

THE HIGH COST OF FORGIVENESS

Healing Life's Hurts

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Tonight we'll share together on the theme, the high cost of forgiveness. Our purpose in this series is to match the healing of Jesus with the hurts that are in our life. We have the realization that if we want real inner healing the pathway to inner healing is through forgiveness. Both receiving forgiveness and giving forgiveness.

As you hear the message this evening focus on the person or persons who have done you the most hurt. Think about how this message applies to the people who have done you wrong. And perhaps the spirit will bring to mind the persons whom you have done wrong to also.

We think Lord of the words of the song that says "All is vain unless the spirit of the Lord comes down." Each of us in this moment wants to open our heart freely to the Holy Spirit so that life that you want to put in our life may come to us this evening. That we may gain insight and wisdom from the Lord and that we may gain power to redirect and change as the spirit shows us areas in our life that need his healing and changing hand. We ask this Lord in your name. Amen.

Peter Marshall is a favorite writer of mine. He was chaplain at one time of the United States senate. One his favorite stories, popular stories was called "Keeper of the Springs." He starts off by telling the story of a little town that lay at the foot of a mountain range. High in the hills above the town lived a strange and quiet forest dweller who took it upon himself to be the keeper of the springs that provided the water supply for the town. This man patrolled the hills. Whenever he found a spring, he cleansed it's pool of brown leaves and silt that had collected, removing all the foreign matter in the pool so the water could bubble clear and run down to the city as cold and pure water. The water from the springs high in the hills supplied the city.

One day however the city council found in the city budget the salary of the keeper of the springs. They wondered who this person was whom they never saw. They voted to delete him from the budget and build a cement reservoir instead. But the water soon became foul and dirty and an epidemic came to the town. The city council met again and begged for the keeper of the springs to return to his position. When he did it was not long before the clear water began to run again.

Peter Marshall used that story to illustrate that there are some springs that need to be kept clear in our society. His particular sermon that day was on motherhood. The care that God has given to mothers for their children is such that it keeps society clean and nourished. If mothers fail to be nourishing people then ultimately society becomes clogged.

I don't use that story as Peter Marshall did. I use it as the analogy that the Holy Spirit is the keeper of the springs in our life. He is the water of the emotional resources that water our being. It's sometimes the case that things collect in the pool of our lives which would equal or are tantamount to fallen leaves and mold and mud and dirt and the springs of our life become fouled and our outer nature becomes changed and different over a course of time.

One of the things that the Holy Spirit wants to do in us is to allow clean water of personality to flow out through us. I think if I were to identify the thing which most plugs up the systems of wholesome personality it would have to be unforgiveness. The Holy Spirit as the keeper of the springs wants to take us through the scriptures and take us to the heart of Christ and just see if

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there aren't some areas of our life that are clogged that need the healing and cleansing work of Christ.

Last week we looked at unforgiveness from the standpoint of its cost, that it brings despair. It brings distance between us and another person. It impacts our emotions. It causes us to scapegoat rather than to accept responsibility. It makes us punish others and in turn be punished ourselves. It brings alienation. It can bring illness. It brings retention – that is we retain sins we do not forgive.

The solution to despair is to restore. That is the acrostic we'll use tonight. Instead of DESPAIR we'll use RESTORE. There is a high cost of forgiveness.

In balancing these two messages together what I'm trying to put before us is that you cannot stay on neutral ground. If you choose to be an unforgiving person you're going to pay a cost for that. If you choose to be a forgiving person you're going to pay a cost for that as well. It simply depends on which cost you or I want to pay, which side of the fence we want to be on. There is a cost for forgiveness.

R – Repentance. That's the first high cost of forgiveness. Repentance is a commitment to change. It comes from the Greek word *metanoia*. To change one's mind. It is not a sentimental feeling. It is not a matter of gushy emotions. It is not even necessarily a matter of shedding tears although it may involve all those things. False repentance is always emotional and never volitional or intellectual. False repentance simply involves a good time of weeping and we get up and go about and do the same old thing all over again. True repentance is volitional. It involves the will, it involves the mind and it may involve the emotions. But it is fundamentally something far deeper than emotion. It is a commitment to change.

Repentance may not involve necessarily a complete change all overnight. For some of the patterns we get ourselves into involve a time of reprogramming, a time of relearning. But repentance is a commitment to change the direction we have been on. In regard to forgiveness repentance means that we choose to be forgiven and we choose to forgive.

