

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 8, 2009**

## **THE FREEDOM OF FORGIVING**

**Ephesians 4:31-5:2**

You may be familiar with the remarkable story of Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch woman whose family hid Jewish refugees and members of the Dutch underground resistance movement from the Nazis in their home during World War II. They were arrested by the Gestapo in 1944, and Corrie was sent, along with her sister Betsie, to the German concentration camp at Ravensbruck, where Betsie would die. But in the providence of God, Corrie survived to have a great impact on the lives of many who heard her testimony. Corrie's story is told in the book and movie, *The Hiding Place*, along with a later book, *Tramp for the Lord*.

In *Tramp for the Lord*, she tells this moving story:

“It was 1947, and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that is where forgiven sins were thrown. ‘When we confess our sins,’ I said, ‘God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says **NO FISHING ALLOWED.**’

“The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that is when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a cap with skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush – the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were! That place was Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard there, one of the most cruel guards.

“Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: ‘A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’ And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course. How could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him. I was face-to-face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze.

“‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying. ‘I was a guard there.’ No, he did not remember me. ‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘I have become a Christian. God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there. But I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein’ – again the hand came out – ‘will you forgive me?’

“And I stood there – I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven – and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow, terrible death simply for the asking? It could have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

“For I had to do it. I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. ‘If you do not forgive men their trespasses,’ Jesus says, ‘neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.’ And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart.

“But forgiveness is not an emotion. I knew that, too. Forgiveness is an act of the will. And the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘Jesus, help me!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’ And so, woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’ For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then. But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Try to put yourself in Corrie Ten Boom’s place. If you had seen what she saw, if you had been imprisoned and mistreated as she was, if you had suffered what she suffered, if you had lost what she lost, if you had experienced what she experienced, could you have done what she did in that encounter with her former persecutor? Could you have extended forgiveness to him? I couldn’t. Apart from the power of God’s grace, there is no way I could ever do it. How do you forgive someone who has done something so unforgivable? Only by the grace of God.

Do you remember what we said last week? We said that forgiveness is a miracle. It is a miracle of grace. A miracle of the grace of the Lord Jesus. What took place between Corrie and this former concentration camp guard was nothing short of a miracle.

David, as we saw last week, experienced the exhilarating freedom of forgiveness. He discovered the ginormous blessing of being forgiven. And, as you know, David had some ginormous sins in his life.

I said it last Sunday, but I think it is worth saying again: Blessed are the forgiven. “Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered” (Psalm 32:1). Blessed are you if your sins have been forgiven. Blessed are you if the blood of the Lord Jesus has covered your sins and taken away your guilt.

And... blessed are the forgivers. Blessed are you when you forgive those who have hurt you or offended you, those who have sinned against you. Just as there is freedom in being

forgiven, as Corrie Ten Boom discovered, there is freedom in forgiving. There is freedom in extending the grace of forgiveness to others.

Forgiveness is just as essential to the life and health of our souls as food, water and oxygen are for our bodies. Not a day goes by – for any of us – without the need to seek forgiveness for something we’ve done or failed to do. Not a day goes by without the opportunity to extend forgiveness to someone who has sinned against us in some way. And yet, there is an epidemic of unforgiveness in the world, and it finds its way into the church as well.

Unforgiveness separates parents from their children, and children from their parents. It causes brothers and sisters to be estranged from one another. It divides husbands from their wives, and wives from their husbands. It damages relationships between teammates, between business partners and co-workers. And it creates a barrier to fellowship between fellow Christians.

Maybe someone you love has betrayed your trust, and forgiveness seems out of the question. Maybe someone in your life has done something, or said something, that hurt you deeply, and you are too hurt – or angry – to forgive. Maybe there is someone who has a grudge against you and is unwilling to forgive you for something you said or did. Maybe it was just a misunderstanding. But the result is a roadblock in your relationship, a barrier between you.

Charles Stanley speaks of unforgiveness as a landmine in the path of a believer that can do great damage if not dealt with. But it is not limited to believers, of course. It applies to everyone. Unforgiveness is like a poison or a virus that spreads like a cancer until it takes over your whole life. Someone has said that holding onto a spirit of unforgiveness is like drinking poison and then hoping the person who offended you will get sick or even die from it. When you look at it that way, harboring unforgiveness is not the most rational thing in the world, is it? Unforgiveness is a spiritual acid that will eat through your spirit and damage your soul, if you refuse to let go of it.

Let those images sink into your mind for a moment. A landmine ready to explode. A poison. A virus. A cancer. A corrosive acid. All of them describe the effect of unforgiveness in your life and relationships.

Too often, what we want when we have been wronged by someone is not reconciliation but retaliation. We want to get even. You know the mantra: “Don’t get mad, get even!” But you and I both know that is not God’s way. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 12: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. 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.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (12:17, 19-21).

