



Aug. 24 Forgiveness: Seventy-Seven Times

In life, people will hurt us. It's just a given in this broken world. Last week we talked about some of the hurts that are small, pebble-sized hurts. Real annoyances, but small. And yet they still require our forgiveness.

Last week, after the service, one of you shared a story about a pebble-sized hurt—with a twinkle in your eye and a smile on your face. You said that when you win at Fasttrack, the other player throws their cards at you.

Now, that may be a pebble-sized offense... but if you're a bad winner? A little too smug about it? Well, in my book, that might just *deserve* cards being thrown your way!

Another shared, they are doing real work around forgiveness. They are making sure they are forgiving and asking others for forgiveness. Asking if there is an offense or something that needs forgiveness. That's wonderful work!

They asked someone if they had offended them. And even though the person said everything was okay; it is still wonderful work to do. It is healing and displays spiritual maturity and emotional depth. Good job!

Another handed me their slip of paper, wrote on it. They weren't going to go to an event because someone might be there they didn't want to see. Sermon series helped them see they had unforgiveness in their heart, so they forgave, and went to the event! Good job!

Last week, we also introduced a simple tool to help us deal with those small hurts—a way to let go, to forgive, to offload: RAP.

R is for Remember... A for Assume... P for Pray.

We remember our own weaknesses, assume the best about others, and pray for those who've wronged us.

But not all hurts are so light-hearted. And not all offenses can be handled with a smile and a quick prayer. How do we apply wisdom appropriately for these situations of forgiveness?

We know, especially when the issue to forgive is bigger, if we do not forgive we will begin to falter and fall under the increasing weight of unforgiveness. Real bitterness will get a foothold and grow like black mold in our soul.

Anger will turn to a seething vitriolic resentment and livid frustration. We are in real danger of going postal.

As we go to deeper places of need in applying forgiveness, questions naturally surface. In the struggle, our pain wants answers...the cost to us has gone up.

How do we forgive BIG boulder size hurts?

We know intuitively we need to learn a different approach and more godly wisdom.

First, let's tackle some common questions that naturally arise in bigger wounds.

For instance, **"Is forgiving the same as condoning?"** Is forgiving someone the same thing as basically saying what they did to you was not that bad?

As Minnesotans, sometimes we gloss over what someone did. Sometimes we minimize saying, "It could be worse!"

No, forgiving someone is NOT condoning or accepting what they did as okay. Remember, forgiveness is simply letting go of our hurt and sadness. It is letting go of our desire to make them hurt like they hurt us.

Instead, we are choosing to let go of the pain they have caused and set aside our stones. We forgive and place the issue into God's hands.

We are also choosing to not let these wrongs continue to affect us, impact our thought life, or dominate and influence our feelings, our mood, or our outlook on life.

**"Does forgiveness dismiss consequences?"** We can get pretty confused on this.

If an abusive husband is remorseful, repents, begs for forgiveness and promises never to do it again...well, should the wife take him back?

Unfortunately, many times women have been counseled to take him right back.

Forgiveness and consequences are not mutually exclusive. Some medium sized offense and certainly the larger stone offenses require boundaries and consequences, time to change, thoughtful and slow trust rebuilding.

More on that when we discuss the bigger stone offenses.

Hamilton shared a story about his daughters as they were growing up. Discipline in their home included the time-out chair and being grounded.

Sometimes a daughter would come up to either mom or dad and say they now understood what they did was wrong and were really sorry. So, did they still have to sit on that chair?!

And then the parents had to remind the kids, **"Thank you for saying that. I love you so much. But yes, honey, you still need to finish your time-out or finish being grounded."** Hamilton explained the discipline was not about retribution or getting even.

It was about wanting his child to grow, to form her heart and character. It was to give her time to think about what she had done and choose, to resolve not to do that behavior again in the future.

Discipline and consequences are not opposed to forgiveness. They are sometimes needed and God works in them to help us grow and develop as his children and as functional civil human beings.

As adults in our society, it is possible to forgive someone who has committed a crime against you. While also, at the same time, affirming that society and perhaps even the redemption of the individual is best served by incarceration, or fines, probation...all of the punishments a judge or the law has established.

I have a friend whose son was recently incarcerated. And we were celebrating that turn of events. Because now he could think about where his life was headed. He had an opportunity to make some important life decisions.

And while incarcerated, he would also have access to more resources for the things he was struggling with, his addiction to alcohol and emotional struggles.

**Do we forgive someone who has done something serious and who hasn't repented or asked for forgiveness?**

Yes and no.

