

“Anything Against Anyone”

Discipleship – part #1

Matthew 18:21-35

[title slide] *Welcome, prayer*

[White board question] *“I get most upset when someone...”*

I was blessed to hear Reverend Sandy Robertson from Florida speak to a group of Michigan Methodist pastors at a clergy retreat in 2019. In fact, this message and the slides are a reincarnation of his presentation.

[4 scriptures] Robertson started with this trivia question: What do the following scriptures all have in common?

- 1. *The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5)***
- 2. *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God... (Ephesians 4:30)***
- 3. *...lest Satan should take advantage of us. (2 Corinthians 2:11)***
- 4. *Whenever two or three are gathered in my name... (Matthew 18:20)***

The answer? Each verse immediately precedes or follows a passage on forgiveness.

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5)

“...you must forgive them.” (Luke 17:4)

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God... (Ephesians 4:30)

“...forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)

...lest Satan should take advantage of us. (2 Corinthians 2:11)

“Anyone you forgive, I also forgive.” (2 Corinthians 2:10)

Whenever two or three are gathered in my name... (Matthew 18:20)

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’

Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’

(Matthew 18:21-22)

None of us should be surprised the topic of forgiveness dominates the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. Take, for example, the Lord’s Prayer. We say it every week, as do many others. We pray, “Forgive us our trespasses/debts/sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” But, what comes after the “Amen” in the Lord’s Prayer? (according to Matthew 6)

[What comes after “Amen”] *For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15)*

When we say this beautiful prayer, we are literally asking God to remind us of the importance of forgiveness. That prayer comes with a stern warning from Jesus. If we do not forgive others, we cannot rightly expect God to forgive us.

[AAA Club] In a parallel passage in Mark, we learn about the Bible’s Triple-A club. “Anything Against Anyone.” Do you know who has a AAA membership? We all do. “And when you stand praying, if you hold Anything Against Anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.” (Mark 11:25) The way Jesus says it, it must be true for all. None of us is blameless. None of us is perfect. As much as we hope to be, each of us harbors some hurt, some insult; a time we were ignored, a personal injury we received. Since we all belong to the AAA club, we all need to walk the road to recovery, which is forgiveness.

[Forgiveness is the foundation...] Robertson said, “Forgiveness is the foundation for God’s presence.” In the so-called “forgiveness parable” in Matthew 18, Jesus plainly teaches what forgiveness is supposed to look like, and what it is not. Jesus explained that the man had more debt than he could ever repay: 10,000 talents, literal bags of gold. He could not repay his master even if he worked for the rest of his life. In desperation, the man begged for forgiveness, and it was granted.

Normally, such a reprieve would have us dancing in the streets, singing and laughing. But in Jesus’ story, the forgiven man hunted down a fellow human who owed him a few silver coins – chickenfeed in comparison to the original debt – and forcefully demanded repayment. He showed no mercy whatsoever. When the king heard about it, he reprimanded the first man and threw him in prison “to be tortured.” (Matthew 18:34) Ouch.

There is a price to pay if we are not willing to forgive, even when we don’t end up in a literal prison. Bitterness, anger, and holding grudges cause all kinds of distress and anxiety. We can make ourselves physically sick if we refuse to

forgive. Someone once said (and I'm sorry to say it wasn't me), "Holding a grudge is like drinking poison expecting the other person to die."

[Romans 3:17] Romans 3:13-17 describes the life of such a person, one who does not know the path of peace.

Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.

The poison of vipers is on their lips.

Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.

*Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways,
and the way of peace they do not know.*

There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Romans 3:13-17)

Does that description sound like someone you know? Would you describe yourself that way? If we are honest, it probably does, sometimes. This is the path of those without peace.

[Path to Peace-#1] So what is the path of peace? How do we stop taking in the anger that poisons our souls? Peace only comes through forgiveness.

Robertson described the path of peace in two steps. First, we all need to experience forgiveness. Each of us needs to drop to our knees before the Holy God and say, "Forgive me." When we do that, our sins are forgiven. All of them.

The Apostle Paul preached, "Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you." (Acts 13:38) This is the cornerstone of our faith. Jesus, by his sinless life, his death on the cross, and his resurrection on Easter, has forgiven us and freed us to live for him. As the king forgave the man in the parable of his huge debt, so God forgives us when we come before God, honestly and without excuse, and admit we are sinners. Before you can understand anything else about the Christian faith and discipleship, you have to experience this truth. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

[Path of Peace-#2] The second step on the path of peace is to extend forgiveness, and that means to all others for any and all sins you have suffered. Ephesians 4:32 tells us to "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." This is the step the forgiven man failed to take. He never extended forgiveness to another who owed him very little in comparison to the debt he himself was forgiven.

