

Theology for life: Forgiving one another

Sunday, 28th August, 2011

For a few weeks over the summer we're looking at what happens when we rub Theology – God's Truth, into our daily lives. And today I want to look at an issue that has come up again and again since I have been a pastor. In fact, if I never had to address this issue, then I don't know how I'd fill my time – probably take up golf!

And it's the issue of forgiving one another.

This is a HUGE issue in the Bible – and I believe it is one of the things that matters most to God.

He loves it when we are united and walking together with nothing festering between us and He hates it when we allow ourselves to become bitter or we harbour unforgiveness.

One of the last things Jesus prayed was that we would be one – just as He and His Father are one – so that the World would see something Godly and be drawn to it:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

My first glimpse of real, living Christianity was going to a youth group where everyone was genuinely cared for and loved, and there was real unity – not just among the trendy cool kids, but with the people who didn't naturally fit in too – from all sorts of nations and backgrounds; even shy awkward ones like I was.

And when I saw it I thought it was the best thing I'd ever seen – and I still do; and when sometime later to give my life to Jesus, what I prayed was “I'll give You my whole life if I can be a part of what I've seen there.”

But there's a problem with it.

We're human and we sin and we fall out and we disagree. And sin shatters the perfect picture of what God's like.

Who here knows what it's like to fall out and stay angry and let it fester?

Examples.

But God understands what we're like and so when we fall out and relationships break down, He shows us the way back.

And the Bible shows us the right, godly way to repair relationships.

One of the reasons The Book of Philippians was written was that there was a falling out between two godly women in the church – Euodia and Syntyche

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:2-3)

It isn't obvious that either of them was in the wrong – Paul never shied off of rebuking people who needed it – but here he doesn't rebuke; he pleads.

And he gives the reason why they should get on with each other:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:1-11)

Why does Paul paint this amazing picture of the humbling and suffering and glorification of Christ? – It's to remind these two women why they should get on with each other!

Why should we forgive and work for unity?

Because that's the attitude Jesus left Heaven and came to us with – so whenever we make a step towards reconciliation, we are being like Jesus – being 'Christlike'

And if we consider the mountain of forgiveness that Jesus has given to us, it puts in perspective whatever our disagreements are about.

So if your brother has wound you up and broken your toys – it's not worse than things Jesus has forgiven you for.

And if you and your wife disagree about something, it's not worse than things that Jesus has forgiven you for. (It sometimes seems like godly Christians don't think the same rules apply within the home, so you wouldn't hold a grudge against someone in your Community Group, but you can let things fester against your wife or husband!)

And if your boss at work treats you unfairly, it's not worse than what Jesus has forgiven you for.

And if people have bullied you or spread lies about you and turned people against you and anything else, it's not worse than the offenses that Jesus left Heaven and became a servant and died a horrific death to forgive you of.

The Bible is our plumb-line; we can hold it up and measure our lives against it – We need to measure any harm done to us against the immeasurable price Jesus paid for us.

So sometimes bad things do happen to us and we need to then do what Jesus told us to and rub that Truth into our lives.

Jesus covers this thoroughly in Matthew 18, and that's what I want us to look at now.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

So the first thing Jesus says is that if your brother is going off the rails, maybe even at your expense, it's your responsibility to go after him – that's what Jesus has done for you and that's what He expects of you. In Luke 15 He adds the parables of the lost coin and the lost son to underline the point. We belong to each other.

Jesus wasn't just talking to pastors when He said this – He was talking to everyone who follows Him.

Then He goes on:

A Brother Who Sins Against You

“**If your brother sins against you**, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

Elsewhere Jesus says this:

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that **your brother has something against you**, leave your gift there in front of the

altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.
(Matthew 5:23-24)

That means that it is always our responsibility to fix a broken relationship, whoever is in the wrong.

But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

I don’t want to get into the whole topic of Church Discipline here, other than to say that we believe in it and have used it and use this template when we do.

But the purpose of Church Discipline is always reconciliation.

How did Jesus treat ‘pagans and tax collectors’?

He loved them, ate with them, went to their parties – and won them to Himself!

“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

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?”

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents (a talent was the highest unit of currency and ten thousand was the highest Greek numeral – it was like saying ‘a billion pounds’) was brought to him. 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.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ (This is a ridiculous request from a bankrupt servant! It’s the same as trying to pay God back in instalments for all the sins

we have done – “If you forgive me, I’ll come to church every week!” The servant asked for a chance to repay, but he received total forgiveness!) The servant’s master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (that’s a significant debt – about 5 months’ wages – that’s 600,000 times less than the servant had been let off of!). He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:10-35)

This is a chilling statement, but Jesus made the point consistently:

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)

If we want to be forgiven, then we need to forgive – no exceptions! No delays! We need to deal with our anger every day:

“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4:26-27)

John Jones told me a quote the other day which is “Not forgiving someone is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies.” Unforgiveness doesn’t hurt the person who wronged you, but it ruins your life. It locks you in a prison

where you can't know or receive forgiveness yourself – and that's a horrible place to be.

I have met many, many people who have lived in prisons like this for years – and it's a bitter, horrible, consuming place to be; it eats away at you.

But the door is unlocked – you can go through it any time – and the way through is forgiveness.

Last week our city saw a horrible, demonic greed and anger set loose in the riots, but among the sin and beside the tragedy of 3 young Muslim men being run over in Winson Green, there was a mark of forgiveness that stood out when Tariq Jahan, father of one of the victims stood up the day after his son's murder and said there should be no revenge. That was a turning point that affected Birmingham and beyond.

In the troubles in Northern Ireland after the Enniskillen bombing in 1987 a Christian man called Gordon Wilson talked about how he had held his daughter's hand as she died. He said "I bear no ill will, I bear no grudge... I will pray for these men tonight and every night."

Someone called that "A major turning point in the history of that nation."

In the Second World War, a Dutch Christian woman called Corrie Ten Boom sheltered Jews from the Nazis until she was betrayed. She and her family were taken to Ravensbruck concentration camp – her father died after 10 days, her older sister Betsy a bit later. Corrie survived and went to Germany after the war.

One day, after she had spoken at a Christian meeting, she recognised one of the SS guards walking towards her.

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, a former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing centre at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein." He said. "To think that, as you say,

He has washed my sins away!” His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I prayed, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me. And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

I know from both sides of this how hard it is, but also how amazing and overwhelming and life changing it is – I was forgiven by the Christian family of a man who I killed in a road accident

And I have seen people and situations change as I have forgiven them.

“If the Church is the community of the forgiven, then it needs to be a community full of forgiveness.” (R.T. France)

This is a pointless talk without a response – are there people you need to forgive?

Try the “Avoiding them in the Bullring” test!

Pray.