

**“To Completely Give”**

*“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Matthew 18:15).*

Dr. Fredric Luskin serves as the director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project and in 2002 he wrote a book entitled, “Forgive For Good.” In his book, Dr. Luskin highlights the benefits of forgiveness. He wrote, “In careful scientific studies, forgiveness...has been shown to reduce depression, increase hopefulness, decrease anger and anxiety, heal relationships, increase emotional self-confidence, improve compassion, increase personal growth, and improve quality of life.” Luskin also stated that, “People who are more forgiving report fewer health and mental problems. People who imagine not forgiving someone show negative changes in blood pressure, muscle tension and immune response. People who imagine forgiving their offenders note immediate improvement in their cardiovascular, muscular and nervous systems.”

If you believe what the Bible says, these findings shouldn't come as a great surprise. In Psalm 32, David described unresolved sin in these same physical terms when he wrote, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long” (Psalm 32:3) and throughout Scripture we are encouraged and commanded to seek and bestow forgiveness. The truth is, forgiveness – or the lack of forgiveness – makes a big difference in our lives and whether we look at it from a spiritual, emotional or physical perspective, *and even if we take religion completely out of it*, experts tell us that forgiveness is important to a healthy life and I think most of us would agree that practicing forgiveness would make our lives better. So why is forgiveness so difficult?

Forgiveness is something that virtually all of us aspire to, but it's not something we frequently practice. A recent Gallup poll reported that 94% of Americans surveyed said, “it was important to forgive.” Unfortunately, the same survey indicated that only 48% said they actually try to forgive others.

There are many reasons for our unwillingness to practice forgiveness, but one of the biggest reasons we don't forgive is that we don't like to confront sin. When we witness a sin, or feel we have been sinned against, most of us will harbor angry thoughts, gossip about the offender, or even try to fix the problems that have been created by their sin rather than talking to them about it.

One of our greatest barriers to honestly dealing with the issues that divide us is our paralyzing fear of confrontation, and it may be most prevalent in the Church. Perhaps, we are afraid to offend. Maybe, we think it's disrespectful to interfere in someone else's life. Whatever the reason, much of the sin that causes us anxiety and destroys our relationships is never confronted and ultimately never forgiven.

That is absolutely *not* the model God has given us in His Word. In Leviticus 19, God tells us that the person who refuses to rebuke or confront his brother, “hates” his brother. The picture of confrontation that God gives us in Scripture is vastly different from what we actually do. We say things like “It's none of my business.” God says we have responsibility for our neighbor. We say, “We are afraid to confront.” God says not only *should* we confront sin, but when we ignore the sin of our brother we, “share in his guilt” (Leviticus 19:17).

In today's reading from Ezekiel, God tells us that we are watchmen, charged with the task of warning our brothers and sisters when they are in spiritual danger. And when we fail in this work, the consequences are severe. God says “When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood” (Ezekiel 33:8).

God's Word is crystal clear: We are our brother's keeper! We have a responsibility to confront and deal with sin, and this issue is so serious to God and so important for our lives that Jesus gives us a step-by-step procedure for confronting our brothers and sisters and it begins with a most basic teaching. “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you” (Matthew 18:15).

Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you...” When we hear these words about our brother's sin we may be inclined to minimize it to a sin that is personally committed against us, but understand that in the eyes of God any sin is a sin against the body of Christ. About this verse one commentator writes that, “if a member of the Church sins...then he has sinned against me, he has violated the honor of God, which is the chief concern of the believer. What is done to a believer in Jesus is (actually) performed as (a sin) against Jesus” (Ylvisaker). With this understanding, the “sin” of our brother described in verse 15 can be any sin, because any sin endangers the health of the body.

Jesus then says, “go.” Go. Don’t sit and stew about the wrong you have witnessed. Don’t discuss the problem with others who are not involved. Don’t wait for the guilty party to apologize for their action. Go! As Christian people, practicing forgiveness means that we are proactive in the process. We take the initiative. We go to our brother or sister, we seek them out – we pursue them if we have to – so that, in love, the process of restoration can begin.

