

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Forgiveness

Presented by David Reay

The story has been told of a woman who had “got religion” and was telling others of the difference it made in her life. She told her church study group, “I’m so glad I discovered God. I have an uncle I hated so much that I vowed I would never even go to his funeral. But now, why I would gladly go to his funeral.” Such is the difficulty of forgiving one another. It isn’t as straightforward as it seems, and if it does seem simple or easy, chances are we have not actually started the process of forgiving. We may be denying the hurt or minimising it, or explaining it away.

Because we are not always good at loving one another, we need to be good at forgiving one another. Forgiveness is necessary because of the wounds and hurts we give and receive and which arise out of our failure to love and be loved. Let’s explore this crucial yet challenging area and so be set free from the prisons of resentment or bitterness.

Forgiveness is reserved for the hurts that are deep, personal, and unfair. Let’s illustrate. I go to the airport to check in for my flight to London. As I head towards the queue, another passenger jostles in front of me and gets into the queue before me. I am offended at his rudeness. But I don’t have to forgive him. It is not a deep hurt. Then when I get to the head of the queue I find that the aircraft has been delayed because a storm has hit the airport and all flights are disrupted. I am offended, I am in a sense wronged. But I can’t forgive the weather or the airline. Finally, the aircraft is boarded. As I get onboard, I make a remark to the flight attendant about the fact that I am not a suicide bomber despite my looks. The airline doesn’t see the joke and immediately offloads me. I am deeply hurt. I feel wronged that a flippant remark has cost me a seat. But I can’t forgive the people involved because their actions were fair. I got what was coming to me.

Forgiveness isn’t for all the odd assorted things that people do to us to upset us. It is for the significant things. If someone talks too much, I don’t have to forgive them. If someone talks maliciously about me, I do have to forgive them. So often, we have to forbear others rather than forgive them. We forbear in that we put up with or tolerate an irritating habit, or a frustrating mistake. We may be hurt by the mistake or the habit, but we don’t necessarily have to forgive. So often, what we need to do is not forgive, but to cultivate some patience and make sure we keep our sense of humour. Save forgiveness for the bigger issues.

Which leads us to ask, when do I need to forgive someone? How will I know? Here are some possible indications. We may find ourselves chewing over certain episodes in our life, feeling resentful or wounded. It may be we need to begin forgiving. We may find ourselves experiencing physical or psychological discomfort when thinking about or being in the company of certain other people. There may be a forgiveness issue. Or ironically, when we find ourselves telling ourselves and others repeatedly that we have forgiven someone, it could be we are trying to convince ourselves that it is true when it is not. A more obvious sign that forgiveness is needed is when we find ourselves wishing someone ill, or even plotting revenge. We may do so subtly, camouflaged beneath politeness, but we hope and pray they will stumble and fall.

And there are times in life when we seem stuck. We can't move on. Our prayers are hindered. Our health suffers. Our gladness in God is absent. Dark clouds hang over us. Now of course, we all experience these from time to time. And even if we experience them regularly we can't dogmatically say it is a forgiveness issue. But it may be, and we do well to examine our life and our relationships and let the Spirit of God alert us to people we need to forgive. Lack of forgiveness can lead to a build up of anger, which unresolved can so often lead to depression, which some have likened to frozen anger.

So these are indicators of the need for forgiveness to be exercised. These can alert us to the fact that we have experienced deep, personal, and unfair hurts. These can indicate to us that the issues are not those of forbearance but forgiveness.

But we can say more about forgiveness in terms of what it is and is not. Forgiveness is not leniency. God isn't lenient. He doesn't tolerate sin. He doesn't shrug his shoulders and say it doesn't matter. Nor should we. When we forgive, we blame. We say it does hurt and it does matter. If someone has habitually hurt us over years, we can't just say it doesn't matter and move on. We won't be able to move on since it does indeed matter.

So forgiveness is perfectly compatible with crime being punished. If a drunk driver runs down your child on a pedestrian crossing, you don't just forbear it. It is a deep, unfair, personal matter. Thus it is a matter for forgiveness. But that doesn't mean we tolerate such behaviour. To forgive does not mean to excuse or dismiss or minimise. It isn't about offering some explanation as if to understand is to forgive. The drunk driver may have had an unhappy childhood but that doesn't alter the hurt at all. The driver has committed a crime and it must be punished. Just as sin against God must be punished and was when Jesus died on the cross.

The parent of the child may well both testify against the drunk driver and see him go to gaol, and also begin the process of forgiveness. If the parent does not, not only is the drunk driver being justly punished, but the parent is being unjustly punished by bearing the ugly load of hatred or resentment. I forgive an intolerable act like that not in order to make it tolerable, but to free myself to move on. The state must take what action is necessary to punish the crime, but if I take on that load as well, I am taking on more than I can handle and I will be buried beneath my anger.

And then forgiveness is not some grand gesture which instantly makes all things right. It is a process rather than an event. It is a journey. Repeated hurts over many years can't be dealt with in one instant. Wounds both physical and psychological take time to heal. So don't fret if the hurt comes back, don't worry if it seems to take forever to get to the forgiveness stage. Make a start on the journey. There will be some progress and some setbacks like any life journey. But each significant journey begins with a single step.

