

Family Matters 10: FORGIVENESS MATTERS
Matthew 18:21-22 (AFBC 7/24/16)

Forgiveness matters! If we live our lives in relation to other people--in families, churches, and communities, at work and school—really, in any setting of life, there will be times when forgiveness...will matter a lot.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He said, "Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" (Mt. 6:12)

When He finished, Jesus explained it like this: "For 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 Heavenly Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:14-15)

Later, when Peter was still struggling with what Jesus said and trying to set some reasonable limits on forgiveness, we find this exchange:

"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-22)

Paul got this. When he wrote to the Christians in Ephesus, he said: **"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32)**

And he told the Colossian Christians: **"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Colossians 3:13)**

Obviously, "Forgiveness Matters." There are many things that bind us together; but as Christians, we believe there are two realities that we all share in common:

- 1) First, we're all made in the image of God—regardless of our race, language, income level, or political persuasions—we all bear the image of the Creator.
- 2) The second reality is that God's image in us is marred and misshapen by sin...to the point that it's often difficult to see any resemblance between us and the God who made us.

This is why God sent his Son Jesus to earth--to repair the damage that we might be recognizable again as God's children. This process of change—new birth, new creation, sanctification--begins with what?—**forgiveness**—it begins with God's forgiveness.

How can we be sure that we've received God's forgiveness? Jesus said to look and see if *we* are forgiving *others*. If we've been forgiven—and in Christ, we have been—then we will be... forgiving.

If we don't know God's forgiveness, though, we're far less likely to forgive one another. Do you get this? Do you understand the implications of this—the importance God places...on forgiveness?

A little African-American girl named Ruby was born in Mississippi in 1954, which makes us about the same age now—we were back then, too, of course! That same year, the Supreme Court heard a case called *Brown vs. The Topeka Board of Education*.

The court ruled that the so-called "separate but equal education" for blacks and whites was indeed separate, but in no way was it equal; so by court order, segregation was declared illegal.

Six years later, Ruby's mother got her little girl ready for her first day of school. She wore a white dress and a white bonnet. She had all the fears and hopes of any first grader, but Ruby also had the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Segregation, you see, had held on for six more years--just until Ruby was ready to start school. So little Ruby got escorted to her first day of school by 75 well-armed federal marshals.

When days earlier she enrolled at what had been an all-white school, all the other students withdrew. Their parents, however, were still there to greet Ruby on her first day of school.

Hundreds of people lined the sidewalks. And as little Ruby passed by, they screamed hateful things. They called her awful names.

Most of the teachers in the school resigned—refusing to teach Ruby and other children like her. But one teacher was coerced into service. She was just a year away from retirement and was persuaded to report to work for fear of losing her pension.

The judge who had ordered that Ruby be allowed to attend the school also wisely assigned her a therapist to monitor her mental

health. One day the teacher called the therapist to report a change in Ruby's usual routine.

From the school window, the teacher saw Ruby stop and apparently talk to the angry crowd that continued to greet her each new day. She asked Ruby about this, but Ruby said she hadn't spoken to the crowd.

"Your teacher tells me that she saw you stop in front of the school today and talk to those people." "No sir," Ruby said. "I didn't talk to them."

"Did you stop in front of them?" he asked. "Yes sir, but I didn't talk to them. I prayed for them." "You prayed for them. Why did you pray for them, Ruby?" "Don't you think they need praying for?" she asked.

"I suppose," he replied. "But why were you praying for them?" "Because" she said, "I'm the one who hears what they're saying." So he asked her, "What did you pray?" "I prayed, 'Dear God, please forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'"

The therapist, who recorded this story for posterity, recalled the incident like this: "Her words were strangely familiar to me, as if I'd heard them somewhere before."

Well, as we know, little Ruby was simply following Jesus—doing precisely what He taught us through His words and His example. "Forgive one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."

There's nothing ambiguous about that, is there? It's pretty clear: forgive one another. Forgiveness matters. But let's be honest: forgiving those who've hurt us or offended us can be one of the hardest commandments in the Bible.

Lewis Smedes wrote a book called *Forgive and Forget*. In it, he identifies four stages of forgiveness. The first stage is **HURT**.

Someone, usually it's someone close to us, says something mean or inconsiderate. A friend betrays a confidence. An employer treats us unfairly. A colleague undermines us. A family member abuses the relationship in some way—and it hurts—deeply!

Some of us right here have been terribly wounded. The wounds may be fresh. Or they may be decades old; but they're still

painful. We have an almost unlimited potential for inflicting pain on one another, and then remembering it—for a long, long time--refusing to let it go.

In his autobiography, Lee Iacocca tells how he remembers being fired by his boss, and then later being ignored by that same person at a social function. Interestingly, Iacocca said he was able to let go of the firing even though he didn't understand it.

But concerning the social snub, he wrote, "For that, I will never forgive him." It seemed like a small thing in comparison, but the pain was real. It went deep.

Some here today may be hurting from being violated in more painful and personal ways. We hurt--and we can allow the pain to take over our lives. We keep replaying that offense in our minds: I am the person who was offended/ treated unfairly/ hurt.

Which can lead to stage two: **HATE**. The hurt, if we allow it to fester for long, can cause us to *hate* the other person.

"Hate" is a strong word, I realize—most of us wouldn't admit to it--but we're talking about powerful emotions that can get hold of any of us and trap our lives in a kind of "downward spiral." If we don't choose to forgive, the emotions can intensify.

When we're hurt, the natural reaction is to hurt back. We know that's not Christian—but we don't always respond in Christ-like ways. We may want to see the other suffer as much as we have.

