

Pathways to Preaching

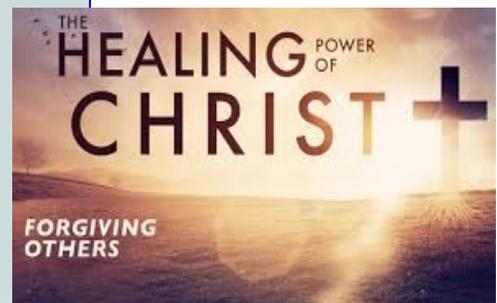
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Topic: Forgiving Others

Forgiveness is central to the Christian message, and yet we are often not entirely clear what we mean when we talk about it. Most Christian discussion of forgiveness centers on God's grace in forgiving us of our sin. Yet what is the relationship between God forgiving us by grace and our responsibility to forgive others? The Lord's Prayer says, "And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Certainly, there is an expectation in the New Testament that Christians are to forgive others who have wronged them. But does forgiveness mean excusing inappropriate behavior or forgetting wrongs done against us?

Written by:

*Rev. Dr. Eric Trozzo,
Director of the Lutheran
Study Centre at STS.*



Bible Text: Matthew 5:21-26

Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount is three full chapters: Matthew 5-7. In chapter 5, Jesus begins with the Beatitudes and then talks about being salt and light. After that Jesus turns to the question of God's law, insisting that he has not come to abolish it but rather to fulfill it. This leads to a series of six statements of "You have heard it said ... but I say to you." In each of these Jesus tells the Jewish law first ("You have heard it said...") and then gives a more radical interpretation of that law ("But I say to you..."), thus showing the extent of holiness that God calls us to live out.

The first of these pairings is found in our focus text: Matthew 5:21-26. Jesus contrasts the law that one should not murder with the command that even being angry at one's brother or sister is enough to condemn a person to hell. In fact, he suggests that God is not interested in receiving our offerings if there is a rift between us and our brother or sister. Thus we must work to heal that broken relationship before we come to worship God. However, in the second part of this passage Jesus recognizes on a practical level that people do in fact become angry with one another at times. It is the reality of human relationships that we get testy with one another sometimes. Given this reality, Jesus gives us the practical example that we should not become so consumed with anger that we allow the relationship to fall apart so badly that we take one another to court; once the judges get involved the relationship has died and the legal proceedings take over rather than love.

Forgiving Others

Law: In the first part of this passage, Jesus insists that anger has no place in the Kingdom of God. We must let go of our anger and learn to forgive. When someone betrays us or wrongs us in some other way, we can easily be filled with rage. We are hurt and angered that someone could do such a thing to us, and so we seek to get revenge. Jesus tells us here that responses of anger are not part of life in the Kingdom of God. We are responsible for the actions we do out of anger. Seeking to get back at someone because they angered us is not acceptable. Going further, even being angry with one another is not part of the vision Jesus paints of the Kingdom of God. To live following Jesus' teaching means to let go of our anger altogether. Thus what we find in this passage first is that if all our human relationships were righteous, there would be no need for anger. Beyond that, if we act out of anger to break relationships rather than to build them, then we ourselves are the cause of unrighteousness. Too often we let our anger at wrongs done to us escalate into wrongs that we do to others. We let our anger control us rather than recognizing it as a warning system that lets us know that there is a problem. We seek to unleash our anger on others so that we can feel avenged and self-righteous, when in fact we are being self-centered in trying to ease our hurt. Jesus tells us that anger can be a sign of brokenness and sin.

Gospel:

The overarching theme of the Sermon on the Mount is a life of love. A life of love is one not controlled by anger and the need for revenge. A life of love is one that is capable of forgiveness. The fact is that as we live together in the communities of our families, churches, towns, and other places of connection, there will be times when we become frustrated with one another. The other person may aggravate us intentionally or unintentionally; it may be that we are tired or stressed; the fault may be our or theirs or both or neither. Yet just as we are forgiven in Christ, through Christ we can be moved by love rather than anger and thus seek to overcome these tensions through forgiveness rather than revenge. We see grace when forgiveness is given, by God or among people.



Transformation: (continued from page 3)

While on the one hand Jesus is saying that there is no place for anger in the Kingdom of God, in the second part of the passage he recognizes that tensions between people are a reality of life in the world and so gives practical advice for dealing with it. That is, we should hear the second part of this text as a pastoral suggestion rather than a command.