Our natural human desire, when we’ve been wronged, is to seek revenge. If you hurt me, I’m going to hurt you back. Our natural instinct is to take matters into our own hands and repay evil for evil. But that is not God’s way. That is not the way of forgiveness. Revenge is born

of an unforgiving spirit. Forgiveness is the opposite of revenge. It begins when we give up the right to get even. In fact, someone has defined forgiveness as “the elimination of all desire for revenge and ill will toward those who injure us” (Douglas Showalter). It means letting go of the bitterness or hostility or ill will we feel toward someone who has hurt us or someone we love.

At the end of Ephesians 4, Paul admonishes us to get rid of all those things that choke off the flow of forgiveness in our lives. What things? Bitterness, rage and anger (an attitude of hostility toward another). Brawling, slander and malice (or ill will). The word translated slander is the Greek word *blasphemia*, which means speaking evil of others, especially behind their backs, in order to defame or even destroy their reputation. In the same way, to slander or blaspheme God is to speak evil of Him in an effort to defame Him. There is no place for any of these attitudes or actions in the lives and relationships of God’s people.

Instead, in verse 32, Paul urges us to show kindness and compassion to one another, and to be forgiving of each other, just as God in Christ has forgiven us. The word for forgiving in this verse is *charizomenoi*, which literally means “acting in grace toward.” So, what Paul is saying is that we are to act in grace toward one another just as God has acted in grace toward us. An act of grace is what forgiveness is. And you and I have been (and are) recipients of this lavish grace. God’s forgiveness is not something we deserve. Or ever will. It is an act of grace. And God calls us to extend the grace of forgiveness to others, just as He has extended this grace to us.

The message would be clear enough if Paul had stopped there. But he goes on in the beginning of Ephesians 5 to reinforce it with the charge to “be imitators of God” and to “live a life of love,” following the example of Jesus, who loved us all the way to the cross and gave up His life for us.

In the context here, I think what Paul is saying is: Be forgiving like God. And be loving like God. Act in grace toward one another. Don’t allow the roots of bitterness or unforgiveness to grow up and cause trouble in your hearts (Hebrews 12:15). Be like God, who is ready, willing and able at every moment to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

If you refuse to forgive those who sin against you, you will never know the blessed freedom of forgiveness in your own life. Unforgiveness has consequences. Jesus spelled it out in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6:14-15, where He said: “If you forgive others when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

That is pretty clear, isn’t it? God will forgive us our sins if we forgive others, but He will not forgive us if we withhold forgiveness from them. If we refuse to forgive others, we cannot expect God to forgive us. God expects the forgiven to be forgiving. We know that isn’t always easy. In fact, like Corrie Ten Boom, we can’t do it alone. We can’t do it without the grace of God.

If you want to be forgiven by God, be forgiving of others. If you want God to act in grace toward you and your sins, act in grace toward others. If you say: “I can’t forgive” or “I won’t forgive,” you cut yourself off from the mercy and grace you need.

No one said it is easy to love and forgive someone who has wronged you or hurt you or cheated you or betrayed you or let you down.

No one said it is easy to forgive someone whose careless or malicious act has brought pain or suffering or tragedy to your life – or to someone you love.

No one said it is easy to forgive someone who has lied to you. Or lied about you, and damaged your reputation.

No one said it is easy to forgive someone who has hurt someone you love.

No one said it is easy. If they did, either they were lying or they just didn’t know what they were talking about.

To forgive is God-like. It is a miracle. A miracle of grace. And you and I can do it only in the power of God’s grace. But in the power of His grace, we can. And we must. Forgiveness is not optional. It is essential.

Friends, is there someone in your life you need to forgive for something they did or said, or failed to do?

Is there someone in your family you need to forgive?

Is there someone in our church family from whom you have withheld forgiveness, and it has caused a rift in your relationship?

Is there someone here today against whom you are holding onto a grudge, and you need to let go of it?

Or, is there someone whose forgiveness you need to seek?

I urge you in the name of Jesus to do it today. Do not allow the landmine or the cancer of unforgiveness to wreak havoc in your life.

In her book *Living Beyond Yourself: Exploring the Fruit of the Spirit*, Bible teacher Beth Moore tells this story: “I will never forget watching an evening talk show featuring the story of the parents and killer of a young college student. The killer was (the student’s) best friend. The weapon was high alcohol content inside a speeding automobile.

“What made this particular feature prime-time viewing? The parents had forgiven the young driver. And if that was not enough, they had taken him in as their own. The young man sat at the table in the chair which was once occupied by their only son. He slept in the son’s bed.

He worked with the victim's father, teaching seminars on safety. He spoke about the one he had (killed) in ways only someone who knew him intimately could.

“Why did these parents do such a thing? Because it gave them peace. The interviewer was amazed. I was amazed. I kept trying to put myself in the parents' position – but I could not. Then, as the tears streamed down my cheeks, I heard the Spirit of God whisper to my heart and say: ‘No wonder you cannot relate. You have put yourself in the wrong position. You, my child, are the driver.’ God was the parent who not only forgave, but also invited me to sit at His table in the space my Savior left for me. As a result, I have peace.”

He has done the same for you and me.

Praise God for the blessing and the freedom of forgiveness. Praise God for the blessing and the freedom of extending forgiveness to others. May you know these blessings in your life, and may you be a blessing to others. Lord, let it be so. Amen.