Dr. Orr preached a sermon I'll never forget. "The First Word of the Gospel." If you were to identify the first word of the gospel of Jesus Christ, what would it be? He selected the word "repent" as the first word that Jesus gives us in respect to the gospel. He went through scripture and showed how this was the case. How Jesus began his preaching he followed in the footsteps of John the Baptist whose first word was "repent." "In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the desert of Judea saying, 'Repent!'" Matthew 3:1-2. When Jesus began preaching Matthew 4:17 "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" When Jesus sends his disciples out on their first preaching, teaching mission he sent them out and they went and preached that people should repent." Mark 6:12. When he sent the disciples out permanently in the Great Commission he taught them in Luke 24:47 "Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations." On the day of Pentecost the first words of the response when Peter was asked the question, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, 'Repent!'" Acts 2:38. Paul's message, the first word of his message when he says to King Agrippa when he is on trial before him in Acts 26:19-20 "I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven first to those in Damascus and then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea and to the Gentiles also I preached that men should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by

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their deeds.” Repent. We really make no progress in our Christian experience until we make a decision to change.

There's a significant difference between feeling better and being better. You cannot feel better if you want to simply have an experience that is an add on, a plaster job to all the unhealthy emotionality that is in your life. You can never plaster it away because like dry rot it will soon emerge through the wall that's just been re-plastered. Our objective is not to feel better but it is to be changed.

God calls us in the first step of forgiveness, to change.

Change how? Change sometimes the language we are using. The negative language we use about people. The statements like “He is always that way...” To repent in the tone of voice that we carry in conversation. To repent of some of the ingrained, deep rooted behavior that has become such a part of our life we really have given up believing that we can change. There are some aspects of my response to situations, which I realize is patterned since I was a child. In looking at them it takes a sermon like this to realize that when I tell others, You've got to change, to make me realize I can't simply stay in rutted behavior that finally after a while I begin to excuse and say that's just the way I am and you'll have to take it or leave it.

Commitment to change or repent means we're willing to give up and ask Christ to invade our rutted behavior patterns. Change our vocabulary, our way of thinking, our tone of voice, our rutted pattern and anything, which consistently speaks of an emotionality of our life that comes out of a spirit of forgiveness or being unforgiven. Repentance, the first step. No other steps are valid until that step is taken.

The second high cost of forgiveness is reflected in the letter E in RESTORE. The first E I'll let represent Empathy.

Empathy is different from the word sympathy. Sympathy allows me to continue to be in a superior position and have pity on someone. Empathy places me in a position that is alongside of them and says, “With God's help, I feel as you feel.” It's one thing to look judgmentally at people but it's quite another thing to set in the place they're sitting, to live in the house they're living in, to have the job that they have, the family they have. That brings a whole different perspective on your life if you will set where other people set.

It seems to be that that's part of what's involved in empathy. When I am in a state of unforgiveness, I feel my own hurt. I concentrate on my hurt. I reflect on how deeply the other person has wounded me. But when I choose to repent and begin to have empathy I begin to come out of my hurt and I begin to consider their hurt. How are they hurting? How can I reach in and help be a ministering person to the grief and the anguish that they feel? Maybe they've done me wrong but perhaps there were reasons in their background that could begin to explain why it is they acted the way they did. God, help me to get in their shoes, to set where they set and have empathy toward them.

A book that had a tremendous impact on me as I read it tells how the author's daughter in 1970 was brutally raped and murdered. Two and a half years later the man who committed the crime was arrested and sentenced to a double life term. The author reflects upon her feeling toward her

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daughter's killer when she learns that they have finally caught him. She could have every reason for a lifetime of hatred toward the man who so brutally treated her daughter. She could wish that he spent the rest of his years suffering for his crime, regret that they didn't execute him. But she is coming to grips with some of her feelings and she exhibits a side of God's grace that I'm not sure if I were in a similar situation I could exhibit. An extraordinary measure of God's grace. She writes this, "We can see no other purpose for his [the murderer] coming into our lives if there is no possibility that he will be saved." The prisoner is already on death row. She is saying we can't envision why God brings him into our lives except God wants him to be saved. They wrote a letter to this prisoner as the girl's parents, not condoning his crime but expressing their concern for him and God's concern for him. There was no response. They wrote another letter. He finally responded to their second letter and indicated why he had not responded earlier that he did not believe there were people in the world anywhere who could place their concern for him above their own hurts. The author writes that it did not excuse the deed but it helped to know that the man had lost his own wife and child through divorce. She goes on to say about her feelings toward her daughter's murderer. "The temptation to hate is always there. But just suppose I had deep resentments and hatred for the one who killed my daughter. From some points of view I would have every right to hold such attitude. It would be normal. To what length would my bitterness take me. I could strike back with threatening letters filled with deadly poison, make all kinds of vindictive statements and truly be out to get him one evil way or another. "I'll pay him back! I'll get even with him if it's the last thing I do!" None of this though could touch the young man in prison other than to make him still more bitter toward life and people and God. It was most certainly not bring our precious daughter back. And it would have an inner destroying effect upon my own life." Notice how sound this reasoning is: three effects of unforgiveness – it won't do the murderer any good, it will only confirm him in his bitterness; it won't bring my daughter back; and it won't do me any good. Sound logic.

