

BELIEVING VERSUS FORGIVING

I heard a story about two elderly men, Jack and John, who had been board members at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church for as long as anyone could remember. They were constantly at odds with each other and at each other's throats, especially in church board meetings. When one would vote "yes," the other would vote, "no." One day Jack died and arrived at Heaven's gates. He noticed how everyone was asked a question before they proceeded in. When it was his turn, St. Peter said, "Hi Jack. To see if you qualify to come in, I have to ask you to spell "Jesus." "That's easy," said Jack, and so he spelled, "J-E-S-U-S." Peter complimented Jack and then asked if he would do him a small favor, "Just take over here for a few minutes." Several people were waiting at the gate, and Jack asked each one the same question, "Will you please spell the name 'Jesus'?" Then Jack could hardly believe his eyes; old John was in line. "What are you doing here? John asked. "I'm just filling in for St. Peter. I'm asking everyone to spell a word before they can go through the gates." "Oh, yeah?" John exclaimed. "What's the word?" After thinking a moment, Jack said, "Spell 'Albuquerque.'"

We continue our summer sermon series on "Authentic Christianity." This is a series based on Craig Groeschel's book, "The Christian Atheist: Believing in God, but Living As If He Doesn't Exist." Craig says in his book, "We all know Christians are supposed to forgive. But many of us think that there are exceptions to this rule. Sure, we should forgive most of the time, maybe even almost all of the time. But we live as though it is okay to make exceptions occasionally. We are good at rationalizing as many excuses as we need to avoid forgiving."

Craig tells the story about his baby sister. His sister Lisa was three years younger than he. His mother told him when she was born that she was his birthday present from God and he immediately became her beloved big brother and took it upon himself to protect her and love her. They were very close. But one day when Lisa was in her teens they found out she had been sexually molested by her sixth grade teacher for years. This man had been a friend of the family and they all knew him well. Craig was outraged. He was mad. Craig said the words "rage, hate and revenge" all came to mind when he thought about this man, but the English language didn't have words to describe what he felt. He found out that this man had done this to numerous girls for several years. He was a sick man.

Craig knew that Christians are supposed to forgive. But he also knew that there was no way he was ever going to forgive him for what he did to his sister. Here was a man in his thirties that knew what he was doing and had hurt Lisa, taken away her innocence, and scarred her permanently. He didn't deserve to be forgiven.

Most likely you can identify with Craig. Most of us have been through situations where we have found it impossible for us to forgive someone for something. There are numerous kinds of abuses people engage in: sexual, physical, verbal, and emotional). Maybe you have been a victim of some kind of abuse. There are all kinds of ways that people hurt other people. Maybe you have been hurt by someone who betrayed your trust.

Maybe someone took advantage of you. Maybe someone cheated you. Maybe a parent or family member did something that caused you a lot of pain. You have been shocked, crushed, devastated or left confused and hurting because of something someone did.

A lot of times we feel like part of the punishment that they should receive is our continued anger toward them. We don't want to stop being angry because that should be part of their punishment.

There is one problem with this though. When we harbor anger, we also experience bitterness. And bitterness grows. Listen to this verse from Hebrews: "*See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many,*" (Hebrews 12:15). That verse is couched right between two other verses that speak about something pretty important to us as Christians. The one before it talks about our calling to live in peace with everyone and our calling to be holy. The one right after it talks about the wrongness of sexual immorality. Right in between those two parameters (peace with everyone, holiness, and sexual purity) is this thing of God's grace and bitterness. They are mutually exclusive. To allow bitterness to take root in your life will cause you to miss out on God's grace! "*See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many,*" (Hebrews 12:15). Bitterness grows where hurt remains that has not been properly dealt with. When bitterness is allowed to remain, it grows. It is like a cancer. It absorbs. It draws in all kinds of other stuff. It dwells on revenge, judgment, negative thinking, and it affects your mood, your emotions and your behavior.

Some time later Craig learned that the man had contracted muscular dystrophy. His immediate response was, "good." God is giving him his due! This is God's punishment and he sensed an inner celebration of his misfortune.

What Craig also discovered was that the longer you allow the bitterness to exist, the deeper the root goes and the harder it is to remove. It becomes very deep seated and is very hard to get rid of.

The problem is that as Christians, we have to forgive. We have no choice. We can't be Christians and not forgive. We can't be followers of Christ and experience His forgiveness and then turn around and not forgive someone who has wronged us. Jesus told many parables about forgiveness. He told the parable about a man who owed his master an enormous amount of money, so much that he would never be able to pay it back. He went to his master and asked that his debt be forgiven. The master decided to forgive his debt. Then someone who owed him a much smaller debt came and made the same request, to be forgiven the debt that he owed him. But he refused to forgive him his debt. When the master discovered what he had done, he had him thrown into prison until he was able to pay back every last penny he owed. When you are forgiven, it is required of you to forgive as well.

