

THE TIME FOR FORGIVENESS IS NOW

MATTHEW 5:21-26

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The Time for Forgiveness Is Now

Matthew 5:21-26

Let me just start by bring us up to date on our journey through the reconciliation process as a church. We started the journey on Ash Wednesday by informing ourselves about the malignancy of sin. We said that sin affects us, our families, and our church family. The sin of one man caused 36 soldiers their lives and left their households without a husband, a father, and a breadwinner. His sin caused the Israeli Army to be defeated in battle and the people to lose courage. His sin caused the death of his wife, children, and the loss of his own life. Sin is malignant. It will fester, grow, and lead to the death of individuals and churches.

Next we talked about the fact that before any reconciliation can take place between people, reconciliation must happen between individuals and God. In reconciling with God, it is imperative to understand how horrible our own sin is and come to the realization that it was our personal sin that caused the suffering, torture, and execution of Jesus. It is only from this point that we can gain a proper perspective of what stands between others and us.

Last week, we talked about that perspective and tried to move us to look at our offenses against others and the offenses others have perpetrated against us from a heavenly perspective. We left off by saying that we are called by God to ask forgiveness from those we have sinned against and also to be ready and willing to forgive those who have sinned against us.

This morning, I want us to catch the sense of urgency with following through with these actions. In other words, if we know that we have done wrong and hurt people, we need to not delay in asking for forgiveness. At the same time, we need to get our emotions in line with the truths of Scripture and genuinely forgive others even if we don't feel like it. Remember, we are more likely to act ourselves into a new way of feeling than we are to feel our way into a new way of acting. The Bible says we are to forgive. Our duty is simply to obey.

But alas, it seems that we always find excuses to put off unpleasant tasks, don't we? Most of you who know me personally, know that I'm a little obsessive-compulsive. When I have a task to do, I do it. When someone says they are going to do something for me, I kind of expect it to be done right away. Look, I know that I am annoying but you really don't need to keep sending me emails reminding me how annoying I am.

One of my friends sent me this email after I had been reminding him of what he had promised he would get done for me. He said that I had been nagging him. In my mind I was just doing him the courtesy of reminding him. Anyway, he said I would have to wait a little longer because he joined the Procrastinator's Club and he sent me their creed:

The Procrastinator's Creed

1. I believe that if anything is worth doing, it would have been done already.

2. I shall never move quickly, except to avoid more work or find excuses.
3. I will never rush into a job without a lifetime of consideration.
4. I shall meet all of my deadlines directly in proportion to the amount of bodily injury I could expect to receive from missing them.
5. I firmly believe that tomorrow holds the possibility for new technologies, astounding discoveries, and a reprieve from my obligations.
6. I truly believe that all deadlines are unreasonable regardless of the amount of time given.
7. I shall never forget that the probability of a miracle, though infinitesimally small, is not exactly zero.
8. If at first I don't succeed, there is always next year.
9. I shall always decide not to decide, unless of course I decide to change my mind.
10. I shall always begin, start, initiate, take the first step, and/or write the first word, when I get around to it.
11. I obey the law of inverse excuses which demands that the greater the task to be done, the more insignificant the work that must be done prior to beginning the greater task.
12. I know that the work cycle is not plan-start-finish, but is wait-plan-plan.
13. I will never put off until tomorrow, what I can forget about forever.
14. I will become a member of the ancient Order of Two-Headed Turtles (the Procrastinator's Society) if they ever get it organized.”

I'm hoping to demonstrate the importance of obeying God right away when it comes to forgiveness. Procrastination is not an option. The main idea of this morning's text is this. **RECONCILIATION IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.** I think it is critical that we keep in mind that our community is founded on reconciliation and it is the primary message of the Gospel that we can be reconciled with God through the blood of Jesus. The Apostle Paul put it this way:

¹⁷What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!

¹⁸All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to himself through what Christ did. And God has given us the task of reconciling people to him. ¹⁹For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others. ²⁰We are Christ's ambassadors, and God is using us to speak to you. We urge you, as though Christ himself were here pleading with you,

“Be reconciled to God!”²¹ For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ” (II Corinthians 5:17-21 / NLT).

