

10. Why Forgive?

Texts: Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 5:43-45, 1 Peter 2:13, 14.

Quotes

“My nature is the most peaceful in the world. All I ask is a simple cottage, a decent bed, good food, some flowers in front of my window, and a few trees beside my door. Then if God wanted to make me wholly happy, he would let me enjoy the spectacle of six or seven of my enemies dangling from those trees. I would forgive them all wrongs they have done me, forgive them from the bottom of my heart, for we must forgive our enemies. But not until they are hanged!”
Heinrich Heine

“Forgiveness is not natural; it is not a universal human virtue. Vengeance, retribution, violence are more natural human qualities. It is natural for humans to defend themselves, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when hurt, to bite back when bitten.”
Will Willimon.

Introductory questions

What really is forgiveness? What is this “forgiveness factor”? Can forgiveness also be manipulated? Do we have to forgive? In what situations would it be unwise to offer forgiveness? Why do we forgive anyway? What does forgiveness do to the forgiver and the forgivee? Why did Jesus stress forgiving enemies? How does forgiveness relate to civil justice? How does our understanding of forgiveness relate to our ideas of God?

Discussion ideas

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:43-45 NIV. As Jesus comes to the end of his Sermon on the Mount, he gives a final “you have heard that it was said” comment. In his commentary on previous “law standards” Jesus gives the final coup-de-grace to his hearers legalistic attitudes. For he turns the love your neighbor/hate your enemy statement around, and requires love for your enemies. In this way, Jesus completely undercuts the Pharisaical position. For, as some probably muttered, it is not humanly possible to love your enemies. And Jesus says “yes, that’s true—in your humanity you cannot.” Only the forgiving, healing grace of Jesus can make that kind of change possible.

What about forgiveness and justice? as the lesson mentions. Can you be forgiving and be unjust? Can you be just and unforgiving? What is justice anyway, and how does forgiveness relate? For one may forgive, but the consequences remain.

What of the reason to forgive? Isn’t forgiveness in human terms just as much of a need for the one who has been hurt or wronged? The ability to forgive means each is able to move on, and the process of reconciliation—at-one-ment, if you like—is begun.

EGW comments

At this, some of the scribes said within themselves, “Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only?” (Mark 2:7). How astonished they were to have their unspoken thoughts opened before them. “Why reason ye these things in your hearts?” Jesus asked. “Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house” (verses 8-11).

Christ changed the relation of the sinner toward God, taking the guilt from the inmost soul. The rich fool died in his bloated wealth, but the helpless sinner was brought to Christ, and manifesting his belief that Christ could heal him, he was not disappointed. His diseased mind was first cured, and then the great Physician cured his bodily infirmities. *This Day With God*, p.106.

Christ healed the man, both soul and body, showing that He had power to pardon sins, and bring peace and righteousness to the conscience-stricken soul. *Bible Echo*, February 20, 1899.

Extra material

Sometimes we are like children when we think of forgiveness. Like the girl who was told by her mother she should not quarrel with her friend, and then prayed for forgiveness for them both—saying that she was sorry and hoped she was forgiven, and then prayed that the other girl would have no peace until she asked for forgiveness too!

One English sitcom has a married couple arguing and separating. They both feel bad about it, but won't forgive. Eventually the husband's brother comes to him and tells him that all it would take is just one phone call. “Well alright then,” says the husband. “Tell her to give me a call and I'll forgive her.”

All too often we think like this, holding other's faults against them until they come and confess and ask our forgiveness. By withholding forgiveness we demonstrate the kind of people we are—who do not naturally forgive, and who only agree to forgive when we are asked to do so. Just like Peter, we are keeping score...

But instead, we need that openness, that spirit which naturally forgives, that want to heal and restore. We all want to be forgiven and reconciled, accepted and healed. Ernest Hemingway tells the story of the man who was estranged from his son, Paco. One day he could not take it any more, and he put an ad in the paper inviting Paco to meet him, saying, “All is forgiven.” When the father goes to the meeting point, hoping his son will come, he finds 800 sons named Paco (a common Spanish name), hoping to meet their father.

11. Out of the Heart

Texts: Ephesians 4:14, 15; James 3:6-9; Matthew 12:35-37; Philippians 4:8.

Quotes

- False words are not only evil in themselves, but they infect the soul with evil. Plato.
- A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes. Mark Twain.
- A lie told often enough becomes the truth. Lenin.
- Repetition does not transform a lie into a truth. Theodore Roosevelt.
- Oh what a tangled web we weave,/When first we practise to deceive! Sir Walter Scott.
- A lie would have no sense unless the truth were felt dangerous. Alfred Adler.
- We lie loudest when we lie to ourselves. Eric Hoffer.
- No one gossips about other people's secret virtues. Bertrand Russell.