"I would be doing harm only to myself. One writer states that "Malice not only spreads but also destroys all that is noble in a person's life. When malice or anger is running your life and the critical dominating edge of life is ruining you then it is ruining you because it cannot let good things emerge." Malice is blind and knows nothing but to disparage good qualities. The dictionary associates malice with malignancy. It eats and consumes and finally destroys. If I allow malice to take hold in my life I am anything but a free person. The very tool that I would use to get even is the one that would chain me. Only God is able to handle this kind of treachery in our lives and release us from the entrapment. So the decision is mine. I carry anger, unforgiveness, resentment around with me and break under the load or hand it over to my heavenly father who can bear the weight."

Empathy. When you are unforgiving you become like the people you hate. Unforgiveness is a deadly thing. It does not allow us to walk alongside another person and to feel their hurt and loss. Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek. It seems utterly ridiculous and utterly absurd. But if we don't do it we become like the person or the group of people we hate.

S – Substitution. Substitution is when we allow ourselves to pay the debt that another person owes. We substitute ourselves for what they owe. We let them go free and we pay the price. This is the nature of atonement. That Christ substitutes himself for us, thereby he pays the price for the wrong that we did. We go free and he is guilty. We might ask, why should we forgive? Someone has got to pay. If you do wrong you pay. Our whole liability, civil system, is set up on the basis of redress. Legal redress. If you commit a wrong against someone, if you libel

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someone, if you do damage to them, property damage, bodily injury you pay because that's your responsibility.

But there are some things you can't get payment for. How do you get payment from a person who broke your life not just a car? How do you get payment from a person who broke up your home? How do you get payment from a person who did damage to your parents or your children? What happens in social relationship where we can't get satisfaction, we can't get payment, we substitute things other than financial payment. There are some things you can't get financial payment. What can you do when somebody's broken your life or your home or your child? If you can't get repayment you can do several other things.

You can get revenge. Treat them like they treated you. Get even.

Hatred. This is probably where a lot of Christians are. We don't have opportunity to get revenge because we know that's wrong so we settle for a quiet kind of hatred or loathing.

Hatred then leads to I simply ignoring someone. We say we'll let them know that they're persona non grata in our life.

What does substitution do? Instead of revenge or payment or hatred or ignoring a person substitution comes along and offers something totally different. If I wrong you, you have two options: you can make me pay the price or you can forgive me. If you forgive me you bear the loss and I go free. How could I pay for the wrong? I don't have the means. If I'm truly sorry for what I did immediately I'm going to ask, "Please forgive me." You're either going to carry that the rest of your life and take vengeance out on me. Or you can forgive me. If you forgive me you bear the cost of repayment. You never get satisfaction given you.

In a theological sense this is exactly what happens in atonement or substitution. Christ bears our sin for us. Because we are Christ's people we long to enter into his atonement work. Paul knows what this is in Romans 9:3-4 "I can wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, those of my own race, the people of Israel." Paul's saying I would bear the cost, I'd be willing to substitute myself if they could go free. Christ died for the ungodly Paul says in Romans 5. "Very rarely would anyone die for a righteous man though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his love for us in this. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Forgiveness takes place in our life when we deliberately accept the hurts and the abrasions that someone else has given to us and drop all charges against them. Substitution. We take their place, we bear the punishment of a wrong that was done. We let them go free and we drop all the charges. That's hard. Drop all charges and don't keep rehearsing them and bringing them up.

T – represent Trial. The high cost of forgiveness involves trial. When you set out to forgive there are dangers which you face. In fact, Jesus' hunger to forgive other persons made him overlook dangers to himself. In Mark 2 he forgives the paralytic. Of course the danger to himself is he claims to be God and he sets himself up for a charge of blasphemy. In John 4 when he forgives the woman at the well he sets himself up for the danger of being misunderstood. In John 8 he forgives the woman taken in adultery and again he sets himself up for the charge that

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he has transgressed the law. Jesus says, "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve and give him life as a ransom for many."

