forgiveness is described in the OT and NT.

- There are 3 primary Hebrew words for Forgiveness found in the OT that begin to convey the concept of forgiveness:

1. Kphr = KAPHAIR

(to cover; idea of atonement)

Gen 6:14; Exodus 2:3

2. Slh = SHOLAK

(pardon/stop blame)

To forgive and give a hug; seeks to restore relationship; NOT I forgive you and then forget you!

Leviticus 4:35

ex. father hugs prodigal son

3. Ns = NASAH

(lift or removed far away)

Psalms 103:12/Gen 50:17

- There are 2 primary Greek words for Forgiveness found in the NT:

1. Charizomai/Kar-idz-omi

Charis = grace; it's where we get the English word charity

(a gift/not merited)

Paul's preferred word

Ephesians 4:32

2. Athesis/Aphiemi

(remission)

(release from debt)

40 times in NT

Mark 1:4

E. In Summary, here are some of the Primary ideas of Forgiveness in the Bible:

1. We are covered - our nakedness and shame are covered
2. We are pardoned & no longer to blame
3. The wrong is far removed from us - as far as the east to the west
 - a. "forgive but not forget" is not biblical; we do not see it any longer; doesn't mean there are not consequences though.
4. It is freely given as a gift that cannot be earned
 - a. too much to pay back!

5. We are released from the debt

- a. The debt is paid on our behalf and therefore absorbed by the one forgiving the debt.

F. Let's read the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

Matthew 18:21-35 – 21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” 22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. 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 “At this 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. 28 “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded. 29 “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’ 30 “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. 32 “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. 35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

The good King in the parable, of course, represents God and the servant represents humanity.

- There are 5 things that we see in this passage that are crucial to Forgiveness:

- 1. Brought Him forward (verse 24)

- a. Truth telling; compassionately names the trespass or debt.

- 2. He took pity (verse 27)

- a. Relates to the perpetrator; empathy and sympathy.

- 3. Forgives the debt (verse 27)

- a. Absorbs the debt.

- b. Example: a friend borrows your brand-new car and totals it because of reckless driving. You may choose to forgive the debt, but the cost created by the “wrong” does not evaporate into the air. You either find the money to buy a new one or go without a car. It costs you something.

- c. Are we willing for forgiveness to cost us something?

- 4. Released Him / let him go (verse 27)

- a. The debt is no longer held against them.

- b. Now does this mean that a relationship may not change going forward? Every circumstance is different so there may be times where the relationship doesn’t or can’t go back to the way it was before the wrong was committed. For example, in the case of abuse it may not be safe to resume a relationship with the perpetrator. The key is that we are no longer harboring resentment for the wrong and do not hold it against them.

- c. For many of us, this may be the hardest part!

- 5. Jesus says, “forgiveness is from your HEART” (verse 35)

- a. To truly forgive someone, something must happen at a heart level.

- b. It’s a choice that starts in the heart; it’s not primarily about external circumstances.

These are 5 elements that are essential to forgiving others. If any one of these steps is missing, then it’s not real biblical forgiveness.

- We also see 3 Dimensions of Forgiveness in this parable:

- 1. Vertical - this is divine forgiveness from the King / God.

- a. The King does not have to extend forgiveness. He was well within his rights to punish the servant. He chose to forgive the servant because he is a “good and compassionate King.” This is the same of God with humanity.

- b. God’s forgiveness is offered to all of us.

