

“Why Forgiveness?”
Zion Baptist Church
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Greeting and Introduction

I am delighted to be able to bring God’s word to you this morning. This is my second visit to Hakha, but the first time to preach here. Many of my students at MIT are Chin, and many have come from Hakha. Furthermore, I first came to Burma, because Cung Lian Hup, the former academic dean of Myanmar Institute of Theology invited me. We went to school together in the United States 30 years ago. When he graduated, he told me that Burma needed more Christian professors. He invited me to come to teach at MIT. It took me 14 years to say, “Yes,” but in 2007 I finally came. And I’ve been coming back to teach almost every year since then. So, although this my first time in this church, I feel as if I already know you a little bit, because I have come to know and love so many Chin people over the past 30 years.

Our message this morning is on love and forgiveness. You may have heard many sermons on this subject before, but this is the message God has put on my heart today for you. As you know, loving and forgiving others is very important for Christians. But, as you also know, loving others can be really hard sometimes, especially when someone has hurt you. But it is possible.

Prayer

Scripture

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Colossians 3:12-14).

Sermon

Every one of us has been hurt by someone. Every one of us deserves an apology or some kind of compensation, which we haven’t received. Every one of us may feel quite justified in holding a grudge, or even refusing to forgive someone else. Yet, no matter what our rights may be, or how much we have been hurt, the Scripture tells us over and over again that we must love and forgive one another.

Jesus said the greatest commandment is that we should love God. The second greatest command is that we should love one another. He also said, nonChristians will recognize his disciples by the way that we love one another. Furthermore, love is so important to the Christian life that John taught that if we don't have love for our brothers and sisters, then we don't truly love God, and the love of God isn't in us. Furthermore, Jesus taught us to pray, “Father, forgive us our sins, *as we forgive those who have sinned against us.*”

In other words, loving and forgiving others is not optional for Christians. To love and forgive others is your calling. It's God's expectation for you. God has chosen love and forgiveness as his way to set you free from bondage to hatred, anger, resentment and bitterness. It's his way of healing you and healing others. Ultimately, love and forgiveness is God's way to build up the church and to make us a shining witness to others outside of the church.

There's real power in forgiveness. As hard as it may be sometimes to do, it is possible with God's help.

Forgiveness beyond belief

When I was teaching pastors in Rwanda one time, I was amazed by a story I heard about forgiveness. The woman's name was “Sarah.” Her husband and children had been killed during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, along with over 800,000 others. Hacked to death actually. In this case, by her next-door neighbor. The killer was sent to prison, but his wife and children still live in the same place.

Every day for 15 years, “Sarah” had to walk by their house and be reminded of the horror of that night, of all she has lost, and of all that she must continue to suffer because of what happened. On top of it all, the killer's wife resented Sarah for causing her husband to go to jail and was cold and rude toward her.

Then, one day the unthinkable happened. Sarah decided she couldn't take living under this cloud any longer. She took a friend from her church and knocked on her neighbor's door. When the woman saw Sarah standing there, she screamed. She left the door hanging open, ran into the interior of the house, and locked herself in the bathroom. When her children begged her to come out, all she would say was, “Run away. Run away. Don't you know they've come here to kill us!”

Sarah and her friend sat down inside the living room and waited. Yet, when the woman refused to leave the bathroom, they decided to come back later with a different friend who knew the woman well. When Sarah returned the next day, this time the neighbor nervously let her in.

What happened next is beyond my comprehension.

Sarah fell on her knees and began pleading with the woman. With tears streaming down her face,

she begged for forgiveness. Sarah was sorry that she had been so judgmental of her neighbor. Could she forgive Sarah? At this, the neighbor dissolved into tears. “No, no! I should have been the one to go to you to ask for forgiveness,” she cried out. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. Please forgive me!”

A miracle was happening. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for Sarah to live next door to the family of the man who killed her husband and children for all those years, let alone comprehend living with the memory of their brutal murder. But going to ask the man’s wife for forgiveness? What in the world was going on?

Yet, there she was. She did it. And in an instant, years of hatred, guilt, shame, fear and grief were transformed. I doubt all their pain is now gone forever, but real healing took place in a way that I had never experienced or heard of before.

10 helpful truths about forgiveness

What about you? Is there someone in your life that you need to forgive? If so, I’m going to share with you some practical truths that might help you in moving forward in obedience to God’s command. These five truths have helped me to understand better what forgiveness is and isn’t. I offer them to you this morning to help you let go of the past and move on with your life and spiritual journey. Here they are.

1. Forgiving others doesn’t mean denying the wrong. You’re not saying that what happened to you wasn’t awful, or that you will enable their abusive behavior by not calling them to account. Rather, forgiveness means that you no longer want to stay stuck in your anger. You want to stop being fueled by harsh, resentful, or vengeful feelings. Holding on to your anger isn’t going to make things right; it’s only going to make you sick.
2. Forgiveness means forgoing revenge. You’ll stop hoping something bad will happen to “pay them back” or “to make them suffer” for what they did. Instead, you begin praying that God will work in their hearts and minds for good, remembering that “God’s kindness leads to repentance” (Romans 2:4) and that Jesus said, “love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27).
3. Forgiveness doesn’t mean being foolish. You can forgive without necessarily putting yourself in a position to be hurt by them again. You need to know with whom you are dealing and what to expect from this person, so that you can set boundaries for your own well-being and that of others who may depend on you for safety. You may appropriately limit their power to hurt you by not looking for or expecting kindness, goodness, or fair treatment from those who cannot or don’t want to love you in return.
4. Forgiving others will set you free from being a prisoner to the past, if you begin to discipline your thinking. For example, you will help yourself if you do the following.

- Stop ruminating over what has happened. It’s not helping.
 - Stop trying to make sense of senseless behavior. It’s not possible.
 - Learn whatever you can from what happened, and then stop going over and over the failed or dysfunctional relational dynamic. Such internal churning will wear you down and gives you nothing in return.
5. Forgiveness, then, means looking forward and moving on. For example:
- Use your energy to focus on what brings you life and joy.
 - Cultivate and enjoy your relationships with those who truly love you, enjoy your company, appreciate you, nourish and sustain you, and treat you well.
 - Focus your attention on your calling and purpose in life to serve Christ with your unique set of gifts, abilities, resources, and opportunities regardless of whatever that other person thinks, may have said about you, or has done to you.

Conclusion

I can’t know what you have suffered. I imagine, for some of you, you have every right to be angry, and every right to demand justice. But if you have become a prisoner to your anger, resentment, bitterness, what good is it? Such bondage is not the way of Jesus. It’s not what he wants for you. It’s not what he wants for the church.

The way of Jesus is the way of forgiveness. And if you just don’t have the power within you to do what he commanded, ask God for help. Ask the Holy Spirit to release the poison trapped in your heart and mind. Ask God to pour his love into your heart to set you free and to heal you. Ask God to give you a supernatural ability to love and forgive others, for their sake, for your sake, for the sake of the church, and for the sake of your witness to the world so desperate for love and hope.

The Apostle John said:

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:7-11).

Invitation and Prayer