To forgive others is not easy and the trial part comes that we expect that forgiveness will be a wonderful experience. But often it is not a continuing uplifting experience. It's sometimes just downright hard to forgive and we wrestle with all kinds of feelings about taking our forgiveness back. Initially when we made the breakthrough and decided to forgive we might feel like a million dollars. But the devil is not happy that we're forgiving people because that means Christ is really having full sway in our lives. So often when we set out to be forgiving we'll wrestle with feelings like, What have I just done? I've give up all my chips and lost my bargaining position and we'll begin to feel depressed about having forgiven someone else. Our depression may shift to anger and blame to other people. Then we begin to flagellate ourselves: I'm such a patsy. I let people walk all over me. I should be stronger. And those kinds of things.

Yes, there is a time when we need to stand up for what's right. I'm not saying let anybody do what they want to and never hold them to account. There's a whole teaching in scripture that people are accountable for their actions. But I'm talking about the kind of inward coercive, mental and emotional spirit that comes to us that makes us exact prices out of people. What the Lord is simply telling us and what the scriptures are telling us in the example of Jesus is that it costs big time, a trial, and people will misunderstand your actions. There is trial associated with forgiveness. Don't expect it necessarily to be easy.

O – Overcoming. We often say to forgive is to forget. Preachers are perhaps as guilty as anybody in this regard. We as ministers will remind you that God has removed your sins as far as the east is from the west and he remembers them no more. Remembers our sins no more then we ought not remember them either. That's good theology as it pertains to God. God really does forgive our sins. I believe in respect to a sin we do more than once if we confess it and come to God and say, "I just did this sin again, will you forgive me?" God will say, "I don't remember it. I've cast it into the deepest sea. I've forgotten it. It's your first time as far as I'm concerned."

But the problem with us is we don't have the erasable mind of God. Our minds are like a computer program or like a tape. We have a lot of stuff stored on them. Sometimes things don't get blocked out and lost. It's hard to forget. I'm not sure that the scriptures are insisting that we totally erase something from our mind. It's hard to erase things. To say Forget. Don't remember it any more. That's a stronger incentive to remember it! We've been told not to remember so now we've got to remember that we're not supposed to remember!

I don't think that the key to forgiving is forgetting. It's simply overcoming. I would call it re-imagining the past. I would identify faith as a pre-imagining the future. That is, see the picture of something before it has yet happened. That's faith. Forgiveness is re-imagining the past. It's looking at the past, realizing that it's there, that it's there with all of it's curse, but it's asking the Lord to overcome those memories and show us some insights into his teaching and character and what good that he was bringing out of that situation. Overcoming it by asking the Lord what new potentialities are being put into our life by our having walked through that valley of experience. Jesus taught us to overcome by re-imagining people and by re-imagining their demands of us, turning the other cheek, yielding our outer coat as well as our inner coat, going the second mile, loving instead of hating, praying instead of reviling, blessing instead of cursing. That's a critical thing and that's part of re-imagining. Blessing instead of cursing.

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Cursing is not just swearing at people. It's downing them all the time. Blessing is not saying religious words toward people. The word in the Greek for blessing is the *eulegeo* word eulogy. It's a well-word, a good word. Speak well of people instead of speaking down of people. In re-imagining the past instead of verbalizing all the hurts and resentment and trouble and what someone did to us, we find the things in that experience that we can speak well of and bless and attribute to the positive working of God in our life. Overcoming through re-imagining past and present actions.

R in the word RESTORE I'll let stand for restitution. Some things we must make restitution. Especially I think where there are financial areas that involve anything that can be compensated for we are under obligation to make restitution. Not simply treating forgiveness as something cheap or light – as Bonhoeffer said, cheap grace. Restitution can be carried to extremes. The Holy Spirit is not an inquisitor in the sense that every little flaw we've ever done he's asking us to set straight with someone. We have to make the distinction between a conscience that sometimes goes crazy with introspection versus the real work of the Holy Spirit who is truly concerned with making the past right but is not into a guilt trip on us. There's a point where your conscience can go amok trying to find areas to restore. But there are legitimate areas of restitution. If you have wronged someone financially you have a real responsibility to seek to make restitution in that area as part of the forgiveness process.

There are some things you can't make restitution for. David when he had Uriah murdered and the baby born to him and Bathsheba died, there was no way on earth he could make restitution for that. This thing about David's experience with Bathsheba and Uriah no matter what he did he couldn't make restitution. It was beyond being restored and he had to fling himself upon God. That's why he said to God, "You don't accept sacrifices or that is what I'd offer to you. But You don't despise a contrite spirit and a broken heart."

Zacchaeus on the other hand had some things he could restore. Luke 19:1-10, he gave half of his possessions to the poor and he returned four fold any one he had defrauded. Restitution.