And once we have their attention, Jesus says we are to, “show them their fault, just between the two of you.” Jesus understood the delicate dynamics of accountability, and He gives us these instructions to underscore the purpose of the process. This is not about having control in a relationship; this is not about gaining moral high ground, or being able to say, “I told you so.” The process of confronting sin is always and only about restoration. It is about healing. It is about forgiveness!

This week, as we prepare to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, one of the most striking lessons from this terrible tragedy is that life is short. Our time on this earth is fleeting, and the relationships we share today, tomorrow might be gone. The time to love one another is today and the time to forgive is now! Jesus says, “go.” Talk to your brother or sister one-on-one. Out of love, tell him what he has done and let the process of forgiveness begin now.

As difficult as it may be, confrontation must be practiced in order for healing to happen. This can be hard, gut-wrenching work, and if all God did was instruct us to confront and forgive, it would be an impossible task for us. But God’s Word doesn’t stop with this command. Jesus gives us the instructions to forgive in the context of the incredible promise that we too have been forgiven, and because of this promise we can confront. We can go to our brother! We can have difficult discussions and, ultimately, we can forgive because we have been forgiven and this changes everything!

The etymology of the word forgive, is literally “to completely give,” and this phrase, “to completely give” is a wonderful description of what Christ has done for us. In a love that we can’t begin to comprehend, Christ gave everything. And where we are afraid to confront sin, Jesus met sin head on. Where we have failed as watchmen, Jesus succeeded and, rather than let us die, Jesus actually took the responsibility and sentence for our sin. On the cross, our sin has been confronted, and it has been punished, and the results are that we have been forgiven, we have the promise of eternal life, and *God has given us the power to forgive!*

Brothers and sisters don’t miss this: Because of Christ we can forgive! This is a monumental concept and it is critical for us to hear. *God has given us the authority to forgive!* When the leader of a country makes an agreement or treaty with another nation, it would be meaningless if that leader didn’t have the authority to follow through with the action promised, and if we didn’t have the authority to forgive, Jesus’ instructions to us in Matthew 18 would be utterly worthless. But because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the whole world (John 3:16), God has given us, as His body the Church, the power and the authority to forgive. That is precisely what Jesus was saying when He told the disciples, “whatever you loose (or forgive) on earth will be loosed (or forgiven) in heaven.”

We have been forgiven, and because of this incredible gift we have been given the power to offer forgiveness – not only our personal forgiveness, but also the forgiveness of God! The job of the church is to forgive, and when we confront sin and go through the process of forgiveness, we do the work of the Church! As his people, God has given us the job and power to offer forgiveness, and the stakes couldn’t be higher. Our actions in this life have eternal ramifications, and when we ignore sin for fear of offending, we risk losing a brother to hell. But when, by God’s power, we risk worldly rejection and step out in love to confront a brother or sister, we carry on the work that Jesus accomplished on the cross, and God promises to use us in ways that will have eternal results.

The job of the Church – our job – is to proclaim forgiveness, and as we carry out that work with the people in our lives, the results are nothing short of amazing. Jesus says that when forgiveness is practiced, when we confront sin and there is repentance and forgiveness, we have “won our brother over.” When we forgive, miracles happen. Relationships are restored, wounds are healed and lives are enriched. Not only does forgiveness change things in our earthly lives, Jesus says that when one sinner repents, “there is rejoicing” in heaven (Luke 15:10).

When it comes right down to it, forgiveness is the only thing that matters. Theologian Karl Barth once remarked, “It is always the case that when the Christian looks back, he is looking at the forgiveness of sins.” Christ has “completely given” Himself to save us from sin and because we can look back to the cross, we can look to the future as forgiven people, and we can change the lives of others with the message of their forgiveness now and forever. May God grant you the courage to confront sin and the grace to “completely give” the gift of forgiveness. Amen.

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