If it is a pebble. We forgive even when they do not repent or ask for forgiveness. Sometimes a person doesn't understand that what they did was wrong, they don't get it.

And sometimes, they didn't really do anything wrong...we just think they did. Sometimes we assume their motives, therefore what they did had to be really wrong. But it really wasn't.

In situations like these, what would be helpful is simply to talk about it. They might see the error of their ways and change. Or in the course of the conversation...we might gain some insight and understanding into their true motive for doing what they did.

Always late for a meeting?

You might learn they take the bus and the bus always gets them to the office later than they would like. They have spoken to the boss and the boss has extended grace and understanding. Oh! Well, they aren't as much of a villain as I thought!

But what about those large, those big boulder stones?

**Do we forgive more serious wrongs when the other has not displayed an awareness of the wrong? They haven't expressed regret or remorse, or expressed a willingness to change?**

Hamilton shared some much-needed wisdom to help us navigate deeper areas of hurt and offering forgiveness.

He mentions two dimensions to forgiveness of any size.

First, there is our internal release of bitterness and anger or desire for revenge. And then secondly, there is the extension of mercy and reconciliation, rebuilding the relationship with the person who has wronged you.

Regarding the release of anger and bitterness and desire for revenge...we must forgive. But now the process will take longer, be mindful of that.

And that is not fair. It's not fair. But if we do not forgive, we end up giving power to the one who hurt us. Unforgiveness robs us of life, joy, and peace.

In the second dimension of offering forgiveness, we might actually harm the wrongdoer if we extend mercy too quickly. Forgiving too quickly might stall out the wrestling they need to do in their own heart in the hurt they have caused.

In December 1997, fourteen-year-old Michael Carneal walked into his high school in Kentucky and shot three of his classmates dead and wounded four more.

A day or two later, his classmates thinking they were doing the right thing, created a poster that said, "**Michael, we forgive you!**"

But at that point Michael wasn't asking for forgiveness. Offering him mercy so soon wasn't helpful. Of course, those students would need to do their work of forgiveness at some point.

But it was too soon into the tragedy. Big stone forgiveness takes time, lots of prayer and taking it to God, asking for healing.

Extending forgiveness too quickly when he hadn't repented or shown remorse in the face of having done something so terrible...was not what Jesus had in mind.

Michael needed to come to terms with what he had done, to feel the terrible weight of his actions. To feel the horror of it, to confess it and to change his heart and behaviors.

Once that inner work became visibly lived out, for others to see, then forgiveness could be carefully applied. Mercy too soon diminishes the gravity of the act and may stall out much needed change.

And they may still need to face legal consequences.

How about abuse in the home? This is another one of those examples in which the offender has to understand what they have done AND make changes in their behavior.

Often if the abused is a Christian, they feel as if they must not only forgive quickly but also take the offender back in the home. After all the person is apologetic, remorseful, regrets their actions, promises never to do harm again.

But actually, the offender MUST take time to review their behavior, get help in processing their anger, go to therapy to find out why they think hitting someone is okay.

And then to think differently and behave differently, learn new ways of relating. That's real repentance and wise.

Then forgiveness can be applied carefully, slowly, bit by bit as trust is rebuilt and the offender grows in their ability to manage their emotions. Words are cheap.

True repentance requires change in behavior, learning how to manage anger and vent frustration in healthier ways.

Christianity requires and the Bible defines right from wrong. Then we are to own our wrong doings, feel regret and remorse, confess, AND CHANGE our behaviors.

Anything less is not Christian, anything less is not what Jesus taught, modeled, and desires from us.

In closing, Jesus didn't wait until we deserved forgiveness—he offered it while we were still sinners. His haunting words from the cross—'**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do**'—reach across time to each of us.

And yet, even with that example, we are not called to rush forgiveness. Forgiveness, especially for deeper wounds, takes time. It requires prayer, wisdom, boundaries, and support.

But it's worth it. Your heart is worth it. Your peace and well-being is worth it.

Because in forgiving—whether pebble, mid-sized or boulder—we are not excusing wrongs or forgetting what happened.

We are releasing *our* grip on pain, and placing that pain in God's hands, trusting him to do the work of justice and healing.

So, we keep praying. Keep talking to God. Keep seeking wisdom. Keep becoming the kind of people who look like Jesus—full of grace and truth and forgiveness. Amen.

**Time of Reflection:**

1. Is there someone I need to forgive—not because they've earned it, but because I no longer want to carry the weight of what they did? What might it look like to put it into God's hands today?
2. If you are not struggling to forgive, please take this time to be in prayer for the rest of us.