Reconciliation is important to God. It must be important to us. I often hear misguided Christians talk about the Old Testament as if the commands of God are no longer applicable. They say that since Christ came we are no longer bound by the harshness of The Law. We now live under grace. If I read Scripture correctly, actually Jesus raises the bar. He says in this morning’s text that being angry with someone, hanging on to that anger, and verbalizing it is the same as murder. Later on in His sermon, Jesus went on to say that lusting is the same as committing adultery. It seems to me that living according to grace forces us to a higher level and expectation of holiness. That’s why in verses 21-22 we see that there will be plenty of occasions in which we will have to ask others for forgiveness and others will be asking us for forgiveness. **GOD HAS HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHRISTIAN BROTHERS AND SISTERS.**

OCCASIONS FOR FORGIVENESS (VS 21-22)

Before we get into these two verses, I want to point out the structure of them. They comprise a chiasm. In other words, the first sentence, which takes up all of verse 21, matches the last sentence in verse 22. The first in verse 22 parallels the second sentence in verse 22. So basically the verses are saying that murder and anger that manifests itself verbally carry the same penalty in God’s eyes. Think about it. When we verbally abuse someone or gossip about them, we have murdered their spirit and their reputation. What the passage wants us to learn is that as impossible as it is to make restitution to someone we have murdered, it is equally hard to make restitution to someone whose reputation or spirit we have murdered.

Verse 21 describes a situation in which there can be no possible reconciliation. Hebrew law was consistent and clear on this matter. When someone committed murder, nothing short of that person paying with his or her life was acceptable. Listen to what God tells Moses:

“⁵And murder is forbidden. Animals that kill people must die, and any person who murders must be killed. ⁶Yes, you must execute anyone who murders another person, for to kill a person is to kill a living being made in God’s image” (Genesis 9:5-6 / NLT).

There was absolutely no wiggle room here. In fact the Mosaic Law reinforced this concept. Here is the idea. How could you possibly make restitution to a dead person? Once they are dead, they are dead. There is nothing we can do to bring them back. Let’s say you or I got drunk, got behind the wheel of a car, and killed someone. Oh to be sure, we would be sorry. We could even be genuinely sorry. But when we go to say sorry to this person’s husband, wife, children, or parents, what does sorry do? Once a life is taken, we can never possibly make restitution. And we would ultimately have to ask the question, “How could we possibly be reconciled to a dead person?” And the obvious answer is that we can’t. Everybody who heard Jesus quote this part of His sermon would certainly agree. I think that most people can understand this as well.

However, what shocks us and His audience was when Jesus traced back the roots of murder in the first half of verse 22 where He describes where it all starts. Here is where the passage gets

interesting. Jesus goes on to say that anyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. The word judgment He used in this sentence is the same word He used in talking about the judgment a convicted murderer would experience. Jesus is saying that murderers must face judgment and so do people who remain angry. At this point, His audience may or may not still be with Jesus because Jesus merely said that people who remain angry must face judgment. He is not yet saying that they face the same judgment as murderers but these angry people will face a judgment by God. The word used for anger here is a word that refers to someone who remains angry, who nurses a grudge, and the anger is a long-lived anger. The person stewes over it. This kind of anger is dangerous. In fact, nursing a grudge and stewing over our perceived hurts is forbidden. So Jesus is starting to raise eyebrows a little. It doesn't seem as if this person has done anything wrong. The person is just being eaten up by his or her own anger. But then Jesus raises the stakes a little. He went on to say that anyone who calls his brother or sister an idiot is answerable to the Sanhedrin. Now the Sanhedrin was the official ruling religious body of the Jews. They were comprised of scholars, many who were schooled in religious law. When we call someone stupid or brainless, what we are actually saying is that we are smarter than that particular person. More importantly, we are saying that we are right and they are wrong. Jesus has now made this an issue of spirituality. The problem at this point is that technically, the person has not yet committed a sin according to the prevailing law. And most of us in our modern society would also not classify this as a sin. But you see, when we nurse our anger along, it leads to the point where we think the person we are angry with is an idiot. He or she is stupid and brainless. What we are doing is dehumanizing them. We are saying that they are not as good as us.

And then the last sentence in verse 22 shows us where it all ends up. We have been wondering all along what kind of judgment these angry people will face. Here Jesus says that it will all end up in danger of hell. The word for fool here now implies that the person's soul is defective. Prior to this, the angry person was devaluing the intellectual ability of the person he or she was angry with. Now they are devaluing the person's soul value. It is a word that talks about someone playing the moral fool and has no moral uprightness. This really is slander. That is why the church must discipline those who slander, those who tell lies, those who verbally abuse others, and those who gossip. Let's bring this back to Jesus' bottom line. Once we slander or lie about someone, once we gossip about someone, or verbally abuse someone, we have murdered their reputation and oftentimes their spirit. There is no way we can go back and make restitution for that. It has all been put out there. Jesus has just equated slander, gossip, lying, etc. with murder.

Before we get into the application of this section, let me just say that next week, we will be discussing the expectations of church leaders. For our journey through reconciliation, that means the board members who resigned and left will take responsibility for not staying and putting up a knock down drag out fight. I will also again apologize for my lack of standing up and not fighting. But for this morning, I want to just deal with this issue of slander, gossip, and lying. Further, I need to deal with our failure as a congregation to stand up against it.