Forgiving Others

Transformation: (continued from page 2)

..... When he says to leave your gift at the altar and go be reconciled with your brother and to come to terms with your accuser on the way to court, these should not be heard as law but rather as pastoral counsel. It is not that God is unwilling to receive our offering or worship when we have a conflict with a brother or sister. Rather, it is that we are unable to properly give that offering or worship when our heart is consumed by anger. It is hard to act lovingly when our heart is filled with anger. Thus for us to effectively set our hearts upon God, we first deal with our anger and move towards forgiveness. To do this means being humble enough to recognize that we may be the ones at fault and are in need of being forgiven. It is not easy to do this, but it is better to humbly admit it than arriving at court and having the judge condemn us.

Living as Jesus' disciple does not do away with conflicts or causes for anger. Yet life led by the Holy Spirit is one that seeks ways to forgive in order to be free from the power that anger has over us. We do this by dealing with the problem directly, rather than holding them in our hearts. When we let resentment fester in our hearts, it can poison us. It grows and turns into hatred. Hatred then leads us away from the Kingdom of God and leaves us open to being consumed by evil.



In order to stop this process of being overtaken by anger and hatred, we must name the issue that we have immediately. If our human relations are not right and we have hate brewing in our hearts, then we are not ready for our relationship with God to be right. Thus rather than offering a gift or worshipping God, we are moved to seek to fix the broken relationship. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to name the source of our anger directly and seek to resolve the problem that causes it. In hearing that we should come to terms with our accuser on the way to court, we can hear in this that we are empowered to make the opening bid to avoid a permanent fall into hatred of one another by seeking forgiveness or forgiving before things go too far.

Again, this pastoral advice should not be seen as a divine command. Rather it is a glimpse at what life filled by the Holy Spirit looks like. On our own, we naturally turn to anger to solve our differences. Jesus calls us to a different path, and it is the Holy Spirit that moves in us to empower us to take that path.



Theological Reflection on Doctrine

Many Asian cultures prefer to deal with conflict between people indirectly, backing off from direct confrontation. While there is value and wisdom in this that is worth retaining, there is also a danger in this approach. The danger is that feelings of hurt and resentment can be bottled up and held until they explode. Most often this explosion does much more damage to ourselves than it does to the person with whom we are angry. We can hear in this teaching of Jesus an exhortation to be more direct in expressing our frustration so that it does not grow into hatred and seeking revenge. Hatred and revenge only perpetuate a cycle of anger and broken relationships, while Jesus calls us to stop the cycle. Forgiveness is a break in a cycle. It is a refusal to return like with like – hatred with hatred, violence with violence, sin with sin. Forgiveness is allowing love to break through the cycle and start something new. It offers a fresh start.

At the same time, forgiveness does not mean excusing the actions that caused the hurt and anger in the first place. It does not mean reckless forgetting of the injury, nor does it mean putting



oneself in a situation to be hurt again. In fact, it would be problematic to characterize anger as evil or sinful. After all, Jesus famously becomes angry in the Temple. **Anger is not sinful in and of itself; rather, it is a sign that something is wrong.** It is a response to sin, unfair situations, betrayal, or any number of other injustices within human relationships. Too often this passage has been used to insist that someone who is a victim must let the person who hurt them off with a cheap forgiveness. In particular, in my experiences as a chaplain I came across several women who had been the victims of domestic abuse. These women were nervous about speaking with a pastor because they had heard too many times that they must forgive their offender because Jesus commands it. Even though the women were the ones who were attacked, they were told by the church that they were the sinful ones because they were angry and not able to immediately forgive those who hurt them. We must guard against lapsing into a theology that endangers people by absolving violent perpetrators of responsibility for their actions. Too easily Jesus' command is seen in a manner that drains life rather than in one that gives life. ...



(continued from page 5)



Forgiving Others

Theological Reflection on Doctrine (continued from page 4)

..... Anger in response to such issues is in fact the proper response because anger can help us uncover the problems so that they can be rectified. Forgiveness is the choice, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to not allow previous hurts to continue hurting. It is responding to the cycle of hate and violence with love. If the other party is not ready to participate in breaking the cycle, we cannot force them to do so, but we also do not have to force ourselves to live trapped by the evil forces of hatred and violence. We can only remove ourselves from anger once we are safe from being hurt by the other's anger. Yet once we are safe, then we can open ourselves to healing rather than continuing in the cycle of hurt. This is not natural to us – we



much more easily respond with bitterness and anger – but it is a sign that the Holy Spirit has been at work healing the hurt in our lives. Anger served to help us protect ourselves when someone does something against us, but once we have reached being able to forgive it no longer serves a purpose and so will disappear.