Receiving and extended forgiveness are intricately connected. If you try to experience one without the other, you won't experience the peace of God “that passes all understanding.” (Philippians 4:7)

[What forgiveness is not] Finally, Pastor Robertson reflected on what true Biblical forgiveness is, and what it is not. First, what biblical forgiveness is not. It is not:

1. Reconciling – a two-way street
2. Condoning – approving of the offense
3. Dismissing – saying the sin doesn't matter
4. Rejoicing – being glad the sin happened
5. Forgetting – which is not humanly possible, I believe

[sign] Check out this sign from a fire department: “9/11: Never forget, never forgive.” Does that sound biblical to you? I know that's an emotional question, but remember, God's commands us to always forgive. I don't think, for my generation, it is possible to forget the tragedy of 9/11. However, to say, “Never forgive,” implies we will continue to hate, blame, and drink the poison of bitterness for as long as we live. Forgiving and forgetting are not the same thing. But only one of those two leads to peace.

[What forgiveness is] So what is true biblical forgiveness? Forgiveness is:

1. A Choice, not a Feeling.
2. Refusing to punish when given opportunity.
3. Relinquishing the desire to get even.
4. Forgiving All (Living & Dead) ... Family, Friends, Enemies, Churches, Organizations, Employers, and
5. Releasing Yourself

Each of those truths could be a sermon in itself, but I want to focus on the first: Forgiveness is a choice. It is conscious, deliberate, and even unnatural. The other four descriptions follow from the choice to forgive. They describe how we live out that choice. We forgive because we choose to obey God and believe forgiveness is the best way to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. When Jesus' desire for our lives supersedes our own, then we do the things he did. We refuse to punish, refuse to get even. We consciously forgive all – living and dead, people,

communities, and organizations, and most of all, ourselves. Let’s be real. Forgiving ourselves is probably the hardest of those five.

[Why should we forgive] I almost feel like a salesman showing you this last slide. But it’s true. There are many excellent reasons to follow the biblical pattern of forgiveness. Let me just offer you these five from Pastor Robertson.

1. I want a relationship with God more than to see others punished.
2. I want anointing more than revenge.
3. I want the presence of Jesus more than retribution.
4. I want inner peace more than the toxic poison of bitterness. (Prov 5:7; Mt 5:7)
5. I want to obey God’s Word (Jn 14:15; Eph 4:30-32; 1 Cor 13:5)

If you’re taking notes, look up those extra scripture references. God wants us to take forgiveness seriously, as seriously as God does. What kind of a warning is it to us that unless we choose to forgive, God will not forgive us? Honestly, that seems like a natural consequence. If you don’t want to extend forgiveness, why on earth would you want to receive forgiveness? It would be meaningless to you. It’s like winning free ice cream for the rest of your life, and refusing not only to eat it, but never even sharing it with anyone. And forgiveness is much better than ice cream! You can quote me on that.

Forgiveness is a choice. If we make that choice, then we won’t keep bringing up the offense. We will recognize our own failures as well, but not be defined by them. We will “go on to perfection” – being made perfect by the love of Christ, as John Wesley once taught.

[Reflection time] I believe this church is full of people who want to live by God’s Word. I believe you are a congregation who take seriously the task of being Jesus’ hands and feet in this world. So I’m going to give you a few minutes to reflect, and I simply want you to answer one question: “Whom do I need to forgive, right now?” Don’t blow this question off. Maybe you can think of one person, maybe you can think of a dozen or more. Identify them. Picture their face. Write their name down. Maybe it’s your own name. Whatever it is, next to the name, write: forgiven. I’ll give you some time to do this now.

(play Matthew West – “Forgiveness”)

Prayer

Memory Verse: Matthew 6:12 (NLT)

"...and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us."

Reflection Questions:

1. Recall a time when you were forgiven. What did it feel like?
2. Have you asked God, in Jesus Christ, to forgive you of your sins...all your sins? Have you accepted his mercy and grace? Have you forgiven yourself?
3. Why would Jesus teach that God does not forgive us if we don't forgive others? (Matthew 6:14-15) How do you make sense of that verse in light of God's love?
4. How does true biblical forgiveness differ from pop culture ideas like "forgive and forget"?
5. Whom do you need to forgive right now? Write their name and the word "FORGIVEN" over it.