

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 5, 2009**

## **WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO FORGIVE**

### **Philemon 1-21**

Two Sundays ago, in our ongoing study of the Lord's Prayer, we looked at Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. In case you missed it, or have trouble remembering that far back, we looked at what Jesus had to say in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 and in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 about the necessity of having a forgiving spirit if you want to experience the blessing of God's forgiveness in your life. We said that forgiveness is not optional. That is not to say that forgiveness is always easy. It is not. In fact, in some circumstances it may seem absolutely impossible and utterly out of the question. But Jesus says that for His followers, for those who have received His grace and forgiveness in salvation, forgiveness is not optional. Why? Because forgiveness is something everybody needs, and if you refuse to forgive others when they hurt you – if you withhold forgiveness from the person who has sinned against you – you shut off the flow of God's forgiveness in *your* life. "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" (Matthew 6:14-15). That is what Jesus said.

Forgiveness is not optional. It is as necessary for our spiritual life and health as are oxygen, food and water to our physical life.

But here is the thing. It is one thing to say that Jesus wants us to have a forgiving spirit. It is one thing to say that God calls us to be forgiving of others. It is another thing to know *how* to forgive. Because there are times when you may not know how you can ever forgive someone for what they have done.

Some people and things are easy to forgive. No big deal. But some people and some things are hard to forgive. If your name is Jenny Sanford, and you are the wife of Mark Sanford, the governor of South Carolina, there is no doubt it is a big deal to you. As I'm sure you know, Gov. Sanford recently confessed publicly to an extramarital affair with a woman from Argentina. It seems to me that it would be hard enough to deal with the betrayal and hurt of infidelity privately, with the love and care of family, friends and church. But to have it played out in the glare of the public eye, as fodder for every news organization under the sun, would be excruciatingly painful.

Mrs. Sanford made a public statement a few days ago in which she said: "There is no question that (my husband's) behavior is inexcusable. Actions have consequences and he will be dealing with those consequences for a long while. Trust has been broken and will need to be rebuilt. Mark will need to earn back that trust, first and foremost with his family, and also with the people of South Carolina."

She went on to say: “The real issue now is one of forgiveness. I am willing to forgive Mark for his actions.... My forgiveness is essential for us both to move on with our lives, with peace, in whatever direction that may take us.”

She quoted Desmond Tutu (the former Anglican Archbishop of South Africa and winner of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize), who said: “Forgiveness is the grace by which you enable the other person to get up, and get up with dignity, to begin anew.” “Forgiveness,” Mrs. Sanford continued, “opens the door for Mark to begin to work privately, humbly and respectfully toward reconciliation with me. However, to achieve true reconciliation will take time, involve repentance, and will not be easy.”

It will take time, it will involve repentance (on the governor’s part) and it will not be easy. Isn’t that the truth! The amazing thing – and this, I think, is a reflection of God’s mercy and grace in her own life – is that Jenny Sanford is even willing to forgive her husband and work toward reconciliation.

Could you do that?

What do you do when you don’t know how to forgive?

How do you forgive a husband or wife who has been unfaithful?

How do you forgive a drunk driver who killed a friend or member of your family?

How do you forgive someone who abused a loved one – or even you – sexually?

How do you forgive someone for damaging your reputation by spreading lies about you?

How do we forgive the terrorists who plotted and carried out the 9/11 attacks on our homeland?

Do you remember the genocide which took place in Rwanda in the 1990s? Nearly one million Rwandans, mostly Tutsis, were slaughtered by Hutu extremists. If your family were among those killed, how could you forgive those who did it? The remarkable thing is that forgiveness and healing are taking place in Rwanda. Survivors of the massacre are opening their hearts to their former enemies, and those enemies are seeking forgiveness for their actions. One particular woman, whose husband and five children were beaten to death by a group of Hutus, went to one of the killers to extend grace and seek reconciliation. Explaining her actions in an interview with CNN last year, she said: “I am a Christian, and I pray a lot.” Her faith in Christ, and her trust in the power of prayer, enabled her to take the step of forgiveness.

How do you forgive something like that? Only by the grace and power of God.

The word “forgiveness” doesn’t appear in Paul’s brief letter to Philemon, but the idea of forgiveness is there just beneath the surface. Philemon was a prominent member of the church in Colosse who had come to faith in Christ through the ministry of Paul (see verse 19). Paul wrote to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, a slave in Philemon’s household who had run away and gone to Rome, where he met Paul and came to believe the gospel. In verse 10, Paul refers to Onesimus with obvious affection as his spiritual “son”. Now Paul was

sending Onesimus to Philemon with this letter, in which he asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back not as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother in Christ (verse 16). At the very least, Paul is asking Philemon, as a fellow believer in Christ, to extend the grace of forgiveness to Onesimus. He appeals to Philemon “on the basis of love” to show mercy to his runaway slave. Beyond that, I think Paul hopes that Philemon will take the unusual step (in 1<sup>st</sup>-century Roman culture) of giving Onesimus his freedom. Paul may even hold out hope that Philemon will send Onesimus back to *him*, so that the former slave might be of help to Paul while he is in prison.