Introductory questions

What does this lesson have to do with forgiveness? How does our use of words affect our thoughts and behavior? Is it true that “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me”? How does our speech and writing reveal our attitude towards God and the truth? What about thinking—is it only our actual words that matter? Why is it so important to be truth-tellers? What do lies do to us?

Discussion ideas

To tell the truth is impressed on us from an early age. But is it always helpful to tell the truth? What about “white lies”? Ephesians 4:15 tells us we should be “speaking the truth in love.” We can all imagine—and have experienced—situations when the truth was not spoken in love; or when something was spoken in love and was not the truth.

Jesus said that Satan was a murderer from the beginning, and was the father of lies (John 8:44). What was the issue over which he lied, and why is it so important? Isn't the heart of the great controversy over who is telling the truth, what it is, and why? Jesus said these words to the Pharisees and teachers of the law—the ones preoccupied with legality. For them, whatever you thought was OK, as long as you did not act on evil thoughts. Jesus is showing that the thoughts behind the actions are of great importance. Lies are designed to cover up evil intentions, and to misrepresent evil as good.

Can we force ourselves to speak truly, or do our minds need to be changed first? When Jesus spoke about what truly defiled a human being, he pointed out that it was not external contamination but the choices of the mind. As we speak and act, as we reveal to the whole onlooking universe the kind of people we are, what do they see?

The issues in the great controversy have much to do with how character is represented. God's nature and character has been vilified by Satan the Accuser. As God responds to the charges, he could simply argue—and the result would be like a childish “tis so, tisn't so” argument in a school playground. The answer is not so much in words—in refutation by argument—but in demonstration and love for the truth. What does this say to us and our attitudes and actions? Committed truth-tellers!

EGW comments

As the dew and the still showers fall upon the withering plants, so let words fall gently when seeking to win men from error. God's plan is first to reach the heart. We are to speak the truth in love, trusting in Him to give it power for the reforming of the life. The Holy Spirit will apply to the soul the word that is spoken in love. *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 157.

Let not those who write for our papers make unkind thrusts and allusions that will certainly do harm, and that will hedge up the way and hinder us from doing the work that we should do in order to reach all classes, the Catholics included. It is our work to speak the truth in love, and not to mix in with the truth the unsanctified elements of the natural heart, and speak things that savor of the same spirit possessed by our enemies. All sharp thrusts will come back upon us in double measure when the power is in the hands of those who can exercise it for our injury. *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, p. 60.

I wish we could have a pledge in our hearts that we would not utter any one word against a brother or a sister. Remember that they also are tempted, it may be more strongly than you... Those who are really the most erring are in greatest need of your help. Do not gossip about them and make remarks about their character, but go to them in the love of Jesus and the love of the truth and try to help them. *In Heavenly Places*, p. 289.

Extra material

Communication is the key. "Speak the truth" in love is the command of Paul to his friends in Ephesus. You can speak the truth, and be as hard as stone, as sharp as steel, as bitter as gall. You can speak in love, and lie through your teeth. Make it your motto always to speak the truth in love. The result: "Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." (Ephesians 4:15 NIV).

Humility in our truth-discovery journey is also essential. As André Gide said, "Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who find it." Not categorically, but always examine the evidence. To balance this rather jaundiced quote, here's one from famous observer and scientist Galileo Galilei, "All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them." True enough.

Finally, on speaking the truth about others, and avoiding the cardinal sin of malicious gossip:

There is so much good in the worst of us,
And so much bad in the best of us,
That it hardly behooves any of us
To talk about the rest of us.
—Edward Wallis Hoch

12. Selfless Service

Texts: Matthew 10:7, 8; 20:26-28; 10:38, 39; Acts 2:44, 45; 4:34, 35.

Quotes

- There is no benefit in the gifts of a bad man. Euripides.
- Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can. John Wesley
- The excellence of a gift lies in its appropriateness rather than in its value. Charles Dudley Warner
- The spirit in which a thing is given determines that in which the debt is acknowledged; it's the intention, not the face-value of the gift, that's weighed. Seneca.
- It's the thought that counts. English proverb.
- We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give. Winston Churchill.
- Purchase not friends by gifts; when thou ceasest to give, such will cease to love. Thomas Fuller.
- Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind. William Shakespeare.

