

God's Healing Work through Forgiveness

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May 1 – 11
Kitimat, BC

That was an amazing time we had with the team from Lakewood last weekend. More than anything, I appreciated their genuine desire to serve. And now we know that another church is really praying for us; we are not alone.

I always love the Easter weekend because it is so rich and central to history, to the meaning of life, and especially to the Christian life. What can compare with the nature and reality of this story – how God's himself came to us in his Son and willingly submitted himself to the cruel death of a criminal at the hands of the very people that He had made, and loved, and revealed himself to in such awesome ways? It was a sacrifice of significance like no other. But its real value can only be appreciated in the reality of Jesus' glorious resurrection.

He came, he lived, he died -- such a seemingly horrible ending to the life of such an incredibly special man. But then he rose again from the dead. And now we see and understand that all of this was part of a much larger plan, a larger picture, something that we too can experience in our lives.

On Wednesday evening at our Prayer Meeting, we looked at the experience of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane just before his betrayal and arrest. There in the Garden, late in the night, Jesus agonized in his spirit about what was about to take place, and in that time, he asked three of his disciples if they could stand with him in prayer. But in that oppressive moment, they too were overwhelmed by the darkness of it all and succumbed to the temptation of distraction and sleep.

In that time we had together, I commented on the fact it is inevitable, as we learn to follow Jesus, that sooner or later, we will have what has come to be called, *a dark night of the soul*. I don't particularly like to have to tell you this, but as you go on in your Christian experience, there will be these times. When that happens, we should not be surprised because that was Jesus experienced and also promised for us – as did the other early biblical writers of the Scriptures (i.e. Philippians 1:29 – *it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.*)

I know this from my own experience. There have been some amazing experiences of beauty and high-mountain living, but there have also been some huge valleys. (One Christmas we were so low in our souls that we actually spent the day fasting.)

And in those times, there is nothing like knowing that others are praying for us. **That's why we have called for a prayer meeting for you in this time.** Because it is true, that during these days, you as a church have been called to go through a very dark time. You've had some high times, but this is a low time because of the number of people that have moved on after the closing of the mill, and then because of what happened in the life of your pastor. And so, like Jesus in the Garden, I call on you to stand with the church in prayer in this time.

Once again this past week, God has reminded me that this is an exceptionally difficult time for the church. The church has been hit by a series of losses in a way that I can't begin to imagine. (That is often how deep trial in our lives happens – by the loss of one thing or another. Right now, I know of a family and a church in Victoria that is going through a huge time of trial. The pastor suddenly contracted pancreatic cancer and is dying...)

So when the mill shut down, you experienced some huge losses, some huge changes. And there are more it seems. There have been illnesses of various kinds too. It's been a tough season. And then, if all that were not enough, you've also had to sustain the loss of your pastor in circumstances, in the end, that have been very, very difficult. And in this especially many of you have been overwhelmed with feelings of sorrow, of shame, of betrayal, and even of anger.

The effect of all this has been disheartening and acrimonious. And the question is what to do about it. And I'm sure the answer has to do with trust and forgiveness – trust toward God for the future of the church and forgiveness toward your former pastor who sinned against you. And though confession was made and forgiveness was extended through our Superintendent at that time, there is a personal dimension of this for each of us with which we need to come to terms.

So I sensed that we need to talk this morning about how God can bring healing to our lives through forgiveness. And though you will be thinking in terms of this particular application I want to speak of it in more generic terms. Because forgiveness is one of the biggest issues in our lives that we have to deal with again and again and again. And that is why it comes up so often in Jesus' teachings and in the New Testament.

Think of these words, for example, from Ephesians 4:25-32.

We live in a world that in general bases relationship on merit. The basic philosophy is I'll be good to you because you have been good for me. The negative form of this is *tit for tat*. If you've been mean to me, then I need equal compensation -- "*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*" It's the way justice works. You pay for the crimes, sins, and transgressions you have committed. And that is actually how we stand before God. That is why, *the wages of sin is death* and the reason the world is under God's judgment – because of God's holiness and justice. But in the New Testament, or the New Covenant, the judgement that should have been ours is dumped on Jesus and he dies in our place. By His death on the cross, he takes what we all deserved. In Christ and his cross we are offered forgiveness. *Father forgive them...*

Forgiveness is a distinctly Christian grace, because Jesus initiated it. Forgiveness is rooted in the very character of God expressed supremely in what Jesus did for us by his death on the cross for our sins. This is revolutionary. It is a whole new way of administering justice. And because of what God has done for us, we can do the same for someone else.

But how does this really work? How do you deal with the pain of someone else's violation against you? What do you do when someone you have trusted robs you of your dignity, takes advantage of you, lets you down, says something about you that isn't true, or belittles you in some way? How do you find peace and joy in that situation – especially if it costs you your reputation or your future in some way?