- 2. Internal - this starts with us receiving God's forgiveness. We have a choice here. We don't have to receive it.
 - a. This is the process of repentance.
 - b. Mark 1:14 says to "REPENT AND BELIEVE" the good news.
 - c. When we do this, we are given a new identity.
- 3. Horizontal - this starts with us offering or extending forgiveness to others because of the divine forgiveness we have received.
 - a. When we truly realize the depth of our own depravity and sinfulness and how God absorbed our debt, we are compelled to forgive others. It is a love response!
 - b. When true reconciliation occurs the "wrongdoer" also repents and receives our forgiveness.
- The missing link is the "Internal Dimension." The servant does not repent. He wants his circumstances with going to prison to change but does not want to do the work of heart change. There is no real heart change, so he is not able to extend forgiveness to his fellow servant. Tim Keller in his book "Forgive" says "The most fundamental lesson of this parable is that human forgiveness must be based on an experience of divine forgiveness. A superficial reading of verse 35 (this is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive) and even in the Lord's prayer (forgive us of our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us) has led some to interpret Jesus' teachings as saying that God's forgiveness of us depends on and is earned by our forgiveness of others. But that interpretation does not fit the narrative of the parable at all. The king extends forgiveness first and then says specifically that the servant's forgiveness of his fellow servant should have been based on and motivated by the King's forgiveness of him. Both in this parable and the Lord's prayer Jesus is communicating that divine mercy should change our hearts so that we are able to forgive as God forgave us. In Colossians 3:13, Paul says 'Bear and forgive as the Lord forgave you.'"

G. Bottom line: If we will not offer other people forgiveness, it shows that we did not truly repent and receive God's forgiveness. Wow, let us reflect on that for a moment! That is a true statement, but it is vital to realize that receiving God's forgiveness is both a light switch (salvation) and a thermostat (sanctification). We work out our salvation with fear and trembling as scripture says. Realizing the depth of our sin and therefore the depth of God's forgiveness for us is not solely a moment in time but a lifelong journey.

1. It's very important to understand something about forgiveness and even reconciliation. Forgiving someone (or being reconciled to them) does not mean there are NO consequences to the sin. Remember Exodus 34:7 (God will punish the wicked). Deuteronomy 32:35 and Romans 12:19 says "vengeance is mine says the Lord." He will repay in due time according to his Will. The key to forgiving others is trusting God. Do we believe and trust him with His judgment and vengeance? We often do not want to forgive because we want to be judge, jury and executioner according to "our" will. It goes back to the "original sin" in the garden where Adam and Eve want the "knowledge of God." Satan still tempts us today to play God.

H. Paul offers some very practical steps to Reconciliation & Forgiveness. Let's get practical for a moment. Scripture gives us a historical and theological context for forgiveness but in the NT Paul gets practical too. If you are struggling with unforgiveness here are some things to consider based on Romans 12.

Romans 12:14-21 – 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

5 practical ways to extend forgiveness to one another:

1. Pray (verse 14) - it is more difficult to remain angry or bitter at someone if you are praying for them. Prayer softens the heart.
2. Serve (verse 20) - share Neal's story. Serving your wrongdoer is like praying for them. It may soften their heart and attitude toward you and cause them to consider their offense and the value of your relationship.

3. Release Revenge (verse 17 and verse 21) - this once again speaks to the heart change that we do not see in the parable of the unforgiving servant.
4. Don't avoid them (verse 16 and verse 18) - forgiveness is about the good and unity of the greater church community. Sometimes we can't avoid people. We have to be around them for a number of reasons. This also doesn't mean we have to be best friends with them. We can still have boundaries.
5. Be humble (verse 16) - two times in the same sentence Paul challenges us to consider humility as we seek reconciliation. He says, "do not be proud" and "do not be conceited." It must be pretty important! I once heard it said that humility is not "thinking less of yourself but thinking of your self less." In other words, try your best to put the other person's feelings first.

I. **REMEMBER!** Forgiveness is a means to an end! RECONCILIATION is the heart and "end game" of God. Forgiveness then is the bridge between us and God and us and others. You cannot have reconciliation without forgiveness.

Consider these 2 powerful scriptures.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19 – 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Colossians 1:19-22 – 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. 21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

1. Reconciliation is now our ministry and mission to the world around us and we use God's example of forgiveness in our own lives to accomplish this work. We are reconciled to God that we may now reconcile to others.

J. **Here is today's main takeaway.** If you do not take away anything else today, PLEASE catch this! WE CANNOT TRANSMIT SOMETHING WE DO NOT HAVE! We cannot give forgiveness if we have not first received it from God on a heart level. One way to tell if we have received God's forgiveness is to ask yourself "do I look the same or am I changing more into the likeness of Jesus?" God's forgiveness and love is transformative. Jesus is transformative! Forgiveness is a Christian ethic. It is something we do but most importantly it is something we receive!