I have seen board members who were slandered here mercilessly and only a very few of the congregation stood up and defended them. I can only think of three people who publicly got up and said they could not believe any of these lies were true. Who can go back now and make restitution to all their family members who had to listen to all these lies and slander and endure

the pain that goes along with that? Even after the mediator publicly vindicated them, I know of only one individual who apologized for not openly defending and standing up for them. Certainly those who left with them in planting the new church demonstrated their trust in them, but as far as I know, none of those who remained behind has come to offer any sort of an apology for not standing up for them. These board members suffered a great deal for faithfully shepherding this congregation.

The mediator told me that I should have gotten up and protected them instead of quietly resigning to show my support of them. So let me start by apologizing to those board members who had to endure this assault on their characters. I should have done a better job in protecting you. And further, because your families had to suffer as well, I apologize to all your family members as well. I promise you that in the future, I will indeed protect all of you and indeed the whole congregation. I will indeed take the model of a shepherd seriously. I promise to track down every bit of gossip and slander. I promise to track down any lies or reports of people spreading seeds of discontent. And I promise to exercise church discipline swiftly.

I have to say to those who remained behind without challenging these lies, sander, and false teachings may think they have nothing to apologize for. They may feel badly about what happened but don't see the need to apologize. If this description fits you, you may want to think about apologizing to those who were slandered in this whole process. They and their families endured a great deal. **GOD HAS HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CHRISTIAN BROTHERS AND SISTERS.**

THE URGENCY FOR FORGIVENESS (VS 23-24)

Once we know that we have wronged someone, we should not hesitate in apologizing. Likewise, those who have been wronged ought to be ready to forgive. Verses 23-24 describe the urgency of forgiveness. In this section we are going to see that **GOD MAKES RECONCILIATION A PREREQUISITE FOR WORSHIP.**

I think most of us would agree that worship is the most important task of a Christian. Let's think about this as we set the scene in the first half of verse 23; worship is important. The text starts out, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar." When we studied through the book of Leviticus, we learned about all sorts of sacrifices. We learned about sacrifices made with the confession of sin to cleanse the worshiper of all their sin. We saw free will offerings and thanksgiving offerings just to say, "I love You" to God. The Hebrew life was centered on worship. The cycle of their religious, civil, and ceremonial law centered around worship. And in fact their religious holidays coincided with their agricultural year. Our lives ought to center around worship as well. Worship is our response to what God has done in our lives, what He is doing in our lives, and what He will do in our lives. Worship is important. And that is where we are in Jesus' lesson. Someone is bringing his or her sacrifice up to the priest to be offered up in worship to God. Whether they are about to worship by asking for forgiveness of sin with this sacrifice or whether they are simply going to praise and thank God with the sacrifice, they are about to enter worship. In fact Jesus portrays the worshiper as actually in the act of worship. He may just have handed over the animal or the wheat to the priest and the priest is about to kill the animal or burn the wheat on the altar.

The second half of verse 23 through the first half of verse 24 illustrates what God thinks is more important than worship. The priest is about to slit the animal's throat and start the ceremony on behalf of this worshiper when the worshiper remembers that he has sinned against someone and has not resolved it. Jesus said at that point, the worshiper should tell the priest to stop the ceremony. The person must then go and find the one he has offended and be reconciled first. If we have wronged anyone, we must first go and make things right with that person before we even think about worshipping.

Let me show the logic in that. Let's say the guy who came to worship was offering up a sacrifice to atone for the sin of stealing. Here he is, asking God to forgive him of stealing when he needs to take care of the consequences of his stealing first. Before this guy can worship, he needs to confess to God that he has stolen, find the person he had stolen from, confess to him, make full restitution, and ask for forgiveness. What good is confessing to God and asking for forgiveness without making things right with the people you have stolen from? Saying we are sorry is a very small part of reconciliation.

Let me go back to last week's sermon for a moment. We said that we need to be ready and willing to forgive those who sin against us. When we forgive someone, what we are doing is releasing him or her to God for God to deal with. We are renouncing all our rights to seek revenge. So we are forgiving people whether they ask for it or not. This act is between God and us personally. However, for reconciliation to take place, the offender has to first of all demonstrate that they understand what they did to harm us and demonstrate they understand all the damage their sin has done. Then they have to personally take responsibility for all of this and ask for forgiveness. But it doesn't end there. If the person is truly sorry and repentant, they will make restitution. At this point reconciliation can take place and the one who was sinned against is obligated to forgive the person and be reconciled.