Introductory questions

How do we go from forgiving to giving? What are the similarities—apart from the words themselves? What attitude lies behind a spirit of giving? Can charity be a mask—can it be faked for other than good reasons? By being a donor, might we not be trying to make ourselves look good, in our own eyes, and in the eyes of others? What about the widow and her mite—what lesson was Jesus drawing in comparing her action to others? When Jesus speaks about becoming a slave to others, what did he mean?

Discussion ideas

Selfless service—benevolence—is an issue that stirs up much discussion. While all may agree that this is a worthy cause, questions often arise over motives and methods. All too often the way that funds are solicited may seem duplicitous or manipulative. By appealing to the spirit of giving in the wrong way, many have given up. Yet giving is a practical demonstration of what is and what is not important in our lives. Giving shows us that we are not totally self-centered, and that we do care about others. That is why Jesus so clearly told us that where our treasure is there our hearts would be too.

Placing value on things of true importance is a frequent theme in Jesus' statements, and in his practical demonstrations. In many ways, his value system was a complete opposite of the value system we find in our society. Think of the many statements Jesus made that turned contemporary value systems on their heads. His commendation of the attitude of the widow in giving her mite says much.

At the heart of the great controversy is God's invitation to value what he most values. In such a scheme, truth, freedom, honesty, trustworthiness, righteousness are all primary values, and are shared through giving. Far more important than giving cash is the giving of the gifts that God has shared with us. So how to practice such ideas today? What of the apostolic church having all things in common? How can we replicate a situation that shares the things of true value with each other?

EGW comments

Constant, self-denying benevolence is God's remedy for the cankering sins of selfishness and covetousness. God has arranged systematic benevolence to sustain His cause and relieve the necessities of the suffering and needy. He has ordained that giving should become a habit, that it may counteract the dangerous and deceitful sin of covetousness. **Continual giving starves covetousness to death.** Systematic benevolence is designed in the order of God to tear away treasures from the covetous as fast as they are gained, and to consecrate them to the Lord, to whom they belong. *Adventist Home*, p. 370-1. My emphasis.

Our Saviour was the light of the world, but the world knew Him not. He was constantly employed in works of mercy, shedding light upon the pathway of all; yet He did not call upon those with whom He mingled to behold His unexampled virtue, His self-denial, self-sacrifice, and benevolence. The Jews did not admire such a life. They considered His religion worthless, because it did not accord with their standard of piety. They decided that Christ was not religious in spirit or character; for their religion consisted in display, in praying publicly, and in doing works of charity for effect. They trumpeted their good deeds, as do those who claim sanctification. They would have all understand that they are without sin. But the whole life of Christ was in direct contrast to this. He sought neither gain nor honor. His wonderful acts of healing were performed in as quiet a manner as possible, although He could not restrain the enthusiasm of those who were the recipients of His great blessings. Humility and meekness characterized His life. And it was because of His lowly walk and unassuming manners, which were in such marked contrast to their own, that the Pharisees would not accept Him. *The Sanctified Life*, p.14.

How tenderly the Saviour dealt with him who was to be His betrayer! In His teaching, Jesus dwelt upon principles of benevolence that struck at the very root of covetousness. He presented before Judas the heinous character of greed, and many a time the disciple realized that his character had been portrayed, and his sin pointed out; but he would not confess and forsake his unrighteousness. He was self-sufficient, and instead of resisting temptation, he continued to follow his fraudulent practices. . . . Jesus dealt him no sharp rebuke for his covetousness, but with divine patience bore with this erring man, even while giving him evidence that He read his heart as an open book. He presented before him the highest incentives for right doing; and in rejecting the light of Heaven, Judas would be without excuse. *Conflict and Courage*, p.286.

Extra material

There- my blessing with thee! /And these few precepts in thy memory
Look thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue, /Nor any unproportion'd thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar: /Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel; /But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
Of each new-hatch'd, unfledg'd comrade. Beware /Of entrance to a quarrel; but being in,
Bear't that th' opposed may beware of thee. /Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice;
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment. . . /This above all- to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day, /Thou canst not then be false to any man. Farewell.
William Shakespeare, Hamlet.

13. Living the Life of Faith

Texts: Micah 6:8; John 12:32; Romans 1:17; 1 John 4:18.