Listen to these verses: "*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you,*" (Col. 3:13). Jesus

instructed us how to pray in the Lord's Prayer: *"Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us,"* (Luke 11:4). In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins,"* (Mark 11:25). Jesus says in Luke, *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven,"* (Luke 6:37). Again, after Jesus had given his disciples the model prayer, the Lord's Prayer, he explained what he meant about forgiveness: *"For if you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive them their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins,"* (Matthew 6:14-15). That sounds pretty drastic, doesn't it? Here is what Jesus was saying. He was not saying that His forgiveness toward us is the result of our forgiveness of others. God has always been the merciful and loving and forgiving God and always will be. But his forgiveness is based on our understanding of what it means. We can't receive His forgiveness if we don't understand it. When we don't forgive others we don't understand our common ground as sinners in need of God's grace and forgiveness.

It is easy to ask God for his forgiveness when we have done something wrong. It is much harder to extend it to others when they have wronged us. But when we ask God to forgive us for sin, we have to ask ourselves, "Have I forgiven those who have wronged me?"

One morning Jesus was teaching in the Temple courts. There was a crowd of people around him. Some Pharisees brought before him a woman that had been caught in the act of adultery. "This woman has been caught in the act of adultery," they said. "In the Law Moses commands us to stone such a woman. What do you say?" After several moments Jesus replied, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." They all went away, one by one. Jesus asked the woman where her accusers were. "Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she replied. "Then neither do I. Go and sin no more."

That was a powerful statement about judging others. Jesus was highlighting the power of compassion and forgiveness. Often we are quick to judge others. Yes sin will have its consequences. There are prices that will be paid for sin. Your sins will find you out. But it is not our role to judge. That is God's job. "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. I will repay." When we judge others we act as though we have never sinned. That is not true. Our role is to show compassion and forgiveness.

When the prodigal son returned home the father reached out to him and forgave him. He showed him love and compassion. He accepted him and restored him into the family. The older son had a very different response. He resented his younger brother for what he had done. He became angry. He refused to go inside the home and be a part of the celebration. His father went out to him and pleaded with him to come inside. He explained to him how his brother had been lost and had now come back home. He explained to him how everything that was his (the father's) was also his (the son's) to enjoy. But the older brother was bitter about the injustice of this. In one sense his

unwillingness to forgive his brother rendered him lost too. He was just as lost to his father's love as his younger brother had been! When we refuse to forgive, we miss out on our Father's joy. When you forgive, you experience the Father's joy.

As Craig finished the story about his sister Lisa and his unwillingness to forgive the man that had done this to her this is what happened that started a change in him. He said he was in a worship service where the pastor was preaching a sermon on forgiveness. And as the sermon went on, God began to chip away at him. Little by little he kept hearing God speaking to him. "*Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you,*" (Luke 6:28). "I didn't want to do that," he said. "*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 5:43-44). God kept working on him. He kept speaking until it felt like He was almost shouting. "*Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you,*" (Ephesians 4:31-32).

Finally he decided to try to pray for the man. He says he "decided" to do this. It wasn't because he "wanted" to do it or even "felt" like doing it. It was a decision that he finally made. In obedience to God he began to slowly pray for the man. "God, I pray that you would work in his life." And over the weeks and months he continued to pray those words. It was hard at first. And then it became easier. And then he discovered that he actually meant what he was praying. He really did want God to work in his life. What he discovered was that his prayers changed him. They changed his feelings. And his anger and bitterness began to go away.

Craig admitted that it wasn't his ability to forgive the man. It was God who gave him the ability to do this. He never could have done that in his own humanity. God gave him the grace and power to do it. And a weight was lifted from him. God seemed nearer. His heart was more pure.

Ultimately he wrote the man a letter and told him that he had forgiven him. He told him that he had forgiven him and that God could forgive him too. And he included a prayer he wrote that the man might pray asking Jesus to heal his heart and forgive his sins. When the man received the letter, his muscular dystrophy had advanced to the point that he could no longer read. His hospice nurse read it to him. As she read the letter, tears streamed down his face. He asked her to pray the prayer with him. In the prayer he asked Christ to forgive him and make him new. The nurse said his whole countenance changed. The man died a few days later.

We can make all the excuses in the world not to forgive someone. But if you are a Christian, you can't. You can't "not forgive." You will remember that you have been forgiven for your sins. And you will fight your way through the anger and bitterness and use Christ's love and power to do what you can't do in your own strength.

Who do you need to forgive in your life? It doesn't matter whether they are still living or if they have passed away. Ask God to help you to forgive them. Make the decision to do this regardless of how you feel. Begin by simply placing them in God's hands and ask God to work in their life. Then slowly release them. Let go of the anger and hurt. Tell God you forgive them. Ask him to help you do this. And keep doing it, day after day, week after week. Ask God to heal any remaining hurts and remove any scars. Ask him to set you free from all bitterness and anger and replace these with love and compassion. Thank him for what he has done in your life. Thank him for forgiving you. And then make a commitment to make forgiveness a way of life from this day forward.

Let's pray: O God, we have all sinned and we all need your grace and love and forgiveness in our lives. We would be helpless and hopeless without you. But we also need your strength and power to be able to forgive those who hurt and wrong us. We give to you those in our lives who have hurt us. Help us to release them and what they have done to us. We pray for them. And we forgive them. Make us people of grace and forgiveness. Help us to always show love and kindness. Amen.