What do theologians say?

“It is grace that we are allowed to please our brother, and pay our debt to him, it is grace that we are allowed to become reconciled with him. In our brother we find grace before the seat of judgment.” *German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 130.*

Songs and Hymns:

#371 They'll know we are Christian
#347 Oh Lord forgive my sin

“In spite of the fact that the law of revenge solves no social problems, men continue to follow its disastrous leading. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path.”

American pastor and theologian Martin Luther King, Jr., A Gift of Love

“Forgiveness as such does not rule out anger or just punishment, and certainly does not excuse those who oppress and victimize. . . . What forgiveness rules out is that malicious and vindictive vengeance that perpetuates the cycle of violence.”

South African theologian John W. DeGruchy, Reconciliation: Restoring Justice, 172

Prayer: Father Lord, we are all your children. Send peace among your people. When we want to tear down, help us to build up. When we are angry, help us to name the hurt and offer it to you for healing. Let anger be for us the start of a changed life. We thank you for the teachings of Jesus and for the healing presence of your Holy Spirit. Amen.



Topic: Stewardship

What is stewardship? It is recognizing that all that we have comes from God, and using these gifts in order to praise and serve God. We act as “stewards” – people who manage something but do not own it – when we offer our gifts to God. These gifts may be the money we give at Church, money donated to charity, time that we share to help others, a lifestyle that cares for creation, using our talents in work or serving, or other ways that we live well to honor God. There are several Bible stories about stewards. There are also many stories and verses about generosity. Perhaps the most famous is the story of the widow’s mite (Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4), which reminds us that we give proportionally (not equal giving, but equal sacrifice) and that we should never judge others for how much or little they are able to give.

The idea of proportional giving comes from the practice of tithing, or giving 10% of our income. Our Scripture text from Numbers shows some of the roots of tithing. But it is important to remember that we live best when we offer God not only 10% of our money, but our whole lives.

Bible Text: Numbers 18:21-32

This text is one passage that shows the Biblical root of tithing. Israel was reorganizing itself after decades of slavery. Now they had a tribe of priests who cared for worship and the “tent of meeting.” Formerly, offerings to God were meat that was burned on an altar – a fragrance that was pleasing to God, and an understanding of offering as being purely to please God and not to have multiple purposes. Now in Numbers 18 the offerings, 10% of one’s produce, is given to God as an offering, and it is also used to feed the priests and their families. This is the beginning of offerings being used for community needs – the house of worship, people to serve as priests, and every third year, to have a collection for the poor (Deuteronomy 26:12).

This passage shows how stewardship and offerings can be in danger of becoming “fund-raising.” Before this, offerings at first were simply burned; they were purely a gift to God. In this text, we see that offerings became a community tax in order to meet specific needs. Today, while our gifts can be both offering (given freely) and useful for people, we must take care with our attitude toward offerings and stewardship. All giving to and through the Church needs to be, at its root, an offering to God rather than a focus purely on earthly results.

Written by:

Rev. Wendolyn Trozzo, coordinator for congregational outreach at the Lutheran Study Centre at STS.





Stewardship

Law + Gospel = Transformation

Law: *Not gift, but duty*

The roots of tithing for Israel after leaving Egypt were twofold: to praise God and to care for the community. This was a benefit in that people knew how much to give and their giving did not depend on their mood. However, giving was a tax, an obligation. Offerings were not given freely. Thus if you were not giving your tithe, you could be excluded from the community. This sense of duty is important, and it reminds you that your offering makes a difference. However, it could easily lead to giving grudgingly and finding no joy or relationship in giving to God. It also turned priests into tax collectors (as some pastors today feel like fundraisers or leaders who must worry about money). When a community comes together, it will clearly have needs, like buildings, vehicles, utilities, and salaries. How can we avoid a sense that people are “paying for” their time with God? How can we invite people to give generously and joyfully, without putting shame on those who find giving (of time, skills, or money) a real challenge? We see in this passage that giving is a duty, the Law, that God demands of us.