We hate what they did to us, and we may even hate the person who did it. We may want others to hate them too, and try to make the people who know us both...choose sides. It can get real ugly.

We can talk all we want about loving the sinner and hating the sin, but we're human. Maybe we can't really separate the two.

This becomes a critical time, because it's so easy to get stuck right here. Before long, the wound inside of us has grown way out of proportion. Bitterness and anger have invaded our hearts.

When we refuse to forgive, we think we're punishing the person who hurt us—and maybe we are. But the punishment goes both ways. We're not only hurting them, we're hurting ourselves.

Just before Paul tells the Ephesians to forgive one another, he says, **"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (Ephesians 4:31).** Otherwise, if we keep all this venom inside, we get stuck; and because of our hurt, we begin to hate.

It's sad to get stuck here—but there's an option. In stage three, we choose to let go of the hurt and the hate, and we **HEAL**.

We choose to be 'kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving.' We choose to honor Christ and follow in His ways by forgiving one another.

Listen to what Smedes writes about this stage: **"As we forgive people, we gradually come to see the deeper truth about them, a truth our hate blinds us to, a truth we can see only when we separate them from what they did to us...."**

They were people before they hurt us, and they are people after they hurt us. They were needy and weak before they hurt us and they are weak and needy after they hurt us. They needed our help, our support, our comfort before they did us wrong; and they need it still."

When I read that, I couldn't help but wonder if this is how God sees *us*—as people who are weak and needy--who inevitably get things wrong in our relationship with Him.

So the only way God can have a relationship with us is to forgive us—over and over again, to forgive us of our sins—with the clear understanding that we will also forgive those who sin against us.

Broken relationships cannot heal without forgiveness. *We* cannot heal without forgiveness. When the hurt and hate of our lives are overcome by the power of forgiveness, this opens the door to stage four, which Smedes calls **COMING TOGETHER AGAIN**.

Now, coming together again, in the sense of restoring the broken relationship, isn't always possible. Our forgiveness may not be accepted. The damage to the relationship may be too great. Some consequences of our actions will be permanent.

God chose to reconcile with the world, but not everyone in the world is willing to be reconciled. It can be this way with us too.

But just as God went to extreme measures to “reconcile us to Himself,” so too should we make every effort to reconcile with one another. Still, some may refuse.

We can’t control what others do. *Forgiving one another* is a commandment. *Reconnecting* is a choice that both persons must make. Our aim is full reconciliation, but God holds us responsible only for what we directly control—which is to forgive.

Smedes’ four stages can help us find out where we are in the process. Hurting. Hating. Healing. Coming together. Now, a few **Other Aspects of Forgiveness** for us to consider:

A. We Must Forgive even while Still Remembering the Wrong. So often as I have discussed with a person who is hurting and angry their need to forgive the one who wronged them, I have heard them say, “I may forgive them, but I will never forget what they did.”

Well, of course they won’t forget. Our minds don’t work that way. If forgetting was a requirement of forgiving, we wouldn’t be able to do it! Forgiveness is not forgetting.

Eventually, maybe, we’ll forget the hurt. But there’s no magic way to delete what happened. Memory, for the most part, is un-erasable. We may bury the hurt deep inside, but under the right circumstances, that painful memory will resurface.

I don’t know of any Scripture passage that commands us to forget. God doesn’t insist that we do the impossible. In fact, if we could forget, forgiveness would not be the act of love it’s intended to be.

Actually, at the very heart of forgiveness is the act of remembering. Two things here:

B. We Must Remember Whose Child We Are as We Forgive. As Christians, we have a loving, forgiving Father God whom we are to resemble—our attitudes and actions should demonstrate that we’re truly part of His family—that we’re legitimate children. God forgives you and me and tells us to do the same for one another.

Maybe we don’t *feel like* forgiving someone--doesn’t matter! As children of our heavenly Father, forgiveness is what we *do* regardless of how we *feel*—yes, just because our Father said so.

This is action, not emotion—it's an act of obedience--and it's our action alone. It's not based on what the other person does. We want to demand an apology before we forgive, but the lack of an apology doesn't get us off the hook.

You won't find the word "apology" in the Bible. What we do is not conditional upon what the other person does. As children of our heavenly Father, we forgive. It's not optional.

Forgiveness, you see, is all about trusting God. Philip Yancey, in his book *What's So Amazing about Grace?* writes: **"...in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God's hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy."**

When we forgive, we surrender the right to get even. We trust God to do what's best—whether it is to dispense justice or mercy, we leave this to God. It's His responsibility, not ours. Finally...

C. We Must Ask Our Heavenly Father to Help Us Forgive.

Back to the story of little Ruby? What did she do? She prayed for those who were treating her badly. This is what it means to ask God for help—we pray.

It's hard to do what Jesus said—to pray for those who spitefully use us. We don't feel like praying for them. We feel like hurting them. There are some things that are so important to God, though, He tells us to do them whether we feel like it or not.

God tells us to forgive. If we don't feel like it, we either choose to disobey God, or we pray and find in Him the strength to forgive.

It's hard to hate people that you're praying for. It's hard to carry a grudge or to harbor ill-will against them. The more we pray for them, the more open we become to putting our differences aside.

Prayer opens the door to forgiveness. When we pray and God helps us to open that door, we discover that it isn't the person who offended us that's been imprisoned. It's us—and by forgiving them, we've been set free.

The burden is lifted, and life is better. This, friends, is why "Forgiveness Matters" so much!