Forgiveness, as one biblical scholar (David Garland) points out, was not the norm in Philemon’s world as a slave owner. But it is not optional for us who profess to be followers of Christ. It is required, if we are to be obedient to our Savior and Lord.

Though slavery was an ingrained, accepted part of the fabric of 1<sup>st</sup>-century life, Paul undoubtedly hoped Philemon would take to heart his instruction in Colossians 3:13, where the apostle said: “Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” There is no question Philemon had grievances against Onesimus. But Paul hopes that Philemon, as a sinner forgiven by God, will extend forgiveness to Onesimus.

If you want to know how to forgive someone who has hurt you, there are a few things you need to know about forgiveness.

First, when you forgive, it means you give up the right to retaliate or seek revenge. Author Anne Lamott says it this way: “Forgiveness means it finally becomes unimportant that you hit back.”

When someone hurts you, isn’t it often your natural instinct to want to hit back? To fight back? To get even? Of course it is. We have this natural (fallen) desire for revenge. But getting even is not God’s way. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 12:17-21:

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” (If someone wrongs you or does evil to you, resist the desire to wrong them back.” “Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 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 (Deut. 32:35). 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.’  
(Proverbs 25:21-22)

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

When you forgive, you give up the right to retaliate. As long as you want to get someone back for what they did to you, you’re not ready to forgive. Forgiveness begins when we give up the right to get even.

Second, forgiving is not the same as forgetting. You can forgive without forgetting. And you can forget something that happened without really forgiving the person who did it. Forgiving and forgetting are two different things.

Some things in life are best forgotten. But there are some things we should never forget. Like 9/11. Or the holocaust. Or the scourge of slavery in our nation's past. Or a betrayal of your trust.

It is possible to forgive without forgetting. In fact, forgiveness is especially necessary when you can't forget. You may not be able to forget, but when you forgive, you can move on in your life.

Third, when you forgive someone, it doesn't mean you treat a wrong as though it doesn't matter. The reason forgiveness is such a big deal is because the stuff that happens in life is a big deal. Ask Jenny Sanford. Or the genocide survivors in Rwanda. Or all the people who invested their retirement funds with Bernie Madoff.

Forgiveness is necessary precisely because what happened (or what happens) *does* matter. It doesn't mean you pretend things are OK when they are not. Because they *aren't*.

Fourth, when you forgive, it doesn't mean you are obligated to trust the person(s) who hurt you. Forgiveness and trust are two different things. You can forgive someone without restoring that person to a place of trust in your life.

Trust has to be earned. If it is broken, if it is violated or betrayed, it has to be re-earned. Which is not easy. Trust is not automatic. The Sanfords in South Carolina find themselves in that awkward place today because of Gov. Sanford's unfaithfulness to his wife. Mrs. Sanford may extend forgiveness to her husband, but for him to regain her trust is an entirely different matter.

Forgiving someone does not mean you restore that person to a place where he or she can hurt you again.

Fifth, when you forgive, it doesn't always lead to healing or reconciliation. Sometimes it does. But not always. Forgiveness can be a unilateral act. That is, it does not depend on the repentance of the offender. You don't have to wait for the person who wronged you to repent before you forgive him or her from your heart. Just like Jesus on the cross, when He said: "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

Forgiveness can be a unilateral act. But reconciliation is a two-way street. It depends on both parties. That is why Paul says in Romans 12:18: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

If it is possible. As far as it depends on you. It is not always possible. You can't live at peace with someone who continually harms you or abuses you. What you can do is conduct your life in a way that expresses the character and love of Christ.

Forgiveness, sad to say, does not always lead to reconciliation. Some people refuse to be reconciled. And there is nothing you can do about it. Only God can change a hardened heart.

Sixth (and I will close with this one), when you don't know how to forgive, remember that forgiveness is a choice. It is an act of the will. There is no "easy button" for it. You can't wave a magic wand and make forgiveness happen. Ultimately, it is not dependent on your feelings, but your will.

Forgiveness is a choice made by Jenny Sanford in the face of her husband's infidelity. It is a choice made by a Rwandan woman. Paul hoped Philemon would make this choice, too, and forgive his runaway slave, Onesimus.

In your life forgiveness may take time. You may find that you have to forgive the same person many times for one offense. Not the same offense committed many times, but many times for an offense committed one time. Why? Because feelings of anger or bitterness or the desire for revenge may keep welling up in your heart. And you must choose to take the step of forgiveness over and over again. Or, you must remind yourself when it happens that you have already forgiven the offense.

Remember that forgiveness is not optional for Christians. It is a choice. It is hard work. It is heart work. Without a willingness in your heart to forgive, you will never be able to do it. When it seems like it is humanly impossible, when you just can't find it within yourself to forgive someone who has wronged you, you can ask God to help you do what you can't do yourself. And when you don't want to forgive, you can ask God to make you willing. You can ask Him to give you the "want to."

When you don't know if you can forgive, remember how much God in His grace has forgiven you.

When you don't know how to forgive, remember that forgiveness is a choice. It may not always be easy. But it is always possible with God's help.

Someone said that life is an adventure in forgiveness. Adventures can challenge us. They can be difficult. They can stretch us. But they can be so transformative in our lives. May we live the adventure of forgiveness to the glory and praise of God, whose forgiveness in our lives has set us free. Amen.