And forgiveness is not forgetting. God can erase our sins from his memory, but humans can't. To forgive is not to forget, but to remember and yet not let the hurt shape us and define us. When I forgive, I don't forget, but I do decide to face the hurt, to remember it, but not dwell on it. To feel the pain, but not surrender to it. When I forgive, I free myself to move on creatively in life.

And then forgiveness is not reconciliation. Not even God can be reconciled with everyone, though he offers forgiveness to all. I can offer forgiveness to others, and begin the process of forgiveness in myself. But I don't have the power to force reconciliation. That takes another person to cooperate. So we must not despair that our forgiveness doesn't make much difference. Our task is to make the offer. Remember that forgiveness is not letting a wrong done to us destroy a relationship. But this won't mean the relationship is restored or is all that it should be. It means that I am not going to let the hurt shape my attitudes. It means I am doing all I can to keep the relationship going in some way.

So forgiveness won't necessarily mean the two of us become close friends. The hurts inflicted may be such that we can't get that close again. If a husband abuses a wife, she is invited by God to forgive him and so be able to move on. But this won't mean she must go back to him and put up with his behaviour. Remember that forgiveness doesn't tolerate bad behaviour. God doesn't, nor should we. Forgiveness doesn't make us doormats, insipid and cowardly. Forgiveness doesn't ensure friendships turn out all right. It means we can get on with life, perhaps with a different relationship. As I work through the process of forgiveness, I may even have to avoid that person for a time or minimise contact with them. Forgiveness is more to do with the heart than with the outward circumstances.

Let's now move on to the question of who it is we may need to forgive. The short answer is that it is most likely those closest to us. Those who love us or claim to love us. The reason being that they have the most capacity to wound us. Strangers have far less power over us. We can be betrayed most deeply by those we trusted most deeply. Then again, we may also have to forgive monstrously abusive people. No one is to be put into the too hard basket.

Remember that if we refuse to forgive the monsters in our lives we are giving them continued power over us. Only forgiveness sets us free. Trying to get even just puts us on an escalator of pain and resentment and hurt. It is the fairest thing we can do for ourselves. But remember, we are not excusing or tolerating their behaviour. We are just choosing not to let it shape our lives.

We may have to forgive ourselves, though this might be more accurately described as accepting ourselves as being forgiven by God. When I do wrong, I may condemn myself and despise myself. I let my wrongdoing shape my attitudes and feelings. I shrivel. I hide in a pit of despair and despondency. I need to remember that God knows my darkest recesses, he knows my shadow side. And yet he is willing to wipe out my sins and walk with me in the future.

And now we come to the issue of how we forgive. The short answer is very humbly and very carefully! Having understood what forgiveness is and is not, we can begin the process. We face the pain, we lay blame. Do we then confront the person who did us wrong? Maybe, maybe not. Sometimes it isn't possible: the person may be dead or ill or uncontactable. Much forgiveness happens internally. If we can let go of the hurts and move on in life without going to the person, well and good. If it is more of a one off wound, then it may well be healed internally.

But we may need to face the person. This may be necessary if the hurt is ongoing, if it involves public actions and words which affect a wider group, if the hurt is particularly heinous. In such cases, failing to confront the person will mean a continuation of the bad behaviour and toleration of the wrongdoing. So we may need to take time to talk directly to the wrongdoer.

The first thing we must avoid is saying, "I forgive you". At least in the early stages. To clobber someone with forgiveness is to assume an air of moral superiority. It is to make your feelings paramount. It is to assume you are the only wronged party. In some cases, there has been mutual wrongdoing. In such cases, it is best to approach the person with humility, using "I" statements. I feel we are estranged and I feel wounded by your words so often. Can we talk about it? Am I hurting you by what I say as well? This gives the opportunity for a clearing of the air in a context of humility. Maybe you both need to repent and both need to offer forgiveness. Who knows, the hurt you experienced may have been fair. Or you may have been far too sensitive. A bit of clearing of the air will help sort out these issues.

Of course there are some occasions when it is more obviously a one sided matter. If you finally choose to confront an abusive parent, nothing in you can justify their abuse of you. You have every right to express

your hurt and invite their response. And remember that whether they repent or not, God invites you to forgive them (not tolerate or excuse them). If they repent, maybe a relationship can be at least partly restored, but if they fail to, then sadly the estrangement may remain.

If we confront the wrongdoer, we may not even have to mention the forgiveness word. A grace filled conversation will be evidence enough of forgiveness doing its work. A recognition of mutual pain, or individual wrongdoing, will be enough. Remember we don't use forgiveness as a power play to show how spiritually superior we are. It is to bless and advance relationships and clear the decks in our own lives. It is not a weapon to be used against others.

Maybe after private or public forgiving, there is repentance and the delight of a restored relationship. Maybe there is repentance, but no restoration of a relationship because too much has happened. This is so in abusive relationships. However, you, the forgiver, can move on in freedom with some sort of relationship with the wrongdoer, distant though it might be. Then again, there may be no repentance, only continued wrongdoing. In this case, we can go on forgiving (not tolerating or excusing), aware that our broken hearts are known by the broken hearted God who offers forgiveness to those who respond and who fail to respond.

Forgiveness, after all, is no magic cure, but choosing not to be shaped by our woundedness but by grace. Forgiveness is freedom: when we forgive, we set a prisoner free and find that prisoner is us.