Quotes

- Hold faithfulness and sincerity as first principles. Confucius.
- Treat the other man's faith gently; it is all he has to believe with. His mind was created for his own thoughts, not yours or mine. Henry S. Haskings.
- To believe in God or in a guiding force because someone tells you to is the height of stupidity. We are given senses to receive our information within. With our own eyes we see, and with our own skin we feel. With our intelligence, it is intended that we understand. But each person must puzzle it out for himself or herself. Sophy Burnham
- Whatever God's dream about man may be, it seems certain it cannot come true unless man cooperates. Stella Terrill Mann.
- Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark. *Rabindranath Tagore*
- Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservation. Elton Trueblood
- Faith... must be enforced by reason...When faith becomes blind it dies. Mahatma Gandhi

Introductory questions

How do we “live the life of faith”? What does it mean? Is it a blind stumbling in the dark, or is it an assured confidence in One who is altogether trustworthy? How do the just live by faith—an often misunderstood text? The lesson suggests that our faith is based on “the forgiveness offered us at the Cross” (p.152). Is faith based on forgiveness, or is there something more? How do we understand the phrase “dying to self”? What is the relationship of fear and love?

Discussion ideas

At the close of these lessons on forgiveness, we need to look back and discover what we have learned. Is forgiveness the primary objective, and what kind of relational model is being described? Much has to do with our understanding of what went wrong in God's universe, and how we conceive of the God who is putting it right.

If we accept the great controversy view as fundamental for our understanding, then we see that what God is doing has far greater implications than simply our salvation. While God's forgiveness is rightly important to us, we need to look deeper into the issues to recognize how God is answering the charges of Satan and the questions of the onlooking universe.

While we live the life of faith, looking at our own needs, we must also look beyond to the role we play in this theater of the universe, the spectacle to angels and to men. Most of all, while we may choose to identify ourselves as the forgiven, God welcomes us home not as forgiven sinners, but as his healed and trustworthy friends.

EGW comments

Live the life of faith day by day. Do not become anxious and distressed about the time of trouble, and thus have a time of trouble beforehand. Do not keep thinking, “I am afraid I shall not stand in the great testing day.” You are to live for the present, for this day only. Tomorrow is not yours. Today you are to maintain the victory over self. Today you are to live a life of prayer.

Today you are to fight the good fight of faith. Today you are to believe that God blesses you. *Signs of the Times*, October 20, 1887.

Watch, pray, work--this is the true life of faith. *Signs of the Times*, September 10, 1885.

It is no time to be ashamed of our faith. We are a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. The whole universe is looking with inexpressible interest to see the closing work of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. *Christian Education*, 212-3.

Extra material

Most people think that they have to **do** something in order to earn God's favour, to please Him. I remember talking with a woman about her experience. She had tried *so hard*. Doing everything her church leaders told her she had to do. Making sure that her behaviour was faultless. As if she were trying to impress God, just as we try to impress those around us. The result? It made her life miserable, and she ended up hating God. Sad, tragically sad. Because even in human relationships, the ones that last, the one that are meaningful, are not based on trying to impress. Only by being what you really are can you hope to have a deep and enduring relationship.

The same with God. He love us just as we are. Not that He loves all the mess of sin that we have got into, but He still sees what we can be. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8). He came here to this earth for that very purpose: to show us what He was really like (John 14:9), and to win us back to love Him and to trust Him. What God most wants is that love relationship based on mutual trust, and the Cross shows the ultimate trustworthiness of God.

Said Jesus, "If I be lifted up...I will draw **all** to me." (John 12:32). The drawing power of God is His character that wants to love all of his unlovable, rebellious children. He offers friendship, and saving, healing love. Think about it! How do you form a lasting relationship with anyone? Can you call someone friend without spending time together, doing things together, sharing life together?

Same with God. You can't call God friend if you don't take time out together. He's not interested in a long-distance relationship--he wants to be involved with you, be close beside you, the one you call first! So to have a lasting relationship with God, *you* have to put time into it.

A good friend came to me and told me that she'd 'lost her faith'--speaking in the same way as if she'd left her handbag on the bus. Suddenly she'd woke up one morning and realized that she didn't have a relationship with God any more. But in reality such a change doesn't come overnight. It comes from years of neglect, of taking God for granted, of forgetting to have Him involved in your day-to-day life.

Think of those people who **did** have a good and lasting relationship with God. [Examples: Abraham, Moses, Job, see Hebrews 11 etc]. They weren't perfect, but they knew where to go when they went off course. They realized that their failures were due to their failure to take time with God and to trust Him completely. But despite their failures, they were still *friends of God*. That is the objective, that is what God wants. And it should be what we want: to be friends of the Friendly God.