The final letter in the word RETORE – the high cost of forgiveness is the word Exhilaration. I think the father of the prodigal son knew the meaning of this word. When his son came home he was exhilarated. He was glad to give forgiveness and he broke out the very best for his younger son. The older son gives us a picture of a person without empathy who like the Pharisee could not feel what another person has gone through.

God calls us to rise above the hurt in our life and enjoy the exhilaration of giving forgiveness.

Five questions that probe whether or not we are willing to undergo the high cost of forgiveness that we may know the exhilaration of forgiveness.

Am I ready to forgive regardless of the cost? Whatever may be exacted of me in a situation that I am in. Am I ready to forgive no matter what is required of me? Including maybe being humiliated, being misunderstood, financial loss, any kind of a number of things we fear by approaching a person if we have wronged them. Am I ready to forgive? Even if I am not the one responsible for being wronged. Even if I am the innocent person in this transaction. Am I ready to forgive regardless of the cost?

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Is my forgiveness unconditional or does it depend upon the other person changing and becoming worthy. I will forgive you if you will change and make certain steps but if you revert to the old behavior I forgive you no more. Is my forgiveness unconditional? Or does it depend upon another person changing and becoming worthy of my forgiveness?

Am I open to all the good in him or her and thus find myself responding in love to someone who's hurt me? Am I open to all the good in them? Unforgiveness is being open to all the bad in them. Forgiveness is being open to all the good. When we get anger in our life and unforgiveness all we can see about the other person is everything they do wrong and we can't see anything they do right. Forgiveness is calling us out of that to ask us can we be open to the good. Can we see the beauty that is there? Can we grow it and praise it and bring the beauty into existence in a person's life?

Can I focus not on the hurt but on the change and the growth in both of us and thereby celebrate and give thanks? Can I now focus no longer just on the hurt but can I change my focus on the growth that is occurring in my life and in the person with whom I've been estranged? Can I focus upon that growth and begin to celebrate and give thanks? This is what the father of the prodigal son obviously did. He could have spent the rest of his life saying, "My son did me wrong." But he chose to focus on the growth that was happening in his son's life and in his life.

The fifth question is this, Can I try to call him or her closer to me than he or she was before the hurt ever occurred?

In a later message we're going to deal with the difficulty of forgiveness. There are some people for one reason or another can't be called closer. Perhaps they're dead or there may be reasons why they can't be closer. But the question at this point, can we call a person closer to us before they ever were before the hurt occurred?

Those are powerful questions. Ones that focus us on decision and meditation. Restore. The most common barrier I think to the inner healing in our life is failure to decide for healing. The most common block to inner healing is our unwillingness to forgive. When we decide for healing we begin to remove the block and God allows us to begin to move toward forgiveness in our experience. Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:31-32 "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate one to another, forgiving each other just as god in Christ forgave you."

Are there persons you need to ask, Will you forgive me? Would you be specific and ask the Holy Spirit to help you be specific and begin to release that to the Lord. It may be you need to ask in a different way. Ask as though another person is hurting because of you. Maybe the question that's on their heart that you could project that they may be asking of you, "Would you please forgive me?"

I want us now to unite our hearts in some moments of prayer and take these words and apply them to our life situation.

Is there a person you have not forgiven? If you cannot think of a person in this whole wide world whom you have not forgiven for anything that they've done to you, then that's either a

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dishonest life or a life that's forgiving and only you know which. Are you being honest? Or have you forgiven?

Or who is the person that pops up on your screen? What is it that they've done to you? What is it that you need to forgive them of? Is there a second picture? A person you've not forgiven? Focus on that a moment. What have they done to you? How can you forgive them? Recognize them. If there is a person you have not forgiven pray for that person.

Lord, I lift this person up to you who has become my enemy, who has wronged me and hurt me, scarred my life, reached into the treasure of my personality and robbed it of its choicest treasures. I pray now for this person. I ask Lord that you will give me a forgiving heart. Lord Jesus, I ask you to create in me a different picture of this person than I've ever had before. I ask you to help me to set them free from all that they've done to me. In your name, Jesus, I forgive them. I take the eraser in my hand and erase out the wrongs against me. I ask Lord that you will help me to forgive. I struggle with my feelings even now. But I ask for you to overcome my feelings and help me to forgive. Help me to set them free and have this hurtful picture be transformed by your grace into something that heals my life. Show me where healing is in this picture. Show me love. Show me compassion. Help me in this moment to see things that I have not seen before. Help me to look and see their hurt and grief. Help me to put my hand figuratively on them and forgive. Help me to love as you loved. Pour your love into me now. I forgive and I ask your forgiveness. Fill me and set my spirit free. Thank you, Lord.

[end of tape]