Gospel: Offerings as a way to

approach God The good news is that God desires relationship with us, and God gives us many gifts to build up that relationship. God sends the Holy Spirit to encourage and guide us, and to forgive us when we miss opportunities to be generous. God sends us leaders who can teach about joyful stewardship: pastors, authors, and non-ordained leaders within congregations. God blesses us with skills in order to get good jobs, or land on which to farm, and these provide money that we can offer back to God. When we can remember that we are truly giving to God, we can be filled with wonder at how much God gives us and how awesome it is to be able to approach God with our offerings. The Gospel changes the way that the faithful approach tithing. No longer is it a requirement. Churches don't give bills to members. There is no admission fee to come near to God! This means that when circumstances make it difficult to give, we are still welcomed by God and kept in the community of the Church. Giving is a sign of discipleship, an integral part of our Christian living. Instead of a heavy requirement and sorrow if we can't give, Jesus teaches that we should offer what we can. Instead of a bill, we are free to give to a tithe and beyond. Giving changes from duty to delight.

Transformation: Growing in trust by doing; steward is a stand-in for owner – like image of God

Giving to God is an act of letting go of something important to us: money. Money has so many meanings to us: security, reputation, comfort, fun, hope. But we should not make money an idol. An idol is something that we put our trust in, but an idol cannot love us. God is not an idol: God deserves our trust and God always loves us. When we let go of money, when we give to God, we are practicing trusting God. At first it is quite difficult and scary to really trust God.... (continued on page 8)



Transformation: (continued from page 7)

...The world tells us to be afraid and to take care of ourselves first. But when we trust God, very often God proves to us that our trust in God is well-placed. We grow in trusting God because of the experience of giving. We are transformed from fearful into bold; greedy into generous; hypocrites into good examples. God changes us.

A steward is a manager, not an owner. The steward was in charge of resources but not the boss. So we are stewards of many resources, and God is the one to whom it all really belongs. But we care for these resources like we think God would. This includes money, time, and talents; it also includes the treasure of creation. We are made in God's image, Genesis tells us, and when we grow in stewardship, we show the world an image of God. We are not as good as God, but we try to be like God: faithful, trustworthy, wise, caring, creative. We are transformed by serving God and being good stewards.

Read more at...

Read more at: http://www.christianbiblereference.org/faq_tithe.htm

Songs and Hymns:

#320 Fill my cup Lord

#266 Take my life and let it be



A warning:

Sometimes we hear that if we give, we will receive more blessings. The idea that if I put RM1 in the offering, later I might expect a surprise of RM10. The Bible does urge us to be generous with our wealth and time. However, any claim that wealth, health, good fortune or other blessings will come as a result of a donation should be looked at with suspicion. Many times people do find their financial life improving after they begin giving more, but often this is because people have to organize their finances better in order to give – and being organized leads to better financial decision-making and more discipline and control over one's spending habits.

Related texts:

Tithing: Genesis 28:22, 1 Corinthians 9:13-14, 1 Timothy 5:17-18. Generosity: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7 and 9:6-7, Ephesians 3:1-3. God's good gifts: 1 Chronicles 29:10-14, Psalm 24:1. Stewardship is woven into the whole of Scripture, because it shows God's goodness and power and what our right response should be.



Stewardship

My testimony:

I have heard it said, and I find it to be true, that once a person or family starts tithing, they rarely want to stop. This has been true for us. And there have been so many benefits to the habit of tithing:

We calculate what 10% of our income is and keep track of our offerings, making sure that we give at least that 10%. We don't have to wonder how much we should give, it is already set.

We have learned to keep a budget so that we are sure our tithe is given in full. Having a budget has been great for reducing financial worries and for building up savings. We use a free app called Goodbudget.com and it has truly made life happier for our family – we know exactly how much money we have for extra things like eating out or toys, and we can plan ways to save for something important.

We are always giving. Each week we give at worship, plus when we hear of needs, we have funds ready to donate. It feels good to be generous.

We know that we are honoring God in the ways we use our time, talents, and treasures. Our wallet and our calendar are signs of faithful living.

And someone is always giving more than us, so we hopefully stay humble.

I share my story here to encourage others to try to increase their % of giving, not because I am proud, but because it has truly been a blessing to our family.

What theologians say:

“Over the years, I have time and again invited folks who have been worshipping with us and contributing in many ways to the life of the congregation to join, only to be asked, “What do I get as a member that I don't get now?” Membership is about getting; discipleship is about giving. Membership is about dues; discipleship is about stewardship. Membership is about belonging to a select group with its privileges and prerogatives; discipleship is about changing and shaping lives by the grace of God.”

— Michael W. Foss, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing Church*



Prayer: God, you are the Giver of all good gifts. Everything we have comes from you. Help us to want to use our time, talents, and treasures to praise you. We offer you our whole lives, Lord; we thank you for always being willing to welcome us in your Kingdom. In the name of Jesus, who gave himself for us, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, our Counselor and Guide: Amen.