1. **You accept the reality of the cost involved.** You have to be realistic about the pain and loss. It is your keen sense of justice that makes you conscious of the fact that you have been violated, and it is important to recognize the reality and seriousness of another's violation against you. (Sometimes people try to deal with violations against them simply by denying them but then the hurt comes out later in other ways. This is especially true of people who have been hurt deeply as children – perhaps in sexual violation. It is so painful that a person denies it but then it goes deep into their sub-conscious until the hurt comes out in some other way. And that is why the violation of children is such a serious matter.)

So it is important to come to a place of dealing with the reality of the violation. This is where counselling can be helpful. A trained counsellor can help you deal with the reality of what happened so that justice can be done. But, what does one do then?

2. This is where the Gospel comes in: **you forgive in the same way God has forgiven you.** That is why it is such Good News. As I said, the most common response is to seek compensation for the hurt that has been caused. That is what the legal business is all about. Lawyers and courts, are in the business of seeking justice for those who have become victims. And part of that involves adequate punishment, incarceration, and so on. It also consists in the prevention of continuing violations involving further pain and even the loss of life. It is evident in Scripture that God has given civil authorities the right to punish, incarcerate, and even to kill when necessary.

But the larger question is how we deal with the pain and violation on a personal level? And I think the only satisfactory answer is: *by offering forgiveness.* And the only way that you can do that is by giving the pain and cost that you have suffered over to Christ. You have to recognize that Jesus came in order to offer you forgiveness for your sin and also for the sins of others. So by an act of your will, in prayer, you decide to turn the offence of another person over to Jesus knowing that He died for that purpose.

3. By an act of your will, **you turn it all over to Jesus,** trusting Him to exercise justice in relation to the perpetrator, and trusting Him to compensate in your life for the loss that you have suffered. Romans 12:19: *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.*

This is the key to the process of forgiveness. In order to get off the devil's hook or to escape being held hostage to the hurt that the other person has caused you, you need to be willing to give it over to Jesus and trust Him for His justice toward the violator, and for His blessing toward you in the place of what the person has done. For God is able to compensate in ways that we can never imagine for the things that others do to us.

For example, it's possible that by someone else's action that you end up losing your job, and you may have to go through some pain because of it. But through it God may open up other opportunities for work that you may never have dreamed about, or He may bring some blessing into your life that you hadn't known about or counted on. One of the blessings might be that you will learn to lean on the Lord like you hadn't before and then will be able to offer God's comfort to others for the experience you have had, and so on.

So instead of pining away about your loss, consider the new ways God might want to work in you and through you because of what you've been forced to go through. It's always amazing to see how God can use a seemingly negative experience to multiply the opportunity for blessing that you may never have dreamed about. (Think of what Jesus' death did.)

But there's another question in this regard that is very relevant as well: *What about forgiveness toward your violator to the point of the restoration of your relationship?* That's another important part of this process. You can accomplish a lot just by forgiving that person in your heart. But the next step depends on the other person's willingness to acknowledge the offence. Consider Luke 17:1-4, for example.

1. In one way or another you have to be able to talk about it together.

Essentially it is the same principle by which we become Christians. It is one thing for Jesus to die on the cross for our sins and to offer us forgiveness. It is quite another thing for us to end up in a reconciled relationship and fellowship with Him. In order for that to happen, we need to acknowledge our violation against Him. In order to receive His grace, we need to be able to say, *God be merciful to me a sinner.* We need to repent and believe. We need to submit ourselves to Christ. We need to acknowledge the depth of our sins. It is then that fellowship with God is restored and that the washing of His blood is applied to our own lives.

The same principle applies to reconciliation with someone who has sinned against us. The person who sinned against us needs to humbly and sincerely, acknowledge their sin toward us and then ask for our forgiveness.

Ideally, this will happen by the person coming to us and asking for forgiveness. Isn't it wonderful when it happens in that way! But if he/she doesn't, in order to be truly reconciled, you may have to go to that person and tell them about how you have been hurt. (Sometimes people find it easier to do this by a letter.) Jesus said, *if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First be reconciled with your brother; then come and offer your gift* (Matthew 5:23). And according to Matthew 18:15, you may have to take someone else with you. And depending on his response, you will either win your brother over, or else you will have to turn him over to the Lord for him to deal.

If he responds, it will mean that the trust process of your relationship can once again begin and you can build that relationship. But if not, you put him or her in the Lord's hands.

2. And then there is one more thing in this process: If the person rejects your attempt to seek reconciliation and the restoration of fellowship, you still have something else you can do. **Bless them and pray for them.** This is what Jesus instructed his followers to do in Matthew 5:43 *You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* It is in this same context of offence toward us from others that Paul writes in Romans 12 about not taking revenge into our own hands: *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.* And then Paul adds, *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

It is a fact that no matter where we live or what our involvement in the world, we are going to face the challenge of forgiveness. How we deal with it will be absolutely critical to our spiritual and emotional progress.

So, don't minimize the seriousness of sin as it occurs in every form. Recognize the seriousness of someone's offence toward you, but don't carry it; don't hang on to it. Give it to Jesus and trust him to deal rightly with it and then seek reconciliation with the person who offended. If that doesn't happen, having brought the offence to their attention, bless them and pray for them.

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