Again let me repeat this. The Christian Church is built on the act of God reconciling people to Him through the suffering and death of Jesus. That is the message we are to live and to preach. Therefore, if reconciliation is what God built the church on, then we must be reconciled with one another. We cannot worship if we are not reconciled. To be sure here, it is the one who has sinned who must seek forgiveness.

After reconciliation takes place, the second half of verse 24 states that this is the proper time for worship. The Corinthian Church was a church with a lot of divisions and people causing trouble. In describing the attitude in which to approach the communion table, the Apostle Paul says this:

¹⁷But now when I mention this next issue, I cannot praise you. For it sounds as if more harm than good is done when you meet together. ¹⁸First of all, I hear that there are divisions among you when you meet as a church, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that those of you who are right will be recognized!

²⁰It's not the Lord's Supper you are concerned about when you come together. ²¹For I am told that some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. ²²What? Is this really true? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace the church of God and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say about these things? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly do not! ...

²⁶For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again.

²⁷So if anyone eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily, that person is guilty of sinning against the body and the blood of the Lord. ²⁸That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking from the cup. ²⁹For if you eat the bread or drink the cup unworthily, not honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself. ³⁰That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died.

³¹But if we examine ourselves, we will not be examined by God and judged in this way. ³²But when we are judged and disciplined by the Lord, we will not be condemned with the world.

³³So, dear brothers and sisters, when you gather for the Lord's Supper, wait for each other.

³⁴If you are really hungry, eat at home so you won't bring judgment upon yourselves when you meet together. ... (I Corinthians 11:17-34 / NLT).

We have already said that God has high expectations for relationships between Christian brothers and sisters. Jesus has made that same point in this morning's text. The Apostle Paul also made it. If we come to understand that we have wronged someone, we must get that relationship reconciled before we can worship. **GOD MAKES RECONCILIATION A PREREQUISITE FOR WORSHIP.**

THE IMPORTANCE OF FORGIVENESS (VS 25-26)

Jesus ends up this section by doing what He does so well. He illustrates the logic of this theological issue with an example from everyday life. In verses 25-26 Jesus demonstrates the importance of forgiveness. **GOD EXPECTS US TO BE HUMBLE AND TO BE RECONCILED.** This is not a suggestion. It is not a guideline. Being reconciled is a command. In the first half of verse 25, Jesus demonstrates the wisdom of humility. Look at Jesus' reasoning. We have wronged someone and he has caught up with us. He has subpoenaed us and we are on our way to court. Let's say we owed him \$1,000. Jesus reasons like this. When we get before the judge, the judge is going to find us guilty. She is going to order us to pay the plaintiff the \$1,000 we owed him. Then the judge will order us to pay an additional fine for committing the offense or perhaps throw us in jail. Jesus said, find the plaintiff and pay him the money we owe him. If we settle out of court, we will suffer a lot less.

On the other hand, those of us who are stubborn may live out the folly of pride described in the second half of verse 25. What would cause us to allow the plaintiff take us to court when we clearly owe him \$1,000? I can't tell you how many times I have watched people self-destruct over my years in the ministry. Instead of apologizing and really demonstrating true sorrow and repentance by making restitution, they carry on a fight or grudge and end up suffering a great deal. God gives us opportunities to examine our hearts and review our words and actions. Each month when we celebrate communion, we are invited to examine our hearts and judge ourselves. When we force God's hand, it never turns out the way we have imagined it. Jesus said in His example, the defendant who owed the \$1,000 will be required to pay back the \$1,000 and be sent to jail.

Jesus makes the point absolutely clear when He describes the consequences of pride in verse 26. Jesus put it like this, “I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.” Is that what any of us really wants? I have got to tell you that the most painful thing I have to watch as a pastor is to continually watch people self-destruct. I have often warned people they were going in the wrong direction. For some reason, people rarely are humble enough to take some good advice. I often find myself discouraged because I feel helpless to hold them back from crashing and burning. Let me make this as clear as possible. **GOD EXPECTS US TO BE HUMBLE AND TO BE RECONCILED.** For those who need to ask for forgiveness, don’t waste time. Get it over with. Get it done.

God is serious about this point. **RECONCILIATION IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.**

I’d like to illustrate the attitudes of one who is truly repentant and one who is truly eager to forgive. It is the ending of the famous story of The Prodigal Son. You all know the story of the son who demanded his father give him his inheritance right away. The father did and the son squandered all his money away on partying. When the son found himself without friends and jealous of the pigs he was forced to feed the story goes like this:

“¹⁷When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger!’¹⁸I will go home to my father and say, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you,¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man.’”

²⁰“So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’

²²“But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. ²³And kill the calf we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began” (Luke 15:17-24 / NLT).

There is no doubt about what God wants from us. He wants us to be reconciled with Him and with one another. And he wants it now.